

Coathced

LAGAN

THE *Foster* BROTHERS

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

NORA PHOENIX

LOATHED

THE FOSTER BROTHERS 3

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Loathed: Lagan (The Foster Brothers Book Three) by Nora Phoenix

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This book contains sexually explicit material which is suitable only for mature readers.

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CONTENTS

[Connect with Nora](#)

[Loathed - Lagan](#)

[The Foster Brothers](#)

[Trigger warning](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Signed Paperbacks and Swag](#)

[Freebies](#)

[Books by Nora Phoenix](#)

[Audio Books by Nora Phoenix](#)

[More About Nora Phoenix](#)

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LOATHED - LAGAN

When mutual hate turns into something else entirely...

Lagan absolutely despises his law professor, Killian Evans. He's an arrogant, snobby know-it-all who looks down on anyone who's not up to his standards.

If only he wasn't so damn hot.

If only he didn't make Lagan want an entirely different lesson from him...

Killian absolutely despises his student, Lagan Foster. He's a lazy, flying-by-the seat-of-his-pants C+ student who barely can be bothered to pay attention in class.

If only he wasn't so damn hot.

If only Killian didn't want to teach him an entirely different lesson...

Loathed: Lagan is a steamy enemies to lovers MM romance that has insta hate mixed with a solid dose of insta lust, an age gap, found family, and two men who discover they're much more alike than they thought. It is the third book in The Foster Brothers series, a contemporary MM romance series about four men who chose to be brothers that can be read as stand alones.

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THE FOSTER BROTHERS

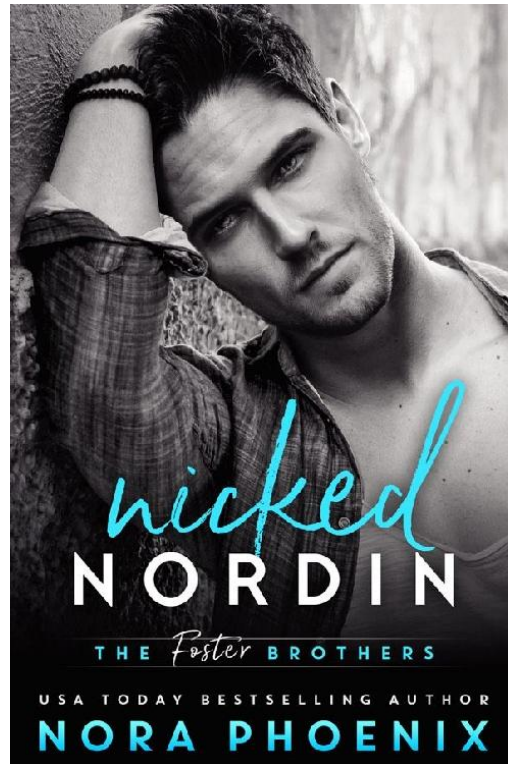
Loathed - Lagan is the third book in new contemporary MM romance series called *The Foster Brothers*.

Don't miss the FREE prequel, *Marked: Myron*, available through Prolific Works in a massive giveaway that will be available for all of 2022. Check out all the amazing books and authors in the [Your Book Boyfriend's Boyfriend giveaway on Prolific Works](#).

THE FOSTER BROTHERS

JAREN, Hadley, Lagan, and Nordin chose to be brothers after growing up in foster care together, and now nothing can come between them...not even when they find love.

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The stupidest thing a con artist can ever do is fall for the man who's trying to catch him...

Nordin likes to think of himself as a modern-day Robin Hood, redistributing the wealth from those who don't deserve it to those who do. It's fun, it's exciting, and it makes good use of his talents and gifts.

Unfortunately, not everyone sees it like that, including FBI agent Tavin Donley. He calls Nordin a con artist, which is, like, such a rude term. Worse, he's determined to catch Nordin.

That in itself is already a problem, but much worse is the fact that the chemistry between them is explosive. It always has been. And even though they're adversaries, they can't keep their hands off each other.

But when fire burns that hot, someone will get burned...

Nicked is the fourth book in The Foster Brothers series, a contemporary MM romance series about four men who chose to be brothers that can be read as stand alones. It has an epic game of cat and mouse, two men who can't keep their hands off each other, a battle for the top, and the sweetest surrender.

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TRIGGER WARNING

This book has a content warning for a one-time mention of suicidal thoughts, bullying (prologue only), loss and burial of a parent (they weren't close), a character who gets very drunk (no alcoholism), and brief mentions of mistreatment and abuse (not sexual abuse).

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PROLOGUE

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CHICAGO, FIFTEEN YEARS AGO

Lagan popped his head around the door and peeked into the hallway. Nope, no sign of Ricki and his friends.

Phew. He had to be careful today. Hadley was sick, and Nordin and Jaren were already in high school. Lagan was still stuck in seventh grade, much to his chagrin. One misstep was all it took for him to run into the wrong people, especially after what his father had done.

And Ricki Carvecchio was definitely not someone he wanted to encounter. The kid had a massive grudge against Lagan ever since he'd been forced to leave his fancy private school and attend this lowly public middle school and had discovered who Lagan was. Just his luck that the son of one of the men his father's blabbing had destroyed now attended Lagan's school.

He shuffled into the hallway, keeping his head down as always while still being vigilant. In this school, you could never let your guard down. South Side, baby. No margin for error here. One wrong word and your life could be over. Ask his dad. Though he'd definitely spoken more than one word. The man had sung like a canary, and they'd all paid the price for it.

Ever since his father had gotten arrested for boosting some fancy car, it had been two years of increasing hell, and Lagan didn't see his misery end anytime soon. His mom was gone, his father had been sentenced to life in prison, his grandparents were dead, and his two uncles wanted nothing to do with him. A kid would only cramp their styles, they'd told him. Maybe

he was better off without them, since they were involved in all kinds of illegal shit as well.

The only positives were Nordin, Hadley, and Jaren. They had met in the group home they'd all ended up in, and they'd become instant friends. They'd promised each other they'd stick together, have each other's backs. Their families had all deserted them, so now they were each other's family. Brothers.

Without them, Lagan wouldn't have survived. Literally. Fuck, those dark days after his mom had died were still fresh in his memory. He'd seriously debated taking his dad's gun, the one he'd hidden in the basement and the cops had somehow never found when they'd raided the house, and just end it all. But he hadn't. Had to be his mom's stubbornness he'd inherited. Now, he had a reason to live. All he had to do was keep his head down and get through school. Five more years.

He sneaked past the wall that was supposed to contain positive messages. Hey, they'd hung a new poster, a massive white-and-black thing with a big red stop sign. He glanced at the text from between his eyelashes, then snorted. *This is a no-bullying zone.* Well, someone shoulda told Ricki 'cause he sure as fuck hadn't gotten that memo. Seriously, did the school administrators really think that shit worked? Like, they'd hang a poster, and suddenly, everyone would realize bullying was wrong? God, to be that naïve.

A hand appeared out of nowhere and wrapped around his throat, and he was slammed against a locker. "Where the fuck do you think you're going?"

Fuckity fuck. Ricki. Somehow, Lagan had missed the bastard sneaking up on him. He made an attempt to wrestle himself free, but with Ricki having four inches and a good fifty pounds on him, it was futile. At least they were in the hallway, so Ricky couldn't do too much damage to him. Right? Please let it be so.

"The fuck you want?" Lagan snapped with more bravura than he felt. He couldn't show fear, or he'd be dead.

“The fuck I want? How about my dad out of prison, jackass?” Ricki shook him until Lagan’s teeth rattled.

“Sure, I’ll get right on it.”

Another shake, even more violent this time. “Don’t you fucking dare mock me.”

“Then stop asking me for stuff I got nothing to do with.”

“Your father did this.”

Lagan rolled his eyes, unable to stop himself. “Yeah, exactly. My father. Not me. Not sure what you think I can do about this.”

Ricki seemed confused for a moment, but then he regrouped, tightening his hold on Lagan’s throat. “I don’t care if you can do something about it or not. He’s your old man, so I can take it out on you.”

That argument made no sense at all, but Lagan doubted Ricki would be open to logic. Still, he had to try. “You don’t reckon I already paid a high enough price?”

Ricki frowned, relaxing his hand enough so Lagan could at least get some air into his lungs. “What do ya mean?”

“My mom?”

More frowning. Was he that good an actor, or did he really not know what Lagan was talking about? He didn’t seem that skilled or smart, so Lagan was tempted to believe the second. “My mom was killed because of what your father did.”

Ricki froze. “That’s bullshit. You’re lying.”

Holy shit, he didn’t know. Ricki had no idea what his father was capable of. “Your father works for Victor Duvall, one of the biggest crime bosses in the city.”

“Uncle Victor is in the import and export business.”

God, he sounded like he was repeating something his parents had told him. Was he really that much of an idiot? Lagan hadn’t pegged him as the brightest bulb, but this was next-level stupidity. “Yeah, import and export of narcotics, you

dumb fuck. What, you thought your dad made all that money legally?”

Ricki’s knuckles connected with Lagan’s mouth, and pain exploded across his lips. Damn, Ricki had swung so hard and fast Lagan had never seen it coming. His mouth filled with wet copper, and he spit it out, barely missing Ricki, who seemed to be shocked at the effects of his vicious punch. Holy fuck, the motherfucking piece of shit had clocked him good.

“You’re lying. My father would never do that,” Ricki snarled, regaining his composure.

Lagan spit on the floor again, the pain still sharp enough to take his breath away. From the corners of his eyes, he caught some curious stares from other students moving in to see what was going on. At least they had an audience. If nothing else, that should temper Ricki’s urges somewhat.

“I’m not. Ask your dad. My dad testified against Victor and sent him and his top lieutenants to jail, your dad being one of them. And then Victor took his revenge by having my mom killed.”

“It was a random shooting by some meth head who was high as a kite.”

“Oh, puh-leeze. She was hit by one of Victor’s men. He went to jail for it, but his family is taken care of by Victor. And then Victor pinned a murder on my dad he didn’t commit, ensuring he’ll spend the rest of his life in prison.”

A flicker of doubt passed over Ricki’s face. “Your father deserved everything he got and more for being a fucking rat and a snitch.”

Lagan straightened his shoulders and met Ricki’s glare head on. “Yes, my father ratted Victor and his lieutenants out. And yes, he’s the reason your dad went to prison for a long, long time. But you do realize he was guilty, right? My dad didn’t accuse him of stuff he didn’t do. He merely told the cops what he knew Victor, your dad, and others had done over the years. It’s not like your old man was wrongly convicted. He’s guilty of every single thing they accused him of.”

Fuck, every word hurt, having to push it past his bleeding lips, which were already swelling up. His brothers would have a fit if they saw him, and he'd probably have to hold back Nordin from going after Ricki. Nordin had a protective streak a mile wide and a temper that was slow to rise but savage when it reared its head.

Ricki opened his mouth, then closed it again. "It don't matter. If your father had kept his mouth shut like he should have, my father would still be a free man, and we'd still have money."

With his father in prison, the constant stream of money had dried up for Ricky and his family. So he, his mom, and his two younger sisters had been forced to move into a rental. Ricki and his sisters had been pulled out of their expensive private school and had been sent to public school with the common folks—and Ricky resented the hell out of Lagan for just that, as he'd made abundantly clear.

"Sure," Lagan agreed easily. Righteous fury the likes of which he'd never experienced before blazed through him. "And my mom would still be alive. But that's on Victor and your dad, not on mine. And your father would still be a fucking criminal, free or not. Open your fucking eyes, Ricky. You can be pissed off at me all you want, but deep down, you're not that dumb. You know damn well it's not me you should be furious with 'cause I didn't put your dad in prison. Now either finish what you started or let me go 'cause I'm not gonna spend the rest of my day trying to talk some sense into your goddamn stupid head."

Whether Ricky was too stunned to react or was genuinely convinced Lagan had a point, Lagan wasn't sure, but the guy let go of him. With his head held high, Lagan shot him a last fierce look and stalked off. Not until he'd turned the corner did he give in to his tears.

Goddamn, his face *hurt*.

PROLOGUE

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SEATTLE, NINE YEARS AGO

Killian couldn't take his eyes off him. Ever since the guy had come into the gay club, surrounded by three friends, Killian had been drawn to him. He had an energy about him, an effortless magnetic sexiness, that was irresistible. The way he moved on the dance floor was smooth and elegant, his slender body dipping and swaying to the music.

He was having fun, losing himself in the music, smiling and glowing. Every now and then, when one of his friends said something, he threw his head back, laughing with abandon without being overdramatic. The affection he had for his friends appeared genuine. They formed an interesting group. One was a total flirt, one a sweet one who was batting his eyes at a big guy he was interested in, and the last one seemed more of an amused observer. And then there was him, a little shy but flirting low-key. So far, no man had managed to break them up.

The clingy, black shirt highlighted his alluring shape, and the tight jeans he'd managed to wrestle himself in made it clear to every man in the room what his sexual preference was. No strict top would ever put his ass on display like that...and what a luscious ass it was. Fuck, Killian wanted to bury himself between those ass cheeks, first with his mouth, then with his cock.

But did he even stand a chance? A year ago, he wouldn't have asked himself that question, but everything had changed. He'd always been so confident, cocky even, but after

Armando, that daring attitude had evaporated. How had he been that gullible, that stupid? Two months later and he still couldn't figure out how Armando had gotten to him. He'd broken every single one of his rules, and for what? For a man who had turned out to be nothing but a criminal, one who excelled in lying and deceit.

Before Armando, Killian wouldn't have hesitated. He'd never had any issues scoring hookups, either through Grindr or in person. Every twink in Boston had been willing to bend over for him—no exaggeration. He was always dressed impeccably, kept himself in excellent shape, and his cock was a work of art. Plus, he knew damn well how to use it, according to the feedback. Who wouldn't get a boost in self-confidence from those kinds of reviews?

He'd always had a high sex drive and had many partners, but he'd never received complaints. In fact, he'd done some repeats with men who'd loved what he'd dished out, though under the strict warning that he didn't do relationships. One guy could never be enough for him, and besides, he didn't have the time for a relationship. He had a fantastic job as a criminal defense attorney in Boston, and he'd loved his life way too much to settle down.

But then he'd met Armando, and for the first time ever, he'd thought himself capable of settling down. Armando had made him want things he'd never yearned for before. When everything had blown up in his face, he'd started questioning himself, his morals, and above all, his judgment. If he'd fallen that easily for a con man, clearly he wasn't as street smart as he'd always considered himself to be.

But what could be the risk here? He was in a strange city where he didn't know anyone, so no one could be out to get him. He hadn't spotted anyone from the conference following him into the club—and why would they? No one knew. No one but Killian himself, and he'd have to live with that humiliating memory forever.

Should he try to score with this guy? Killian was a tad overdressed. Or underdressed, depending on how one looked at it. His attire was too formal for this club, too stuffy, but he

hadn't planned on hitting up this place until his taxi had driven past it. Coming here had been an impulse decision, maybe the first one he'd made since Armando.

Fuck, he wanted him. It had been a long time since Killian had such a visceral response to someone, but this guy hit all his buttons. He had to be legal, since this club had checked everyone's ID at the entrance, though the red stamp on his hand indicated he wasn't of legal drinking age yet. That made him roughly fifteen years younger than Killian.

He sighed. He was too old for him, wasn't he? He would turn thirty-five in two weeks. Maybe it was time for him to accept the reality that he'd outgrown places like this. If he weren't careful, he'd become an old creep. The kind of guy baby twink warned each other about.

But how he admired those tight, slender bodies. How he appreciated their energy, their style, their RuPaul-inspired sassiness. He adored everything about them, but above all, he loved the way they looked bent over with Killian's fat cock splitting them open. Mmm, yes, how they squirmed and panted to take him and then absolutely went crazy with pleasure as he wrecked them in the best way.

That was the old Killian, though. The BA—Before Armando. Little had remained of that confidence, but at some point, he had to put himself out there again. Regain some trust in himself, a sense that he hadn't lost everything. The conference in Seattle had been interesting and worthwhile, but after two days of talks and speeches, smooching and networking, he was fried and in desperate need of a fun reward. He had to give it a shot with this guy.

Killian emptied his glass of rum and Coke that was a little heavier on the rum than he would've preferred, then rose from his bar stool. He dragged a hand through his hair, straightened his polo shirt, and took a deep breath.

Showtime.

Lagan cracked his knuckles. He had two hours to crank out this paper. Okay, he could do this. He'd read all the material, had compiled his notes, and had an outline of the issues he wanted to cover, so he should be fine.

Women's Rights in Divorce Law Between 1950 and Now, he typed. He'd learned to type blind in an extra class in school when he was fifteen, and it had been one of the best investments of his time. It not only came in handy in his job as a paralegal for Roberts, Smith & Reed, a top three law firm in Seattle, but even more in all the papers he had to write for law school. He could look at a text, whether it be printed or handwritten, and his fingers would fly over the keyboard, only occasionally making a mistake.

He composed paragraph after paragraph, outlining how the legal position and rights of women in divorce court had changed over the years. The first big development was the concept of no-fault divorce, of course, pioneered by Ronald Reagan in 1969, when he was governor of California. How interesting that a conservative Republican had advocated that groundbreaking step. Divorce rates had skyrocketed, as partners didn't have to fabricate reasons to divorce anymore.

The words came easily, his hands rarely needing to pause, and he was giddy with the flow. He had made a note that initially, researchers had thought divorce empowering for mothers. Something about growth potential? He flipped through his stack of notes. Yup, there it was. He added it to his paper. Another paragraph done.

When he'd reached the nineties, a knock on his door pulled him out of his concentration. The door opened, and Oliver Brewer, the lawyer he worked for, stepped inside. "I need you in conference room two."

Lagan hesitated, then gathered his courage. "I'm off the clock. I came in at six this morning so I could have two hours to finish a paper for law school."

Oliver shrugged. "Sorry, but this takes precedence. We finally have Mr. Donaldson for a deposition, but he could only do it right now, so I need you there."

Mr. Donaldson? Oh shit, that was the Hammitt case. Donaldson was the business partner of Rudolph Hammitt, the man they were defending. He was on trial for insider trading and tax fraud, and the evidence against him was overwhelming. Not that it mattered. Guilty people deserved legal representation as well, a fact Oliver had drilled into him. But Hammitt's business partner had refused cooperation so far, so this was a crucial breakthrough. No doubt the man had information Oliver could use in the trial.

Lagan took a deep breath. The paper would have to wait. His job was more important, and Oliver wasn't known for being understanding and accommodating when it came to Lagan's ambitions. "I'll be right there. Give me five minutes to prepare."

Oliver held up a thumb, then hurried out again.

Crap, crap, crap. Lagan buried his head in his hands for a moment. He shouldn't have stayed at work to write the paper. He should've left so Oliver couldn't find him. But writing here was so much easier, with a super fast computer and access to all the research material he could dream of. Plus, plenty of helpful coworkers if he had questions. He was one of the twenty-seven paralegals in the firm, and they were a pretty tight bunch that had each other's backs.

Sadly, no one could write this paper for him, so he'd have to figure out how to get an extension. Of course, the paper was for Professor Evans's class. The man already hated Lagan's guts, so he was sure requesting an extension would go over

well. *Not*. With anyone else, it wouldn't have been an issue, but for some reason, Evans had hated Lagan the second he'd laid eyes on him.

In all fairness, it was mutual. Lagan couldn't stand the man either. An *egghead* was what they would've called someone like him back in Chicago. Someone who felt better than everyone else. Evans's snotty I-attended-Hahvahd-Law attitude was irritating as fuck, especially considering he taught at a state university. And while Lagan wasn't dissing his school, it sure as fuck wasn't as top-notch as Harvard, so why on god's green earth did the man feel the need to keep boasting about his credentials? If he was half as good as he pretended to be, he wouldn't be teaching the law. He'd be practicing it in some fancy-schmancy firm. Like the one Lagan worked for.

Anyway, he'd have to worry about his research paper later. He had a deposition to attend, and Oliver didn't like to be kept waiting. He grabbed his laptop and his water bottle, stuck a meal bar into the pocket of his suit, and hurried out the door. In the hallway, he stopped for a moment and checked his reflection in an office window, making sure his tie was straight. All systems go.

Two hours later, he navigated his trusty old rust bucket named Bertha through the evening traffic. As usual, Montlake was jam-packed this time of day, so all he could do was inch his way forward, praying he'd still make it on time. Bertha was one of those indestructible Toyotas that had already lasted way past a normal life expectancy. Sure, she had her hiccups every now and then, and her once bright red was now more of a faded rusty burgundy, but she was cheap, and she worked. Most of the time. For years, Lagan had shared her with Hadley, but now that his brother had found himself a boyfriend, things had changed.

Sebastian LeClerc had been one of the richest bachelors in Seattle, but he'd fallen as hard for Hadley as vice versa when Hadley had started working for him as his assistant. They had moved in together quickly, leaving Lagan on his own for the

first time in his life. He'd always shared a room and even a bed with Hadley, and he still wasn't used to being alone.

His new apartment was a massive improvement, though, courtesy of Sebastian, who had felt bad for taking Hadley away from Lagan. He'd bought Lagan an apartment—Hadley had managed to convince him he didn't need to buy the whole building—and was now his landlord. Lagan was well aware he'd gotten the deal of the century, but he wouldn't complain. Without Sebastian's offer, he wouldn't have been able to rent a broom closet.

Hadley and Sebastian were as sweet and lovey-dovey together as Jaren and Reid. With two of their brothers now in love, Nordin and Lagan were the single ones, and he didn't see his own status changing anytime soon. How would he ever date if he barely had time to eat and sleep?

Between working full time, doing law school, and meeting with his brothers every Friday, he had no time for a relationship. It would cost too much time, and ultimately, it would mean the end of his dream to become a lawyer. No, finding a partner would have to wait until he had graduated law school.

All he could schedule in was the occasional hookup on Saturdays when his itch got too strong to scratch himself. And even that had been weeks ago, despite now having an actual apartment he could use to take guys home. Whatever. Sleep was more important than sex. Probably.

Oh, Thank god, he'd finally reached the Montlake Bridge. Almost there. All he needed was to—

Bertha coughed, sputtered, then stalled.

“Dammit, no!”

Holding his breath, he turned the ignition key again. Nothing. She didn't even hiccup. Total silence. Fuck, fuck, fuck. He banged his head on the steering wheel. It had to be on the bridge, of all places, without a shoulder, and where he was blocking a whole lane.

BEEP! BEEP!

Yup, the pissed-off driver behind him was making their displeasure known. He took a deep breath, unbuckled his seat belt, and got out. With a helpless shrug to the car behind him, he indicated his car had stalled. The man rolled his eyes, but at least he stopped the honking. Now what?

He could move his car to the pedestrian walkway, but he'd need help. And he should call AAA first so they could tow him. That was one membership he never let lapse, as he'd needed it at least once a year. He was still on the phone with them when a police cruiser pulled up behind him, flashing his lights.

"My car stalled!" he called out to the officer before she'd even gotten out of her car. "She's dead. I can't move her to the side by myself."

The officer—a friendly, competent-looking woman in her fifties—nodded briskly, then spoke into her radio, requesting backup. Lagan shot a quick look at his watch, and his stomach sank. He'd never make it on time now to Evans's class. Not only would he have to request an extension for his paper, but he'd also have to do it after coming in late, something the man notoriously abhorred. Just his luck.

A drop splatted on his cheek, and he absentmindedly wiped it off. God, the help the officer had requested had better come soon. The traffic was backing up big-time. Another drop, this time on his neck. Wait, was it...? He looked up. Gray clouds hung dangerously low in the sky and looked like they contained hours of rain. Could things get any worse?

Five minutes later, in the pouring rain, pushing his car onto the pedestrian walkway with help from two cops, he had his answer. They sure as fuck could. By the time the AAA tow truck had arrived, he was drenched to the bone, shivering and sneezing. What a clusterfuck.

The tow truck driver was kind enough to drop him off at the entrance to the UW School of Law, where he walked in looking like a drowned cat. His laptop backpack was the only thing still dry. Thank god he'd left it in the car. At least Mr. Fox, the custodian, hadn't done the floors yet. Otherwise,

Lagan would've felt awful dripping all over them. The man always made such an effort to keep the building immaculate.

He rushed into a washroom to survey the damage. One look in the mirror had him all but turning around and giving up. Even if he spent fifteen minutes there, he would still look like a wet rag, so what was the use? Still, he had to try.

He took off his dripping sweater and hung it on a heater. Fingers crossed, it would still be there when he got back. He'd mop up any spilled water later. Using paper towels, he dried his hair the best he could. He was still as cold as balls, but at least he didn't look quite as pathetic.

Not unless he compared himself to Professor Evans, who was always perfectly dressed in sharp suits, not a silver hair out of place, his masculine jaw shaved clean. In the classroom, he always took off his jacket, revealing slim-fit shirts that showed off his lean physique and highlighted his biceps. Who knew biceps could be sexy? Lagan had never considered them particularly attractive, but with Evans, he found himself staring at them more than he cared to admit, even to himself.

Yes, the man was hot as fuck, and Lagan had picked up on some definite nonstraight vibes from him, but that was about the only appealing thing about him. Lagan had always possessed a weakness for older men, and even Evans's vile character couldn't negate his undeniable attractiveness. But all Lagan had to do was picture the man orating, and any and all sexual chemistry dissipated.

Mentally bracing himself, he entered the classroom, which fell silent. Professor Evans lowered his hand, interrupted midsentence, and shot an icy look of disdain in Lagan's direction. "Mr. Foster. How kind of you to grace us with your presence tonight, albeit"—the man demonstratively checked his watch—"an hour and a half late."

Lagan balled his right fist. "I was—"

A haughty hand wave cut him off. "Contrary to what you may think, Mr. Foster, I'm not the least interested in your excuses. Please find a seat so you don't disrupt the class any further. Unlike you, some students are actually here to learn."

Fury bubbled inside Lagan so fiercely he had to clamp down his teeth to prevent himself from blowing up. *It won't help.* He kept repeating those words to himself over and over again. *It won't help.* Antagonizing Evans even further wouldn't get him anywhere. He needed the man, and hopeless as the prospect of getting an extension seemed, all would be lost if he told the man how he felt about him.

Arrogant asswipe.

He dropped down in the first empty seat he spotted, much closer up front than he would have liked.

Condescending cockwaffle.

As he took his laptop from his backpack, he suppressed a grin at his accidental alliterations. What else could he come up with?

Daft Douchenozzle.

Weasely Wankhammer.

He booted up his laptop, feeling better already.

Shallow Shitgibbon.

Farcical Fucktrumpet.

Oh, he liked that last one. Finally, a chance to use a word he'd learned a few weeks ago with his word of the day calendar. *Farcical: of, relating to, or resembling farce; laughably inept.* He'd bought one for the last five years, and he'd tried to remember each and every new word. One never knew when they came in handy, like when one wanted to call their law professor a *know-it-all knobjockey*. Jesus, he was having way too much fun with these.

Then again, what else could he do? Evans was droning on about marriage law, which didn't interest Lagan that much to begin with, plus he'd missed the first hour and a half, as Evans had so subtly pointed out. He had no clue what the man was yakking about. Something about the division of marital assets, but whatever. He'd read the damn syllabus and catch up that way. He had a good forty-five minutes more of listening to

this, and then he'd have to get on his proverbial knees and beg Evans for an extension.

Or... Wait. He still had time, didn't he? Maybe he could try to... Hell, yes. He whipped out his notes and started typing like a madman.

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Killian had no idea what Lagan was doing, but he did know one thing: he wasn't listening to a word Killian was saying. Lagan's fingers were flying over the keyboard, barely making a sound, and Killian would've believed he was taking notes for class if not for the papers on his desk that he kept looking at. He never so much as glanced at Killian. No, Lagan wasn't paying attention at all.

Should he call him out on it? If he asked him a question now, chances were that Lagan would have no idea what he was talking about. It would be a prime opportunity to embarrass him, rub it in that he had no business being here in the first place. Why on earth someone would pay this much money for a law school, only to squander the opportunity was a mystery to Killian. So far, Lagan had only gotten mediocre grades, a B-minus being the highest. What was he even doing here?

Killian had given this lecture on marriage law so many times by now that he operated on automatic pilot, the words falling from his lips without any conscious effort. The downside was that he had way too much brainpower to devote to Lagan, which annoyed him to no end. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't stop himself. Every single class, he had this absurd obsession with this one student.

But no, he wouldn't embarrass him. Not more than he already had. He wasn't proud of the icy reception he'd given Lagan. From his disheveled appearance, it was clear something had gone wrong on the way over, and yet Killian

hadn't been able to make himself care. Maybe if it had been the first time, if this had been an exception rather than one in a continuous string of unfortunate incidents, of one excuse after another, he would've found empathy. Maybe.

Sure, this was a part-time program, and most of his students worked full time. Life happened. He got that, and he never made a big deal out of the occasional extension. But Lagan had made excuses into an art form, coming up with something different every single time. After the last time, Killian had vowed he wouldn't give him another one. At some point, Lagan had to start taking law school seriously.

Then it hit Killian. Oh, he knew *exactly* what Lagan was doing. His research paper was due today, and Killian would bet good money on him trying to finish it during class. The audacity. Did the guy think he could compose a quality paper during class? It only proved once more Lagan wasn't taking his studies seriously at all. It shouldn't surprise Killian, not after all the previous incidents, and yet he was disappointed.

He finished his class, answering some questions, then wrapping it all up. Lagan had been typing the whole time, confirming Killian's suspicions about what he was doing. Only when most of his classmates were filing out did he look up. With a somewhat dazed expression, he shook his head, stretched his arms above his head, and leaned back, yawning. The move made his T-shirt ride up, exposing a tantalizing strip of smooth skin.

Killian ground his teeth. Like he needed a reminder of what that body looked like. It might have been nine years ago, but he hadn't forgotten. And it didn't look like Lagan had changed all that much. He'd gotten older in his face, but he still had that same tight, slender body that moved with so much grace and fluidity. Killian still responded to him the way he had when he'd first met him—and he hated himself for it. Never again would he give in to such raw attraction. Especially not with a student. It would be history repeating itself, and he wasn't quite *that* stupid.

He had worked hard to rebuild his life and his reputation. Being a professor brought respect, and he'd done everything

he could to be worthy of it. He attended conferences, wrote the occasional article, volunteered, and above all, he stayed out of trouble. No scandal would be attached to his name ever again.

Killian waited until everyone else had left, then crossed his arms and sat down on the edge of his desk. “Did you get your paper done?”

Lagan raised his chin. “Yes. I submitted it two minutes ago.”

“I’m sure I don’t need to warn you that the chances of you getting a passable grade based on the work you did during class are abysmally low.”

Lagan narrowed his eyes, his jaw tight. “And here I thought you’d be judging the papers on their quality and merits, not on how much time each student spent on them or how long before the deadline they were uploaded.”

Killian’s cheeks heated. Goddamit, how did this student have the power to make him blush when nothing and no one else could? “Of course I will. I’m merely advising you that the chances of success are small.”

Lagan shrugged. “I haven’t failed a class yet.”

“That depends on your definition of failure.”

“All my grades have been passing. I haven’t had to redo one single exam or paper.”

Now it was Killian’s time to shrug. “If that’s what you call succeeding. Personally, I would set the bar a little higher.”

“Passing is passing. I wish I had the time and the energy to go for an A-plus in everything, but alas. I have a full-time job and a life.”

“As does everyone else in this class, and yet they somehow seem to manage. No reputable law firm will want to hire you if you graduate from law school with such a low average.”

Lagan quirked an eyebrow, putting his hands on his hips. “You mean like Roberts, Smith & Reed? The highly rated law firm I work for right now?”

Killian choked on his breath. “You work for Roberts, Smith & Reed?”

“Yes. I’m a paralegal.”

“Right. And they’re satisfied with their return on investment considering your grades?”

Lagan frowned. “Return on investment?”

“I assume they’re paying for your law degree.”

“Like hell they are. Have you never worked for one of those firms? Lawyers are a dime a dozen, but good paralegals are rare. They’re not happy at all about me working my way up. Nothing would please them more than me staying a paralegal for the rest of my life. We get paid a tenth of what lawyers make, and yet we do all the work.”

He was right, of course, much to Killian’s chagrin. Killian *had* worked for one of those firms, and good paralegals had been the exception. Most had been glorified administrative assistants or secretaries, well willing but lacking the knowledge to do the job well. “I worked for Ashley, Smith, Snyder & Cooper, one of the most prestigious law firms in Boston. You didn’t think they would let just anybody teach here, did you?”

Lagan crossed his arms as well, mimicking Killian’s pose. “I don’t know. Is there no truth in the adage that those who can’t teach?”

He was baiting him. Lagan was deliberately pushing his buttons. Yet even knowing that, Killian had a hard time keeping his temper in check. What was wrong with him that this guy got to him so easily? Was his ego that bruised from one rejection? “I can assure you I’m highly qualified for this job.”

God, could he sound any more like a stuck-up, prim snob? For some reason, Lagan brought out the worst in him.

“I would say I’ll take your word for it, but I’m pretty sure that’s not what a good lawyer would do. After all, you were the one who hammered on checking all our facts, dotting all our i’s, and crossing all our t’s.”

“Feel free to verify with the school. They should be able to provide you with my résumé and qualifications.”

“I might do that. But to answer your earlier question, my goal in becoming a lawyer is not to work for a fancy law firm. I want to offer legal assistance to those who can’t afford good lawyers. Maybe become a public defender or take on clients who need expertise but don’t have the money.”

How did Killian counter that? Sure, what Lagan had said had a ring of lofty naïveté, but at the same time, he couldn’t judge his intentions. He settled on “I hope you will.”

Lagan pushed himself off his desk. “It may take me a while to get there, but I can guarantee you I will. But I’d better head home. I have an early alarm again tomorrow.”

Killian was tongue-tied, frantically searching for something sharp to say, some witty repartee that would gain him the upper hand again. Or at least make him feel like he wasn’t coming out of this as an utter loser. But he had nothing, and after a brief pause in which Lagan looked at him quizzically, Lagan shrugged and walked out.

Not until Lagan’s footsteps had died off did Killian turn around and put his hands on his desk, forcing a few deep breaths into his lungs. What the hell was wrong with him? How could he let one guy get to him so badly? It was pathetic, even more considering that once upon a time, Killian had been an absolute beast in court, a lawyer with a reputation for being brilliant and brutal. Where had that man gone?

No, strike that question. He knew the answer to that all too well, and he wasn’t going there. Not today. He had rebuilt his life, and he wouldn’t let one man upend everything he had worked so hard for. Not again.

He packed up his things and shoved them into his Italian leather briefcase, a last reminder of his previous life he hadn’t been able to let go of. He’d bought it for himself after winning his first big case, and even though that memory was bittersweet, tainted along with everything else, he still wanted to hang on to it. He’d felt on top of the world that day,

invincible and indestructible. Such arrogant folly, but that was hindsight.

He flipped off the lights and left the classroom, his footsteps echoing through the empty hallways. He greeted Mr. Fox, then hurried through the drizzle to his Porsche Taycan. The parking lot was almost empty, but he wouldn't have had an issue finding his car anyway, considering the color he'd picked. The official name was Olympic Blue, which he thought rather fitting for the area where he lived, and he'd fallen in love with the baby-blue shade when he'd seen it in the showroom.

She purred like a kitten, courtesy of the electric engine. Since Killian only drove locally and rarely ventured more than a hundred miles out of Seattle, an electric car had seemed perfect to him. He carefully drove out off the parking lot, on the lookout for people popping up from between cars in the dark.

When he turned out of the lot, his headlights illuminated a single figure sitting hunched over on the bench near the bus stop. Lagan. Killian recognized him instantly.

He hesitated. Should he offer him a ride? He wasn't even sure if they lived anywhere close to each other. Probably not, considering he lived in an apartment building Lagan would never be able to afford on his salary. But the sight of that lonely, shivering figure tugged at his heartstrings, proving he wasn't quite heartless. Yet.

With a soft curse, he pulled over and opened the passenger window. "Do you need a ride?"

Lagan widened his eyes, but he quickly composed himself again. "I'm fine."

"You're soaking wet, it's dark and chilly, and you're sitting still. Sounds like a recipe for catching a cold to me."

"A cold is a virus. It's an urban legend that you can catch a cold from being drenched."

Of course Lagan had to argue with him. "Do you want a ride or not?"

Lagan hesitated. “Where do you live?”

“Why?”

“Because I’m not about to send you on a ride in the wrong direction.”

“That would be my choice, wouldn’t it?”

They stared at each other, and Killian capitulated first. “I’m south of uptown, a few blocks from the Needle.”

Lagan frowned. “So am I. First Avenue.”

Killian gaped at him. “You live on First Avenue? Which block?”

“The 2700 block. You?”

How the hell was Lagan able to afford that? Those apartments ran seven hundred grand and more. And that building was rather new, like the one he lived in, so Lagan hadn’t scooped it up for much less either. Curious. “2900 block, also First Avenue. Seeing as I’m in the same street as you, will you now accept a ride?”

Lagan sighed. “Yes. Thank you.”

The latter sounded as if it had cost him to get the words out. It probably had. “Don’t mention it. I would do this for any other student as well.”

Lagan got into the car, dropped his backpack between his feet, and buckled up. “Yeah, somehow I didn’t think you were giving me preferential treatment.”

Killian clenched his jaw as he pulled away from the curb. “I strive to treat all my students the same.”

Lagan snorted. “Sure you do.”

“You think I don’t?” He shot him a sideways glance, surprised to meet Lagan’s eyes.

“I think we both know you’ve had it out for me from day one.”

“I don’t have it out for you.” Did he? Had his weird obsession with Lagan manifested in Killian treating him

differently?

“You could’ve fooled me. You’re always on my ass about my grades or my attitude or whatever.”

“I want you to succeed,” Killian said stiffly, maneuvering the car through the dark and wet streets.

“I *am* succeeding, just not according to your definition.”

“You consider getting a B-minus or a C-plus succeeding?”

“Yes.”

“But you could do so much better. You’re smart but not dedicated enough.”

Lagan let out a long sigh. “Is that what you think, that I’m not dedicated enough? That I don’t take law school seriously enough?”

“I don’t know what else to think at this point. You’ve shown promise, but you don’t give your studies and assignments enough of your attention. Law school has to be your sole focus, or you’ll never make it.”

Lagan was quiet for a long time, not even reacting when Killian looked sideways a few times. Had he said something wrong? He wanted the best for Lagan. Why was that so wrong? He strived for all his students to become successful, and Lagan had shown he was capable of much better than what he’d achieved so far.

“Third building on the right,” Lagan said as they entered their street. Killian parked in front of the building. Lagan unbuckled his seat belt, then turned half and faced Killian. “I’m trying to believe you when you say you want the best for me, but it’s hard when all I hear is criticism. Contrary to what you think, I’m doing the best I can. If that’s not good enough for you, that sounds like a you problem, not mine.”

Before Killian could respond, Lagan got out of the car. “Thanks for the ride, Professor Evans.”

Fuck, he was late again. He'd missed the bus by only a few seconds—it was rounding the corner when he came sprinting to the bus stop—and the next one hadn't come till fifteen minutes later. Lagan hurried into the classroom, which was buzzing with voices instead of Professor Evans lecturing. Students had split up into groups, and Evans was leaning over the table of one of the groups, explaining something Lagan couldn't catch. His dark blue dress pants were stretched tightly around his ass, and Lagan swallowed. The fact that the man was such a dickhead and yet hot as fuck was *so* unfair.

He grabbed a chair and joined the group closest to the door. Maybe Evans wouldn't notice him being late? Amid the group sat Sylvia, a fellow paralegal, who he'd shared a few conversations with. She looked up and cleared her throat. "No offense, Lagan, but could you find a different group? Professor Evans said we should have groups of four, and we're already with four."

Lagan glanced around the room, counting the people around each table. "It seems all groups already have four, so I'm sure it'll be fine if I join you."

Uncomfortable glances from the group made his stomach churn. What was going on? Did they not want him in their group? But he'd never had an issue with any of them.

"We'd rather have you join a different table," Stephen, one of the older students, said.

And just like that, Lagan was back in the group home on his first day, walking into the room he was supposed to share with a bunch of other boys. Two big boys had gotten up from their bunks immediately, positioning themselves in front of him. “We’re full,” they had declared. “You can’t sleep here.”

Tears had burned behind his eyes, but he’d held them back, though it had cost him. “Director Berringer said this would be my bedroom,” he’d managed.

“Then you’ll have to sleep on the floor. We’re full.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, are you two at it again? Stop bullying the new kid.”

A much smaller kid had come forward, eyes blazing and his fists planted firmly on his hips.

“Stay out of it, Nordin. You can’t protect all of them,” the biggest of the two bullies had snarled.

Nordin had shrugged. “Maybe not, but I’m claiming this one.”

He’d grabbed Lagan by the hand and pulled him forward. In the back of the room, he’d introduced Lagan to two other boys, Hadley and Jaren. And that had been it. Ever since, the four of them had been inseparable.

But Nordin wasn’t here to save him now. This time, he was on his own. No matter how old one got, rejection always hit hard. He fought to keep his face blank. “Okay. I’ll find a different group.”

“It’s not that we don’t like you, Lagan,” Sylvia said. “But first of all, we’ve got a group of people here who are all striving for an A-plus. No offense, but you seem to have different goals. And for some reason, Professor Evans doesn’t like you, and we’re afraid that will influence our grade as well.”

How could he dispute either of those two statements? Both were true. At least he hadn’t imagined Evans’s animosity toward him, and others had picked up on it as well, but that was only a small consolation. It did leave him in a pickle.

Should he try to join another group? What if they didn't want him either? Bile rose in his throat.

He pushed his chair back. "I understand."

"Is there a problem?"

Shit, Evans. The man had impeccable timing as always. He popped up right next to Lagan, towering over him in his chair. How fitting.

"No, no problem at all," Lagan said between his teeth, avoiding looking at Evans. He wouldn't give the man that satisfaction.

"Our group is full, Professor, so we asked Lagan to find a different group," Stephen said.

Lagan looked up. How would Evans react to that? He had to see the truth as well, right?

Just like Lagan had done, Evans did a quick survey of the room. His eyes were pensive as they landed on Lagan. "It seems all tables are full, leaving you the odd one out. I suppose that's what happens when you show up late."

God help him. He couldn't lose his temper now, no matter how much he wanted to smack him. "No, Professor Evans, I beg to differ. That's what happens when you divide an odd number of people into groups of four. Even if I *had* been on time, someone still would've been left out."

"You can join our group." Joel, another student Lagan had chatted with a few times, waved him over. "We don't mind having five people in our group."

"Well, that's settled, then." Lagan turned his back on Evans and the students who didn't want him, and walked over to Joel's table. Thank god for Joel. Had he clued in on what was going on? It didn't matter. He could kiss him for inviting him to their table.

"Now that Mr. Foster has found a home as well, I expect you all to start working on your projects," Evans said, his voice as icy as ever.

Seconds later, low murmurs floated in the class once again.

“Thank you,” Lagan said softly to Joel.

“No problem. Man, that was all kinds of awkward and uncomfortable.”

The three others, two girls and another guy, all nodded, looks of sympathy on their faces.

Lagan hesitated. “They didn’t want me in the group because they were afraid I would drag their grades down.”

He didn’t mention Evans. Hopefully, they would figure that part out themselves.

Joel shrugged. “None of us are A-plus students, so we couldn’t care less as long as we pass. I mean, law school is all good and well, but we also have a life, you know? Like, I’m a dad with two kids under five, so I have to squeeze study time in whenever I can. I don’t have the luxury of striving for perfect grades.”

“Same,” one of the girls said. “I have an eight-month-old and a seven-year-old. I’m happy if I get six hours of sleep. I’m Dawn, by the way.”

Relief filled Lagan. “Lagan.”

Dawn chuckled. “Oh, we all know your name... *Mr. Foster.*”

Her imitation of Evans’s haughty tone whenever he addressed Lagan was spot on.

Lagan grinned. “I’m glad to hear I’m not the only one. I don’t have kids, but I work full time as a paralegal, and my job is very demanding.”

“What firm do you work for?” Dawn asked.

“Roberts, Smith & Reed. I’ve been with them for five years now.”

“Oh my god, that’s so funny. I work for Douglas & King. We go up against you guys a lot in court.”

Lagan’s grin widened. “Tell me about it. My boss, Oliver Brewer, has this constant sense of rivalry with a few guys in your firm. He’s always trying to outsmart them.”

“He’s so hot, though.” Dawn fanned herself. “I wouldn’t mind spending time with him at all.”

“He’s definitely attractive.” Lagan shrugged. “He’s not playing for my team, though.”

“You’re gay?” Joel asked.

Lagan had been asked that question many times, and by now, he had a finely tuned radar for whether someone meant it as an insult or a genuine question. In Joel’s case, he detected no malice whatsoever. “I’m bi.”

“Cool,” Joel said. “I’m gay, married for five years now to my high school sweetheart, Chris.”

Wow, it seemed Lagan had ended up in the right group after all. “That’s awesome, man. Anyway, I missed the assignment, so what are we doing?”

“We have to do a group research project on any topic having to do with family law. Evans said it could be related to marriage, divorce, testaments, and wills, you name it.” Dawn looked at her notes. “We’re supposed to combine a judicial review with the social effects of that law and whether the law has proven to work or needs updating.”

“We were thinking maybe gay marriage, since that hasn’t been codified into federal law yet?” Joel said.

Lagan leaned back, tapping his chin. He didn’t mind diving into gay marriage, but it was a bit obvious. They’d be better off to pick a lesser-known topic, something they could maybe surprise Evans with. Something like... “How do you guys feel about foster care and the laws surrounding foster kids?”

Chloe, the other girl in their group, quirked an eyebrow. “How did you come up with that? It’s not a common topic.”

“I like it,” Joel said. “Especially because it’s not something that’s overdone. Maybe we’ll get points for originality.”

Lagan saw no reason to keep his motivation a secret. He wasn’t ashamed of his background. “I’m a former foster kid. I

grew up in foster care in Chicago, so I have firsthand experience.”

“Oh, wow.” Chloe’s eyes had grown wide. “That can’t have been easy.”

“It wasn’t, but I’m lucky I made friends there, and we supported each other. Lots of foster kids aren’t that fortunate.”

“I think it would be a great topic for us.” Dawn tapped her pencil on the table. “There’s certainly been enough in the media about things that went horribly wrong in foster care, like that family in California that ended up abusing all their foster kids. They had, like, nine kids are so?”

Lagan nodded. “The statistics on abuse in foster care are horrific. For example, more than half of child trafficking victims came from foster care or group homes. And a study showed that children in foster care are four times more likely to be sexually abused. When we take into account that a lot of the kids don’t even report the abuse they suffered, the numbers have to be much higher. The system is failing foster kids.”

He had to be careful not to climb on his soapbox. Few topics were so special to him as this one, and he knew the numbers and statistics all too well.

“I’m all for doing our project on foster care. Sounds like there’d be plenty to say about it.” Joel leaned forward. “Is everyone on board with this?”

A look around the table revealed no one had objections.

“Again, I missed all the specifics, so how long do we have for this project, and what should the final result look like?” Lagan wanted to know.

Dawn looked at her notes again. “We have four weeks, and we have to present our conclusions in class. It doesn’t need to be a group presentation, so one of us can present our case. But the paper itself needs to be written by all four of us, and we need to specify who wrote what.”

Four weeks. That was doable, right? “Okay, sounds good. What angle do we want to take, and does anyone have any preferences for what they want to research and write?”

They spent the rest of the class brainstorming topics, and by the end, they had a solid concept, the tasks were divided, and for once, Lagan was truly excited about a project. He'd suggested writing a chapter from a foster kid's point of view, and everyone had agreed that sounded good.

"Mr. Foster, a word, please?" Evans asked as Lagan was about to walk out of the classroom.

He clenched his teeth. Now what?

Evans waited until everyone had left. "Mr. Foster, your tardiness is not only becoming a habit but a problem as well. If you keep interrupting my class by coming in late, I have no choice but to mark you as absent."

If he did that, Lagan would automatically fail the class. Evans couldn't do that to him. "That's not fair! I was only—"

"You were twelve minutes late today. Last week, more than an hour and a half."

"My car broke down. And I missed the bus by seconds."

Evans crossed his arms. "Yet everyone else seems to be able to get here before class starts. I can't keep making exceptions for you, Mr. Foster."

Making exceptions for him? Singling him out, he meant. Picking on him. What the fuck had he ever done to Evans that he deserved this kind of treatment? "I'll do my best to be on time next time, Professor."

"See that you do. The next time will have consequences for your academic record, Mr. Foster, and with your current GPA, that does not bode well for your academic future with this institution."

Without saying another word, Lagan walked out. He had to, or he would say things he'd regret later.

Insufferable idiot.

Cocky Cumwipe.

He'd show him what he could do. He'd fucking ace that group project, even if he didn't sleep for days to get it done.

Evans would have to eat his words. Lagan had worked too hard to become a lawyer to see it all go up in smoke because of one man.

Two-faced Twatwaffle.

Judgmental Jizzstain.

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Killian dreaded presentations of group projects. They might be an invaluable tool in education and a necessary practice to provide students with experience in presenting, but he always suffered from a bad case of secondhand embarrassment.

Take Julie, the sweet and smart girl who was currently fighting her way through a presentation on laws surrounding surrogates. A fascinating topic, for sure, but oh my god, couldn't the group have picked someone else to do the presentation? Her cheeks were fiery red, sweat was pearling on her forehead, and even her throat and neck were blotchy. He felt so bad for her, and yet he had to sit there and take this torture without saying anything, suffering with every word. God help him. And her.

"Thank you, Julie," he said when she'd finally reached the finish line. Thank god that was over. Hopefully, his relief wasn't visible on his face. "It's clear you guys worked hard on this project."

They had, and their conclusions were correct, but please let their paper be better than the oral presentation because that had been pure hell. For Julie and for him. Not that he would say that out loud.

"Thank you, Professor Evans." Julie let out a sigh of relief as she found her seat again, comforted and affirmed by her group mates that she'd done a good job. On what planet? But Killian didn't say that either.

He checked his notes. Right. One more group to go, the one he'd saved for last. "Who will be doing the presentation for group five?"

Lagan's hand shot up, and Killian fought to hide his surprise. Why had they picked him? He would never admit it, but he had overheard the comments the first group had made about why they didn't want Lagan in their group. Up until then, he'd been able to convince himself he was treating Lagan a certain way because he wanted the best for him. After his eavesdropping, that illusion had been hard to maintain, and he'd taken a good, hard look in the mirror. Those comments had shamed him. He *was* treating Lagan differently, and he shouldn't. Still, group five was taking a risk by letting Lagan present.

"Ready when you are, Mr. Foster."

Lagan got up from his seat, holding a single piece of paper. "Thank you, Professor Evans."

He took the spot behind the lectern and adjusted the microphone so it was aimed at his mouth. One last look at his notes, a deep breath, and then he started. "In 2020, 213,964 children under eighteen entered foster care in the United States. A total of 493,000 kids under eighteen were living in foster care in 2020, a number that has been steady for years. With almost half a million children under eighteen in foster care, the government bears an incredible responsibility for the physical and mental well-being of these children, yet the numbers show that foster kids are at a highly increased risk for physical and mental abuse, for trafficking, for sexual abuse, and more. And when they exit foster care, former foster kids are at a much higher risk of becoming homeless or incarcerated and have a much lower chance of completing college and finding steady employment. In this presentation, we'll explore the laws and regulations that allow this systemic abuse to continue and propose changes that would bring improvements and set up these kids for success in life."

As openings went, that one blew Killian away. Foster care? That was a topic his students had never discussed. What had made Lagan's group pick that? It was far from a predictable

choice. And god, the numbers were staggering. Half a million children in foster care? He'd never given it much thought, but that was much more than he would've expected.

He leaned back and settled in for Lagan's presentation. In a clear, systematic fashion, Lagan walked them through horrific statistics on abuse in foster care, including evidence from cases the media had reported on. Killian's stomach twisted as Lagan outlined the physical and sexual abuse these kids had suffered, sometimes in more than one foster family. Abhorrent.

Lagan spoke with passion, barely consulting his notes, and Killian couldn't help but be impressed. He was good. He spoke clearly, smoothly delivering his lines while managing to sound sincere and invested in the subject.

After discussing statistics, Lagan provided a thorough overview of the laws regulating foster care, both on national and state level, then moved on to propose improvements. "The bottom line is that funding is a major issue in almost every state, resulting in understaffing in key positions, low oversight on compliance, and not enough manpower to investigate reports from foster kids about supposed abuse. As we mentioned, some things can be improved by changing laws, but for the most part, it comes down to funding. So at the end of the day, as a society, we have to ask ourselves how much the well-being of foster kids is worth to us. Surely, it has to be worth more than what they're getting now, which is less than the crumbs of our attention *and* our budget."

Lagan nodded at that last statement, the closing line of his presentation, then raised his chin. A pregnant pause hung in the room, but then applause broke out, with all students cheering Lagan on. No wonder. That had been a passionate plea as well as a sound legal overview. Killian hated to admit it, but it was by far the best presentation of all the groups, and judging by the thunderous applause, everyone thought the same.

Killian waited until the class had become silent again. "Thank you for that solid presentation, Mr. Foster. Your group has done an excellent job of combining legal research with the

human interest angle. An impressive piece of work. I look forward to reading your paper.”

An audible gasp traveled through the class, another sharp reminder that the students had picked up on Killian’s treatment of Lagan. His words of praise were so exceptional and unexpected that everyone noticed. The heavy, bitter weight of guilt settled in his stomach. He’d failed not only as a teacher but also as a human being. Again.

Lagan blinked a few times, then shook his head as if he wanted to make sure he wasn’t dreaming. “Thank you, Professor Evans.”

At least he wasn’t commenting on it. A small relief, but Killian would take it.

But as Lagan walked back to his seat, he looked over his shoulder at Killian and said, “That’s unexpected but highly welcome praise from you.”

Killian clenched his jaw. The audacity of that statement couldn’t go unchallenged, and yet he wasn’t sure how to respond. Lagan was right, and that was the damn problem. As much as Killian wanted to contest his words, he couldn’t, and everyone in the room knew it, including Lagan. He gritted his teeth and let it pass.

“That concludes class for today. You have one more week to finalize your papers. Please make sure you hand them in on time, using the student portal. No extensions will be granted for this project. I’ll see you next week.”

The students were slow to leave the room this time, many of them walking up to Lagan and complimenting him on his presentation. The man must have sore shoulders by now from all the slaps on the back he’d gotten. His beaming smile was a sight to behold, and Killian had trouble looking away.

Lagan was peering at one of the other students from beneath his dark lashes, his cheeks still flushed, his lips shiny from licking them, rocking back and forth as if a restless energy was buzzing through him. How Killian wanted to cover that body with his own and help him release that pent-up

energy. He'd kiss that pretty red mouth until his lips were throbbing and swollen, suck on his tongue until they were both out of breath, and then he'd...

Stop it. Jesus, he had to stop thinking about Lagan like that. Nothing good could ever come from that. He forced himself to take out his phone and pretend to check on something, but his eyes weren't even seeing until he realized he'd pulled up his fitness app. With a soft curse, he closed it again. He needed to get a grip on himself.

He waited until everyone was gone, then slowly made his way out, turning off the lights as he went. The last thing he wanted was to run into students, especially Lagan.

"You did a fantastic job with your presentation."

Killian had no trouble recognizing the voice. Morris, originally from New York, had a sharp accent that was easy to identify. And he had to be talking to Lagan, the very person Killian had wanted to avoid. They were around the corner of the hallway, probably, just out of sight for Killian, and he halted. He shouldn't listen in, and yet he couldn't stop himself.

"Thank you. I'm relieved and excited it went so well."

"Even Professor Evans was full of praise. That speaks volumes."

Lagan chuckled. "I know, right?"

"Listen..." Morris's tone changed. "I know this comes out of the blue, but do you feel like celebrating it? With me, I mean?"

Killian's throat became dry. Morris was asking him out?

"Oh. Yeah, I wasn't expecting that. Erm..." Lagan cleared his throat. "What are we talking about here? Did you mean coffee, drinks, a dinner...?"

Morris laughed. "I guess I wasn't clear enough. I was inviting you to come back to my place and celebrate. In bed. We can negotiate positions, though I wouldn't be opposed to drilling you into my mattress."

Holy shit, Morris wasn't asking Lagan on a date. He was asking him for a hookup. Why on earth had Killian stopped? Now he had to torture himself by listening to this.

Or did he?

On impulse, he stepped forward and rounded the corner. "Can I suggest you further arrange your hookups outside, Mr. Foster, so I can close up?"

Morris turned beet red, stammered some kind of apology without meeting Killian's eyes, then hightailed it out of there. Lagan let out a deep sigh as he put his hands on his hips and faced Killian. "Was that necessary?"

"Was anything in my question factually wrong? Did I not overhear you arranging a hookup?"

"You didn't. What you heard was Morris proposing one. You didn't hear me arrange anything, and you interrupted before I could have given him my reaction."

"Are you trying to tell me you were going to turn him down?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. He's not my type. Besides, he has complications written all over him. He's not hook-up material. He wants a boyfriend, and I'm not that person."

"Why not?"

Lagan quirked an eyebrow. "I'm pretty sure my sex and dating life falls outside the purview of your responsibilities as my professor."

Of course it did, and Killian should never have started this conversation. But now that he had, how could he worm his way out? "It is if you make a habit out of hooking up with your fellow students and then dumping them. I don't need that kind of drama in my class."

Lord, he'd never made a weaker argument in his life, and judging by the wicked little grin curving Lagan's mouth, his opponent had picked up on that as well.

"That makes zero sense, considering I've never hooked up with anyone in class, and I wasn't going to. The plan was to let

Morris down gently.”

Killian was too far in to retreat now. “All I’m saying is that you might want to focus more on your studies and less on getting laid.”

Shit. He couldn’t believe that had come out of his mouth. What was *wrong* with him?

Lagan’s eyes flashed. “And *you* might want to focus more on treating all students equally and sticking to what concerns you than getting involved in my sex life.”

Killian balled his hands into fists. Lagan was right, but how could Killian admit that? It would mean a defeat for him, and he wasn’t a man who let others best him. Then again, he’d also always prided himself on being fair, and he’d been anything but that with Lagan. “You’re right,” he brought out between clenched teeth.

Lagan’s mouth dropped open. “What?”

“You heard me. I did treat you unfairly, and it’s none of my concern who you sleep with.”

Lagan narrowed his eyes. “What’s behind this?”

“What do you mean?”

“Why are you being nice to me all of a sudden?”

“Nice? If you call this nice, you need to raise your standards. I’m conceding a point that you rightfully made. Nothing nice about it.”

“So you’re admitting you’ve been a total dick to me?”

If he ground his teeth any harder, he’d crunch them to pieces. “I’m not admitting anything of the kind, merely acknowledging that I may have treated you differently than others.”

“May have? That sounds like a nonapology apology.”

If Lagan showed that calm persistency in court, he’d make a brilliant lawyer. “I did treat you differently.”

“Yeah, you did.”

“I shouldn’t have.”

“What made you realize it?”

Of course he had to ask that question. Lagan wouldn’t let him off the hook, and on some level, Killian respected him for it. “I overheard why that first group didn’t want you on their team. The A-plus reason was fair, but the other one was on me, and I do regret that.”

Lagan’s expression hardened. “You should. It wasn’t the first time I got rejected, and I’ve learned to deal with it, but for another student, that might’ve been a blow they’d never have recovered from.”

How rich that this guy was getting on his case about rejection. The irony was almost too heavy to take. “Duly noted. Do keep in mind that people in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones, though. Before you lecture me on rejection, you might want to examine your own behavior a little closer.”

Satisfied he’d gotten at least a last good line in, he walked off.

Every Friday evening, Lagan and his brothers had dinner together. They rarely missed it, true emergencies the only exception. Well, Nordin was traveling on occasion, but even he tried his hardest to be back on time for their weekly meet-up.

This week, they were gathering in Reid and Jaren's loft. Lagan loved that place. They lived in an old industrial building that had been converted into apartments. The walls were partially the original bricks, and the ceilings were at least eight feet high, with the one bedroom and bathroom on an open mezzanine. The whole effect was stunning.

Plus, it was spacey, unlike his own apartment. Sure, his place was one hell of an improvement over the cramped one-bedroom he'd shared with Hadley, but it was still much smaller than this or the luxurious mansion Hadley now lived in with his billionaire boyfriend, Sebastian.

Every other week, the boyfriends would join them, but this Friday, it was the four of them, Lagan and his brothers. Jaren had cooked some super healthy lentil stew that looked unappealing but turned out to be much tastier than Lagan had expected. And it was full of fiber, as Jaren had stressed at least twice. He was on a health kick, eating obscure green stuff. Good for him, though Lagan wasn't sure why they had to suffer with him, but whatever.

"Do you and Sebastian have any travels planned?" Lagan asked Hadley.

“Nothing yet, but Sebastian is being secretive again, so I’m sure I’ll be whisked away to some exotic location sometime soon.” Hadley rolled his eyes, but he was beaming, the love for his boyfriend radiating off him.

“It’s such a hard life you lead now,” Nordin commented dryly. “Thoughts and prayers, brother dear. Thoughts and prayers.”

“Sometimes I can’t believe this has become my reality, you know? It feels like only weeks ago that I had this massive bucket list I thought would always be a pipe dream, and now Sebastian is helping me check off one thing after another.”

“The man is all too happy to spend his money on you rather than on material things,” Jaren said.

He wasn’t wrong. Sebastian was richer than Midas, but Lagan had gotten the impression he hadn’t been truly happy until he’d met Hadley.

“Which reminds me...” Hadley tapped his chin. “Sebastian asked me to tell you he’s looking for new LGBTQ+- friendly charities to support, other than the usual suspects. Apparently, he needs to donate more for taxes or something. So if you guys know of any, let him know.”

Lagan sat up straight. “Does it have to be a specific charity aimed at helping LGBTQ+ people? Or is the requirement that the charity is queer accepting?”

“The latter. He wants to make sure he’s not sponsoring any activities that aren’t inclusive. Why?”

“The legal aid clinic I volunteer for could use some more funding. Our director is transgender, and we have a very diverse clientele. I think word-of-mouth has driven a lot of queer people to our clinic because they know they’ll find acceptance with us.”

“That sounds like a good fit. I hate to be this guy, but could you send Sebastian an email with a brief pitch? Or have your director contact him? I prefer to stay out of this, as I don’t want Sebastian to feel like he couldn’t say no to you if he wanted to, for some reason.”

Lagan nodded. "I'll talk it over with Chelsea, the director, and let her decide what the best approach is."

"I didn't know you still volunteered there," Nordin said. "Where do you find the time?"

"It's something my firm supports. Every employee gets two hours a week paid to volunteer in a legal aid clinic or something similar. I take off from work every other Thursday afternoon and spend it in the clinic. It's not enough, and I'd love to do more, but that's impossible with my current schedule."

"Yeah, I'll say. How do you even manage to get laid?"

What was up with everybody's interest in his sex life all of a sudden? Was he wearing a sign that said he wasn't getting any or something? Still, he couldn't get upset with Nordin, not when he knew his brother was being genuine. "To be honest, I don't."

Nordin frowned. "You're not hooking up? For how long?"

Lagan shrugged. "I don't know. Couple of weeks. Months, maybe? I don't have the time. Every time I find myself thinking about a hookup, I'm already tired at the idea of having to dress up and prep and get myself ready. It's too much effort."

"Oh my god, that sounds so sad," Jaren said, his eyes wide. "Do we need to stage an intervention?"

Lagan couldn't hold back the sharp reply on the tip of his tongue. "Not all of us have a rich boyfriend, you know?"

Silence descended, and Lagan immediately regretted his barb. He'd sounded like a jealous asshole, and that wasn't who he was. At all.

"Are you okay financially?" Nordin asked, a frown marring his forehead.

"I'm a lot better than I was before, thanks to Sebastian and the ridiculously low rent he's charging me."

"If it were up to him, he wouldn't charge you rent at all," Hadley said. "You insisted on paying him."

“Yeah, because otherwise, it would be charity. Just because he’s rich doesn’t mean he has to pay for everything. I don’t want to take advantage of him.”

“How would that be taking advantage of him?” Hadley looked puzzled. “He offered it himself. You didn’t ask him for it.”

“It would still be charity.”

“And what is so wrong with that?” Jaren asked. “Not to make this about us, but do you realize how hard it is for us at times to see you struggle and not be allowed to help you?”

“You pay my tuition. How is that not helping me?”

Jaren shook his head. “You helped me pay mine. We agreed you worked so I could go to school, and I would pay your tuition once I had a job. That’s not helping you. That’s settling a debt.”

“But what else would I need?”

“A new car, for starters?” Hadley’s tone was sharper than Lagan had expected, betraying his emotions. “You know Bertha needs to go into retirement. Any money you now invest in getting her to run again is wasted.”

Lagan’s cheeks heated. “I’ve already sold her to a junk dealer who gave me two hundred bucks for her, which was more than I had counted on.”

“So how are you getting around?” Hadley wanted to know.

“The bus. There’s a bus stop one block from my office, and getting to the university is easy as long as I leave on time. It might even save me money.”

“I don’t like it.” Jaren was looking at Hadley and Nordin, and judging by their faces, they agreed with him. “Why not let us buy you a newer car? It doesn’t have to be an expensive, brand-new one. Just something reliable so you don’t have to depend on public transport. You know that’s going to be a pain in the ass in the winter.”

“I told you I don’t want charity.”

Nordin slammed his hand on the table, his eyes spewing fire. “For fuck’s sake, Lagan, it’s not charity if it comes from your own brothers. You can’t expect us to stand by as you struggle and not do a damn thing about it.”

Lagan swallowed, his throat tight. Out of the four of them, Nordin had always been the one with a temper, though it wasn’t easily triggered. Nordin had a point, but how could Lagan accept help from his brothers without losing his self-respect? He’d always needed them, had always leaned on them. He couldn’t spend the rest of his life depending on them, especially now that they were establishing families of their own.

One day, Nordin would find someone as well, and his brothers would want to have kids. There was no room for Lagan in that scenario. And he couldn’t afford to have a partner, not when it came at the cost of his dream. He’d have to finish law school first and find a job. Maybe then he’d have time to find someone and settle down.

“You know being independent is important to me,” he said softly. “I have to stand on my own two feet, like you all do.”

“That’s not a fair comparison,” Hadley protested. “Until I met Sebastian, I was in the same boat as you. Although in my case, it wasn’t a matter of being independent. I happened to get lucky that I fell in love with a wealthy guy.”

“Same.” Jaren sighed. “Well, not entirely. My previous job did pay well, but I also had a fiancée to support, and she had expensive habits. Between that and your tuition, Lagan, I didn’t have a hell of a lot left either. That only changed because I met Reid.”

“How about you, Nordin? Care to enlighten us on where your money is coming from?”

Oh, Lagan was well aware he was hitting below the belt, but he didn’t care. His brothers were backing him into a corner, not listening to what he was saying. Why did they keep insisting on him accepting charity when he had made it crystal clear he didn’t want it? He didn’t need them. He could do it on his own.

Nordin froze, and his expression changed into one Lagan had never seen on his face. So hard, almost cruel. It was like looking at a stranger. “You know there’s a reason I keep the three of you out of my business. It’s to protect you. If something ever goes wrong, I want you to be able to swear with your hand on a Bible that you didn’t know anything, that you had no knowledge whatsoever of my activities.”

Lagan’s shoulders dropped, and he cringed. Nordin had the ability to make him feel so, so small. “That was out of line. I’m sorry.”

The hard look on Nordin’s face disappeared as quickly as it had shown up. “I know you didn’t mean it. We’ll back off, okay?”

“Thank you.”

“Just promise me that you’ll ask for help when you truly need it,” Hadley said. “Don’t allow your pride to make you act stupid and irresponsible.”

Lagan forced a smile. “I promise. I have that credit card Sebastian gave me, remember? The one for emergencies? I don’t know what the limit is on that, but I’m sure it’ll allow me to get a taxi or whatever when I need it.”

Hadley snorted. “Dude, you could buy a car with that and have money left. He put a fifty-thousand-dollar limit on it.”

Lagan gasped. “Is he fucking insane?”

“No, he’s fucking rich. Babe, that money is nothing to him. Absolutely nothing.”

Lagan couldn’t even wrap his head around the truth of that statement. How could one not miss that much money? It was insane. “Don’t expect me to ever max it out.”

Hadley patted his shoulder. “Yeah, I didn’t think you would.”

“How are the studies going?” Jaren asked. Thank god for him changing the subject.

“Good. I finished a group project this week, and we got an A, so that was a welcome surprise.”

“That’s amazing!” Jaren grinned. “Must’ve been a different professor than that guy who hates you so much.”

“It was his class, actually. And even better, he sort of apologized afterward for treating me differently than the others.”

“He did? Holy shit, that must’ve been a shock for you.”

“What made it even more epic was that he’d commented first on this other guy trying to score a hookup with me and that I should focus on my studies and not sex.”

Silence descended. “Hold up.” Nordin frowned. “He remarked on your sex life?”

“He overheard this guy called Morris asking me if I wanted to hook up with him. Professor Evans interrupted us, which chased off Morris. Then he told me I should focus on my academics and not sex. Or something along those lines.”

“That guy is way out of order! What you do in your private time is none of his goddamn business.” Jaren was getting worked up. “You should report him to the school. You could make a case for sexual harassment.”

“Sexual harassment? No, it wasn’t. Inappropriate, yes, but he wasn’t harassing me.”

“But he shouldn’t even have brought it up. How is it okay for a professor to comment on his student’s sexual activities?”

“I set him straight, and then he acknowledged he was out of line. That’s enough for me.”

“It shouldn’t be. You should file a complaint against this guy. What if he does this to another student as well?”

Unexpected anger bubbled up inside Lagan. “He won’t. He’s nothing but professional with everyone else. It’s me he seems to take issue with.”

“Ah.” That one word was thick with meaning, and Lagan frowned. What was Nordin implying?

“What do you mean, ‘ah’?” Jaren asked before Lagan could.

Nordin smiled smugly. “Don’t you see it? The professor has the hots for Lagan.”

What? “Are you out of your fucking mind? He doesn’t have the hots for me. He hates me as much as I hate him.”

“Right, hate. Because we all know hate and attraction can always easily be distinguished. Tell me. Is he straight?”

Was Evans straight? Hell, no. Lagan wasn’t sure what label fitted him, but straight, he wasn’t. “I don’t think he is, but that doesn’t matter. I’m not attracted to him!”

“You sure about that?” Nordin quirked an eyebrow. “I hate to go all ‘thou doth protest too much’ on you, but yeah, that.”

Oh, shit, was he? Evans was hot, no question about it, but Lagan had always told himself the man was a dick, and that had been it. But if he hadn’t been such an ass, would Lagan have been more attracted to him?

He groaned as he buried his head in his hands. “Thanks a lot, dickhead, for putting that image in my head.”

Nordin slapped his back. “Anytime, brother dear. Anytime.”

No matter how old one got—if one could call forty-four old—a first day somewhere was always nerve-racking. Even when it was a volunteer position. Killian checked his hair in the rearview mirror of his Porsche, took a deep breath, and got out.

He could tell himself all day long the clinic should be grateful to get his expertise, but that still didn't take away the nerves. But maybe that was also because his previous volunteer experience had ended on such a sour note. Thank god he'd left that place behind him. Wasn't it sad how one person could ruin an environment completely? Five years, he'd volunteered, and he'd always seen it as valuable and rewarding...until that Scott guy had become the director. Within mere weeks, everything had changed.

He'd debated whether to find a new place to volunteer. With the résumé he had built by now, he didn't need to anymore. But he liked the work. He liked using his legal expertise to help others, even if it was on a small scale. It brought him more satisfaction than he'd realized before he was considering quitting. The decision to find somewhere else to donate his time had been an easy one.

This legal aid clinic was situated in a little strip mall, a nondescript building in the back, right next to a chiropractor's office and a nail salon. When he walked inside, the scent of lemon cleaner tickled his nostrils. The walls were painted a light yellow, various green plants provided homey accents, and the dark blue carpet was immaculate. One wall held a large

framed picture of President Shafer, another several enlarged quotes from the Constitution.

The place looked professional and yet inviting. Small details to others, maybe, but it spoke volumes about the effort they were putting in to make even a free clinic a positive experience for their clients.

“Good afternoon,” the guy behind the welcome desk said. “How may I help you?”

“I’m Killian Evans, the new volunteer.”

“Ah, yes. Chelsea told me to expect you. Welcome, and we’re so happy to have you. Feel free to grab some coffee or water. I’ll ask one of the other volunteers to help you get settled as soon as one becomes available. Right now, they’re all in conversations with clients, but it shouldn’t take too long. My name is Caleb, by the way.”

He extended his hand, and Killian took it, receiving an enthusiastic handshake. “Pleasure to meet you, Caleb.”

Caleb laughed. “Oh my god, you’re doing that repeating a name thing to remember it, right? I should start doing that. I’m awful with names.”

Killian smiled at his exuberance. “It’s become a habit of mine over the years. I also teach law school, so I have a lot of names to remember every course.”

“Killian, so happy to meet you in person.” Chelsea Geyer, the director of the legal aid clinic, walked up to him, a broad smile on her face. He’d done his volunteer interview with her over Zoom, so they hadn’t met in person yet.

“Thank you. I’m excited to get started.”

She gestured, and he followed her, stepping away from the welcome desk. “How did the other clinic react when you told them you wouldn’t be volunteering anymore?”

Killian sighed. He’d been open with her about the reasons for his switch, as he had nothing to hide. “Not well. In the exit interview, I made it clear that their lack of inclusivity was the reason for my departure. The director denied any problems

and tried to convince me they were LGBT-friendly. The number of homophobic and transphobic remarks I caught over the last six months had already proven the opposite. It's frustrating to see one man have such a negative impact."

She put a hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry. I hope they're realizing what a valuable volunteer they lost."

"I've given them enough chances to improve their attitude, but in the end, I was dreading to go there, which shouldn't be the case. Especially when volunteering."

"No, it shouldn't. Volunteer work might be tiring, but it should also provide you with joy and a sense of fulfillment and satisfaction. If that's not the case, it's a good sign you're not in the right place. Anyway, we're delighted to have you. Has Caleb found a volunteer to show you the ropes yet?"

"He said he was waiting for someone to become available."

Chelsea pursed her lips for a moment. "Follow me. I know the perfect guy to help you find your footing. He's been with us for two years now, and he's one of our most dedicated and trustworthy volunteers."

She knocked on a door with privacy glass, then pushed it open. "I'm so sorry to interrupt, but could I have a moment of your time, Lagan?"

Killian's heart skipped a beat. No, it couldn't be. But what were the odds of someone else with that same rare name? Zero. It had to be him.

"Excuse me a moment, Mrs. Porter. I'll be right back."

It *was* him, and Killian braced himself. This was about to get awkward.

The second Lagan spotted Killian, he froze in his tracks, but he recovered quickly. "What's up, Chelsea?"

"I'd like you to meet our new volunteer, Killian Evans. He's a lawyer with experience in both family law and criminal law. We're excited to have someone with his broad expertise

on the team. Could you have him shadow you this afternoon and show him the ropes?”

Lagan took a deep breath. “Absolutely. Good to see you, Professor Evans.”

He was shooting Killian a superficial smile, but his remarkable green eyes were icy cold, like frozen shards that would’ve happily stabbed Killian.

Chelsea frowned. “You know him? Oh, wait, he teaches at the university. Is he one of your teachers?”

Lagan nodded, his fake smile firmly in place. “He teaches family law, and I’m enrolled in one of his courses.”

“Will that be an issue? Should I ask someone else?”

Killian held his breath. Would Lagan take the out Chelsea was offering him? He hoped not, though why, he couldn’t explain. Considering the animosity between the two of them, trying to work together might not be the brightest idea, and yet Killian wanted to.

Lagan met his eyes in an arctic staredown. “Nah, it’s not a problem. I’m happy to show him around.”

“Good.” Chelsea looked relieved. “Then I’ll leave you in Lagan’s capable hands, Killian. Once again, welcome on board.”

She walked away, leaving Killian and Lagan to gaze at each other. “I hope you’ll believe me when I say this is pure coincidence,” Killian said stiffly. “I wasn’t aware you volunteered here. Also, please call me Killian when we’re here.”

Why was he even attempting to explain himself to Lagan? As if he cared what Lagan thought of him. He didn’t. At all.

“I believe you. Mostly because I can’t think of a single reason why you’d want to volunteer in the same place as me.”

“The last few years, I worked at a different legal aid clinic, but they changed directors. The new guy is a homophobic bigot, so I had to find somewhere else.”

Again with the explanation. He needed to stop.

“I’m sure you’ve seen by now this place is about as inclusive as it gets, but we can talk about that later. Mrs. Porter is waiting for me to get back to her. Feel free to sit in. *Killian.*”

He got a strange jolt from hearing his name on Lagan’s lips. He nodded, then followed Lagan back into the room, which was little more than a small cubicle with one table with four chairs around it.

Mrs. Porter was a frail-looking woman in her late sixties, early seventies, with bluish-silver hair and soft blue eyes. The lines around her mouth betrayed she smiled a lot.

“My apologies for the interruption, Mrs. Porter. This is a colleague of mine, Killian Evans. Are you okay with him sitting in on this conversation?”

“Of course, dear. I’m just hoping you can help me.”

Killian took a seat next to Lagan, who consulted his notes, then leaned forward. “So, Mrs. Porter, to summarize your situation. You own a single-family home where you have lived for the last forty-six years. Lately, you’ve had your house and your car vandalized, you hear strange noises at night, and there’s knocking on your windows at odd times. Do I have that correct?”

He was seeing a whole new side of Lagan, a confident side, and Killian liked it. A lot. And he had to admit he was pleasantly surprised Lagan volunteered here, and for two years too, Chelsea had said. That would look good on his résumé.

Mrs. Porter nodded. “I know I sound like a crazy old lady, but I swear I’m still sound of mind.”

“Oh, I believe you. Have you talked to the police?”

Killian had no doubts about her story either. To be honest, it sounded way too outlandish to be made up.

“Yes.” She sighed. “They did think I was crazy. The car and the house, I could prove, but the rest was in my mind. They didn’t say it in so many words, but the man suggested

that what happened to my house and car might've scared me so much I fantasized the rest."

"And did they have any leads as to who vandalized your car and house?"

She shook her head. "They said there's been an uptick in small crimes recently and that they'd gotten more reports. I know some neighbors had issues as well. Two of them have already decided to move, my friend Gracie and her husband, Frank, and a younger couple. She was pregnant. Told me she didn't want to raise her baby in such a dangerous environment."

An uptick in crime? In Seattle, that wasn't outside the realm of possibility. As much as Killian hated to admit it, the city had developed some serious issues since he'd moved here.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Porter, but I'm not sure what we could do for you. If the cops haven't found a suspect, it's hard for us to initiate legal action."

"Excuse me, Mrs. Porter, can I ask you where you live?" Killian asked, ignoring Lagan's sound of protest.

"Sure." She rattled off her address.

Killian put it in the Maps app of his phone to see where it was, then zoomed in and switched to Google Street view. Both Mrs. Porter and Lagan were watching him, the first with curiosity, the latter with thinly veiled impatience. But Killian took his time, surveying the street where she lived. They were all cute little single-family houses, quite old from the look of it. A picture was emerging.

"Do you know what kind of crimes the cops were talking about?" he asked.

"Vandalism, but also trash that was dumped on people's lawns, needles and dirty condoms right in front of their houses." She shivered. "It's horrible to see the neighborhood change for the worse."

Oh, he was certain now. "Did you receive any offers to sell recently?"

Lagan turned his head sideways sharply, his mouth dropping open. Was he cluing in?

Mrs. Porter frowned. "I did, as a matter of fact. This gentleman has stopped by twice already, offering an outrageous sum of money for my house."

"How outrageous?"

"He said he'd pay four hundred thousand dollars cash the first time, and the second time he offered fifty-thousand dollars more."

"That's not an outrageous sum for where you live, Mrs. Porter. Those houses sell for well over eight hundred thousand dollars."

She gasped. "They do? But that's preposterous. We only paid thirty thousand for it at the time, I think."

"And you own your home outright, I assume? No mortgage?"

She waved her hand. "No, dear, we paid that off years ago, even before my Henry passed away. God rest his soul."

"Thank you. That's helpful. I have one more question. Would the man who offered to buy your house happen to be the same person your neighbors sold their houses to?"

"I would have no idea. I could ask them, as we've stayed in touch."

"That would be helpful, yes. Would you excuse us for a moment? We'll be right back, I promise."

"Of course, dear."

When Killian walked out, Lagan followed him and closed the door behind him. He crossed his arms, his face thunderous as he faced Killian. "You want to explain what you think you're doing, taking over from me like that?"

Killian held up his hands. "I know what's happening here. And I was only asking questions, and I did take you outside so I could talk to you about it."

“Okay.” Lagan sighed, but his eyes still shot daggers. “From your questions, I take it you’re thinking of some kind of intimidating campaign to get her to sell?”

“That seems most likely. It’s a street with all older single-family homes built in the early nineteen hundreds. I think this guy is either a developer himself or a real estate agent who sees an opportunity and is doing the dirty work for someone else. Probably for a developer who wants to tear down the houses and build something new. Maybe an apartment building. Something that’s gonna make him a hell of a lot more money. But to make it attractive to potential buyers, all the houses need to be empty. If only one tenant refuses to sell, the whole deal is off.”

Lagan’s expression lost its tension and annoyance. “How did you know?”

“A combination of factors. Mostly the fact that these are well-known tactics plenty of real estate agents and developers have used before. Plus, the houses are old, and many of the owners would be as well. They wouldn’t know how much their houses are worth now. You heard Mrs. Potter. Few things are as attractive to developers as being able to snatch up a whole block—far under the market price—where they can build something bigger. I’ve seen it a few times before, which is why I recognized it.”

Lagan’s gaze roamed from Killian’s face down to his toes and back up in a thorough perusal. “Well, you *are* quite a bit older than me, so it makes sense that you would have more experience.”

“I’m also an actual lawyer with years of work experience,” Killian bristled.

Lagan snorted. “Touchy, much?”

He’d been baiting him. And Killian had fallen for it hook, line, and sinker. “You were joking.”

“It took you long enough to catch on. But you defending your experience to me was cute.”

Killian quirked an eyebrow. “Cute?”

Much to his surprise, a blush crept up Lagan's cheeks. "Not cute in that sense. Cute as in cute behavior. Funny, adorable. Like a dog. Or puppy."

"You're saying I am a puppy."

"No. Yes? You know what I mean."

Killian had never seen Lagan squirm like that, and he took perverse pleasure in it. "No, I don't know what you mean, but I'll let you off the hook."

"Yes, we should focus on Mrs. Porter's situation. Let's assume you're right. What can she do about it?"

A slow smile spread across Killian's face. "She can team up with her neighbors, install some cameras, and catch this bastard red-handed."

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Lagan checked himself in the mirror, turning sideways and then the other way. The tuxedo he'd borrowed from Hadley wasn't a perfect fit, but it was close enough and a hell of a lot better than a rented one would've been. His brother had bought an expensive, custom-tailored tux for some of the formal events he had to attend with Sebastian, and Lagan happily reaped the benefits. They had a similar build and were about the same height.

He'd trimmed his beard, had put some product in his hair, and had even sprayed some eau de toilette from a free tester he'd gotten. The tuxedo brought out the green of his eyes and looked stunning on him. He wore suits to work daily, but this one was at a different level. The whole combination was very 007, and he looked dashing. Suave. Like a man of the world he was so very much not. It proved how much looks could deceive.

He disliked having to dress up like this, but he didn't want to miss the gala the legal aid clinic held once every other year to draw in new donors. His attendance wasn't required, but it was expected, considering what he'd signed up for, and he wouldn't let Chelsea down. They had organized a bachelor auction for the first time, and she'd persuaded Lagan to participate. He was convinced no one would bet more than fifty bucks on him, but she seemed to think he could bring in good money, so whatever. He'd take some humiliation and embarrassment if it helped the clinic.

Would Killian attend as well? God, to say he'd been shocked when the man had shown up at the clinic was an understatement. To be honest, Lagan *had* considered for a moment that Killian had done it on purpose, just to piss off Lagan, but then his rational mind had prevailed. Still, he'd been pretty irate with him for how he'd taken over with Mrs. Porter. The man was so fucking arrogant. Why had he thought he could do that and on his first day? Lagan might only be a law student, but that didn't mean he was stupid.

Then again, he was impressed with Killian's analysis and plan of action, and Mrs. Porter had been elated. Her grandson would be visiting over the weekend, so they'd told her to order some security cameras and have him install them, preferably inconspicuously, then advise her neighbors to do the same. She was a woman on a mission now, updating them on the progress through lovely rambling emails. So yeah, that had been satisfying.

But how would Lagan survive having Killian there every week? Ugh, maybe he should switch to another day and avoid him. Sure, he wouldn't have to help him get settled for much longer, since Killian had so much experience, but chances were Lagan would have to let him sign off on each case. As a law student, Lagan couldn't handle everything on his own and had to have an actual lawyer check his cases. The thought of having to submit everything to Killian frustrated him to no end.

God, he needed to stop obsessing with the man. Why was he wasting so much energy thinking about him? He'd even dreamed about him last night, some absurd dream about Killian chasing him and Lagan running from him. When Killian had finally caught him, he'd kissed him, and then Lagan had woken up. So weird. Did Nordin have a point with his theory about attraction disguised as hate? Not something Lagan wanted to spend too much time on.

If Lagan was sexually attracted to his professor, it was because he hadn't had decent sex in way too long. He should arrange for a hookup this weekend. The one advantage of Hadley moving out was that Lagan had privacy now. Before,

they'd had to alternate Saturdays and make sure they spent a few hours elsewhere if the other had scored and needed their bed. He had his whole apartment to himself now, so that should make hooking up a hell of a lot easier.

Yeah, tonight he'd find some guy on Grindr who could rail him good. When he was stressed, like he'd been for the last years, he preferred men over women. Something about a guy fucking him hard always helped him release tension and relax, whereas with a woman, he had to make much more of an effort. Men were easier in that sense, though at times, he preferred the softness of women. Who knew? He might even find someone through the auction.

As long as he managed expectations and made it clear he wasn't looking for anything serious. Just sex. He couldn't afford distractions now, especially not with Killian riding his ass so hard about Lagan's performance in his class. The group project had helped, but his academic record was far from stellar.

When he walked into the grand ballroom of the hotel they had rented for the occasion, a live band was playing jazz music, toned down enough for people to talk. Conversations were already buzzing with sharply dressed people sipping wine and cocktails as they hung in the bar area. The tables were mostly empty, but those would fill later on during the auction. Aside from the bachelors, various art pieces were on auction. Several people had also offered their talents, like drawing a portrait, teaching a certain skill, or providing piano music at a party.

Even if those offers held any appeal to Lagan, he wouldn't be able to bet on them. Everything was geared toward people with money, which was the whole point. People like him might volunteer at the clinic, but he didn't have the discretionary income to donate money on top of his time. Rich people, however, seemed to be happy to throw money at charities. Lagan suspected it was a form of buying off their guilt, but who cared?

"Lagan!" Chelsea, dressed in a sparkling blue formal dress, waved Lagan over. She was talking to a man who had

his back toward Lagan. Wait, was that...?

“Lagan, I’d like you to meet Sebastian LeClerc, one of our new benefactors. Mr. LeClerc, this is Lagan Foster, one of our volunteers.”

Shit, what did he do now? Did he tell Chelsea he knew him?

Sebastian took care of his dilemma by putting a warm hand on his shoulder. “Lagan and I know each other, Ms. Geyer. He’s my brother-in-law, actually, and he’s the one who brought the clinic to my attention.” He turned to Lagan. “Good to see you as always.”

“You too. Didn’t know you’d be here.”

“I wasn’t planning on it, but our other plans fell through, and Hadley wasn’t feeling well, so I figured I might as well make an appearance. It’s a well-known phenomenon that one big spender has an effect on the rest of the audience, increasing the number of donations.”

Lagan raised his eyebrows. “Really? How come?”

Sebastian shrugged. “It’s either keeping up with the Joneses effect, plain jealousy, or some kind of group thinking. I’m not sure, but I’ve seen it happen time and again.”

When Sebastian told Chelsea Lagan was his brother-in-law, she’d stared at him with open mouth, but she seemed to have recovered from her shock. “He’s right. One or two big names can have a strong positive effect on the total outcome of the evening, so we’re grateful for your attendance, Mr. LeClerc.”

Funny, Sebastian didn’t tell her she could call him by his first name. “It’s Lagan who deserves the credit here, Ms. Geyer. Without him, I wouldn’t have known about the clinic, let alone donated.”

Chelsea looked at Lagan with new respect. “I’ll make sure he knows how much we appreciate him. Excuse me, gentlemen.”

She walked off, and Lagan and Sebastian both let out a sigh. “Fuck, I hate these galas so fucking much,” Sebastian muttered. “Seriously, kill me now. No one warned me that being rich meant I’d have to attend these.”

Lagan grinned. “You’re not the one who has to humiliate himself by participating in the bachelor auction.”

“Oh god, for real?”

Lagan nodded.

“Want me to bid on you? Once we have a few bids, I’ll offer an outrageous amount of money. That’ll keep anyone else from bidding. You’ll have done your part, and you’d be off the hook.”

“Fuck, yes. If you weren’t so crazy in love with my brother, I’d marry you and have your babies for that.”

Sebastian’s face lit up, changing his usually standoffish expression into something much more open. “It can be fun to have money sometimes.”

“I bet. So what’s wrong with Hadley?”

“Nothing major. He caught some kind of stomach bug, and you know what he’s like when he’s sick.”

Lagan winced. “Yeah. No wonder you preferred coming here over staying home.”

He loved Hadley to pieces, but his brother was a complete nightmare whenever he was sick, which didn’t often happen, luckily. Something about not feeling well brought out the worst in him, and over the years, Lagan had learned to stay out of the way until he felt better.

One of the other volunteers tapped Lagan on his shoulder. “Lagan, we’re starting with the auction.”

“Okay, thanks. I’ll be right there.”

“I’d wish you good luck, but you won’t need it.” Sebastian slapped his back. “I got you.”

“Thanks. Much appreciated.”

Knowing about Sebastian's offer made Lagan a hell of a lot less concerned about the auction. His biggest worry had been that nobody would bid on him, which would've humiliated him to no end. Coming in second but hot on its heels had been that he wouldn't bring in a lot of money, even if he managed to score some bids. With Sebastian's promise of offering an outrageous amount of money, that problem was solved as well.

Feeling much lighter, Lagan walked up to the stage, where the emcee of the evening, a smooth-talking guy named Spencer, had already started warming up the audience. Lagan smiled on cue, answered some nonsensical questions Spencer asked every candidate, then awaited his turn. With ten bachelors in total, the auction wouldn't take too long.

He was fifth, and the guys before him all brought in around ten grand, which was pretty sweet. The idea that Sebastian would bid more than that was outrageous, and Lagan would've been concerned about him spending that much if he hadn't known this was not more than a drop in a very large bucket for Sebastian.

"Bachelor number five, ladies and gentlemen, is our handsome young lawyer-to-be, Lagan Foster. He's smart, accomplished, and as you can all see, quite handsome. As a bonus, this gentleman swings both ways, so all genders can place a bid."

Chelsea had asked Lagan upfront if he would be okay with this, and he'd agreed. He'd been out as bisexual for as long as he could remember, so what did he care if it was said out loud at the auction? Chances were it would only bring in more bids, so whatever, right?

A wave of laughs and whistles traveled through the crowd, and Lagan chuckled, then shrugged dramatically. It earned him even more reactions.

"Let's start the bidding. Who bids five hundred dollars for this charming gentleman?"

A hand with a numbered sign rose instantly. Was that Sebastian?

“Five hundred for Mrs. Greaney,” Spencer said. “Mrs. Greaney is newly divorced and dying to spend her ex-husband’s well-deserved money,” he joked.

“Damn right, darlin’,” a female voice called out, presumably Mrs. Greaney, and everyone laughed.

“Who will bid more than five hundred? Do I have six hundred?”

Much to Lagan’s surprise, the bidding jumped up to five thousand, then inched in on six. And as far as he knew, Sebastian hadn’t even bid yet.

“Ten thousand dollars!”

Thank god. That was his brother-in-law to the rescue.

“I have ten thousand for Mr. Sebastian LeClerc. Thank you for your generosity, Mr. LeClerc. Do I have eleven thousand, ladies and gentlemen?”

Lagan expected nothing but silence. After Sebastian’s bid, this would be over, right?

“Eleven thousand for the gentleman with number fifty-three. Do I have twelve?”

Sebastian raised his sign.

“Twelve thousand for Mr. LeClerc. I see thirteen for number fifty-three. Fourteen thousand for Mr. LeClerc. Fifteen, sixteen thousand. Do I have seventeen thousand?”

Lagan’s mouth had dropped open. Who on earth was bidding against Sebastian? They had to know they couldn’t outbid him. He was by far the richest man in Seattle.

“Twenty-five thousand,” Sebastian called out, annoyance audible in his voice.

The crowd had grown silent, everybody cluing in on something happening. Lagan couldn’t see who had number fifty-three. All he knew was that it was a man, but from his angle on the stage, whoever it was was hidden behind a concrete pillar.

“Thank you very much, Mr. LeClerc, for that generous offer. Twenty-five thousand going once...”

Murmurs rose in the ballroom.

“Twenty-six thousand for number fifty-three. Twenty-seven, twenty-eight, twenty-nine... Do I hear thirty?”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake. Fifty-thousand dollars,” Sebastian snapped.

Lagan paled. Fifty thousand? Had Sebastian gone mad? He couldn’t spend that much money on a fake date with his brother-in-law. Except he had, and it was a binding offer. At least this would end it. No way on earth was whoever was bidding against him topping that.

“Seventy-five thousand dollars.”

Lagan froze. He knew that voice. Hell, he’d listened to that voice for hours and hours in class. But it couldn’t be. He had to be dreaming. No way would Killian bid that crazy amount of money for a date with him. He was a professor. They didn’t make that much, did they?

“Seventy-five thousand dollars for number fifty-three. Sir, might I have the pleasure of your name?”

Silence. Then, “Killian Evans.”

“Seventy-five for Mr. Evans going once...going twice... sold to Mr. Evans for seventy-five thousand dollars.”

A thunderous applause broke out, but Lagan stood motionless, his ears ringing and his body shaking. Had Killian gone crazy? What the fuck was *wrong* with him?

What the fuck was *wrong* with him? As the bachelor auction continued, Killian sat in his chair, pasting a smile on his face as he questioned his own sanity. He'd pulled some crazy stunts in his life, including some desperate Hail Mary moves as a lawyer, but this one topped everything. What had possessed him to offer seventy-five thousand dollars for a date with Lagan Foster?

No, correct that. He hadn't *offered* it. The offer had been accepted. He had to shell out seventy-five grand for a date with a man who hated him as much as he disliked him. What was *wrong* with him?

He'd only attended the gala because Chelsea had invited him. Killian wasn't naïve enough to think she'd done that without ulterior motives. Perhaps she had reasoned that he could afford to spend some money, and rightly so. He'd had every intention to, if only because it was for a good cause he'd happily contribute to. That it was a nice tax write-off and fit into the professional, respectable image he wanted to project was the icing on the proverbial cake.

He hadn't planned on bidding in the bachelor auction. When the men had filed onto the stage, Lagan among them, Killian had balled his fists. It wasn't his problem that Lagan was participating in this archaic and humiliating auction. Nor was it his responsibility that Lagan seemed to, once again, prioritize fun over his studies. Lagan was a big boy, and he could take care of himself.

When the bids on him had started, Killian had stayed quiet and watched, though seething. Until Sebastian LeClerc had made his ten-thousand-dollar bid. Killian knew of him, of course. Practically every gay man in Seattle had heard of him. Only a short while ago, Sebastian LeClerc had been the most desirable bachelor in Seattle, the object of affection of every gay and bisexual man in town. Hot, filthy rich, and—according to the rumors—great in bed.

Killian had never crossed paths with him before, but even if he had, he doubted they would've hooked up. They weren't each other's types. From what Killian had heard, LeClerc tended to gravitate toward twinks, and so did Killian himself.

But when the man had offered that bid on Lagan, something inside Killian had snapped. LeClerc was supposed to be off the market, faithful to his new boyfriend. That relationship was only months old, so what the hell was he doing bidding on Lagan? Lagan probably didn't even know who LeClerc was, since they didn't move in the same circles. He had no idea what a playboy LeClerc was or had been. The dude had fucked his way through every available man in the city.

Or maybe they had met before. Lagan was exactly his type, so maybe LeClerc had already hooked up with him. Maybe he'd recognized him and wanted a repeat performance. Bastard. He had a boyfriend, didn't he? Cheating was despicable. Lagan should stay away from him.

And that was how Killian had found himself entering the bidding war, and once he had, he'd refused to surrender, thanks to his stupid pride. He'd never given up a fight in his life, and he'd hung in here as well.

Luckily, LeClerc had stopped at seventy-five. The man could have bid a million dollars, and it still would've been peanuts to him. Killian would've had to bow out long before then. He had money, but he couldn't match Sebastian LeClerc.

The emcee wrapped up the auction and invited all the winning bidders to meet their hard-earned bachelor to discuss details. Oh, fuck. Lagan was going to kill him.

Still, Killian kept a friendly smile on his face as people congratulated him, slapping him on the shoulder and telling him he was a good sport for donating that much to charity. He'd never let anyone see his regret over his actions.

"My pleasure," he kept repeating, even though pleasure was about the last thing on his mind. War was more like it, and chances were, things would get nuclear between Lagan and him. Neither of them was the type for a cold war.

And then he stood eye to eye with Sebastian LeClerc, whose expression was neutral, even though his eyes spewed fire. Was the man that upset about losing a bid? That seemed a little over the top. "Mr. LeClerc, pleasure to meet you. I'm Killian Evans."

LeClerc stepped close to him, ignoring the hand Killian held out, so he dropped it. "I don't know what your game is here, offering that much for Lagan, but here's a friendly warning. Hurt a hair on his head, and I will come after you."

He was threatening Killian? What the hell was going on here? "Is that a threat?"

"No." LeClerc smiled, cold and full of disdain. "That's a promise." Then he took Killian's hand and shook it in a rather dramatic fashion, clearly for the benefit of the onlookers. "The better man has won. I wish you both a fantastic evening," he said and walked off.

Apparently, LeClerc was as aware of the importance of keeping up appearances as he, which, under the circumstances, was something to be grateful for. But more importantly, Lagan and LeClerc *did* know each other. The familiarity with which he'd talked about Lagan suggested as much. They must've hooked up. Lagan was LeClerc's alleged type for sure.

Still, it was curious that LeClerc would bid on a man he'd slept with while having a boyfriend. Didn't he care about his reputation? Killian couldn't make heads or tails of it, but he didn't have time to ponder it as Lagan stopped before him, irritation coming off him in waves.

Too many people were watching. They couldn't have a confrontation here. And so Killian broadened his smile. "There's my prize."

Lagan gaped at him, but before he could say anything, Killian bent in and kissed him on the cheek. "Let's find somewhere private so we can discuss the details of our date."

He put his hand on Lagan's lower back and steered him out of the ballroom into an empty conference room across the hall. Lagan's body was trembling under Killian's hand, and he braced himself for the confrontation. Taking a deep breath, he closed the door behind them. This wouldn't be pretty.

"What the actual fuck is wrong with you?" Lagan exploded.

Killian crossed his arms. "I thought you'd be elated about raking in a donation of that size."

"I would be if it hadn't been you who had made that bid."

Ouch. That one stung, although Killian wasn't sure why. "I suppose you would've preferred to snag Sebastian LeClerc instead? I don't even know why the man was bidding on you when he has a boyfriend. It's despicable."

"He's my brother-in-law, you moron! He was supposed to bid on me so I wouldn't have to go on a date with some rich idiot, and he had an easy way of donating more money. And it would've worked too if you hadn't stepped in and started outbidding him."

Brother-in-law? Oh, crap. "I wasn't aware he was related to you," Killian said stiffly.

"No, and why would you be? It's none of your damn business. But yes, my brother Hadley is his boyfriend. Sebastian and I talked before the auction, and he agreed to bid on me."

"Right. If I had known that, I wouldn't have..." He gestured vaguely.

"You shouldn't have bid in the first place. What's wrong with you to waste that much money on a stupid bachelor

auction and then on me, of all people? You don't even like me."

"You don't like me either," Killian fired back.

"Exactly, which is my point. Why on earth would you throw so much money at a date with a guy you don't like? You could've picked any of the other bachelors."

"Eight of them were straight," Killian pointed out. "And the gay guy who entered is very much not my type."

He'd been attractive, all right, but he'd been taller than Killian and built like he spent hours in the gym every day. No offense, but he wasn't into men like that.

Lagan crossed his arms. "Are you saying that I *am* your type?"

Shit. He'd dug his own grave there, hadn't he? "If I didn't dislike you so much, yes, you would be."

No harm in admitting that much, right? He'd already confessed it anyway, so he might as well own it.

"Well, I don't care either way. I'm not going on a date with you."

"I have seventy-five thousand dollars that say you will."

"Dude, you can't buy me."

"Pretty sure I just did. If you don't hold up your end of the deal, the clinic will miss out on the money."

Lagan's eyes grew wide. "You would be that much of a dick?"

"You would refuse to honor the contract? When you put yourself up for auction, you knew what you were getting into."

"I'm not a prostitute. You can't *buy* me."

Lagan spat out the last words, almost like a growl. There was nothing sexy about it, and yet Killian's stomach swirled in response. His cock, which had already perked up when they'd been fighting, hardened even more. Seriously, something was wrong with him for liking this.

“I didn’t buy your body. I bought your company. According to the rules, you have to spend an evening with me in exchange for the money I paid.”

“It’s gonna be some pleasant evening, considering we can’t stand each other.”

“Worst-case scenario, we could always make it a private tutoring session so I can help you with some of your classes.”

Lagan balled his fists. “I don’t need a tutor. I told you all my grades are fine. Besides, why on earth would you pay that much money only to tutor me?”

“I bid because I thought Sebastian LeClerc would take advantage of you! I was trying to protect you.”

“Protect me? I don’t need your protection. I’m a grown-ass man.”

Killian rolled his eyes. “I thought he was cheating on his boyfriend with you, okay? I didn’t want that for you. Besides, I figured you might know him, might even have hooked up with him.”

Lagan threw up his hands. “In which universe does that line of reasoning make sense? If I’d hooked up with him, doesn’t that mean I knew what I was getting into?”

“You didn’t have any say in who would bid on you, did you?”

Lagan rubbed his temples. “This whole conversation is giving me a massive headache. I suppose I should thank you for trying to protect me, even if it was unnecessary and you paid a ridiculous amount of money for it.”

“Your apologies need work. Can I point that out?”

“Come to think of it, how are you even able to afford this? No way are you making that much money as a professor.”

Of course he had to ask the one question Killian wasn’t prepared to answer. He was not discussing this with Lagan. “To borrow your expression, that’s none of your damn business.”

Lagan sighed. “Fair enough, but you can’t blame me for asking, not when it’s that much money.”

“No, but I assure you every penny of it was made legally.”

“I never implied otherwise.”

“Just wanted to make sure.”

Somehow, they had ended up standing face-to-face. Killian was an inch or two taller than Lagan, and he took a perverse pleasure in being able to look down on him. He shouldn’t, and it was wrong in every way, but he loved it. Lagan’s green eyes were still on fire, and his pretty, plump mouth was wet from licking his lips. His cheeks were rosy, his hair messy, and in that tuxedo, he looked good enough to eat.

“I owe you a date, so let me know when and where to show up,” Lagan said, his voice hoarse.

“Where to show up? If I take you on a date, I’ll pick you up. I’m a gentleman.”

That got a reaction out of Lagan, those sweet lips curving up in a little smirk. Killian’s cock was like steel in his pants now, throbbing and demanding release. Thank fuck his tuxedo jacket was long enough to hide it. “You, a gentleman? There’s a word I’d never have picked to describe you.”

“No? What word would you choose?”

“Arrogant. Cocky.”

“Don’t those mean the same thing?”

“Overbearing know-it-all.”

“That’s two words.”

Lagan made that growly sound again. Fuck, Killian was so wrong for taking pleasure in that.

“Infuriating. Condescending. Judgmental. Overbearing.”

“You’re not being very nice, Mr. Foster.”

“I hate the way you say my name. You do it the same way Alan Rickman as Professor Snape spat out ‘Mr. Potter.’”

“Hmm, is that so? Must be because we’re both brilliant professors.”

“Fuck, you drive me crazy!” Lagan snapped and smashed their mouths together.

Killian reacted on instinct and kissed him back, meeting Lagan’s tongue in a wet, slick duel. Their kiss was more of a battle than a seduction, teeth nipping and scraping, tongues licking and sucking, lips bruising and chasing. The whole world disappeared around Killian. That kiss was all that mattered.

Killian put his left hand on Lagan’s ass, kneading the firm flesh, and wound his right hand around his neck and yanked him even closer. Lagan rubbed against him, making a low sound in the back of his throat that Killian wanted to swallow. Lagan was as hard as he was, and wasn’t that good to know? Fuck, he wanted to be inside him. He wanted to...

Reality hit him like a bucket of ice-cold water thrown into his face. He froze at the same time Lagan did. They both took a step back, the terror on Lagan’s face perfectly capturing Killian’s feelings.

“Oh, shit,” Lagan whispered.

“Lagan...” Killian didn’t even know what to say. What was there to say? Lagan might have initiated the kiss, but he’d all but goaded him. He’d bid on him, which in itself had been all kinds of inappropriate.

Lagan’s cheeks turned bright red. “What did I *do*?”

He spun on his heels and fled the room.

Fuck.

To: Professor K. Evans
From: Lagan Foster
Subject: Apology

PROFESSOR EVANS,

I SINCERELY APOLOGIZE for my behavior yesterday evening. I let my temper get the best of me, and I initiated something I shouldn't have, both because I'm your student and because I didn't have your consent. Please accept my apologies.

LAGAN FOSTER

To: Lagan Foster
From: Professor K. Evans
Subject: Re: Apology

LAGAN,

APOLOGIES ACCEPTED. Please accept mine as well, since I wasn't blameless either. I propose we never mention this incident again, as the consequences for both our reputations have the potential to be disastrous.

Killian Evans

To: Professor K. Evans
From: Lagan Foster
Subject: Re: Re: Apology

I AGREE, but what about the date you paid for? Will you collect on it?

To: Lagan Foster
From: Professor K. Evans
Subject: Re: Re: Re: Apology

I ALREADY INFORMED Chelsea that you and I had talked about this beforehand and that this was merely a way to get a tax write-off for me, so you're off the hook. Unless you need the tutoring at some point, in which case I'd be happy to help you.

To: Professor K. Evans
From: Lagan Foster
Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: Apology

OKAY. Thank you, I guess? Though I don't like lying to her.
Or to anyone else, for that matter.

To: Lagan Foster

From: Professor K. Evans

Subject: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Apology

I DON'T LIKE it any more than you do, but I think it's the best way to avoid any scrutiny. Besides, that part was on me, so I didn't want you to have to bear the consequences. Now, we can both walk away with our reputations intact.

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It had been five days since the auction, and not an hour had gone by without Lagan thinking about what had happened.

The whole evening had been absurd from the bidding to that kiss. But no matter how much time he spent analyzing every second, he still couldn't figure out what had possessed him to kiss Killian.

He'd *kissed* him, for fuck's sake. And Killian had kissed him back. With passion too. And with tongue. And teeth. He'd devoured Lagan's mouth, and he'd loved every second of it.

In fact, it had been one of the best kisses Lagan had ever shared, if not the best. How was that fair? How was it possible that he had this explosive chemistry with a man he despised so much? Jaren and Hadley had both experienced sexual attraction with the guy they'd ended up falling for, but of course he had to go and make things difficult.

Forget about Killian being an asshole. The man was his professor. Even if he did like him—which he didn't, just to be clear—nothing could ever happen between them. Not that Killian would be interested. He'd probably only kissed Lagan back on instinct.

But then what had made him bid on Lagan? That whole story about wanting to protect him from Sebastian had made no sense, even when taking into account Killian hadn't known Sebastian was Lagan's brother-in-law. That explanation had holes the size of Mount Washington, so what could Lagan make of that? He had no clue.

At least Killian wasn't planning on cashing in that proverbial check for a date with Lagan. What would they even do together? Hell, they'd probably end up killing each other before the night was through. The whole notion was ridiculous.

But how would they manage to work together at the legal aid clinic after this? The best thing to do was pretend this had never happened, like Killian had suggested. It wouldn't be easy, but the alternative was even more complicated.

He was still mulling the Killian problem over as he got off the bus at the stop in front of the university. At least he was on time today. For once, Killian couldn't get on his case about being tardy. In fact, Lagan had ten whole minutes to spare. How about that? Such a stupid, small win, but he'd take it.

When he walked into the classroom, he didn't so much as glance in Killian's direction. He chose a seat in the front row—why so close?—and finally looked up. Apparently, Lagan's pick of seats surprised Killian as well, his eyebrows rising when he spotted Lagan. Lagan immediately regretted his choice, but no way would he change seats now. That was akin to admitting defeat.

Instead, he unpacked his stuff. He had his laptop all set up, ready to take notes, when his phone rang.

"You know the rules, Mr. Foster." Killian's tone was icy. "No phones during class."

"Class hasn't started yet," Lagan said, his stomach sinking as he looked at the number. Chicago area. This couldn't be good. He swallowed.

"I don't care. Don't answer it."

Ignoring Killian, Lagan took a deep breath, bracing himself. "Hello?"

"I'd like to speak to Lagan Banks, please."

"This is him, though my last name is Foster now."

"Are you the son of Theodore Leonard Banks?"

Nausea rose in his throat as everything else faded into the background. Oh god, oh god, oh god. “Yes. Who am I speaking with?”

“Good evening, Mr. Banks. Foster, I mean. My name is Richard Modrowski, and I’m the warden of the Statesville Correctional Center. I believe you are familiar with our facility?”

“Yes, I am.” When his father had been sentenced to prison, he’d visited him every week, then every month, and now he hadn’t seen him in years. What was there left to say? Nothing. They were strangers to each other.

“I’m afraid I have some bad news to share, Mr. Foster. Your father passed away this afternoon. I’m sorry for your loss.”

All the blood rushed from his head, leaving him dizzy, and for a moment, he feared he would faint. He balled his fists, fighting for control. “Have you determined the cause of death yet?”

His voice came out a little squeaky, but at least he’d managed to talk.

“It looks like he had a heart attack. He collapsed during recess. Despite the best efforts of our medical team to resuscitate him, they couldn’t get his heart to start up again.”

“Thank you for letting me know.”

The words came automatically, like he was a robot, following some script he hadn’t even been aware he’d internalized.

“Mr. Foster, will you claim your father’s body for a funeral?”

A funeral. The man needed to be buried, of course. Or cremated. As his sole surviving relative, Lagan would be responsible. “What happens if I don’t?”

“Then the state will bury him in an unknown lot. I understand this must be difficult news for you to hear—”

“With all due respect, but you can’t possibly understand.”

The warden was quiet for a few beats. “Most people who don’t claim the bodies of their loved ones come to regret it later.”

Loved one. Those were about the last words Lagan would’ve used to describe his father. They were related by blood, by DNA, but love had nothing to do with it. It never had. Funny how he had been expecting this news for years, and now that he got it, he felt nothing like he had thought he would. The adrenaline was already retreating, his heart rate reverting to its normal rhythm. “How long do I have to make that decision?”

“I can give you twenty-four hours. We’ll transport his body to the morgue. Please let me know your decision at your earliest convenience. Once again, I’m sorry for your loss, Mr. Foster.”

“Thank you, Warden.”

The call ended, and Lagan sat frozen, staring at his phone. His father was dead. The man whose decisions had cost Lagan everything was gone. What was he supposed to feel now? He should be sad, right? Grief. That was what he should be feeling. Some kind of sense of loss, if only for the father he’d never had.

Except he didn’t feel anything. Numb, that was the best word to describe him after that first rush of disbelief. Disconnected, as if his body and mind had somehow separated. Or maybe his mind and soul? It was like he was looking at himself from a distance, analyzing how he should feel, what he should do, not understanding why he felt nothing.

“Mr. Foster? Lagan?”

The voice pierced through his numbness, and he looked up. Killian was standing in front of him, his face marred with concern. “Are you okay?”

Was he okay? That shouldn’t be such a difficult question to answer, but his mouth wouldn’t form the words that he was fine. Of course he was fine. He’d perfected the art of being

fine ever since his father had gotten arrested, since his whole life had fallen apart. Fine had become his motto, if only to keep everyone off his case. The only people who had ever known the truth about how not fine he was and had been were his brothers.

Shit, his brothers. He'd have to call them. Wait, Hadley and Sebastian were in Rome for one of those spontaneous bucket-list trips Sebastian loved to surprise Hadley with. Though Hadley had seen this one coming, even if he hadn't known the destination. And Jaren had accompanied Reid to a tattoo convention in New Orleans. That left Nordin, but hadn't he mentioned he'd be out of reach for a few days? Lagan was pretty sure he had.

His father was dead, and none of his brothers were available to talk to. He couldn't interrupt their trips for this news. They couldn't do much for him anyway. A stab of loneliness pierced his heart, and he clenched his eyes shut. He wouldn't lose it. Not here, not in front of his fellow students, and especially not in front of Killian. Professor Evans. He would keep his shit together until he was alone. Then he'd figure out what to do.

A hand landed on his shoulder, and he jolted. "Lagan."

Something about the way Killian said his name got to him. Maybe because the man had never sounded this concerned and kind. And he'd never called him by his first name in class.

"I'm fine," he finally said, but it came out so pathetically weak he didn't blame Killian for shaking his head in disbelief.

"You're not fine."

No, he wasn't, but what else could he say? Killian seemed to realize Lagan's predicament. He took a step back, dropping his hand, and addressed the class. "Class, please spend some time reviewing *Griswold v. Connecticut* and *Eisenstadt v. Baird* and the consequences those two cases would have for contraception and marital privacy."

The soft murmur traveling through the room reached Lagan as through a fog. He sat numbly as Killian closed

Lagan's laptop and put it in his backpack, then took Lagan by his arm and nudged him forward. He allowed Killian to lead him out of the class into the hallway, where Killian walked a little farther until they were out of hearing distance from the classroom.

"You don't owe me any information, and I understand I'm about the last person you want to talk to right now, but you're not okay. Who can I call for you?"

Who could he call? His brothers weren't in town. The one time he needed them, and they weren't there. Oh, he wasn't being reasonable. He had needed them a thousand times before, and they had never failed him. And yet it felt so unfair he would have to go through this alone. But he wouldn't alert them. They'd insist on coming back, breaking off their trips, and it wasn't that important. His father didn't deserve that kind of consideration.

"My brothers are..." He took a deep breath. "None of my brothers can be reached right now."

"Okay. What about any other family? Friends?"

He had no one else. No friends. How could he, when he barely had time to sleep? "There's no one else. They're the only family I've got, and they're not in town right now."

Killian's face softened, his eyes showing a kindness Lagan had never seen from him before. "I couldn't help but overhear. Your father passed away?"

"Yeah. He was in federal prison in Chicago."

Why was he volunteering that information? No one, outside of his brothers, knew his father was still alive. He'd buried the subject a long time ago. So why was he telling Killian? Probably because he was catching Lagan at such a vulnerable time. Besides, the man must've overheard enough to piece things together anyway.

"I figured as much," Killian said, confirming Lagan's suspicion. "I assume you'll need to travel to Chicago?"

He would, wouldn't he? As much as he wanted to tell the warden he could fuck off and let the state bury his father, he

couldn't. Somehow, he still owed him that. Or maybe he owed it to himself to get closure. Maybe if his father was in the ground, Lagan would finally be able to walk away from all of it for good, to let go once and for all.

"Yeah. For the funeral."

"Okay. Do you need to leave right now?"

"I don't know. The warden said I had twenty-four hours to make a decision, but I already know I need to bury him. He said the state would do it otherwise, but..."

"He's still your father."

"Yeah."

"So call him back and tell him you want to claim the body. Then you can make travel arrangements for tomorrow."

Travel arrangements. Shit, he would need to fly out to Chicago. With what money? No way in hell would he have enough in his bank account to cover a last-minute plane ticket. And he'd made it a hard rule not to use any credit cards to protect himself from drowning in debt, which would be all too easy in his situation.

Except... He had one credit card in his name, but it was linked to Sebastian's account. Sebastian had insisted on it, saying Lagan should use it in an emergency. He'd made it clear he didn't like that Lagan had no financial reserves to fall back on, no rainy day fund. Did this constitute an emergency? It had to. Family deaths were considered an emergency, right? Fuck, why was this so hard? Why did it take so much effort to even think?

"Yes. I'll call him first."

"I'll wait."

"You should go back to teaching class."

"How about you let me decide what I should do? The class is fine without me. You, on the other hand, I'm not too sure about. Make the call, Lagan."

The sharp weight of that command settled deep inside Lagan. It felt so good to have someone else make a decision for him. “Okay.”

He kept the call brief, informing the warden he would try to fly in the next day. Killian stood by his side the whole time, his presence offering far more comfort than Lagan would’ve expected.

“Good,” Killian said when Lagan had ended the call. “Did you drive here tonight?”

“No, I took the bus.”

Killian reached in his pocket, then held out car keys to Lagan. “Go wait in my car. I’ll dismiss the class, and then I’ll be right there.”

Lagan was too numb, too tired, too baffled to protest, so he took the keys and trudged off, his steps slow slides on the stone floor. Killian’s car stood out like a burst of color among a sea of gray and black. Lagan made his way over and slipped into the passenger seat.

Killian was doing a nice thing, taking care of him and driving him home. Lagan couldn’t wrap his head around why the man would do it, especially after what had happened at the auction, but he couldn’t spare the energy to worry about it. Right now, he’d take all the kindness he could get.

When Killian got into the car, Lagan looked up. He’d been so lost in thought he had no idea how much time had passed. Killian started the car and drove off, the engine barely making a sound. Electric cars might be good for the environment, but the lack of an engine purring was disconcerting. Eerie, even.

“Is it okay for you to dismiss the class like that? You won’t get into trouble?”

Killian chuckled. “Don’t worry about it. I’ve never missed a class before, so I doubt it will be an issue. Besides, the other students caught enough of the conversation to understand it was a family emergency, so they won’t complain.”

A family emergency. That was one word for it. His father was his family, no matter how much Lagan wanted to deny it.

As far as he was concerned, his brothers were his family. Maybe not by blood, but they had declared themselves family and had taken the same last name.

God, that had been a day he'd never forget. The weather forecast had warned about an impending snowstorm, and the skies had been threateningly gray, the air heavy and pregnant with the coming snow. But they had made it to the courthouse, all dressed in suits. Ridiculous, of course, since the judge didn't care what they were wearing, but they'd wanted to.

To them, it had been a momentous occasion, something they had looked forward to for years. His brothers had waited for Lagan to turn eighteen, and as soon as he had, hell, on his actual birthday, they'd filed the paperwork. It had taken two months to make its way through the system, and then they'd gotten their court date.

Their judge had been a woman a few months away from her retirement, a grandmotherly, warm, and affectionate type who had been emotional about their case. "I'm proud of the four of you," she had said. "Not only have you survived and made it through some horrible circumstances that were none of your fault, but here you are, standing before me, determined to succeed in life. I have every faith in you. It is my honor to hereby declare your last names have been changed to Foster. May God bless you on your journey."

With one dull thump of her gavel, she had changed their lives. They'd left their old names and troubled pasts behind them and forged a new future for themselves. A few months later, the day after Lagan had graduated from high school, they'd moved to Seattle, and they'd never looked back.

Until now.

Lagan didn't say a word on the drive home, and Killian kept shooting glances sideways to check in on him. He was sitting there, not speaking, his face emotionless, and yet he had to be hurting on the inside. Killian had no idea what Lagan's story was and how his relationship with his father had been, though he had some ideas based on what he had overheard, but it was still his father. That couldn't leave him unaffected.

Killian had cried like a baby when his father had succumbed to the cancer that had slowly eaten him alive. Death had been a blessing for his father, but what a loss it had been. Killian's mom had never been the same, and she'd followed her husband only two years later. The official cause of death had been a heart attack, but Killian was convinced she'd died of a broken heart. His parents had shared the kind of close relationship he could only dream of, something that seemed so far out of reach he wasn't even trying anymore.

Truth be told, he'd given up after Armando. His deceit had been such a hard hit to his pride and his whole identity that he'd decided to change course. His life might've become more predictable, but it was also much safer. He'd never have to go through something like that again, never have to worry about losing his reputation, everything he'd worked so hard for to build. At times, he missed his old life, though, especially the sex.

God, he missed the sex. The only sexual encounters he had nowadays were arranged meetings once a month with discreet

sex workers he could trust. He wasn't ashamed of that, but it did make him sad he never had any spontaneous connections anymore. His body seemed to have adjusted, though. Or maybe he was getting older, and his previously hyperactive libido had slowed down. At forty-four, he wouldn't rule that out.

But he'd better stop thinking about sex and focus on the problem at hand. Where should he take Lagan? To Lagan's condo or his own? The first seemed much more logical, considering that Lagan wasn't his problem or his responsibility. But how could Killian drop him off, knowing he would be alone? No one should be on his own after news like that, especially when the situation was so complicated. Lagan had a plane ticket to book and funeral arrangements to make, and how could he do that in the state he was in?

No, Killian wouldn't leave him like this, so that left him with two choices. Either he could take Lagan home with him and pick up whatever he needed from Lagan's condo or vice versa. Which made more sense? The latter. His condo had to be bigger, plus it would be easier to provide Lagan with whatever he needed. They were about the same size, Killian being a couple of inches taller, so Lagan could even borrow clothes from him if necessary. He could help him book his plane ticket, maybe advise him on some of the things he'd have to organize. Killian had been there after all. He'd made the arrangements for both his parents.

Decision made, he drove past Lagan's building and turned into the garage under his own. His condo came with three parking spaces, which was ridiculous for the one car he owned. The whole building and all the amenities were a little over the top, but he'd been in a mood when he'd purchased his condo, and he couldn't change things now.

"Where are we?" Lagan asked, coming alive when Killian turned off the engine.

"We're in my building. I'm taking you to my place."

He got out of the car, and after a brief hesitation, Lagan followed him. "You don't have to do that."

“I know. But I’m doing it anyway.”

“Why?”

“Because you need someone to be there for you. I wouldn’t wish this on my worst enemy, and I won’t let you deal with this on your own. Unless you can call someone to be with you and help you take care of things, you’ll have to do with me.”

Lagan blinked, and his shoulders hunched. “There is no one else. My father was my last family, other than my brothers.”

Something was off about the whole situation. Why would the warden call Lagan and not his brothers? And why hadn’t he informed them yet? Didn’t they have the same father? Not something Killian would ask now, but he filed it away for later. “Let’s go.”

He put his hand on Lagan’s lower back and guided him through the parking garage, then into the elevator up to the top floor.

“The penthouse. Why am I not surprised?” Lagan said, but his voice held no venom.

If only he knew how Killian had been able to afford it. But no way in hell would he stir up that whole mess. “The view is amazing.”

“It had better be for what you paid for it.”

Killian opened his front door and stepped aside to let Lagan pass. “It does come with a lot of amenities.”

He closed the door behind them, put his bag on the welcome bench, as he called it, and hung up his coat. “Can I get you some coffee? Tea?”

“Tea, please. If I drink coffee this late, I won’t sleep all night.”

Killian headed for the kitchen, where he filled the electric kettle and put out two mugs. He was more of a coffee person himself, but he didn’t feel like going through the trouble of starting his Italian coffee machine. Tea would work.

Lagan was drifting through the living room, touching the couch, running his hands over the velvet fabric of the curtains, taking a few moments to check the view over the Puget Sound, only to continue his restless explorations. “Do you have two bedrooms?”

“Three. One master, one guest room, and I use the other one as my office. How about yours?”

He thought it best to keep the casual conversation going, provide some distraction for Lagan and help him recover from the shock.

“Two bedrooms. Sebastian insisted on it.”

“Sebastian?”

Lagan seemed to catch himself. “He’s my landlord.”

“He bought that condo for you?”

His tone was sharper than he had intended, and Lagan spun around. “I used to live with Hadley, and when he moved in with Sebastian, Sebastian made sure I had a place to live.”

“You couldn’t stay where you and Hadley had been living together?”

Lagan shook his head. “Couldn’t afford the rent on my own.”

That explained how Lagan had been able to afford that condo, something Killian had been wondering about. “Buying a condo is small change to him.”

“Maybe, but I still appreciate it more than I can express.”

“Your brother got lucky he was able to snag him. When Sebastian went off the market, quite a few people were disappointed.”

“Hadley wasn’t after him for the money,” Lagan snapped, the first time his emotions had surfaced. How interesting that he hadn’t shown them until he’d felt the need to defend his brother.

“I wasn’t implying he was.”

“Oh.” As quickly as Lagan’s temper had flared up, it died down again. “They’re in love. Nauseatingly so, I might add.”

“Ah, yes, I remember that from some of my friends. They became all but unbearable in the first year or so of their relationships.”

“Exactly. I’m happy for him, don’t get me wrong, but the constant affection is a little heavy on the stomach.”

Killian had made tea and now carried their mugs into the living room, putting Lagan opposite him on the couch. Lagan sat down, looking lost and alone. He shivered.

“Are you cold? I can turn up the heating or get you a blanket.”

“I’m often cold. I have a hard time getting warm, especially in the winter.”

He didn’t ask for the blanket, but Killian got up anyway. He loved snuggling on the couch while watching TV, all wrapped up in a soft fleece blanket. He always kept it in the storage cubby under the coffee table, and before he could think better of it, he grabbed it, unfolded it, and spread it over Lagan, who watched him with big eyes.

“There. Is that better?” He made his voice sound gruff to hide the strange, soft feeling inside him. Something about Lagan’s sadness was getting to him.

“Yes. Thank you.”

“My pleasure.”

They sat in silence, their tea still too hot to drink. Lagan found this situation probably as challenging to navigate as Killian. They had bickered and fought for so long they had no clue how to be nice to each other, especially after what had happened at the auction. Killian was still reeling from that kiss, but by god, he would try to summon every ounce of kindness inside him. He wouldn’t lower himself by kicking a man who was already down.

“I don’t mean to insert myself into your affairs,” he started. “But is there someone I can call for you? Someone who can

help you?”

Lagan shook his head.

“No partner?”

“No. I couldn’t possibly fit a relationship into my schedule.”

He wasn’t wrong. What a relief Lagan displayed some common sense and a clear recognition of his priorities. “No family either?”

“I told you my brothers aren’t available right now.”

“You don’t think they’d want to know their father has passed away?”

“He’s not their father. My brothers and I aren’t related by blood.”

That simple statement raised so many questions Killian didn’t know where to begin. “So how are you brothers?”

“Because we chose to be.” Lagan sighed and dragged a tired hand through his hair, making it stick up in every direction. It looked endearing. “The four of us grew up together in foster care in Chicago. We bonded in the group home we were in and promised each other we’d stick together. When we had all turned eighteen, we changed our last names to Foster, and ever since, I’ve called them my brothers.”

Wow, that was the kind of story movies were made about. It also explained why Lagan’s group had done so well on that group project and why the chapter that Lagan had written had been so impactful. He’d poured his own experiences into it. “Very inspirational.”

Lagan looked up sharply. “You’d better not be making fun of me.”

Killian held up his hands. “I wasn’t, I promise. It sounded like something from a movie.”

Lagan snorted. “I can guarantee you that growing up in foster care is about the furthest thing from a movie you can imagine.”

“So how did you end up in a group home, if I may ask? Was that because your father was sent to prison?”

Lagan leaned back against the back of the couch, closing his eyes. “No, it was when my mother was killed by the guy my father had betrayed.”

“*What?*”

“Still think it sounds like a movie?” Lagan picked up his tea, gently blew on it, and took a sip. “My father was a thief, plain and simple. He stole expensive cars, then fenced them through an accomplice. He got caught, and when the detectives confronted him with the evidence against him, he decided to offer them something in return for more lenient sentencing.”

“His accomplice?”

“Nah. He was small potatoes, like my dad. No, my dad had done a couple of jobs for a real crime boss, a guy by the name of Victor Duvall. When he told the detectives he knew Victor, they were very interested, and soon, my father was singing like the proverbial canary. The FBI had been on Victor’s trail for a while, trying to pin something on him, and now they had my father. They convinced him to do another job for Victor, wearing a wire, and he agreed. Victor never suspected a thing, and in the two weeks my father was wearing the wire, Victor and his lieutenants incriminated themselves enough that the FBI had all the evidence they needed. Victor and four of his top guys were arrested, and it looked like they’d be going away for a long time.”

Killian frowned. “Your father wasn’t offered a spot in the witness protection program? I would think that if Victor was as big a crime boss as you make it sound, that would’ve been on the table.”

Lagan shook his head. “He was too stupid to ask for it. The FBI promised him leniency in his sentencing, and he believed them when they told him Victor would never find out who ratted him out.”

“So what happened? The judge ignored the FBI’s recommendation?”

“Victor did find out how the FBI had gotten to him. I can’t believe my dad didn’t consider that. Even I could’ve called that one. Victor couldn’t save himself anymore, but he made sure he wasn’t going down alone. First, he took out my mom in a drive-by shooting. He didn’t pull the trigger himself, of course. The cops caught the guy who killed her, and he went to prison for it, but Victor took care of his family. It was all a setup. Then he came after my dad. One of Victor’s men had murdered a guy two years prior, at Victor’s orders, someone my father had worked with as well, and somehow, evidence popped up that my father had committed that murder. He tried to convince the cops, the FBI, his lawyer, the judge, anyone and everyone that he was innocent, but no one believed him. He got sentenced to life in prison.”

The puzzle pieces fell into place. “Your father went to prison, your mom was gone, and there was no one else to take care of you?”

“My mother’s family had broken with her when she married my father. She was a good Irish Catholic girl, and they never forgave her for marrying a lowlife like my dad. He grew up on the South Side. His dad was a thief, and both his brothers had spent time in prison as well. None of them was interested in taking care of a kid. So I entered the foster care system.”

Lagan’s upbringing was so far removed from Killian’s privileged Boston suburban experience he couldn’t even imagine what things had been like for Lagan. “I’m sorry.”

Lagan shrugged. “It sucked, not gonna lie. But it would’ve been ten times worse without my brothers.”

He put his tea on the coffee table and snuggled deeper under the blanket.

“Another cup of tea?” Killian offered. He wasn’t ready to end their conversation yet. He’d discovered more about Lagan in the last half hour than he had in all the months of teaching him...and one kiss he needed to stop thinking about.

“Yes, please. It’s delicious.”

“It’s a small batch of special, hand-selected tea from Thailand. My sister gave it to me. She’s a total tea snob.”

“Oh, Hadley would love that. He’s just as particular about his tea.”

“I’ll give you some so he can try it. I’m sure he’ll appreciate it more than I do. I’m more of a coffee person.”

Lagan quirked an eyebrow. “Then why did she give you tea?”

“Because she thought I needed to cut down on my caffeine intake. She’s a health nut. What can I say?” He rolled his eyes and was rewarded with Lagan’s laugh. “I’ll go make more tea.”

Lagan was much easier to talk to than Killian had expected, even under these difficult circumstances. He wasn’t the shallow fuckboy Killian had thought him to be either. In fact, he didn’t seem to be one at all. The story he’d told about growing up in foster care and how he and his brothers had met had been touching and real. Had Killian been wrong about him? But what about that rejection then and the cruel words he’d used to shoot Killian down?

No, the jury was still out on that one, and it was too early to come to a new conclusion. He didn’t have all the facts yet. For now, he’d focus on supporting Lagan and getting him through this ordeal. He’d help him contact a funeral home, make travel arrangements, and create a to-do list for everything he’d have to take care of. That way, he could look at himself in the mirror and know he’d done everything in his power to help him.

When he returned to the living room, Lagan was asleep, his long, dark lashes resting on pale skin. His stubborn mouth had relaxed, but even in his sleep, he looked tired. Worn out. Lagan was usually so full of life, so feisty, that it was disconcerting to see him so vulnerable. Almost fragile.

An unfamiliar softness flowed through Killian as he studied the man curled up on his couch. No one should be

alone when burying a parent. He wasn't sure why Lagan's brothers couldn't be there for him, but if no one else would, Killian would take care of him. Someone had to, even if they hated each other. Though as he watched a sleeping Lagan, hate wasn't what he was feeling at all.

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Lagan went from asleep to awake within a millisecond. Where the fuck was he? It only took a moment for the awareness to hit. His father had died, and he was in Killian's apartment after the guy had taken him home. And apparently, he'd fallen asleep on his couch. Instead of the blanket he'd snuggled under, a feathery duvet covered him, the fabric so velvety it had to be like a gazillion thread count cotton. Lagan rubbed it against his cheek. Damn, so smooth and soft.

The apartment was quiet. Was Killian up yet? Lagan checked his watch. Just after seven. Not horribly early but rather a normal wake-up time for many people. He usually had to get up around this time, though it was always a struggle. He much preferred to stay up late and sleep in. A night owl, Hadley always called him. Hadley himself had always been up at the crack of dawn. So unnatural.

What did Killian even do during the day? Did he teach full time? Or did he practice law somewhere? Lagan had no clue. Killian had shelled out an astronomical sum at the auction, so he had to have a lucrative second job. Or maybe he'd inherited from his parents or had been born into money? Not something Lagan could ask.

His phone showed notifications from the WhatsApp group he and his brothers shared. Jaren had posted pics of him and Reid in Bourbon Street, plus another one of Reid inking an intricate line tattoo on some bearded guy. Hadley had done a photo dump of Rome, showing one historic building after the

other. Damn, that was the Colosseum. Lagan had only seen the impressive amphitheater in the movie *Gladiator*. Nordin hadn't replied yet, which made sense if he was off-line for a few days.

Should he tell them? If he did, Hadley would insist on returning home to support Lagan. The two of them had always been the closest, and he wouldn't let Lagan go through this alone. If Lagan said he needed him, Jaren would return as well. But did he want them to? Did he want to drag his brothers down into the last messy remnants of his past?

He was the youngest of the four of them, and his brothers had often had to wait for him. Wait until Lagan had finished high school, until he'd turned twenty-one, until he'd found a job. He'd needed them so much, and they'd always been there for him, but had he done enough in return? With Hadley maybe. They'd helped each other through hard times, but Jaren and Nordin?

Jaren had such a successful career as an accountant. Sure, he'd hit a snag when his fiancée had left him at the altar and he'd gotten fired not long after, but he'd found his happily ever after with Reid and loved his new job. Hadley had worked as a personal assistant at several companies. Then he'd gotten assigned to Sebastian, and they'd fallen in love. He was now his PA, and he'd keep working until they were ready for kids. Lagan didn't think that would take them long, and Reid and Jaren would no doubt become parents sometime soon as well.

That left Nordin and him. Nordin marched to the beat of his own drum and kept big parts of his life to himself. Lagan loved his oldest brother and admired the hell out of him, but he didn't feel like he truly knew him, like he'd ever seen the real Nordin. He had a pretty good idea of what Nordin did for a living, as he'd caught enough clues, even when they'd still been living in Chicago. With a thief as a father, he hadn't had too much trouble putting two and two together. But he'd never brought it up. As Nordin had pointed out during their last dinner, not knowing protected them.

If he asked Nordin for help, his brother would come home, no questions asked. He'd always taken care of them. All of them. Whatever they had needed, whether Christmas presents or new clothes or shoes, Nordin had always found a way to make it happen. But by now, the man had to be sick and tired of always having to solve their problems, Lagan's especially. As the youngest, he'd needed the most help.

No, his brothers had their own lives now, which was only normal. Lagan should be happy for them. He was. For the most part. But in times like this, when he wanted nothing more than to call them and ask them to be there for him, he hated that they'd found love. How could he claim them when they had someone else who should be their first priority, someone who deserved to be?

He took a deep breath, responded to some of the pics, hearted a few, and told both Jaren and Hadley to enjoy themselves. There, done. He'd solve his own problems. He had to.

A door opened and closed, and seconds later, Killian walked into the room, holding a paper bag. "You're awake."

Lagan bit back the smart-ass remark that was on the tip of his tongue. Despite everything that had happened between them, Killian had done something extraordinarily kind for him. He didn't deserve Lagan's snark. "I am. Sorry for falling asleep, but I guess I needed it. I slept like a baby."

A soft smile curved Killian's mouth, and Lagan's eyes were drawn to it like a magnet. Had he ever even seen the man smile like that before? Not a sarcastic smirk but a genuine smile? If he had, he couldn't remember. It changed his whole face, drawing attention to his full lips and highlighting how blue his eyes were. Fuck, his eyes were gorgeous, like Lake Michigan on a clear summer day.

"Glad to hear it. I got you breakfast."

Lagan blinked. What were they talking about again? "Breakfast?"

“You know, the first meal of the day? What you’re supposed to eat in the morning after waking up?”

Lagan caught himself. “Yes, Captain Obvious, I know what breakfast is. But why would you get me anything?”

“Because you’re my guest?”

“Not deliberately. I had every intention of going home yesterday evening.”

“Well, you didn’t, and as such, you are my guest. You need to eat a good breakfast. I wasn’t sure what you liked, so I got you a variety of things. Let me grab a plate for you.”

Lagan sat stunned while Killian rummaged around in the kitchen, then came back with a plate, silverware, and a napkin that he all put on the dining table. A cloth napkin, for fuck’s sake. Like they were in a restaurant.

“Would you like coffee or tea with your breakfast?” Killian asked as he unpacked the paper bag.

The unmistakably delicious smell of bacon wafted out. Lagan’s stomach rumbled in response, and he got up and walked over to the glass dining table. The black leather chairs didn’t look too comfortable, but they were sure modern and sleek, fitting in with the rest of the interior. The whole place was spotless and carefully styled, like a furniture showroom.

Killian had gotten an egg-bacon-cheese sandwich for him and not the fast food kind either. No, it was a real English muffin, and the bacon looked perfectly crispy. Lagan wanted to dig in immediately. Killian also took out a fancy yogurt with fresh berries and granola, a cup of juice or maybe a smoothie, and something that looked like a hash browns patty, only fancier. Maybe a potato latke or whatever they were called?

“I can also make you some toast if you prefer,” Killian said hesitantly, staring at the items on the table.

“No, this is...” Lagan cleared his throat. “This looks amazing, thank you.”

The tight expression on Killian's face disappeared. Had he been worried Lagan wouldn't like the food? It was a gourmet breakfast, stuff rich people ate. Lagan had never had anything like it.

"Oh, good. Please dig in."

"Don't you want anything?"

"I already ate. I'm an early riser."

Lagan couldn't help himself and took a big bite out of the sandwich. Oh, god, so good. The muffin was fresh and soft, the bacon salty and crispy, the cheese creamy and melting in his mouth, and the egg perfectly cooked. This was by far the best breakfast sandwich he'd ever had. "How early?" he asked with his mouth full.

"Five."

Lagan widened his eyes. "Five a.m.? And you do that voluntarily?"

Something passed over Killian's face. "It's become a habit by now, so even when I don't set an alarm, I wake up at that time."

"Fuck, I'd be dead. I have trouble getting up before eight. Not a morning person."

"Coffee or tea?"

Lagan blinked. Had he somehow hit a sore topic? Killian seemed different. More closed off. "Coffee, please. Did I say something wrong?"

Killian turned around, already halfway to the kitchen. "No." Then he sighed. "You touched a nerve, but you couldn't have known."

What could be touchy about getting up early? Lagan pondered it as he ate. He had no clue, but he'd let it go. Killian had said Lagan couldn't have known, so he wouldn't be that angry, would he?

Killian returned with two mugs of coffee, put one down in front of Lagan, and sat opposite him.

“Are you sure you don’t want anything?” Lagan asked.
“It’s delicious.”

“It’s all yours.”

After finishing the breakfast sandwich, Lagan wiped his hands on the napkin, then dug into the yogurt. Yummy, that was all kinds of delicious. The vanilla wasn’t overpowering, and the berries were fresh and juicy. The granola had a hint of maple syrup in it. The combination was perfect.

When he started on the potato latke, Killian coughed as if he was choking on his coffee. Lagan froze. “Something wrong?”

“No, not at all. I was just... I didn’t think you’d eat everything.”

Crap. He put down the latke. “Sorry, I wasn’t thinking.”

“No, don’t stop on my account. You can eat as much as you want. You don’t look like you eat that much is all. You surprised me.”

Should he tell him? He’d never shared this with anyone else but his brothers, and he hadn’t needed to explain himself to them. They all suffered from it. “It’s trauma eating.”

“It’s what?”

“When you grow up without the guarantee of having sufficient food on the table every day, you learn to eat when something is available. It’s a deeply ingrained trauma in my old brain that pops up when I’m not paying attention or super stressed.”

“The group home didn’t feed you enough?” Killian looked aghast.

“Not consistently. Some days we had plenty, but we also had days or even weeks where we went hungry. Sometimes, the leaders used food as a punishment, like withholding it when we’d been bad in their eyes. And they often took what was meant for us. People would donate food, clothes, or toys, and the leaders would take them, leaving us only with the crappy stuff and the leftovers.”

“I can’t believe people would steal from children.” Killian shook his head. “I mean, how low can you go?”

“Oh, much, much lower than that, trust me.”

“Please, eat as much as you want.”

Lagan pushed his plate back. “Thank you, but I shouldn’t. My body needs to remember I have sufficient food now.”

“Just know I wasn’t complaining or criticizing.”

For someone who Lagan had considered a snobby asshole, Killian sure seemed concerned about what Lagan thought of him. “I know, and thank you. The food was delicious.”

“I bought it in a café two blocks away. They’re only open until two p.m., and they make the most amazing breakfast and lunch food. I could eat their stuff every day.”

Lagan wiped off his mouth and leaned back in his chair. Killian was sipping his coffee, and Lagan’s eyes drifted down to where Killian’s throat moved as he swallowed. His salt-and-pepper beard was neatly trimmed, immaculate, just like the rest of him. “Not a fan of cooking yourself?”

Killian winced. “I can barely boil an egg. The best I can do is heat stuff up. I’ve become really good at that.”

Lagan snorted. “That’s rather sad for a grown-ass man. I’m not saying I’m a great cook, but I know my way around the kitchen. Hadley is more talented in that area, and I’ve learned a lot from him over the years.”

“It never interested me, and…” Killian hesitated. “When you have money, it’s not that urgent.”

Fuck, that had to be so awesome, not to have to worry about bills and all that. “I can see that. Anyway, thank you again. I won’t keep you any longer.” Lagan rose from his chair.

“Where are you going?”

Lagan frowned. “Home. It was nice of you to have me, but I didn’t mean to spend the night, so I’ll be on my way now and get out of your hair.”

“You’re not in my way.”

“That’s kind of you to say, but I’m sure you have better things to do than—”

“Are you flying to Chicago today?”

“If I can get a ticket, yes. The sooner I can get my father buried and put this behind me, the better.”

“You may want to talk to a funeral director first and see about availability. You’ll need a place to store the body until you’ve made arrangements for the funeral, even if you don’t want a service.”

A funeral director. Right. Fuck, he had no clue how that even worked. Did he get to pick a cemetery? Oh god, that would cost money as well, wouldn’t it? A casket wasn’t cheap, and a plot in a cemetery had to cost a pretty penny. How would he pay for that? He could hardly charge all that to Sebastian’s credit card.

Shit, he’d have to call into work and tell them he’d be out for a few days. Oliver would not be happy.

He sat down again and buried his head in his hands. “I don’t know how to do this. I’ve never had to... I have no experience with this.”

A rustle and then a strong hand on his shoulder. “I’ve been in that situation before. Had to bury both my parents. I can help, but do you want it?”

He couldn’t do this alone. Killian Evans shouldn’t be the one helping him, and yet here they were. Lagan lifted his head, swallowing his pride and a whole lot of other emotions. “Yes, please, I’d love your help.”

Killian hadn't expected Lagan to accept his help, but the feeling when he had, when he'd flat out said he needed Killian... Killian couldn't even describe it, but it had set him on fire inside. A powerful surge of emotions had barreled through him. Joy, relief, excitement, everything mixed into one. The deep knowing that someone *needed* him, that he still had something left to give. He hadn't even hesitated to offer to travel to Chicago with him, and that Lagan had immediately accepted his offer proved how desperate he'd been.

At the same time, alarm bells had gone off, and they'd kept blaring ever since. He'd been there before, hadn't he? He'd been needed before. Or at least, he'd been told he was, and how good it had made him feel. In the end, it had all been a lie, and it had damn near destroyed him.

But this was different. Lagan wasn't Armando. Lagan couldn't have fabricated that story about his father, not when they were on the plane to Chicago together right now to claim the body. If it had been a scam, Lagan would've found a way to let Killian stay home. He would've asked Killian to pay for it somehow, but he hadn't.

Instead, he'd been embarrassed as he'd pulled a credit card and explained that Sebastian LeClerc had issued it to him for emergencies. Yes, this constituted one, Killian had assured him. Lagan had still hesitated, but in the end, he'd confessed he had no choice, since he didn't have enough money of his own.

And now they were about to land at O'Hare, their bodies pressed together in the economy seats Killian hadn't seen up close and personal in over ten years. Not that he'd mentioned that to Lagan, who had insisted on paying for Killian's ticket as well. Killian had debated offering to pay for business class tickets, but the moment the thought had popped into his head, he'd let it go. Lagan was proud, something Killian had come to realize in the past weeks, and Killian needed to let him hold on to his pride.

Funny how aware Killian was of Lagan's body next to his, even with the armrest between them. Their thighs were touching, their elbows resting against each other. Lagan had dozed off, and at some point, his head had sagged sideways, facing Killian. He'd kept staring at him like a creep. What was it with this man that drew Killian so to him? It made no sense.

That kiss they'd shared kept playing on a loop in Killian's mind. Over and over and over again, he pictured how Lagan had attacked his mouth, how their lips had smashed together, how their tongues had been so hot and slick as they'd found each other, how the heat had pooled in his belly and his cock had been iron hard.

Everything about that kiss had been perfect, and yet it could never happen again for too many reasons to count, but first and foremost, because he was Lagan's professor. Maybe if he kept repeating that to himself a few more times, it would sink in. Lord knew he hadn't heeded all the warning signs when Armando had shown interest in him, and he'd been equally off-limits, considering he'd been Killian's client.

Though in all fairness, legally, there was a big difference. A relationship between attorneys and their clients was prohibited and cause for being disbarred in the state of Massachusetts—as was the case in most states. A relationship between a professor and a student, however, was frowned upon but technically not illegal. Killian had checked the university's code of conduct, which didn't specifically forbid it. That meant they couldn't fire him over one, but it sure as hell would cost him his good name. Again.

Not that anything would happen between them again. Lagan hated him. He'd dismissed Killian from the moment they'd met, which Lagan didn't seem to remember. If he had, he would've brought it up by now. He'd had ample opportunity to use it as ammunition against Killian, and the fact that he hadn't proved he didn't recall their first meeting. Killian did, and even now, his stomach went sour all over again. Would the pain of that rejection ever heal?

Even nine years later, he felt it sharply, a stark reminder that he'd done the right thing by choosing to focus on his career and his reputation rather than on sex or a relationship. He knew all too well where that could lead to. No, he was better off holding on to the life he had built so carefully.

As they started their descent, Lagan woke up, blinking a few times and yawning in an adorable way. Killian had to avert his eyes to keep himself from staring at him. Again.

"How long has it been since you were here?" he asked Lagan as the airport grew bigger through the window. He was determined to push his own pain and needs aside and focus on Lagan.

"Haven't been back since we left, which was after I graduated high school, so over ten years."

Wow. This had to be a difficult trip for him in more ways than one, then. He turned and faced him. "You didn't leave any friends behind here?"

"I took everyone I loved with me to Seattle. Or they took me, I should say. There's nothing left for me in this city."

"I always liked Chicago. Had a couple of conferences here over the years. It's a fun city to visit."

Lagan's smile was sad. "I never had the chance to do much sightseeing when I lived here. My father was too busy stealing to take me anywhere, my mom was too scared to even set foot outside, since we lived on the South Side, and after they were gone, the group home sure as fuck wasn't gonna pay for field trips."

"You've never seen any of the sights?"

“We went on a school trip once in elementary and once in middle school, so I saw the Bean, the Loop, and a few old buildings, but that was it. I remember little of it. My whole life was on the South Side.”

Killian had done research on trauma for several court cases, and one of the well-known side effects was how it affected memory. The public always expected people who had been through something awful to remember every detail, but that was rarely the case. The mind had a way of protecting itself, and so it blocked memories formed during trauma. It wouldn't surprise Killian if that were the case with Lagan too.

Wasn't it crazy how much he wanted to offer him to do some sightseeing? Not today or even tomorrow, but someday. That notion was ridiculous, of course. “I hope you'll get to see more of the city someday. Maybe replace some bad memories with newer, better ones.”

Lagan studied him as if he wanted to see if Killian meant it, but then he nodded slowly. “Maybe someday.”

Deplaning was tedious as they were seated in the back, but the good news was that they only had their carry-ons, so they didn't have to wait for luggage. The first order of business was a meeting at the funeral home that would take care of burying Lagan's father. Killian had made some calls the day before and had found them professional and willing to take the job.

“Shit, how are we even getting there?” Lagan said as they walked into the arrivals hallway, panic lacing his voice.

“I rented a car.”

“You did? I didn't even think of that.”

“I know. That's why I did.”

“Thank you. I'll pay you back.”

Killian waved his hand dismissively as he led them to the rental car pickup. “Don't worry about it.”

Lagan was quiet as they walked to the Herz lot, where Killian picked a car—a silver blue BMW 530—put their luggage in the trunk, and got behind the wheel.

Lagan took the passenger seat, biting his lip. “This car must cost a fortune to rent. I’m not sure I can afford this.”

“I told you. Don’t worry about it. I got this.”

If Killian hadn’t still been watching Lagan, he would’ve missed the way his jaw tightened. “I can’t be in your debt, no matter how small an amount this is for you.”

Killian’s first instinct was to repeat that it wasn’t even an issue as far as he was concerned, but something about Lagan’s tone and face made him change course. “Why don’t we agree that I’ll pay for the difference between the rental price of the cheapest car and this one? That sound fair to you?”

Lagan’s shoulders relaxed. “Yes. I can live with that.”

“Good. Now let’s get on the road.”

He had no intention of letting Lagan pay for it, but that wasn’t a battle he was set on fighting now. All that could wait until they were back. With any luck, Lagan would have forgotten about it by then.

Killian programmed Maps for the address of the funeral home, then drove off. For the first half hour, they barely spoke. Killian was focused on navigating. He liked Chicago, but the city was an absolute nightmare to drive in and around, even from O’Hare. And the traffic was horrendous.

“Have you decided on what you want the funeral to look like?” Killian asked once they had passed the busiest roads, some twenty minutes later.

“Simple and cheap.”

“Do you want a burial or a cremation?”

Lagan sighed. “Cremation is cheaper, but we buried my mom, and I think that’s what he’d want too. He was a total fucking dickwad, but he did love her in his own way, and he never treated her with anything but love and respect. Aside from being a thief, he was a good husband. At least, that’s the impression I had as a child. As far as I know, he never hit her or cheated on her. Though that’s maybe setting the bar very low.”

It was, but that was a discussion for another time. “The cheapest casket, I assume? And do you want a headstone?” Killian was pretty certain he knew the answer, but he still wanted to ask.

“What would I put on it? Worst father in the world?” Lagan snorted. “Nah, thanks, I’m good. And yeah, the cheapest casket is fine. Hell, they can bury him in a cardboard box if that’s allowed. I don’t care. He just needs to be put into the ground.”

Well, that was pretty clear. “Do you want to be there when they bury him?”

“Oh...” It came out shocked, as if Lagan had never thought about that.

“You don’t have to, you know. You can decide to stay away.”

Lagan was quiet for so long that Killian looked sideways. “I don’t know,” Lagan said slowly. “I don’t owe him anything, but maybe I need to be there anyway to get closure? I want to close this chapter of my life once and for all.”

“That makes sense. Whatever you decide is okay, Lagan. And if you change your mind later on, that’s permissible too.”

The funeral director was a woman by the name of Angela Mayer, much younger than Killian would have expected, but she received them with warmth and tact. “Your partner called me yesterday and explained some of the circumstances,” she said to Lagan after offering them coffee, which they declined, and water, which they both accepted.

Lagan turned his head sharply toward Killian. Yes, he’d introduced himself as Lagan’s partner, knowing damn well he wouldn’t get anything done otherwise. “My partner. Right.”

“I can understand this isn’t an easy situation for you, Mr. Foster. You have my sympathies, and if there’s anything I can do to make this easier for you, please let me know.”

“Thank you,” Lagan mumbled. “And please call me Lagan.”

“Gladly. Before I walk you through the questionnaire, I have some news to share that you might not be aware of. I did some checking, just to be sure, and I discovered your father owned a cemetery plot.”

Lagan’s mouth dropped open. “He did?”

Angela nodded. “It’s the family lot where your mother was buried as well. He purchased it well before she passed away.”

Wow, Killian hadn’t seen that one coming, and judging by the way Lagan paled, neither had he. Without thinking about it, Killian took his hand and laced their fingers together. Lagan clung to him, and Killian scooted his chair a little closer to him.

“Well, I guess that answers the question of where to bury him,” Lagan muttered.

Angela wasn’t merely kind but also efficient, and ten minutes later, they had all the details hashed out. Killian had made decisions multiple times when Lagan seemed to zone out. Thank god he’d asked him stuff in the car so at least he knew what Lagan wanted.

“That’s everything.” Angela put down her legal pad. “We’ll arrange for your father’s body to be transported here from the prison, and we’re confident we’ll be able to have the burial the day after tomorrow. We’ll inform you as soon as we’ve finalized the arrangements.”

When they stood outside again, Lagan was still a tad pale. Killian gently steered him to the car, where he got in without saying a word. They sat in the parking lot for a few minutes. How should he handle this? Should he say something? Take charge? Or was it better to give Lagan time to process all of it? He’d wait it out. Lagan looked numb, and maybe time was all he needed.

Finally, Lagan turned his head sideways. “You introduced yourself as my partner?”

“Yes. Otherwise, they wouldn’t have released any information to me. And technically, I *am* working with you as

a partner here, though legally, that's a shaky interpretation, of course."

Lagan snorted, such a normal and welcome sound that Killian breathed out with relief. "I'll say."

"Where do you want me to take you?"

"You make it sound like you're my driver."

Killian twirled his hand in an elegant gesture and bowed his head. "Your lowly servant, sir."

"Pff, I wish. I guess we'll need something to eat."

"Works for me. What are you in the mood for?"

Lagan studied him. "You're being awfully accommodating."

"Just trying to make things easier for you."

"You are. Thank you."

Warmth spread inside Killian like a fire had been ignited. "You're welcome. Now, about the food. Would you prefer to eat out somewhere or have it delivered to our motel?"

"Delivery. I'm not in the mood for company, not even from strangers."

"I'll still be there. I'm not leaving you alone."

"That's different. You're..." He made a vague gesture with his hand. "I've grown used to you."

"Have you now? Well, I'll take that as a compliment," Killian said dryly, then put the address of the motel in Maps and turned on navigation. Lagan had picked out and paid for the motel, so Killian was setting his expectations low.

"I didn't mean it in a bad way," Lagan said when they were on their way.

Killian frowned. "Mean what?"

"That I've grown used to you. I was..." He sighed, then stole a glance sideways that Killian caught from the corner of his eyes. "What I'm trying to say is that maybe you're not so

bad. Like, you've shown redeeming qualities as well. I guess I've grown used to you."

Killian didn't even attempt to repress his smile as he patted Lagan's leg. "I've grown used to you too."

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As soon as Lagan opened the door to their motel room, he came to a full stop. Crap. “Something went wrong with my reservation.”

“What’s the problem?” Killian nudged him aside. “Oh.”

They both stared at the king-size bed. The *only* king-size bed. “I requested a room with a double queen.” Lagan dragged a tired hand through his hair.

“Those are in big demand, so one may not have been available at such short notice.”

Lagan bit his lip. “I’ll head to the front desk and get a second room for you.”

Killian cleared his throat. “As far as I’m concerned, that’s not necessary. I’m fine sharing a bed with you. If you are too, that is. It is a king-size, not a full or queen.”

Lagan hesitated. He didn’t have a problem sharing a bed with anyone, but he was concerned about his reactions. He’d grown so used to snuggling up with Hadley over the years he wasn’t sure he wouldn’t mistake Killian for his brother during the night and try to cuddle with him. And after the kiss he’d already initiated, that would send the wrong signal.

“I’ll take that as a no. Don’t worry about me. I’ll get my own room.”

Killian sounded ice cold, and now that he knew him a little better, Lagan recognized the hurt in that tone. He turned

around and put a hand on Killian's lower arm. "It's not what you think."

Killian raised his chin. "What I think is that you have an issue sharing a bed with me. Is that correct?"

"No. Well, yes, but not for the reason you expect. I'm worried about my own reaction."

Killian's icy expression melted a little. "I'm not following. Your reaction to what?"

"I've shared a bed with Hadley for years, hell, since I arrived in the group home, and the two of us are both snugglers. He only moved out a few months ago, and to be honest, I still miss him next to me. I haven't slept alone since I was a teenager, so I'm concerned that sometime during the night, my tired brain will think you're Hadley, and I will try to cuddle with you."

Killian blinked, then chuckled lowly. "Oh, the horrors of having someone snuggle up to me in the middle of the night. I'm not sure my virtue will survive."

"There's also the matter of you being my professor and all that. I'm pretty sure the university would have an issue with us sharing a bed. "

"I'd suggest they don't find out, then. We'll apply the same policy of never mentioning this again as we did to the auction."

Killian seemed reluctant to get his own room. Lagan wasn't sure why, but even more puzzling was that he felt the same way. Was it because he felt so off-kilter and needed the assurance of someone's presence? Even if that person was Killian. But no matter how hard he tried to convince himself of that, it sounded like a lame explanation.

"Okay. Let's share, then."

"Another problem solved. Now, what would you like to eat?"

If Killian didn't make an issue out of it, he wouldn't either. He'd look like an idiot, and he'd already made enough of a

fool of himself. “What are the options?”

They settled on Chinese, and Killian put the order in, then opened his suitcase. He took out a stack of clothes and put them in the top drawer of the dresser.

Lagan frowned. “You’re unpacking?”

“Yes.”

“We’re only here for a few days.”

“Three nights.”

“You unpack for three nights?”

Killian crossed his arms. “I always unpack.”

“But why? Isn’t it much more work to unpack than to just grab everything from your suitcase for two days?”

“Three nights, and no, it’s not. I like my things in order and my clothes without wrinkles, thank you very much.”

He watched Killian unobtrusively as he unpacked, then shoved his suitcase under the bed. Killian did like everything structured. Lagan had already determined that back when the man had still been Professor Evans to him, when he’d still despised him. Which he didn’t anymore. In fact, Killian was nothing like Lagan had imagined him to be. How had he been so wrong about him?

Killian moved silently, those strong arms flexing in his tight dress shirt. The man gave Lagan a whole new appreciation for suit porn. Before, he would’ve labeled suits as classy but not exactly sexy, but the way Killian filled out those formfitting pants and stretched his dress shirt to the max was downright filthy. He was the classic silver fox, and damn, Lagan couldn’t stop watching him. What the fuck was wrong with him?

In his defense, he’d had gone well over three months without sex. That was probably the reason he’d kissed Killian and why he was so hyperaware of him. He needed to get laid, and Killian was the person he’d spent the most time with. God, that statement was too sad to even think about.

Their dinner—which Killian had insisted on paying for—arrived quickly, and Lagan had to remind himself not to overeat despite the powerful temptation. He loved Chinese, but he didn't get to eat it that often as he tried to limit eating out, and it always seemed to hit the spot.

Considering this was takeout, the quality was much better than he had expected. The orange chicken was super crunchy and with the perfect amount of heat. Killian had ordered some healthy stuff with tons of veggies, but Lagan was all about the comfort food this time. Orange chicken, sesame chicken, and General Tso's chicken, his idea of a *ménage à trois*.

He helped Killian gather the leftovers and put those in the little fridge in the room, then loaded up the rest in the plastic bag it had come in.

"I'll take out the trash from the food," Killian said when they were done. "Otherwise, the entire room will reek of Chinese."

Lagan didn't mind the smell, but if it bothered Killian, that was fine with him. While Killian walked out with the trash, he explored their room. The window looked out over the parking lot, so not anything special, and the room was pretty spartan. Two nightstands, the bed, a mini fridge that needed a thorough cleaning, a wobbly desk with an equally rickety chair, a reading chair with suspicious stains, and a flat-screen TV on a wooden dresser that had seen better times. Everything was done in those olive-green and burgundy-red colors cheap motels seemed to be so fond of.

The bathroom was unimpressive as well. Just one of those standard bathtubs with a thin, plastic shower curtain that would stick to you as soon as you turned on the hot water. Still, a shower would be a good idea. He felt grimy after traveling all day. Decision made, he dropped his clothes on the spot and made his way into the bathroom.

Wow, Killian had not only unpacked his clothes but had also put his toiletries in the bathroom, including a bottle of shower gel. Wasn't that handy? Lagan hadn't even thought about packing shampoo and shower stuff. Killian wouldn't

mind if he used his, would he? If he had no objections to sharing a bed, shower gel shouldn't be a problem.

As expected, the shower curtain was a pain in the ass. The water was hot, though, and the pressure much stronger than he had counted on. He took his time washing his hair, massaging his scalp until his faint headache drifted away, then grabbed Killian's body wash.

As soon as he opened the bottle, he recognized the fragrance from Killian. Body wash couldn't carry a smell all day, could it? He checked the brand. Dior Homme. Too curious to ignore it now, Lagan stuck his head around the curtain and checked the bottles Killian had put out. Yup, there it was. He was using Dior Homme eau de toilette as well. That explained it.

He washed, smiling when the familiar scent enveloped him. Funny, but he didn't mind at all. The stuff smelled amazing. And it had to be better for his skin than the bar soap he always used. No matter how hard those companies tried to convince the public their soap had hydrating qualities, his skin didn't seem to get the message and remained dry.

The fan in the bathroom had trouble keeping up with the steam from the shower, and by the time he shut off the water, the entire bathroom was hazy and the mirror all fogged over. He opened the door a little to let some of the hot air out, then dried himself off.

Oh, crap. He hadn't brought clean clothes into the bathroom. In fact, he hadn't carried any clothes with him, not even the ones he'd been wearing. He'd dropped them right next to the bed. Now what? He hesitated a moment, then wrapped the towel around his waist, tucking it in tightly to ensure it would stay put.

When he walked into the room, Killian was stretched out on the bed, his back propped up against the headboard with pillows, reading on his Kindle. He looked up. "Did you have a nice..."

His eyes widened when he took Lagan in, and then his Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed. Lagan mimicked his

movement, his mouth too dry to even attempt to speak. The air between them seemed to crackle, and sweat broke out all over Lagan's body. Shit, what was happening between them? Had that kiss not been an accident after all? Or was he still in some sex-starved daze that Killian looked so damn hot he wanted to jump him?

"Yeah," he said hoarsely.

Killian dragged his eyes away from Lagan's body and met his gaze. "What?"

"Yeah, I had a nice shower. The water was super hot."

"Oh, good." Another swallow. "I might take a shower later as well."

Lagan gestured at his clothes lying on the bed. Killian must've picked them up. "I forgot to bring clean clothes into the bathroom. Clearly, I'm not as experienced a traveler as you are."

"That's okay. I'm not sure I would've thought of it either. I'm not used to sharing a room with someone."

"Right. I'm just gonna..." Lagan waved his hand at his suitcase, which he'd dumped next to the bed.

"Of course."

Lagan held on to the towel as he bent over and rummaged through his hastily packed suitcase to find clean underwear. What was he going to sleep in? He didn't even own pajamas, since he always slept in his underwear, but he hadn't considered how awkward that would be with Killian in the same room. He could hardly wear his jeans to bed, though. That would not only be uncomfortable as hell but also look all kinds of stupid, as if he were a prude. Underwear would be acceptable, right?

Jesus, why was this so hard to navigate? He should never even have opened his mouth to his brothers about Killian. If Nordin hadn't put those ridiculous thoughts in Lagan's head, he wouldn't have been so hyperaware of Killian's presence. He wouldn't have kissed him either because it never would've occurred to him that hate could mask attraction. Now he

couldn't stop thinking about Killian, and he practically felt the man's eyes burn into his backside.

For all he knew, Killian had returned his attention to his Kindle, but Lagan didn't think so. And when he shot a glance over his shoulder, his suspicions were confirmed. Killian's eyes were glued to Lagan's ass, which had to be nicely outlined under the wet towel.

Then why didn't he mind that Killian was studying him like he wanted to gobble him up? Why did he have the strange urge to drop his towel and see what would happen? Fuck, he was going insane. He had to be imagining things. Killian couldn't be interested in him. The man didn't even *like* him.

But why then had Killian kissed him back? Why had he insisted on accompanying Lagan to Chicago? He could've helped him make the arrangements and then let him handle the rest on his own, but he hadn't. And why couldn't he tear his eyes off Lagan now?

"Something wrong?" Killian's voice was low, and a shiver danced down Lagan's spine.

"No, I'm fine. Just lost in thoughts for a moment."

He grabbed a pair of underwear. Now what? Should he retreat to the bathroom to get changed? That was prudish again, right? Men got changed in front of each other all the time. He'd done it his whole life in school, though he'd hated every second of that, seeing as how his growth spurt had come at least two years after everyone else's, and he'd been by far the smallest. Why was he making such a big deal out of this in his head?

He shouldn't. He should get the fuck over himself and focus on real problems, like the upcoming funeral of his father. That was what he should invest his emotional energy in, not this endless going in circles about sharing a room with Killian and all that it implied. He took a deep breath, unhooked his towel, and sent it to the floor. He forced himself to act normal as he put his underwear on, though he did make sure to keep his back turned to Killian.

Killian made a sound, something like a hushed gasp, but Lagan didn't dare look at him. Instead, he picked up the towel and padded back to the bathroom to hang it on the towel bar. The mirror had unfogged enough that he could see himself, and he dragged his hands through his hair to make sure it didn't dry in a crazy way. He took a minute to brush his teeth and made his way back into the bedroom, where Killian was staring at his Kindle, his cheeks flushed. Was he warm from the steam that had drifted into the room?

“I'm done, so if you want, you can take a shower now.”

Killian closed the cover of his Kindle. “Thank you. I'll do just that.”

He got up, grabbed clothes from the dresser, and vanished into the bathroom, closing the door behind him. Lagan let out a slow breath. Holy shit, that had been all kinds of awkward. He needed to get a fucking grip on himself so he'd stop seeing things that weren't there. Killian wasn't into him, wasn't attracted to him. He'd just been kind to Lagan. Nothing else.

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Killian banged his head against the cold tiles of the wall. Thank god the water drowned out the noise. The sight of Lagan walking out of the bathroom, that fluffy white towel wrapped around his hips, droplets of water running down his bare chest. The breath had caught in Killian's lungs, and he hadn't been able to look away.

He had feasted his eyes on Lagan's slender form, his smooth chest, the happy trail that disappeared under the towel. His nipples had been pebbled, dark pink little buds begging for Killian's fingers, for his mouth. And god, the way he had smelled...

He'd used Killian's shower gel, and the familiar fragrance on Lagan had hit Killian like a sucker punch to his gut. Lagan had been so effortlessly sexy, not even aware of the way he affected Killian.

And when he'd bent over, highlighting that ass...then dropping the towel and showing it in all its glory. Killian had grown instantly hard, every breath an effort. Fuck, he wanted him. He wanted him with every fiber in his body. He longed to touch him, run his hands all over his body, worship him, kiss him and suck him and fill him and then do it all over again. His body *ached* with need, and he hadn't felt such an overwhelming desire in forever.

All this time, Killian had tried to persuade himself that Lagan's cruel rejection had destroyed all chemistry between them. But it hadn't. Not by a long shot. He'd been fooling

himself. All he had to do was look at him, and his body responded. Like he was a magnet, irresistibly drawn to metal. Fuck, Lagan didn't even need to touch him or kiss him—though the memories of that kiss were pretty damn arousing. Just watching him set Killian's body on fire.

And now he was not only sharing a room with him but a bed as well. How on earth could he have ever thought that was a good idea? Sitting next to him on the plane had already been sweet torture. When Lagan had suggested getting a second room, Killian should've jumped on that opportunity. But he hadn't, instead insisting he was fine with sharing a bed with him. He wasn't fine at all. His body was as taut as a crossbow about to be released.

Muttering a soft curse, he got into the shower. He was going to take his time in the bathroom. He would've jerked off if not for fear Lagan would be able to hear him. The walls were paper thin.

But fuck, he needed a minute to recover and figure out a course of action. Was Lagan feeling the chemistry as well? Killian excelled at reading people, something that had come in handy as a criminal defense lawyer, but he struggled to interpret Lagan's expressions. Lagan had kissed him, but Killian still wasn't sure what had prompted him to do that. To him, it had come out of nowhere.

But even if Lagan was attracted to him, that didn't mean they could act on it. First of all, Lagan was vulnerable right now, an emotional state Killian couldn't take advantage of. But, more importantly, he was Lagan's professor. As much as he wanted to make light of that, he couldn't ignore the alarm bells blaring whenever he tried to argue with himself it wasn't a big deal. Even the smallest misstep with Lagan could cost him everything he'd built. His career, his reputation, everything.

He'd followed the same path with Armando, and deceiving himself had only brought him heartbreak and ruin. He'd convinced himself for months that everything was fine because they weren't sleeping together. In the end, that had saved him, but he'd still crossed a line he should never have

stepped over. Morally, he'd been *so* in the wrong, and he wasn't going down that road again.

When he came out of the bathroom, Lagan was asleep. Thank god for that. At least Killian was spared the awkwardness of his scrutiny. Lagan had crawled under the covers and turned on his side, facing Killian's half of the bed. His gorgeous green eyes were closed, and his mouth, which was often so grimly set when they were bickering, was relaxed, turned up in a small smile. He was beautiful, even more so than usual because he seemed so peaceful now.

He must've been exhausted to fall asleep this early. It was eight thirty. Still, Killian got ready for bed as well, brushing his teeth, then turning off all the lights except the one right next to his bed. Lagan had left the pillows Killian had used to lean against the headboard in their place, and he got comfortable again and picked up his Kindle.

Just after ten, his eyes got heavy, and he put his Kindle away, switched off the light, and crawled under the covers. He'd cranked up the AC. The loud rattling and clanking didn't bother him, but the heat in the room would. He preferred to sleep in an ice-cold room, and hopefully, Lagan felt the same way. No way would Killian wake him and ask him.

He turned his back toward Lagan so he wouldn't keep staring at him. Still, it took a long time for him to fall asleep, Lagan's quiet breaths too audible even with the racket the AC made. Killian was too aware of his presence, the heat radiating from his body, the way he smelled, so much like Killian himself. But finally, he dozed off.

He woke up in the pitch dark, needing a second or two to remember where he was. Chicago. Motel. Lagan. But what had awoken him?

Oh. Lagan had done as he had predicted and was now snuggling Killian from behind. He'd plastered himself against Killian's back, his left leg snuck between Killian's legs, and his arm wrapped around his chest. Lagan's hot breath ghosted over the skin of Killian's shoulder, and a light shiver tore through him.

He'd never lain with another man like this. Ever. With Armando, he'd always been careful to keep things out of the bedroom, too scared he'd give in to the pressure Armando had put on him to be truly together. Thank god for that. And before that, he'd only had hookups, one-night stands, and they'd never even spent the night.

By now, he should be used to being alone, and yet lying so near to the body of another man roused feelings in him he'd all but forgotten. A sense of closeness, of intimacy. Soft tenderness flowered inside him, the same protectiveness that had gotten him in so much trouble with Armando.

This was how he'd imagined himself once upon a time. Back when he'd been young and convinced that one day, he'd find the kind of love his parents had shared. The forever, till-death-do-us-part kind. He'd been adamant he wasn't ready yet to settle down, but whenever he'd considered it, scenes like this were what had played through his head.

Sharing a bed, using the same bathroom, showering together. Closeness and intimacy that would grow normal over time, but that could hit you on occasion with how special it was. Like having a man snuggled up against him in bed, sleeping. And his heart ached with a pain he didn't recognize. What was that?

Killian stayed where he was, not moving a muscle, forcing himself to breathe as his eyes clenched shut. Like Lagan, Killian had gone to bed wearing only underwear, and Lagan's hot skin against his was impossible to ignore. Even as he reveled in the sensation of it, his cock perked up and filled until it was at full mast, trying to escape from its confines.

Oh, great. *Traitor.*

He'd ignore it until it went away. It would. It always did. At his age, he didn't often have inopportune erections anymore, but when he did, he got them under control fast. He kept his eyes closed as he focused on his breathing. *Deep breath in. Hold for one...two...three...and out.*

But after a minute or two of slow belly breaths, he was nowhere near relaxed, and neither was his cock. It ached and

throbbled, demanding release. That was what he got for being principled and not hooking up anymore. His next appointment with Mike, his current favorite sex worker, a feisty twink with the smoothest skin, legs for days, and the most glorious peachy bubble butt, was in a few days. That was probably why his cock wouldn't let up.

As long as Lagan was holding him like this, he doubted he'd be able to fall asleep again. His body was too excited. He'd have to do something about it, or he'd be awake all night.

He let out a deep sigh, carefully lifted Lagan's arm, and took it off himself. Getting away from his leg was trickier. He didn't want to wake him, but he managed, then rolled away and sat up. Quietly, he got up, tiptoed to the bathroom, and closed the door behind him. He flicked the light on with one hand while he slipped the other into his underwear. God, he needed relief. He was so fucking hard, his cock leaking in anticipation of something that wasn't happening.

He leaned on the sink with his left hand as his right one got to work, holding himself tightly and spreading the precum with his thumb. He squeezed the head, then twisted. A soft moan escaped him. Fuck, that felt so good. Within seconds, he was panting, jerking his hips as he moved against his hand, seeking more friction.

His eyes drifted shut, and the mental image of Lagan, still wet from his shower, popped into his head. Droplets had dripped down his chest, and Killian hadn't been able to stop watching them. He imagined touching them, following the trail with his fingers, with his tongue. Lagan's skin would be soft and fresh. He'd taste delicious, no doubt.

He'd kiss him, lick him, suck him, maybe try a gentle bite on those pink nipples. Would Lagan like it rough, or was he more the soft-and-slow type? Killian could do either, depending on his mood. Maybe he'd do him fast first, get that burning need out of his system. Fuck him hard until they both exploded, then let it all simmer down and do it all over again.

The second time, he'd explore every inch of him, find out all his erogenous zones. Did he like having his balls sucked? His cock? Maybe he was into rimming? Killian had done it all. He'd always been adventurous in bed, never turning down an opportunity to try something new. Handcuffs, spanking, threesomes, DPs—he'd done it all and then some. BA, of course. Always Before Armando.

Fuck, he didn't want to think about him now. Not when his balls were tingling, and pressure was building up in his body. No, he'd rather picture Lagan again, the way his ass had looked under that towel. Round, firm, luscious...bitable. He'd nibble his way to his hole, then rim him until the man screamed with pleasure. And when his hole had become all soft and pliable, he'd sink inside him. He'd feel so hot and snug around his cock.

One more tug and he came, muffling a grunt as he spurted his load all over his hand and the sink. His legs shook with the effort, and his cock pumped until it was empty and flaccid. He hadn't come that hard in a long time, and he jerked off regularly. He had to if he was only getting laid once a month. Not even watching porn had gotten him this excited. What was it about Lagan that got to him?

His reflection in the mirror was accusing, and he glared at himself as he washed his hands. "Shut up."

It didn't matter. He had to forget about him. Coming here with him was already a bad idea, no matter how well intentioned it had been. Once this trip was over, he'd make sure to keep his distance. He'd go back to being his professor.

If only he could hate him again. That would make things so much easier.

When he slipped back into the room, Lagan stirred. "What's wrong?" he said, sounding sleep drunk.

"Nothing. Just had to use the bathroom." Had Lagan heard him? Surely if he had, he would've commented on it, right?

"Okay."

As soon as he crawled into bed, Lagan snuggled close, wrapping himself around Killian like a vine. Killian froze. Did Lagan realize what he was doing? “Missed you,” Lagan whispered. “Don’t wanna be alone right now.”

Killian’s heart softened, and he relaxed his body, pulling Lagan close. How could he reject him when he was this vulnerable? Lagan needed him. “Go to sleep. I’ve got you.”

That strange, tight feeling in his chest he’d experienced before? It grew a thousand times stronger. Fuck, he was in so much trouble.

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When Lagan woke up, the spot next to him was empty. He stretched, yawning, then pushed himself up and looked around the room. Where was Killian? His eye fell on a piece of paper on the desk, and he climbed out of bed and padded over. Just as he had picked it up, rubbing his morning wood with his other hand, the door opened, and Killian walked in, holding a brown McDonald's bag and two cups of what Lagan assumed was coffee.

Killian froze, his eyes widening as he spotted Lagan, and then averted his gaze. Lagan spun around, turning his back to Killian. Shit, he was still in his underwear, and his hard-on was clearly visible. Killian must've noticed it, but at least he had been polite enough to look away and not mention it.

Killian cleared his throat. "Good morning. I brought coffee and breakfast."

"Thank you for getting breakfast." Lagan put on his jeans and whipped his shirt over his head. "I'm sorry. I woke up two minutes before you walked in. I don't even know what time it is." He checked his watch. "It's ten? Holy shit. I can't recall the last time I slept in that late."

Killian put the bag and cups on the desk. "Apparently, you needed to catch up on some sleep. It's no problem."

"Please tell me you haven't been up since five."

Killian chuckled. "I did wake up at five, but I fell back asleep and got up at seven. As long as I have my Kindle, I'm never bored."

“Well, thank you for being quiet and letting me sleep. I suppose I did need it.”

“My pleasure. The breakfast options around the motel were limited, so I got us some Egg McMuffins. Healthy, they’re not, but it’ll do the job.”

Lagan eagerly opened the paper bag and pulled out the first breakfast sandwich. “Are they both the same?”

“No. Mine is just egg and cheese. Yours has all the meat as well.”

Lagan found his sandwich, unwrapped it, and sat down on the bed. “You know me well already.”

“Angela from the funeral home contacted me. She confirmed the prison has released the body to their care, and the funeral will be at four tomorrow.”

Lagan chewed as he let that news sink in. “Thank you for taking care of that. I’m relieved the process went so smoothly.”

“Me too. I wasn’t sure if the funeral home had any experience dealing with a bureaucratic institution like a prison, but she handled everything well. Is there anyone you’d like to invite to the funeral?”

Lagan shook his head. “I don’t know if my father had any friends, but if he had, they’re long gone. His father, my grandfather, died a couple of years after my dad went to prison. My uncles, I have no idea, but since they washed their hands off me when I needed them, I don’t care.”

“And you’re still set on going?”

“Yeah. I need to put this behind me. Find some final closure.”

Killian’s face softened. “I could say I can imagine, but I can’t.”

Lagan had finished his sandwich and wiped his hands with a napkin. “So, what’s the plan for today? I guess we don’t have anything to do until four in the afternoon tomorrow, right?”

“That’s correct. It’s up to you. If you want to take the opportunity to study or work on some papers, that’s fine. I brought my laptop, so I can always find something to do.”

“I don’t think I could study right now. My head isn’t in the right space for that.”

“Understandable. Well, I was also thinking that if you wanted to, we could maybe head downtown and walk around for a bit. You did mention on the plane you haven’t seen a lot of Chicago, so we could take advantage of this gorgeous spring day and explore the city.”

Shy and insecure were two words Lagan would never have associated with Killian, and yet that was exactly how he looked now. He’d spoken so carefully, as if he wanted to make sure Lagan wasn’t offended or hurt. And his suggestion was really sweet. He had listened when Lagan told him, and warmth spread inside Lagan.

“I’d love that.”

Killian’s face lit up. “Yeah? You sure?”

“It sounds like a wonderful way to spend the day. You said the weather will be good?”

“Temperatures in the low seventies with a slight breeze, no precipitation expected. They’re predicting thunderstorms for tomorrow, but not for today. About as perfect as weather can get if you ask me.”

Lagan got up from the bed. “Sounds like a plan. Let me freshen up real quick, and then we can leave. Unless you need to shower or something?”

“I’m good to go.”

Lagan took a few minutes to do his business in the bathroom, washed his hands, and put some hair product in his hair to make it somewhat manageable. There. Good enough.

He rummaged through his suitcase until he’d found clean socks, then looked around.

“What are you looking for?” Killian asked.

“My gym shoes.”

“Your what?”

“My gym shoes.” Killian still looked confused. “My sneakers. Tennis shoes. Sports shoes. Whatever the fuck you want to call them.”

“Gym shoes? I’ve never heard of that. I always call them sneakers. Anyway, they’re under my side of the bed. No idea how they got there.”

Lagan shrugged as he got on his knees and directed them from under the bed. “It’s a Chicago thing, I guess. One of those weird things that stuck with me. Also, calling them sneakers is totally an East Coast thing, so you’re betraying your Boston roots as well.”

Killian frowned. “Not everyone calls them sneakers?”

Lagan just laughed. “You’re funny.”

A minute later, they were ready to go. “Would you happen to know the easiest way to get downtown?” Killian asked him. “Can we park somewhere and take the subway?”

Lagan snorted. “The subway? You’re not in New York, dude. It’s called the L here. But yeah, from the 355, we can take the Stevenson inbound to Midway and park around there. You can jump on the orange line to the Loop from Midway.”

Killian blinked. “An explanation like that makes me want to gauge my eyes out, just so you know. Care to translate that into normal English for those who don’t speak Chicago?”

Lagan rolled his eyes. “Let’s just get in the car. I’ll make sure we’ll get there, okay?”

Killian muttered something under his breath as he held the door open for Lagan, and they headed outside. Traffic on the Stevenson was a bitch. Outbound traffic was held up by some fender bender that blocked a whole lane, but their inbound lanes had a gapers’ block due to all the idiots rubbernecking at the accident. Morons. What was so fascinating about watching if you smashed up cars anyway? Lagan didn’t get it.

“You grew up on the South Side, correct?” Killian asked once they had parked at Midway and were on the L.

“Yup, out South.”

“Isn’t that area notorious?”

“It is. Or it was. I’ve been gone for so long now that I don’t know what the current situation is. But back when I was a kid, I didn’t know any better. I was born there, you know?”

“Was it dangerous?”

“You grew up in Boston?”

Killian nodded. “Lexington, which is just northwest of Boston.”

“Rich, white suburbia, I assume?”

“Yeah, I suppose so. Why?”

“If that’s your comparison, then yes, the South Side was and is dangerous. Back then, it was poor, run-down, and incredibly diverse. Italians, Irish, loads of Eastern European immigrants, plus Blacks and Latinos, of course. And it was gang and crime central. Lots of competing crime bosses, and you soon learned to either not pick sides at all or pick the right one.”

Killian slowly shook his head. “That’s so hard for me to even imagine. All through elementary school, I had maybe one or two Latino or Black kids in my class. That was it. And crime was... God, I left the garage door open by accident multiple times, and everything was still there the next day. I’m not sure that would still be the case now, but it was back then.”

“If you left your garage open where I grew up, it would be empty within an hour, probably less. And nobody would’ve seen anything, of course. They don’t like snitches down there, as my father discovered.”

Killian was quiet after that, looking pensive. They got off the orange line at Adams/Wabash. A clear blue sky greeted them, the gentle lake breeze making it even more perfect.

“Millennium Park,” Killian said as they passed a sign that pointed out some famous landmarks. “Isn’t that where the Bean is?”

“Sure is. Wanna head there?”

Tourists were gathered around the shiny piece of art, taking pictures from every angle. They walked up close as well, and Lagan laughed at the funny, distorted reflections of himself and Killian. Neither of them took a picture, though. They ventured north, crossing the DuSable Bridge over the Chicago River.

“That’s the Wrigley building.” Killian pointed to a massive building on their left that towered over the bridge. “It’s from the nineteen twenties, I think.”

Lagan halted and looked up. It was nice enough, he supposed, with a clock tower on top and plenty of ornamental decorations. “Cool.”

“Chicago has a lot of interesting architecture. A couple of years ago, I had a conference here in September, and I went on an architectural boat tour. The guide was knowledgeable and shared fascinating details about all the old buildings.”

Huh. Lagan hadn’t even known that was a thing. The tour boats, sure, but one especially for architecture? That wouldn’t be his first choice, but to each his own. Also, he wouldn’t have thought Chicago’s architecture was all that special, but apparently, he was wrong.

Killian pointed to another building on their immediate right. “There’s another famous one, the Tribune Tower. See how it has all these Gothic elements?”

Lagan looked. “I’m sure I would if I knew what Gothic elements were.”

“It’s a copy of late medieval European architecture. Very dramatic, with ornate decorations like gargoyles. Old churches often have Gothic elements, the ones with the massive stained-glass windows, the vaulted ceilings, and all those arches.”

Lagan smiled at Killian’s enthusiasm. He’d shown more passion for this than he had when teaching the law. “You like

this stuff.”

Killian jammed his hands into the pockets of his jeans. “Architecture has always been a hobby of mine. For a brief time, I debated studying it, but too much math was involved. I wasn’t bad at it, but I didn’t excel at it either, so I figured it wouldn’t be the smartest choice.” He let out a sigh. “Feel free to tell me to shut up if I start boring you.”

“No, it’s not that. It’s just ...” Lagan pursed his lips. How did he explain this without once again emphasizing the trauma he’d been through? “My upbringing didn’t leave room for hobbies, you know? I was focused on surviving, on making it through school so I could graduate and leave it all behind me.”

“But you went to college, right?”

“Yes and no. I got my paralegal certification from a community college, then took online classes to get my bachelor’s in English lit. I wanted to go to law school, so I needed a bachelor’s degree. I wasn’t particularly interested in English, but it seemed like a logical choice for me, also because it’s a relatively easy one to get. But I never attended college in the classical sense, and out of necessity, I’ve always had to be satisfied with the bare minimum.”

“I misjudged you when I labeled you as lazy and said you weren’t ambitious enough, didn’t I?” Killian’s face had tightened, and his tone held sadness.

Lagan hesitated, then nodded. He didn’t want to hurt Killian, but he also refused to lie to him. “In your defense, you weren’t the first, and you most likely won’t be the last. For an outsider who has never experienced such dire circumstances, it’s easy to mistake survival mode for being lazy or not caring enough. I do care. But I’ve always had to prioritize my job because that’s what allows me to pay the bills. Rationally, I know I should be able to get a different job as a paralegal easily, especially with my experience, but I’m not a risk-taker. I can’t afford to be.” He looked up at the building again. “So yeah, I never had time to learn about architectural styles. Not all that relevant and practical for me, you know?”

He started walking again, but Killian grabbed his arm and held him back. His blue eyes were full of something Lagan couldn't interpret. Sadness but also regret? "I'm sorry."

"It's okay."

"No, it's not. I was wrong."

Lagan's belly went soft and fluttery at Killian's vulnerability. He reached up and kissed his cheek. "Thank you for saying that. We're good, I promise."

The tightness in Killian's face disappeared. "Thank you."

They set off again. "You said you wanted to be a lawyer to defend those who can't afford good legal representation?" Killian asked.

"Yes. Basically what I'm doing at the legal aid clinic, but as a job."

"I don't want to pry, but that doesn't sound like a career that will make you a lot of money. How will you pay back your student loans? If you want to tell me, that is."

Lagan shot a quick look sideways. "I don't have any."

Killian's eyebrows rose in surprise. "You don't have student loans?"

Should he tell him the truth? He didn't see any reason not to. "No. I'm paying tuition with what I make as a paralegal, and one of my brothers is covering the rest. I helped him get through college, so now he's doing the same for me. Neither of us wanted the debt of big student loans, so we did it this way. Once I've got my law degree, I'm not obligated to take a well-paying job just to be financially secure."

"Wow. That's smart. I'm impressed with how you guys support each other."

"I wouldn't have survived without my brothers. We may not be related by blood, but we're a family nonetheless."

Killian hummed in agreement. "That can't be easy for partners to navigate."

“Probably not, but neither Sebastian nor Reid, Jaren’s boyfriend, has ever made an issue out of it. Every other week, we include them in our weekly dinner, and my brothers chose well. Both men fit in our circle, and I think they understand how much we mean to each other.”

“No partner for you? You said you wouldn’t have time now, but is it something you want down the line?”

Lagan shrugged. “Probably. I can’t focus on that at this stage of my life. I have to get through law school first, and then I can see what’s next.”

“You don’t miss it? Not even when you see your brothers all nauseatingly happy?”

What was with the personal questions? Lagan didn’t mind, but why was Killian so interested? “Sometimes, sure. But my dream is to become a lawyer, and I won’t give that up for anyone.”

“That’s admirable.”

If Killian could ask, so could Lagan, right? “No partner for you either?”

“No.” Killian’s answer came fast and firm, his face tightening ever so slightly. “Like you, I have certain goals, and I can’t let those get derailed.”

Derailed. That was an interesting way to describe the potential effect of having a relationship on life, but didn’t Lagan do pretty much the same when he said he wouldn’t give up his dream for a relationship? Apparently, Killian and he had more in common than he had expected.

Shame had become a constant companion for Killian, and yet the wave that had rolled over him when he realized how wrong he'd been about Lagan had taken his breath away. And he *should* feel ashamed. As kind and understanding as Lagan had been about it, Killian had been judgmental and privileged and hadn't bothered to look past the surface.

The reason was easy, of course. At least for him. Lagan would have no idea, since he didn't seem to remember their first encounter and had no idea how deep the wounds of that rejection were. Wounds that still oozed bitterness, even after all this time.

At least they were on the same page when it came to relationships. He hadn't expected Lagan to be so firm in his convictions that he didn't want one right now, but he admired him for it. Good for him for going after his dream.

"So what's next?" Lagan asked when they'd walked around for a bit.

"You tell me. I've been here before, so what would you like to see?"

Lagan's face lit up for real this time. "Can we go to Comiskey Park?"

That name didn't ring a bell. "What's that?"

"The White Sox stadium."

"Isn't that called..." Killian dug in his memory. "Guaranteed Rate Field?"

Lagan snorted. “Who the fuck calls a stadium that? I mean, seriously, I can’t even say that with a straight face. It’ll always be Comiskey Park to locals.”

He did have a point. “Comiskey Park it is.”

Lagan was a longtime White Sox fan—which made sense, since he was from the South Side—and loved seeing the stadium. Afterward, they strolled along the lake, did some shopping on the Magnificent Mile, and went up the Willis Tower—which Lagan stubbornly called the Sears tower—for the view. Killian hadn’t had such a relaxing day in a long time. They ate dinner at some super healthy pizza place, then headed back on the L and drove back to their motel.

As soon as they walked in, Lagan kicked off his shoes, sending them flying into two different reactions, then let himself fall backward on the bed. “That was so much fun.”

Killian chuckled as he picked up the shoes and put them next to the bed. “It was.”

Lagan turned onto his side, his head propped up on his hand. “You don’t have to tidy up my mess.”

“I know.”

“But it bothers you.”

Killian sighed. “It does. Sorry.”

“No, it’s okay. My brother Jaren is the same way. His boyfriend was a slob before they got together, but now he’s trying his best to be tidy because he knows the mess would be an issue for Jaren. He can’t function if things aren’t neat and clean, so now Reid helps to keep things organized. It’s super sweet.”

“Sounds like they’re a good match.”

“They are.” Lagan stared into the distance, a wistful look in his eyes, but then he returned to the present. “Anyway, if my stuff bothers you, please let me know. I’m happy to tidy if that makes you feel better.”

“Thank you.” Killian looked around the room. “I’m good for now.”

He took off his shoes and crawled next to Lagan onto the bed. His feet were hurting a bit. He hadn't been wearing the most comfortable shoes for a whole day of walking. Still, he didn't regret one moment of it.

"I wasn't always such a control freak," he said out of the blue. Huh, why was he sharing that? It could only lead to questions he wasn't willing to answer.

"It's a common response to a life-changing event," Lagan said softly. "Like, Jaren's mom was a hoarder, and that's why he can't handle a mess. It triggers him big-time. For a lot of people who have been through something traumatic, it's a way to feel in control of something."

"That's it." Killian's voice was hoarse. "I wish I could let go again, but I can't."

Lagan shrugged. "All things considered, it's not the worst possible coping strategy, you know?"

"Maybe, but it makes me so...boring. My whole life is one big routine, and it didn't use to be that way."

"If it makes you feel better, my life is hella boring as well."

"Really? But you're so much younger and... I know you said you don't have time for a relationship, but don't you go out with friends or something?"

"Dude, I can barely find the time to score a hookup." Lagan clamped his hand over his mouth. "Oh, shit. Sorry. Didn't mean to say that to you. It's too—"

They shouldn't be discussing this, but Killian couldn't help himself. "It's fine. We've crossed so many lines already that one more won't matter. We'll make this whole trip Vegas, right? Once we're back, we'll never talk about it again."

"Right." Lagan still seemed a little hesitant.

"So no hooking up for you?" Killian tried to get him back to the topic he was more than a little interested in. He didn't want to sound too eager, but maybe that ship had already sailed.

“The last time was maybe three months ago.” Lagan’s cheeks had turned a lovely pink, but at least he’d answered.

“I don’t hook up either.”

“No? So how do you...? Or are you demi or ace?”

“I’m not, but thank you for asking. That’s considerate and inclusive of you. No, I...” Did he want to confess this? No one knew this about him, not even his sister, who knew more than anyone else. And yet he wanted to tell Lagan for reasons he didn’t want to look too deep into. “I hire someone once a month. A sex worker.”

“You do?” Lagan seemed more surprised than anything else. “That works for you?”

“It does. I have trust issues due to some...bad experiences. I can’t let my guard down, which makes hooking up with strangers complicated. With sex workers, I have no problems, since they’re professionals.”

“You’re not worried about getting caught? Both selling and buying sex are misdemeanors in Washington. I can’t imagine the university would look too kindly on you getting arrested for that.”

“Once again, this is where money makes all the difference. I use a pricey service that is discreet, vets their workers, and guarantees secrecy. I’m not proud of breaking the law, but I think sex work should be regulated and legal. As long as we make sure people are doing it of their own free will, I don’t see a problem with it.”

“But how can we ensure that? It’s not like we can trust cops not to take advantage of sex workers, even if prostitution were legalized. I’m not saying all cops are bad, not at all, but we’ve had too many scandals with cops abusing their jobs to give them that much power over people who are already in a vulnerable position.”

Killian smiled. “You’re something else, you know that? You’re so passionate about the law.”

“And you’re not?”

Ouch. That question hurt. “I don’t know. I honestly don’t know.”

Lagan hesitated. “Can I say something without you getting offended?”

“With an intro like that, how could I refuse?” Killian said dryly. “But yes, you can.”

“The way you teach is... You’re a good teacher, but you’re not inspiring in how you talk about family law. I don’t know how to explain it. You know your stuff, and you teach it well, but it’s...dry. If I compare that to Professor Martins and the way she talks about civil rights law...”

“Civil rights law is a hell of a lot easier to get passionate about than divorce or living wills.”

“Then why did you pick it?”

“I didn’t.” He sighed. “Back in Boston, I used to be a criminal law attorney. But something happened, and I had to move and make a few changes. I didn’t want to be in criminal law anymore, since it had too many negative connotations for me, so I switched. I took some extra courses in family law, passed the bar here in Washington, and started a family law practice.”

Lagan widened his eyes. “You have a family law practice?”

“Technically, yes, but I only take on a few clients a year so I can keep my license. I don’t...” Why was he telling him all this? Lagan was so easy to talk to. He still didn’t want to share it all. He couldn’t. But he didn’t want to lie either. “Financially, I don’t need it. I don’t even need to teach. I received a sizable sum out of a legal settlement.”

“Gotcha. It’s awesome you’re still volunteering at the clinic, then.”

“My passion for the law may have dimmed, especially compared to yours, but just like you, I do want to give back to the greater community, in particular to those who can’t afford quality legal aid. Our judicial system is unfairly biased against those without the means to get good representation, and it’s

shameful. The whole concept of bail is just one prime example of how justice favors those with money.”

Lagan blinked a few times. “Wow, that’s the most passionate I’ve heard you talk about the law ever. And yes, I completely agree with you. But that... That was hot.”

“Hot?”

Lagan blushed again. “Yeah.”

He wasn’t expanding on his comment, but it hit Killian hard nonetheless. It brought back a question he’d been pondering ever since the auction. “Why did you kiss me? At the auction, I mean?”

Lagan groaned, averting his eyes. “I thought we had agreed never to mention that again.”

“Humor me.”

“I don’t know.”

“Oh, I think we both know that’s a lie. You’re not that impulsive, Lagan.”

Lagan sighed, still not meeting Killian’s eyes. “My brother Nordin said the hate between us might be masking attraction.”

Attraction? Did that mean that...? Killian didn’t even dare finish that thought. He was skating on such thin ice here, and yet he couldn’t make himself back off. “Did he now? That suggests you mentioned me.”

“Yeah, as the annoying professor who’s always riding my ass.”

“I’m not even going to mention the number of jokes I could make about that statement.”

“Your constraint is appreciated.”

“And what did you think of your brother’s analysis?”

He held his breath. If Lagan was as attracted to him as he was to Lagan, what would he do? They couldn’t act on it. They shouldn’t. Then again, strictly speaking, it wasn’t against the rules. Frowned upon did not mean forbidden.

“I thought it was ridiculous, but when you were being such an ass at the auction, I figured I’d test it.”

“And? Any conclusions?”

Lagan bit his lip. “That kiss was fantastic.”

“Yeah?”

“Definitely in my top three.”

“Mine too.” Killian hadn’t meant to admit that, but how could he not when Lagan was being so honest with him? He was out of breath, inching closer and closer to the abyss he knew he should avoid yet couldn’t seem to resist.

“Though maybe it wasn’t an experiment conducted broad enough to derive any conclusions from.”

“Not a statistically big enough sample.”

“Exactly.”

They stared at each other, the air heavy between them. Fuck the university. He needed this. He needed him. He hadn’t experienced a connection like this with anyone in nine years, and he couldn’t walk away now.

Killian wasn’t sure who moved. Maybe they both did, and then their hungry lips found each other. Killian slanted his mouth over Lagan’s, and it was like breathing in oxygen after holding his breath for too long, his lungs starving. Lagan opened up for him, inviting Killian’s tongue in, and as he slipped inside Lagan’s mouth, he captured his lovely moan.

He sank into him, exploring his mouth in frantic kisses. Lagan tasted of the pizza they’d eaten, of something savory and sweet, something that wrapped around Killian until his blood thundered through his veins, and his mind went blank. He rolled on top of him, and Lagan didn’t protest, didn’t utter a word. Instead, he pushed up his hips and ground against Killian. Killian got the hint and pressed downward. The friction of their hard cocks meeting sent a wave of heat through him.

Fuck, he wanted Lagan. He needed him. Craved him on a level that would scare the shit out of him if he had a few brain

cells left.

“Killian,” Lagan moaned against his lips. “Don’t stop.”

Don’t stop? He’d barely started. “What do you want?”

“You.” Lagan’s eyes had darkened, his lips were wet from their kissing, his cheeks ruddy. He’d never looked hotter. “I want you.”

“I need a little more than that.”

Lagan swallowed. “Can I suck you off?”

All rational thoughts dissipated. Lust and need were all that was left, and for once, he’d allow himself to feel.

“Yeah.” Killian’s voice was low and rough. He had a million reasons to say no, but his desire drowned out all his objections. “I want nothing more than that. Can’t wait to feel your mouth around my cock.”

With one slight nudge, Lagan turned onto his back, watching Killian through hooded eyes. Killian straddled him, putting a knee on either side of Lagan. He pushed two fingers into Lagan’s mouth as deeply as he could in a quiet test of Lagan’s gag reflex. Lagan sucked on his fingers, slipping his tongue between them. Fuck, how would that mouth feel around his cock? Those lips stretched wide, a mist of tears in his eyes, and that devious tongue licking and sucking him? He had no trouble whatsoever imagining it. Heavenly, that was how.

He slowly pulled out his fingers, and Lagan chased them until they were out of his reach, his lips closing with a smack. “Killian...” he whined.

“You want my cock in your mouth?”

“Fuck, yes.”

So eager. Killian hadn’t had a bed partner in forever who was so genuinely enthusiastic and hungry, and what a turn-on it was. He unbuckled his belt, then unzipped and dragged his cock out, not even bothering with undressing further. “Open up for me.”

Without a second of hesitation, Lagan opened his mouth wide.

“Stick out your tongue.”

Mmm, yes. As much as he loved topping, something about watching a man give him oral always got to him. He swiped at the precum at the tip of Lagan’s tongue, the little moan he let out reverberating deep inside him. He rose on his knees and leaned forward, filling Lagan’s mouth slowly, sinking into him, then pulling back out, lazily fucking his mouth. Lagan used his tongue to swirl around the tip until Killian pushed in all the way, and he could only take what he was given. And he took every single inch.

“Fuck, yes,” Killian mumbled as Lagan’s throat gave way. He pressed forward until his pubic hairs were pressed against Lagan’s chin, where drool was dripping down. “God, that’s so hot.”

He kept a close eye on him, reveling in the way Lagan’s eyes watered, how he lay obediently, so trusting. Killian was blocking his air supply, but Lagan didn’t protest, didn’t tap out. He took it, and something about that quiet trust got to Killian. He pulled out, and Lagan gasped wetly, lifting his right hand to his chin. Killian blocked the movement. “I like seeing you messy.”

Lagan quirked an eyebrow. “You want everything neat and tidy, but you want me drooling and sloppy?”

His hoarse voice sent shivers down Killian’s spine. “I do. Debauched is a good look on you.”

Lagan grinned, then opened his mouth again. With a sigh of happiness, Killian filled that sweet mouth right back up, pumping his hips in a slow rhythm. Sliding in. Holding. Pushing that little bit extra. Pulling back out. Repeat. He was in no hurry, especially not when Lagan didn’t protest. His watery eyes glazed over, and he let out happy hums. And every time he made that low sound of approval, Killian’s cock jerked in his mouth.

Had he ever been this hard? If so, it had been a long time ago, and he couldn't remember. Nothing had ever felt this arousing, this real. Lagan wasn't someone who got paid for being with Killian. He wanted to be. He wanted to suck his cock, and the blissful expression on his face told Killian he loved it.

"Close," he warned him when his balls tightened. Just because Lagan had offered to suck him off didn't mean he wanted Killian's load in his mouth. But Lagan didn't let up. He closed his eyes, thick tears spilling over.

"Open your eyes." Lagan obeyed Killian's quiet command. "I want to see your pretty eyes when I come down your throat."

He sped up, fucking Lagan's mouth relentlessly until his whole body convulsed and he came, spurting into Lagan's throat. He retreated a little for the second squirt so Lagan would taste it, and no matter how furiously Lagan swallowed, some of the cum dripped down his lips, his chin. Debauched indeed. Killian fucking loved it.

The third spurt was the last bit, and Lagan kept suckling until Killian had nothing left to give him. With regret, he pulled out, leaving a wet thread from his cock to Lagan's swollen lips. Killian swiped it with his thumb, then licked his thumb. Lagan's eyes darkened, his chin still covered in drool and cum. Killian bent in, giving Lagan a second to protest, but when he didn't, he lapped at his chin. Lagan moaned, a beautiful, low moan that sank deep inside Killian.

"Dirty," Lagan whispered. "For someone who's always so proper, you're really dirty."

Killian licked off the last bit of his chin and smacked his lips. "Complaints?"

"Hell no."

"I didn't think so." He climbed off Lagan and stretched out next to him, his pants still open and his soft cock out. He'd fix that later. "Your turn."

Lagan had always loved giving blow jobs, but the one he'd given Killian had been next level. Killian's gaze on him had felt so heady, so deep, as if he saw much more than just the outside. And Killian's cock had been as perfect as dicks could get. Just above average in length but full in girth, with an upward curve that would feel so fucking good inside Lagan. Not that he would ever get to feel it.

He cleared his raspy throat. "My turn?"

"Yeah." Killian pointed at the bulge in Lagan's pants. "What do you want?"

Lagan knew what he wanted. He wanted Killian to fuck him into the mattress until he could barely remember his own name, let alone have brain cells left to process everything that was happening. But he wouldn't ask him that. It was too much, and Killian might not be able to say no. They shouldn't be doing this at all, and Lagan couldn't live with the guilt on top of everything else.

"I won't turn down a blow job, but if that's not your thing, I'll happily take your hand."

"I like giving oral."

"Yeah?" Lagan didn't know why that made him so happy. "If you need them, I have condoms in my wallet."

Bringing up the necessary supplies might not be sexy, but Lagan didn't care. They were an essential part of having sex,

and people should stop being weird about it. He didn't like giving oral with a condom, but maybe Killian preferred it.

"Not for oral unless you want me to?"

Lagan shook his head.

"Good. Anything else I need to know?" Killian already had his hands on the waistband of Lagan's pants.

Lagan smiled at the sweet question. "Nope. Do your best."

"I'll give it my best efforts, but yours will be hard to beat."

That was such a classic Killian statement that Lagan laughed. "You have much more experience at this than me, so my expectations are high."

"Was that a dig at my age?"

"Not at all, merely a factual assessment of your experience and how that has affected my expectations."

"No pressure," Killian said dryly.

Was he truly insecure? Or was he just playing along? Lagan wasn't sure, and he didn't want Killian to feel bad if it turned out he wasn't as much of an expert as Lagan had guessed him to be. "If it helps, it's all but impossible to give a bad blow job. As long as you keep your teeth out of the way, we're good."

"Duly noted."

He looked adorably flushed, and Lagan wrapped his hand around Killian's neck and pulled him in for another kiss. Damn, the man knew how to use his tongue, licking his way into Lagan's mouth again, then dueling with his tongue until Lagan surrendered to the invasion. Meanwhile, Killian had unbuttoned and unzipped his pants, and Lagan lifted his hips so he could drag them down. He took off his underwear at the same time, and Lagan worked it down his legs with his feet, then kicked it onto the floor.

By the time Killian let go of Lagan's mouth again, he was panting, his chest heaving with his rapid breaths. "Damn, you can kiss."

“Thank you. So can you.”

Killian crawled off Lagan and stretched out on his stomach, his hot breath ghosting over Lagan’s cock. “I would prefer this position, if you don’t mind.”

Of course he would. The man needed to be in control. Why did that trigger such a warm, soft feeling inside Lagan? “Works for me.”

“Good. One last question, and then I’ll get to work. Do you like ass play during oral?”

The word adorable shouldn’t even come to mind for Killian. The man was forty-four, for fuck’s sake, and a professor at that. Always professional, composed, in control. And yet his questions were so endearing. The way he wanted to know what to do and how he so consistently sought consent was sweet and sexy, and it set an example Lagan intended to follow.

“Fuck, yes. I’m almost an exclusive bottom with men, and I love having my ass played with.”

“Perfect. That was the end of the Spanish Inquisition, I promise.”

Lagan snorted. “Pretty sure the Spanish Inquisition featured an entirely different kind of questions.”

Killian shrugged and turned his attention to Lagan’s cock. With the tip of his index finger, he caressed the full length, taking his time. Lagan shuddered. If that was Killian’s intended speed, he’d better buckle up for a long ride.

“I’ve always loved how cocks feel,” Killian said, almost in a dreamy whisper. “When they’re hard, the skin is so velvety soft. That juxtaposition fascinates me to no end.”

Huh. Lagan had never thought of it that way, but Killian had a point. That was an interesting contradiction.

“And this”—Killian flicked his tongue out and lapped some precum off Lagan’s slit—“is so sweet, and yet it tastes salty.”

Lagan moaned. “Are you gonna continue like this? Because if that’s the case, I might not survive.”

“Always so impatient. Patience is a virtue with rewards that can surpass your imagination. The proverbial A-plus, so to speak.”

Lagan rolled his eyes. “Ah, right. Well, as we both know, I’d rather have it quick and get a B-minus, just saying.”

Killian looked up. “Sometimes, slow is better. Sex is one of those things you want to take the time for.”

“Clearly, you’ve never been fucked against a wall with such urgency that your orgasm sneaks up on you so fast it leaves you breathless.”

Killian made a choked-off sound. “Can’t say that I have, but then again, I’m an exclusive top.”

“It works when you substitute being fucked for fucking too.”

“I’ll take your word for it. Now, would you like to continue this discourse, or can I focus on the task at hand?”

So fucking proper and yet so goddamn sexy. Lagan waved his hand magnanimously. “You may proceed.”

That got a laugh out of Killian. “Why, thank you, Your Highness.”

Lagan propped himself up on a pillow. He wasn’t about to rob himself of the intoxicating view of Killian, who looked at his cock as if he wanted to devour it. His blue eyes were covered by dark lashes, and he licked his lips and moved in. He wrapped his right hand around the base of Lagan’s cock, then took the crown into his mouth, roaming it with the tip of his tongue. So many guys went straight to town, which was awesome, but fuck, Lagan loved it when a man explored his slit with his tongue. It was so deliciously dirty, so arousing.

Killian tongued his slit, then teased the ridges of Lagan’s cockhead. He was so hard by now the head was purple, the veins on his cock protruding like those on a Mars bar. Killian

lapped and licked, running his tongue along the underside of Lagan's cock, taking his time to tease him.

Lagan threaded his fingers through Killian's hair. "I won't push, but I need something to hold on to. You're driving me crazy."

Killian pulled back and chuckled. "Mission accomplished. And it's okay. I like it. It grounds me."

How about that? Lagan tightened his grip as Killian took him back in, taking much more of him this time. Fuck, his mouth was so hot, the pressure sublime. The man did know what he was doing, and Lagan fought to keep his hips still and not buck into his mouth. And then Killian sucked for real, hollowing his cheeks with the effort. The moan that escaped Lagan was obscenely loud, but he couldn't hold it back, not when it felt this good, this perfect.

Killian's left hand joined in, cupping Lagan's balls, rolling them in his hand, and squeezing them until Lagan hovered right on the edge between pain and pleasure. He never went too far, and Lagan's body went crazy with all the sensations. Hot pressure, slick pleasure, it all assaulted him until Killian had become his whole world. His body tuned into every swipe of his devious tongue, every touch of his hands, every breath he gasped against Lagan's heated flesh.

Killian took a raspy breath, then spit on the fingers of his left hand. Before Lagan could even prepare himself, those slick fingers slid backward and found his hole. Killian didn't push inside. Instead, he lazily circled the rim and massaged it until it had become pliant. Lagan had never been aware of how many nerves ended right there, how his hole was connected to his balls, his dick, the place deep inside his belly where his orgasm built and built, even to the base of his spine.

"Killian," he moaned. "Goddamn, so good."

"An A-plus?"

"If you expect me to carry an intelligent conversation right now, you've overestimated my abilities. My brain is off-line. All I can feel is you."

Killian looked surprised for a moment, but then a wicked grin curved up his lips. “Good.”

He inhaled and sucked Lagan right back in, all the way into his throat. Oh, Jesus, Mary, and all the saints, just when he thought things couldn’t get any better, Killian proved him wrong. His body hovered closer to the edge, and he wouldn’t be able to hold on for long. “I’m close. Really close.”

Killian hummed but didn’t let up. The man had excellent coordination, using both his hands and his mouth. He sucked and caressed, stroked and licked, squeezed and rubbed. And all Lagan could do was grind his teeth and hang on for dear life. His body tensed, those seconds of muscle tightness in expectation of that last push that would topple him into the abyss. Killian purred, a sound that sent a shockwave through Lagan’s cock, and at the same time, he finally pushed his finger inside Lagan.

The movement set him off like fireworks. His breath caught in his lungs, his body convulsed, and his cock unloaded in a wave of cum. Killian took every drop, swallowing and licking, easing down on the pressure to let Lagan release the last bit. When his muscles unclenched, Lagan collapsed like a wet rag onto the bed, wrung out. Killian cleaned him up with his mouth—apparently, the man had a thing for that—then stretched out next to him.

“That was spectacular,” Lagan said when he could form words again. “Best blow job I’ve ever had.”

“Good. I’m happy to give you pointers on technique.”

Lagan chuckled. “Asshole.”

“Gotta stay consistent, right?”

Killian’s tone held an edge Lagan didn’t like at all. He turned onto his side. “You’re not an asshole.”

“No? What made you change your mind?”

“You. You may have a tough exterior, but that’s only the outside. Inside, you’re a marshmallow.”

“That’s a minority opinion, I’m afraid, but you do you. Do you feel like risking your neck by showering together in that slippery bathtub?”

“Hell, yes.”

Lagan rolled off the bed, then whipped his T-shirt over his head and dropped it on the floor. Crap, no, he couldn’t do that. He bent over, picked it back up again, and laid it flat on the bed. When he looked up, he met Killian’s eyes. “Thank you.”

Happiness spread inside Lagan like a beam of sunshine. “No problem.”

He watched as Killian undressed, revealing a lean, toned body. Damn, the man had been hiding an actual six-pack under those fancy dress shirts and suits. Who would’ve known? His chest hair was dark, with some silver strands mixed in, but it looked good on him. More than good. It was sexy as fuck.

Killian followed his gaze and sighed. “Give it two years, and I’ll be gray. My dad was too.”

“Not gray, silver. As in silver fox. A hell a sexy silver fox.”

Killian perked up. “You think so?”

“Mmm, I do. You’re in great shape, and you’re incredibly hot. In case you were wondering.”

“So what we shared, that was not because you were desperate for a hookup and I was available?”

Lagan snorted. “If I had wanted an easy hookup without the complications that one with you brought, I would’ve found one within minutes on Grindr. I chose you, okay?”

Killian swallowed. “Okay.”

Lagan gestured toward the bathroom. “After you.”

“You just wanna check out my ass.” The joke was a tad forced, but Lagan went with it.

“Abso-damn-lutely. Those suit pants of yours are nicely tailored, but it’s still not the real thing.”

Killian chuckled, and Lagan did take the opportunity to take in that tight ass. Damn. He hadn't been wrong about that. But where was Killian's insecurity coming from? It seemed so uncharacteristic for a man who had always seemed so confident. Hadn't anybody ever told him how hot he was?

Mulling it over, Lagan followed Killian into the bathroom, where Killian turned on the shower. Once the water was warm, they stepped in, laughing when Lagan got into a fight with the curtain that kept sticking to his wet legs. "Goddamn piece of shit curtain."

Killian threw his head back, his expression so joyful and carefree that it took Lagan's breath away for a moment. "Yeah, yeah, laugh away. It's all fun and games until it happens to you," he joked to cover his reaction.

He reached for the shampoo, but Killian stopped him. "Allow me?"

Lagan nodded and turned his back toward him. Seconds later, firm hands massaged his scalp, and goose bumps broke out all over his body. How could something so simple feel so good? Killian took his time rubbing Lagan's head, and by the time he was done, Lagan had trouble keeping standing on legs that had turned to rubber.

"Close your eyes." Killian's voice was hoarse.

Lagan obeyed. Killian pulled him back so the water hit the back of his head and helped rinse out his hair until every bit of soap was gone. Before Lagan could say anything, Killian grabbed his shower gel and squeezed some into his hands. He nudged Lagan forward again, and he went. Killian's hands caressed his shoulders, then down his back, slipping around him to the front to wash his chest and lower.

This was too intimate, too personal, too far outside the boundaries of a hookup. And yet he couldn't make himself say the words to stop it. It felt too good. When was the last time someone had taken care of him like that? God, he couldn't even remember. Hadley, maybe, when Lagan had been sick, but even then, it had never been like this. So tender and careful, as if Lagan was fragile. Precious.

Killian kissed his shoulder. Such a small gesture, but one that Lagan would never have expected from Killian. What else was the man hiding underneath that cool appearance? He was nothing like Lagan had thought him to be. Nothing.

A tear slipped out of his eye, then another one. At least he had his back turned toward Killian so he wouldn't see. Of course, Killian chose that moment to press Lagan to turn around. He did, opening his eyes again but averting his gaze. Killian gasped, put his index finger under Lagan's chin, and lifted it. Their eyes met, and the wordless question was clear.

"I'm good," Lagan croaked. "Just having a moment here. Please ignore me."

Killian studied him, and Lagan resisted the urge to squirm under that scrutiny. "Okay."

He kept washing Lagan, then rinsed him off. When Lagan wanted to return the favor, Killian shook his head. "Not necessary."

He washed super quickly and turned off the faucet. The motel might be cheap, but their towels were fluffy. Killian wrapped one around Lagan. Before he could offer to dry him as well, Lagan took the towel from him. "Thank you."

Killian slowly nodded. "You're welcome."

And when Lagan toweled himself off, stealing glances at Killian as he did the same, he realized with a shock he hadn't thought of his father all day.

He was such an idiot. Killian had the vocabulary to come up with synonyms that sounded much nicer, soothing euphemisms that hid the bitter truth, but why would he when this word did the job just fine? No coddling was needed here. The fact of the matter was that he was an idiot.

Against his better judgment, he'd allowed himself to give in to this insane attraction, which was problematic in itself, though not something he wanted to think about too much right now. But worse, instead of keeping it all about lust and sexual attraction and hooking up, he'd immediately moved into more dangerous territory again. Showering together? Washing Lagan's hair? When would he ever learn?

See, this was why he was better off with sex workers. With Mike, he only wanted sex, nothing else. He didn't want to take care of him, shower with him or wash his hair or towel him dry, and didn't yearn to feed him and make sure he was okay. He wanted to fuck him, and that was it. Why was that so hard with Lagan?

Killian should never have touched him in the first place, but now that he had, the least he could do was keep it superficial. This was about sex, attraction, scratching an itch. It had to be. The idea of anything else between them, anything more, was just...

Ridiculous, but why then was it so easy to picture them together, eating breakfast, hanging out, going out for dinner, talking and arguing and making love? They'd go for hikes in

the summer, explore the Olympic National Park together, maybe venture a little farther out and see Glacier National Park. They'd stay in cute motels or one of those log cabins, keep each other warm at night, sit in front of the fire, and read. Even the thought made him all warm inside, his whole body lighting up.

Oh god. No, no, no, not even he could be so stupid he would fall for the wrong guy twice. Had he learned nothing from the debacle with Armando? He didn't want a relationship. It would only lead to heartbreak.

Not that Lagan would even be interested in him. He was fifteen years younger than Killian. He was in a different phase of his life, and he'd it made clear he wasn't even looking to settle down.

And did Lagan even like him? Sure, he didn't hate Killian anymore, but between not hating and falling for someone existed a sizable gap. A gap Killian apparently had bridged in no time and with no conscious effort at all. He was such an idiot. He was gonna get his heart broken all over again, and there was nothing he could do about it. Why did this one guy have so much power over him?

"You okay?" Lagan asked.

Killian looked down, afraid too much would show on his face. "Yes."

"Okay." Lagan gave him another scrutinizing look, then shrugged and walked out of the bathroom.

Killian leaned on the sink and met his own eyes in the mirror. *Get it together, or you'll lose everything you worked so hard to build up all over again.* After that encouraging pep talk—Jesus, he needed to learn to be kinder to himself—he made his way into the room, where Lagan had already changed into underwear and was putting on a T-shirt.

Lagan looked up at him. "It's still early. Do you wanna maybe watch some TV together?"

"Sure."

If Lagan noticed it came out hoarse, he didn't comment on it. Killian kept his back turned toward him as he got dressed, opting for pajama pants and a T-shirt. As if that layer of clothing was an extra sheet of mental armor as well. Oh, how he liked to deceive himself. He was defenseless when it came to Lagan.

They both settled on the bed, their shoulders touching, and Lagan turned on the TV. "Anything specific you want to watch?"

"Not really. I don't watch a lot of TV anymore, as I get my entertainment through streaming apps, so I have no idea what's on."

Killian sipped from the bottle of water he'd gotten from the vending machine when they'd returned. He wasn't sure what was wrong with the tap water here, but it tasted like crap. Or maybe he'd just gotten spoiled with the state-of-the-art water filtering system in his condo.

Lagan flipped through the channels until he let out an appreciative sound. "Law and Order Special Victims Unit. I love this show."

Killian chuckled. "I was addicted to the original one from the nineties, but I'm pretty sure I've seen every episode of this spin-off as well."

It was a rerun, judging by the age of the characters. God, they were still so young here. Mere rookies. It had to be an episode from the early two thousands—and fuck, Killian felt old just thinking that. When had that period become old? And worse, what did that make him? A fossil?

Lagan looked at him sideways. "Please don't tell me you decided to become a lawyer because of that show."

"No, I'd settled on that long before then. My father was a lawyer as well, and so is my sister, though she ultimately opted for a different career."

"What does she do?"

"Christine works for a chain of stores that sell interior decorating products. She's their head of sales, and she loves it."

And she's good at it, considering she'd been there for years now, and the company has expanded significantly since she was hired."

"Wow, that's something else entirely. And what kind of law did your father practice?"

Killian had to swallow. "He was a criminal lawyer, like I was. A man with true passion for what he did and admirable integrity in a profession where that's not all that common anymore. He set an example that made me want to follow in his footsteps."

He couldn't help the sorrow that seeped into his voice. God, he missed him. Both his parents. They hadn't been perfect—his mom had been too focused on outside appearances, and his dad had been a workaholic—but they'd been the best parents he could've wished for. They had loved him and his sister and had accepted them wholly, even when Killian had come out. Apparently, he'd managed to hide his attraction to boys well. They'd been shocked but had never missed a beat.

"He sounds like a good man," Lagan said softly, taking Killian's hand and lacing their fingers together. That simple touch grounded him, soothing the profound sense of loneliness.

"He was. A good man and a good father. I was lucky."

"You were."

"I'm sorry. I know this must be hard for you to—"

Lagan squeezed his hand, cutting him off. "It's never hard for me to hear others had great parents. How could I begrudge others what I never had but wanted so desperately? As long as you appreciate it and realize your experience isn't standard for everyone, we're good."

"Thank you." It showed Lagan's emotional maturity that he was able to handle this so well, even amid dealing with the loss of his father.

They watched as Detective Stabler—played by the iconic Christopher Meloni—interviewed a suspect.

“He’s one of those men who only gets hotter as he gets older.” Lagan sighed, starry-eyed. He was playing with Killian’s hand, caressing his fingers, tracing the knuckles, touching the tips. Why did that feel so intimate and sensual, even when Lagan probably wasn’t even thinking about it? “Then again, I do have a thing for older men.”

And just like that, the air between them was charged again. They had both frozen, and Killian forced himself to blow out a breath and relax his shoulders. “Do you, now?”

“I do.” It came out a little squeaky. “I mean, I always have, and even when I still hated you, I thought you were really hot.”

Funny how the past tense of the word *hated* settled deep inside Killian as a truth to cling to. Whatever was happening between them, whatever had happened, at least they didn’t hate each other anymore. That was something to be grateful for because god, hating was so exhausting. He’d spent way too much energy on it, but that was all hindsight, of course.

“Thank you. That means a lot to me.”

More than Lagan knew, but that part, Killian kept to himself. Would he ever come clean to Lagan about how they had first met? He wasn’t sure. By now, what was the point? Lagan didn’t remember, and dredging it all up would only set Killian back. He’d finally started getting over himself, getting over that rejection.

Now that he knew Lagan better, Killian had trouble connecting those cruel words with the kind of man he’d come to know. Maybe Lagan had had an off day that day? Maybe he’d been going through something traumatic. Considering his background, that wasn’t out of the question. Either way, it was done now and in the past. And it should stay there.

“Did you ever see that commercial Christopher Meloni shot naked?” Lagan asked, and Killian was all too happy to change the subject back to their earlier topic.

He turned his head with a jerk. “*What?* He shot a naked ad?”

Lagan let go of his hand, grabbed his phone, and put in the search term. “Here ya go. It’s an ad for one of those workout apps, I think. Can’t even remember, since I was a little too distracted by Daddy Christopher here.”

Killian watched the ad with eyes that grew wider by the second. Sure, everything was blurred, and you couldn’t see any of the important bits, but still. Lagan wasn’t wrong about the Daddy vibes, and Killian wasn’t even into that at all. “That’s hot. I can see why you like it.”

“If only they had an unblurred version...”

“Imagine being the camera person who shot this. I mean, he must’ve been naked during shooting, right? So they got to see all the good stuff.”

“Now there’s a job I wouldn’t mind having.” Lagan grinned. “Much like being a fluffer in porn videos.”

“I had a friend who did that when we were in law school.” Killian smiled at the memory. “His name was Andrey, and he was from Brazil. Hottest guy in my class, with a sexy Portuguese accent and so sensual. Everything coming out of his mouth sounded like porn to begin with. He was only allowed to work a certain amount of hours on his visa, and so he moonlighted in some under-the-table jobs. A friend of his did porn, and that’s how he ended up helping him. He spent hours on set, helping the stars stay hard. The stories he had... and he knew how to tell them too, all dramatic and with that Latin flair and expression. I loved him.”

Lagan laughed. “Did you guys ever hook up?”

“God, yes. We fucked like bunnies, and it was good sex too. He was as passionate in bed as he was about everything else. We were the only two out guys in our class. A few tried to fly under the radar, but Andrey and I were out and proud, so we naturally had a connection.”

Even thinking about it made him all warm inside. What a wonderful time that had been, so carefree and sensual.

“Did you stay in touch?”

Killian nodded. “Facebook. I don’t use it a lot, but it’s a great medium to stay connected to friends like him. He’s married now, has three adopted kids, and he’s nauseatingly happy, as you called it, with his husband, who is almost fifteen years older than him.”

“Oh, like you and me.”

Silence. How did Killian respond to that? What was Lagan trying to say here? Killian didn’t want to jump to conclusions, but Lagan making that statement right after Killian had talked about a marriage was a little confusing. “Yes, like you and me.”

“Not that I’m suggesting we’ll end up married,” Lagan quickly said, his cheeks turning bright red.

“No? And here I was, thinking you were about to propose to me after that spectacular blow job.”

Killian kept his tone light. Things between them were already complicated enough. No need to get on Lagan’s case about something he’d said without thinking.

Lagan snorted, relief filling his expression. “The blow job was good, but not that good, you know? I mean, for me to propose, you’d have to up your game.”

“Or maybe you don’t have a big enough sample yet to appreciate my skills.”

What the hell was he doing? He should increase the distance between them, not goad Lagan into another sexual encounter. It would only leave him wanting more. Didn’t he know by now that Lagan was addictive, that he was in Killian’s blood? The more he took from him, the harder it would be to ever get him out of his system again. And yet he couldn’t help himself.

Lagan turned onto his side, facing Killian. “You think that’s the problem?”

“I’m confident in my skills, so it would have to be, no? Otherwise, you would’ve been on your knees already.”

“On my knees? It’s gonna be damn hard for you to blow me if I’m the one on my knees.”

He shouldn’t.

He really shouldn’t.

He slid off the bed and to his knees.

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Dark clouds were stacked across the sky in shades of gray from light silver to almost black. In the distance, thunder rumbled, and it wouldn't take long for the storm to move in. Judging by the gloom, they could be in for some heavy fireworks. The cemetery was empty save a few mourners who were cleaning up graves or laying flowers, and most of them were packing in as well with an eye on the incoming weather.

Lagan dragged his gaze away from the heavens and focused on the simple pine casket in front of him that held his father's body. His eyes drifted to the headstone right next to his father's open grave. *Bridget O'Malley Banks, beloved wife and mother.* How had he never known his mom's grave had a headstone? Come to think of it, who had arranged her funeral? It sure as hell hadn't been Lagan. He had only been eleven at the time. Had his father done that?

He'd still been awaiting sentencing, not yet accused of the murder Victor Duvall had pinned on him. Maybe they'd allowed him to take care of it from prison? It wouldn't surprise Lagan. After all, his father had been permitted to attend the funeral as well, albeit under heavy guard. But even if he had known about his mom's resting place, would he have come?

When Lagan was eight, his grandmother—his mom's mother—had passed away. By then, his mom hadn't seen her parents in years, as they had cut all ties with her when she'd married his dad. But she'd read about her mother's passing in the newspaper, and she'd been grieving for her nonetheless.

A few weeks after the funeral, she'd taken Lagan to the cemetery to pay her respects. The headstone hadn't been placed yet, a simple temporary marker indicating her final resting place.

"Will you be coming back here once it has a stone? Like, to put flowers every week and stuff?" Lagan had asked her. He'd seen in movies that was what people did with graves.

She'd firmly shaken her head. "No, baby. I just wanted to say goodbye to her, but she's not here."

"She's not? Then where is she?"

His mom had smiled the saddest smile ever as she had patted his head. "She's with the angels, baby. It's just her body here, but her spirit is long gone."

He'd forgotten all about that until now. So many of his memories had been tainted by what happened later, but it was good to remember that his mom had loved him. After his father's betrayal, his life might have become a shit show, but once upon a time, he had been loved.

He took a deep breath and nodded at the funeral leader, or whatever his official title was. The silver-haired man, dressed all fancy in black pants, a white tailcoat, a black vest, and a top hat, bowed his head. He then gave a whispered command to the man to his right, who was a lot less formal. Was he working for the cemetery, perhaps? Not that Lagan cared.

With a push of the button, the casket sank into the ground. Six feet under. Was that an expression, or was that the actual depth at which people were buried? Another question Lagan didn't have an answer to. Or cared about, but his brain seemed to come up with these weird sidetracks. Probably to distract him from the fact that his father lay in that casket.

Funny, even when he did think about it, when he allowed the thought to penetrate the walls he'd put up, his father's death still didn't mean much to him. His father was a stranger, a man who held a title in name only, since he'd never acted on it. He hadn't been a father, let alone a dad.

No, what Lagan was burying was the idea of one. And maybe that was what he felt the most. Regret that he'd never had a father. Grief over what should have been. But even those feelings were much shallower than they probably should be. Had he closed himself off that much over time?

Killian nudged his shoulder. He was impeccably dressed in a dark blue suit that was a hell of a lot nicer than Lagan's crinkly gray suit pants and white button-down, though he was wearing a tie. He shook himself out of his thoughts and stepped forward. He grabbed a handful of the black soil and held it over the casket.

Was he supposed to say something? At his mother's funeral, a priest had said prayers. But she'd been Catholic until the day she died, despite marrying his father. His father had never believed in anything, however, least of all an almighty God or heaven. And even if he had, he would've been refused entry by any standards, right? So what could Lagan possibly say in a moment like this? He had nothing left to say.

He threw the dark soil onto the casket. "Done," he said, jolting at the sound of his voice. "It's done now."

With that, he turned his back to his father and walked away. Seconds later, Killian caught up with him. He didn't say anything, but he took Lagan's hand and laced their fingers together. That brought more comfort than any words ever could have. Killian had been a rock to lean on, a pleasant distraction, and a damn good friend. To think Lagan had considered him an enemy until mere days ago.

Killian guided them back to their rental car. He had already booked them a flight in the morning. One more night in Chicago and Lagan could leave his past behind him for good. "I need a drink," he said hoarsely.

He was still holding Killian's hand, and as long as the man wasn't protesting, he'd keep clinging to it. The grip brought strength, much more than he would ever have expected.

"Do you have problems with alcohol?"

Lagan jerked his head to the side. “What? No. Why would you even think that?”

“I’m not suggesting you have alcohol issues, Lagan. I only want to make sure I’m not enabling an addict to fall off the wagon. We may have gotten to know each other better, but I don’t presume you shared everything with me, especially something so sensitive. But I do need to know.”

Killian didn’t raise his voice but remained calm and patient, and Lagan had to give him points for that. After the way he’d snapped at him, Killian wouldn’t have been out of line to react in a similar matter.

“Oh. I’m sorry. I thought you...” He gestured with his right hand.

“It’s okay.” He let go of Lagan’s hand and took his phone out of his pocket. “I’m assuming you’d rather have a drink in private than in public?”

“Fuck, yeah. No one needs to see me like this. Except you, but that’s different.”

Something passed over Killian’s face, but Lagan was too worn out to try to interpret it. “There’s a liquor store close to the motel. We’ll pick up the poison of your choice on the way back.”

They got into the car, and just as Lagan closed the passenger door behind him, a loud thunder rattled the car. Seconds later, the sky opened up, dumping a deluge of rain on them in a wet wall of gray. Classic funeral weather.

Two hours later, Lagan was well on his way to being drunk off his ass in their motel room. Outside, the pelting rain had turned into an intermittent drizzle, and the dark skies had long since passed, the sun peeking from between the dissipating clouds.

When was the last time he’d been this bombed? Lagan frowned as he tried to remember. Not buzzed or tipsy but full-on drunk? It had to be years ago, when the four of them still went out dancing and drinking on the weekends. Every weekend, they’d hit the clubs. Mostly the gay ones, where

surprisingly enough, Jaren had no issue scoring either, back when he'd still thought he was straight. Those gay clubs always attracted plenty of women too. And they'd have Coke and rums or gin and tonics or those fancy, colorful cocktails, and they usually stumbled home tipsy.

But then they'd gotten jobs, and Jaren had gotten his degree, and they'd all settled down. They still drank, but it was all social now, polite and restrained. A craft beer or two with their meals. Some pretentious wine whenever Nordin had come across something he felt they should try. The man was a total wine snob. On occasion, a cocktail in a bar, but only one.

They didn't get drunk anymore. One, two glasses, and that was it. They had to drive, get up early in the morning, do their jobs. Boring, boring, boring. Fuck, when had he become so utterly dull? His life was a total snoozefest, an endless monotony of work-study-sleep-eat. Rinse and repeat. With the occasional hookup, but even those had become a rarity. He was in survival mode, and he had been for years now. When would he be able to live and enjoy the fun things in life?

Lagan tilted his head back and took another gulp of the Jack Daniels he'd bought, also with Sebastian's credit card. At this point, what did it matter anymore? He'd be paying off that debt for years to come. Classic Jack had been his father's favorite drink, so he'd thought it fitting. He didn't care for whiskey—or was this bourbon?—but it would help him get to his goal of getting wasted a hell of a lot faster than beer or wine, so whatever.

The buzz in his head made it harder and harder to think, which had been the point. No more thinking about his dad, about his mom, about what could have been and should have been, about how different his life would have been if his father hadn't been caught, if his mom hadn't been killed, if he hadn't met his brothers. Would his life have been better? How could he say that when he loved his brothers more than anything and anyone in the world? No, not better. Just different.

No more thinking about Killian either and about what had happened between them. Killian had blown him again the night before, and that morning, Lagan had returned the favor.

They had such incredible chemistry, but what did it all mean? Killian had said this trip was Vegas and that they'd never mention it again once they returned, but how would that even work? And more importantly, did Lagan even want to forget it? Fuck, he had no clue. And he was too drunk to figure things out.

They'd both changed back into casual clothes, and Killian was hanging up Lagan's suit, making sure it wasn't wrinkling. He was so organized with everything, almost anally so. Anally. He snorted. Such a funny word, wasn't it? Anally. Or maybe it wasn't, and he was already more inebriated than he'd realized.

"Something funny?" Killian's tone was icy.

When had Lagan started to think of that tone as sexy? It wasn't. At least, he was pretty sure it shouldn't be. Then again, he found pretty much everything Killian did sexy, even the way he moved. That, too, had to be the alcohol talking.

"Yes. No. I mean, it's probably not funny unless you're drunk."

"Which I'm guessing you are by now, and if not, you will be soon. You're sure giving it your best efforts."

Lagan checked the content of the bottle, which was rapidly dwindling in volume. "I am. Do you have a problem with that?"

Killian sighed and sat down on the bed across from Lagan. "Not unless you're a belligerent drunk."

"Nah. I'm more of the sentimental, clingy kind. I think."

"Good. I have a strong dislike for arguing with drunk people."

"I don't argue."

Killian's mouth curved up into a smile. Gah, the man had such a stunning smile. Too bad he showed it so rarely.

"I beg to differ. You do little else but argue with whatever I say."

"No, I don't."

Killian quirked an eyebrow.

“Okay, so I sometimes disagree with you. That’s different.”

“Sometimes? You take issue with everything I say on principle. I could tell you the sky is blue, and you’d still disagree with me.”

“You do the same with me!” Lagan put the bottle down, but he’d misjudged the distance to the table. Before the bottle could topple over, he caught it and placed it neatly in the middle of the table. “Also, the sky isn’t actually blue. It’s purple. Something about how the earth’s atmosphere scatters the light, but I’m too wasted to explain it properly.”

Killian threw his head back and let out a full-belly laugh.

Lagan blinked. “I’ve never seen you laugh like that.”

Killian sobered. “I don’t have that much to laugh about.”

“You have a pretty enjoyable life, I would imagine. Great apartment, great job.”

“Is that all there is in life, a job you don’t hate and a nice place to live?”

Funny, he’d wondered the exact same thing himself mere minutes ago. “Fuck if I know, but if you find out, let me know.”

“You’re not happy with your life?”

Lagan wanted to take another swig. Where had the bottle gone? He looked around at the table, the bed, his feet. “Where’s my whiskey?”

“Bourbon,” Killian said. “And I took it. You’ve had enough.”

“I haven’t had enough. What do you mean? The bottle wasn’t empty yet!”

“If you finish that bottle, I’ll have to clean up your vomit later on. Thanks, but no thanks.”

Lagan blew a raspberry. “You’re no fun.”

“So I’ve been told. Repeatedly.”

Even in his inebriated state, Lagan recognized the pain in that statement. “’s Okay,” he slurred. “I’m no fun either.”

“No? I had you pegged for a party animal.”

“Ha! You’re hilarious.”

“Am I? Not intentionally, I assure you.”

“I like it when you talk like that. It’s sexy.”

“You think I’m sexy?”

Lagan swallowed, his mouth suddenly aching dry. “I’ve always thought you were sexy. Even when I hated you.”

“You mentioned something like that yesterday about you having a thing for older men. And what, pray tell me, is it that you find so sexy about me?”

His tone was off, but Lagan couldn’t put his finger on what was wrong. Or was it the alcohol in his system that made him hear things? “We shouldn’t talk about this because we agreed never to mention the kiss again. Or sleeping in the same bed. Or what we did yesterday.”

“You get immunity for tonight. Anything you say can’t and won’t be used against you.”

“Oh.” Lagan scratched his chin. “I can say anything, and you won’t hold it against me?”

“Anything,” Killian promised, leaning forward as if he was eager to hear what Lagan thought.

“What was the question again?”

“You were about to tell me what you find sexy about me.”

“Right. Your hair is very sexy. It has that McDreamy vibe.” When Killian frowned, he added, “Grey’s Anatomy? Patrick Dempsey? He’s hot too. You have hair like his.”

“Gotcha. What else?”

“You want a list?”

“A list would be excellent, but I’d be happy with a few more things.”

“A few more things would make it a list, wouldn’t it?”

“For fuck’s sake, Lagan, stop arguing with me and answer the goddamn question!”

Lagan stared at Killian, his eyes wide open. That cliché about not being able to get it up when you were drunk? Total urban legend. His cock had taken a definitive interest in whatever was going on. How weird. Killian was yelling at him, and he got aroused? Man, he was so fucked up.

Killian had frozen after his outburst. “I apologize,” he said stiffly. “I didn’t mean to take that tone with you.”

“I don’t mind.”

“You should mind. No one should talk to you like that.”

“I like it when you tell me what to do.”

Oh, fuck, there went his motor mouth again. He’d forgotten how his filters vanished when he was drunk.

“You do?” Killian’s eyes darkened, and Lagan found it hard to breathe with how intense Killian was looking at him. As if he was the hunter and Lagan was the prey. “That’s a dangerous thing to tell me.”

Was the room spinning? Probably not. That would mean there was an earthquake or something, and as far as Lagan knew, those didn’t happen in Illinois. That meant he was spinning. Or his head was. Whatever.

“Sometimes I get tired from all the decisions I have to make, all the thoughts running on an endless loop through my head, and it’s much easier when someone tells me what to do.”

Killian’s expression softened. “I can see that. But I still shouldn’t yell at you.”

“I didn’t mean to make you angry. It’s hard to think right now. My head is being all fuzzy and dizzy.”

“I bet. So we’ll make it simple. Name two more reasons why you think I’m sexy.”

The man was obsessed with that, wasn't he? Why did it matter so much to him? Lagan couldn't figure it out. "You're smart. Intelligence is very sexy. And I like older men, or did I already say that?"

"You already mentioned that, so that doesn't count."

"You're so strict. That shouldn't be sexy, but it is. But that's not what I wanted to say." What had he wanted to say? What was the question again? Right, why he thought Killian was sexy. "Your mouth. It's very kissable."

"Is it now?"

Lagan nodded enthusiastically. "I've thought so from day one. That's why I couldn't help myself after the auction. You looked so hot, and you were annoying the fuck out of me, so I had to kiss you."

Something flashed over Killian's face, but it was gone again so quickly he must've imagined it. "Thank you."

"Do you think I'm sexy?"

"Didn't that blow job yesterday answer that question? Trust me, if you weren't far past the stage of consent, I would've devoured those soft lips of you again already."

"I can still consent. I consent to you kissing me. I'll even kiss you back. And maybe more? We could do more. You could fuck me if you want. I promise I'll love it."

Killian buried his head in his hands. "You. Are. Killing. Me." He raised his head, his eyes dark. "As much as I would love to accept your generous offer, I'll have to decline. I don't sleep with men who are drunk."

"That's sexy too," Lagan decided.

"What is?"

"That you take it so seriously. Consent, I mean. Though I think you take kissing seriously as well. You're a good kisser. And your blow jobs are spectacular."

Before Killian could respond, someone knocked on the door.

“Are we expecting company?” Killian frowned.

Lagan shook his head. Oh, boy, bad move. The whole room was moving now. Maybe Killian had been right about taking the bottle away. In fact, he should’ve done that sooner.

He swayed as Killian got up and walked to the door. He peered through the peephole, then opened the door.

“Who are you, and where the fuck is my brother?” an angry voice snarled.

Lagan stiffened. Nordin was here? His brother pushed Killian aside and stormed into the room, Hadley and Jaren on his heels.

“What the hell is going on? Why are you in Chicago?” Nordin asked.

“Are you okay?” Hadley hurried over to Lagan.

“We were so worried about you when we saw credit card charges pop up from Chicago,” Jaren said, his hand on his heart.

Lagan looked at his brothers and burst out in tears.

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“**W**hat did you *do* to him?” the angry one snapped at Killian.

So these were Lagan’s brothers, the ones Lagan had insisted were unavailable. They looked pretty available to Killian, considering they were now standing in their motel room, but what did he know? “I did nothing to him, and I resent that premise.”

“Resent that premise? Who the fuck talks like that?”

Killian straightened his shoulders. “I do. Whom do I have the pleasure of addressing?”

Surprise flickered over the man’s face. The other two were busy consoling Lagan, who was crying his heart out. Killian had wondered when the emotions would come out, so he was relieved to see Lagan was finally processing his father’s death.

“I’m Nordin Foster, Lagan’s oldest brother. And you?”

“Professor Killian Evans.”

One of the men gasped. “You’re that law professor he...”

“...he hates, yes. That would be me.”

“I don’t hate him,” Lagan protested, still hiccuping from his crying fit. “I don’t hate you. Not anymore.”

Funny how that simple statement made Killian so warm inside. “I know.”

“I’m so confused right now,” the third guy said, looking from Killian to Lagan and back.

Killian held up his hands. “It’s not my place to tell. You’ll have to ask your brother.”

Nordin took a step closer. “You’d better start talking...and fast.”

Killian raised his chin, crossing his arms. “Did you miss my previous statement where I made it clear you should ask your brother? I don’t know what he’s comfortable with me sharing, and until I do, good luck getting a word out of me.”

Nordin stepped back again, taking Killian in from the top of his head all the way down to his sock-clad feet. “Okay. I can respect that.”

“Good. Want to do the introductions? I’d like to know who I’m dealing with here.”

Nordin pointed. “That’s Hadley, and that’s Jaren.”

Killian tipped his head in their direction. “Pleasure to meet you.”

Lagan had managed to pull himself together and now walked over with an uneven gait.

“You’re drunk,” Nordin said.

“Very drunk,” Lagan confirmed.

“What happened, babe?” Hadley asked.

Lagan’s lower lip trembled again. Killian balled his fists. He so badly wanted to console him, hug him, and tell him everything would be okay. Such a strange, unexpected emotion.

“My father died,” Lagan whispered.

“Oh, babe...” Hadley hugged Lagan. As soon as he let go, Jaren and Nordin pulled Lagan in their arms. Killian watched it all with a weird sense of envy. It should be him holding Lagan. He’d stood by his side the last two days, not his brothers.

“Why didn’t you call us?” Nordin asked.

Lagan shuffled his feet. “You said you weren’t available for a few days, and you know I always take that seriously.” He faced Hadley and Jaren. “And you were both on a trip with your boyfriend, and I didn’t want to ruin that.”

“But this is much more important than a trip to Rome!” Hadley sputtered. “I would’ve come back for you.”

Lagan bit his lip. “What if I didn’t want you to?”

Nordin turned to Killian. “Maybe it would be best if you left. This seems to evolve into a personal conversation.”

“No!” Lagan reacted before Killian could open his mouth. “You’re not sending him away. He’s been there for me since I got the news, okay? Besides, he’s staying here as well. In this room, I mean. We’re sharing a room. And a bed, but that was by accident.”

The warmth inside Killian spread. “I’m not going anywhere,” he promised Lagan. “Not unless you tell me to leave.”

“I’m not. I want you here.”

Nordin rubbed his temples. “I feel like I’ve somehow landed in a different dimension. Lagan, honey, I know you’re wasted, but could you maybe start at the beginning and fill us in? We’re at a disadvantage here.”

“My dad died,” Lagan said, his eyes getting watery all over again. “The warden called and told me, and then he asked if I wanted to claim the body for a funeral. I was in class when the call came, and Killian...Professor Evans helped me. He drove me home, or to his place, actually, and I fell asleep there. And then he booked airplane tickets for us, and I reserved a motel, and he called a funeral home, and that’s where we went two days ago, and the funeral was today, so now it’s all done.”

Considering the amount of alcohol in his system, that wasn’t a bad summary. It was missing a few details, most notably the sexual ones, and above all, some periods, but Lagan had mentioned the most important information.

“Why didn’t you tell us?” Hadley sounded hurt. “Don’t you know we would’ve been there for you?”

“I told you. You were traveling, and so was Jaren, and Nordin had said he’d be unavailable for a few days.”

“I don’t understand why you wouldn’t want us to come back and allow us to be there for you,” Jaren said.

Lagan lowered himself onto the edge of the bed. “I wanted to do this myself.”

“But you were okay with accepting help from a man you hated until two days ago?” Nordin said. “No offense.” He nodded at Killian.

He didn’t take offense at all. It was the truth, wasn’t it? He’d hated Lagan too. Until he hadn’t, and he wasn’t even sure when and how that had happened. He’d discovered that Lagan wasn’t the mean, shallow person he’d thought him to be, and Lagan had probably come to a similar conclusion about him. And he’d confessed he was as attracted to Killian as Killian was to Lagan.

Hell, if not for the unfortunate circumstances of the death of Lagan’s father, Lagan being drunk, and the nagging worry about Killian being his professor, they would’ve been in bed together right now. And Killian doubted he would’ve been able to keep himself from doing more than kissing and giving blow jobs. So maybe he should be grateful that Lagan was drunk.

Lagan buried his head in his hands, groaning. Killian hesitated. Should he end this conversation? It had become more of an interrogation, and he wasn’t comfortable with the direction it had taken. Lagan was drunk. Who knew what he would say? He’d already shared things with Killian he wouldn’t have had he been sober, and the last thing Killian wanted was for Lagan to blurt out opinions that would irreparably damage the relationship with his brothers.

“That’s different,” Lagan said, his voice muffled behind his hands. “He offered, and I don’t owe him anything. And he doesn’t make me feel beholden to him.”

Beholden to him? What was Lagan implying? One look at Nordin's face told Killian that Nordin had no idea either but that he didn't appreciate that remark.

"You're not beholden to us, and we never said you were or that's how you should feel." Nordin's voice was considerably icier than before.

Lagan looked up. "You didn't have to. I've felt that way ever since I arrived at the group home. I was the last one in your family, the baby, the one you all thought you needed to protect. And all my life, it has stayed that way. You always question my decisions, you always check up on me, and the three of you are always in agreement with each other, ganging up on me. And you're all moving on, finding love and boyfriends and traveling and doing fun stuff and god knows what else, and I'm not. I'm dragging you all down, and that's why I refused to get you involved. You guys would've taken over, would've decided for me how to handle the funeral and how to feel, would've told me I had to do things a certain way or had to grieve for my father. And Killian didn't. He was right there next to me, but he let me make the decisions. Every single time, he asked me what I wanted, and not once did he question my decision or judgment. I might've thought him an arrogant, cocky dick at some point, but he sure as fuck respects my boundaries."

Well, if Killian had wanted to prevent Lagan from pissing off his brothers, he was too late now. The three men reeled back as if they had been slapped. Killian held his breath. How would they react? Jaren and Hadley both looked at Nordin, expecting him to take the lead. No surprise there. Killian had already determined Nordin was the natural-born leader of the group.

Nordin swallowed, his hands balled into fists. "I'm really sorry to hear you feel that way. You're wrong, but I'm sorry that's how you feel."

This time, Killian did step in and put a gentle hand on Nordin's shoulder. The man looked devastated, and he was trembling under Killian's touch. "Maybe you should continue this conversation when Lagan is sober again and able to weigh

his words. I'm not sure he is in the right state of mind for an emotional exchange like this."

Nordin's eyes were cloudy when they met Killian's. "Yeah," he said hoarsely. "You're right. Though you know what they say about kids and drunk people. They always tell it like it is."

Killian squeezed his shoulder. "Perhaps, but the combination of the emotional upheaval of the last few days and the amount of alcohol in his system may make him feel things stronger than they are in reality."

"For someone who hates his guts, you sure are protective of him." Hadley looked as stricken as Nordin.

"I told you," Lagan slurred. "We don't hate each other. Not anymore at least. In fact, we kissed and exchanged blow jobs. He's really good at them."

"I thought we'd agreed to keep that to ourselves?" Killian sighed, resigning himself to the fact that Lagan wasn't capable of keeping anything to himself.

"I forgot about that." Lagan giggled. "Maybe I should quit law school. Then I would no longer be your student. Nobody believes I can do it anyway, that I'm smart enough. Including you."

That remark stung, but how could Killian be upset with Lagan when he'd suggested pretty much the same? He had berated him for his mediocre grades and had wondered why he didn't drop out, so Lagan was stating facts, not falsely accusing Killian. "I don't feel that way anymore. But that isn't a discussion we should be having right now either."

Lagan jumped up from the bed, then stumbled. Killian shot his hand out to steady him, and Lagan managed to stay standing. "Don't make decisions for me. Not you too."

"Fair enough. If you want to spend all your drunk energy debating me rather than enjoying the buzz you worked so hard for, have at it."

Lagan let out a sigh, the whiskey still heavy on his breath. "Aaaaand you just took all the fun out of it."

“I excel at that too, or so I’ve been told.”

Lagan stepped closer, tripped over his own feet, and crashed into Killian. With effort, he remained standing and took his weight, then wrapped his arms around Lagan protectively. “You okay?”

“Yeah. Oops. Guess I’m drunkenerer than I thought.”

“No worries. I gotcha.”

Lagan peered up at him, those green eyes so full of trust it took Killian’s breath away. “You do, don’t you?”

“Yes.” Why did that one word carry such meaning for him? As if it was a solemn promise rather than the casual reassurance it was supposed to be.

“I really don’t hate you anymore,” Lagan whispered, and then he stepped back and threw up all over Killian’s shoes.

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Oh god. Lagan woke up slowly, unwilling to let go of his dreamy state just yet. He smacked his lips, then shivered. Yuck. What was that taste in his mouth? Had he eaten a dead animal? Had the food been spoiled? And why were a million tiny hammers smacking his skull from the inside? What the hell had he done the night before?

Fuck. He'd gotten drunk. Really, really drunk. His memories were a little fuzzy, but he distinctly recalled downing almost a whole bottle of Jack Daniels. And now he had to pay the price. His hangover was bad enough when he was still horizontal and in bed to remind him why he didn't get wasted anymore. Holy shit, he felt awful. Like death warmed over.

Wait. Where was Killian? Oh crap, had his brothers really shown up? His eyes flew open. Bad idea. Horrible idea. Even the little light that the curtains let in stabbed his brain viciously. He closed them again.

"You're awake," Killian said softly. Bless the man for that consideration.

"Yeah, though I'm not sure I want to be." His voice sounded as rough as sandpaper.

Killian chuckled. "I bet. If you can push yourself into a sitting position, I have ibuprofen for you."

Lagan carefully opened one eye. Killian sat on the wobbly desk chair, a sympathetic expression on his face.

“You aiming for sainthood?” Lagan croaked.

Another chuckle. “Simply doing my best to take care of you. You had a rough night.”

“I threw up.” He wasn’t sure about the details, but he had a hazy memory of chucking the contents of his stomach all over the floor. That would explain the taste in his mouth as well.

“You did. On my shoes, I might add.”

Lagan winced. “Are they salvageable?”

“I have no idea, but I didn’t try. I dumped everything—my shirt, pants, socks, and shoes—into the trash, then threw out the bag so it wouldn’t stink up the room even more than it already had.”

“I’m sorry.”

Killian shrugged. “I should’ve cut you off sooner.”

With effort, Lagan opened his other eye. His body protested fiercely as he pushed himself up, but he managed. He moved slowly as he stuffed a few pillows in his back, then sagged against them. “I would really appreciate those painkillers.”

Killian got up and grabbed a glass of water and two pills. The man had been prepared, as always. He handed Lagan the water first, and he took two big gulps, then held out his hand for the pills. He swallowed them and drank the rest of the water. Hopefully, they’d work soon.

“Please tell me my memory of my brothers showing up was some kind of alcohol-induced nightmare.”

Killian winced. “Unfortunately, no.”

Oh god. He’d exchanged words with them, hadn’t he? “On a scale of one to ten, how bad did I fuck up with them?”

“You did say some harsh things, but they seemed to understand you weren’t yourself.” Killian’s eyes were full of sympathy.

“Did they leave?”

“They booked a room and are staying a few doors down from us. They requested me to alert them when you had woken up.” Lagan opened his mouth, but Killian cut him off with a sharp wave of his hand. “No worries. I won’t tell them until you’re ready. Take your time.”

“Thank you. For everything. Please tell me I wasn’t mean to you.”

Killian shook his head. “You weren’t. Not even once. In fact, you were pretty nice, complimenting me and everything.”

“So much of yesterday is hazy that you could inform me I proposed marriage to you, and I wouldn’t be able to refute it. I don’t remember a whole lot of details, only some vague impressions and fragments.”

“I’m not sure if I should fill in the details for you. You might be better off not remembering. But rest assured, no proposals were made. By the way, you seem to have a weird fascination with proposals.”

Fuck, Killian wasn’t wrong. Hadn’t Lagan also made some remark about not proposing when they’d been watching Law and Order SVU together? He grunted. “Noted. Was I that bad?”

“No, but you might’ve worded a few things stronger to your brothers than you would’ve had you been sober.”

“You’re always so well spoken. You have a way with words, you know that?”

Killian smiled. “Well, I do have a few years as a criminal defense lawyer under my belt, and I’ve been known to persuade a jury or two, but thank you.”

Lagan leaned back against the pillows, closing his eyes. God, hopefully, those painkillers would work fast. “It was one of the things I disliked about you so much in the beginning. You were always so controlled, so sure of yourself. Slick.”

Killian was quiet for so long that Lagan opened his eyes again. Had he said anything wrong? He hadn’t expected the sadness on Killian’s face.

“I haven’t been sure of myself in a long, long time. What you see is all outside appearance. A mask. And apparently, I wear it well if I had you fooled.”

“I’d never have guessed. You always come across as so cocky. Arrogant.”

Killian slowly shook his head. “I *was* cocky and arrogant, but then something happened that shattered my self-confidence. Ever since, I’ve just been pretending. It may look like I know what I’m doing, but I can guarantee you it’s all bluff.” He took a sharp breath. “But that’s a story for a different time, not something I want to trouble you with when you’re feeling rough already.”

What had happened to him? Little remained of the image Lagan had once had of Killian, of that arrogant Harvard-proud asshole. Instead, he radiated so much human vulnerability it took Lagan’s breath away. How had he pegged him so wrong? “I’d like to hear that story someday...if you’re willing to tell me,” he said softly.

Some of the tightness on Killian’s face dissipated. “Maybe. One day when I’m feeling brave enough. It’s not a feel-good story, and it doesn’t have a happy ending.”

“Yet.”

Killian’s mouth bloomed into a full smile. “Yet.”

They stared at each other, but this time, it felt different. Comfortable, sweet, like a sense of peace had been brokered for good. “I need to take a shower, and I’ll need some food before I deal with my brothers,” Lagan said. “No way in hell am I facing Nordin the way I am now. He’s too formidable a man to confront without feeling myself.”

“Tell me what you’d like for breakfast, and I’ll make it happen while you shower.”

Lagan cocked his head. “Anyone ever tell you that you’d make, like, the best boyfriend ever?”

Killian’s expression changed so quickly Lagan’s stomach clenched. He’d said something wrong. Killian looked as if

he'd stabbed him in the back. His hand trembled as he brought it to his nape and rubbed, wincing as he kneaded the flesh.

"You're way off in that assessment, but that's okay," Killian said. "Please tell me what I can get you for breakfast."

"Killian..." How could he fix this? He'd hurt him, and the anguish Killian radiated tormented him.

Finally, Killian met his gaze, his eyes showing none of the anger Lagan had expected. Instead, he found endless pools of sadness. "I don't want to talk about it, Lagan. Please respect that."

He had no choice, did he? As much as he ached to make things right, he couldn't. He needed to heed Killian's warning and stop pushing. And so he held up his hands. "I'll back off, but please, I'm here to listen if you want to talk, okay?"

Killian nodded.

"As for breakfast, I'll take another Egg McMuffin."

"Coming right up." Killian rose, grabbed his wallet and a keycard from the desk, and walked out before Lagan could say another word.

He'd fucked up, but how? The boyfriend remark had hurt Killian. Had he been through a bad breakup? Had he maybe lost someone dear to him? Lagan groaned, burying his head in his hands. He was too hungover for this. The thinking made his head hurt. Literally. Showering had to come first. Maybe after that, he'd have the brainpower to focus.

He moved slowly and cautiously as he got out of bed, every step reverberating with a pounding in his head. Bending over to get clean underwear from his suitcase tripled his headache, and he ground his teeth as he made his way into the bathroom. Out of habit, he flicked on the light. Jesus Christ. Bad idea. He immediately turned it off again. The little light coming in from the frosted window would have to do. It wasn't like he needed to see what he looked like hungover anyway.

He took his time showering. Every fast movement hurt. Besides, he was desperate for the meds to work before he was

done. By the time he'd dried himself off and donned fresh underwear, his headache was bearable, though still not pretty.

As he walked back into the room, the smell of coffee and bacon greeted him. Killian had unpacked breakfast for him on the desk. God bless him. Lagan made a beeline for the coffee, closing his eyes as he took the first sip. Heaven.

It had been a long time since he'd gotten drunk, but eating a hearty breakfast had always seemed to work to get rid of his hangover. Time to test that theory again now that he was older. He took a good bite out of the sandwich, the saltiness exploding in his mouth.

"Thank you," he said with his mouth full.

"My pleasure. Aren't you cold like that?"

Lagan looked down. He was still in his underwear, hadn't even put on a shirt. "I'm fine."

Killian let out a sigh and placed the suitcase he'd dragged from under the bed on the luggage stand. "Lagan, would you please, for the love of everything holy, put on some clothes?"

Killian was bothered by his state of undress. Shit. Lagan hadn't even considered how it might come across. He put the sandwich down, grabbed a pair of jeans and a shirt from his suitcase, and shrugged them on. "Sorry," he mumbled.

"Thank you."

Lagan finished the sandwich in no time, then downed the coffee, which had cooled enough that it was at a drinkable temperature. "Before I face my brothers, is there anything I should apologize for to you?"

Killian looked up, halting the folding of one of his dress shirts. "What do you mean?"

"I told you my memory of last night is hazy. Did I say or do anything to you that I owe you an apology for?"

"No. You're good."

Killian's words said one thing, but his body language was telling a whole different story. The incongruence was driving

Lagan crazy. What had happened? What had he done wrong?
Not knowing hurt far worse than his head did. If only he knew
how to fix it.

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You'd make the best boyfriend ever. Funny how one sentence could hit him so hard. The second Lagan had uttered those words, something sharp had torn open old wounds, wounds Killian had thought long healed but apparently had barely scabbed over. He was bleeding again, and how did he stop it? How did he take away the sharp pain, the crushing guilt, the endless loop of self-incrimination?

What made it worse was that Lagan had picked up on his anguish. How could Killian explain what his words had done? It wasn't Lagan's fault. He'd made the remark in innocence, not knowing he'd found the sliver of unprotected skin under Killian's armor.

The walls he'd put up had functioned so well. For nine years, he closed himself off and kept everyone at bay. No one had managed to even come close and certainly not get to him like that. How had Lagan succeeded?

Or maybe his armor was simply defenseless against Lagan. He'd slipped through from the start, had made Killian break rules he never thought he would disregard. Lagan was his student, for fuck's sake. That knowledge should've functioned like the Great Wall of China between them, high and thick enough to keep Lagan out, yet that hadn't stopped Killian from opening up to him. He'd taken not only his walls down for Lagan but his armor as well, leaving his heart wide open. How foolish.

It would be so much easier if he could hate him, if he could convince himself again that Lagan was a shallow, mean, and bad person. If he could tell himself that none of this was on Killian, that he was blameless, maybe even the victim. But that was bullshit. None of this was Lagan's fault, as much as Killian wanted to pin it on him. No, this was all Killian.

But he couldn't explain it to Lagan. Even if Lagan understood how it had all happened, he'd never look at Killian the same way again. Everything they had built over the last few days, the fragile connection they had created, would be destroyed. Mere weeks ago, he couldn't have cared less what Lagan thought of him. Now the idea of Lagan hating him again was unbearable.

"I remember us talking yesterday evening," Lagan said softly.

Killian had finished packing his suitcase and now zipped it closed, then locked it. "Talking about what?"

"About why I thought you were sexy."

Shit. Why couldn't Lagan have forgotten about this, or at least have kept it to himself? "We don't need to talk about it. You were drunk."

"I was, but you seemed awfully interested in learning why I thought you were sexy. And you weren't drunk."

Killian swallowed. "I was out of line. I should never have asked you that."

"I didn't mind."

"I took advantage of your lowered inhibitions. It was unfair, and I shouldn't have done it."

"Killian..."

He resisted as long as he could, but then he raised his head and met Lagan's gaze. "What?"

"I don't want your apologies."

"Then what do you want? Because if you honestly think we're continuing that conversation, you're wrong. I would

rather forget it ever happened.”

“What we shared over the last few days meant something.”

The words hung in the room. Lagan held his hand over his mouth as if he were shocked he’d said them. That made two of them. Killian looked away, unable to watch the emotions in those green eyes. “We shouldn’t be talking about this.”

“Yes, we should. You told me that if I wasn’t drunk, you would’ve kissed me again. The way you looked at me tells me we would’ve done more than kiss. You don’t think that’s something we need to discuss?”

Killian took a deep breath, lifted his suitcase from the bed, and put it on the ground. “I absolutely think we don’t need to discuss this. In fact, I would very much prefer for us never to raise this topic ever again.”

“But why?”

“Because it was inappropriate, and it should never have happened. None of it.” Even saying the words ripped his heart open, but he had to.

“And you think ignoring it will make it go away?”

“No clue, but I’m sure as fuck willing to try.” Another deep breath. His muscles were aching from how tightly wound he was. He needed to get out of here. “I’ll go put my suitcase in the car. Let me know when you’re ready to leave.”

He grasped the doorknob, but Lagan moved in front of him with surprising speed. “No. We’re talking about this.”

“Yesterday, you told your brothers that you were fed up with them making decisions for you, and here you are, deciding for me that we’re not done with this conversation. We are, Lagan. I don’t want to talk about this.”

A flash of hurt sparked in Lagan’s eyes, and he stepped aside. “You’re right. My apologies.”

With his hand on the doorknob, Killian cursed. He couldn’t leave it at this. Lagan couldn’t think this was his fault. He turned around and faced him. “Once upon a time, someone said those exact words to me. ‘You’d make the best boyfriend

ever.' He said it because we couldn't be together at that time, even though we wanted to, and the promise between us was that one day, we would. He used those words to say we were perfect for each other and that all we had to do was be patient. And then he stabbed me in the back, and I found out that every word out of his mouth had been a lie."

Lagan's eyes clouded over, a look of pure anguish on his face. "Killian... I didn't know."

"No, you didn't. How could you? Yesterday evening, we said things we shouldn't have. You had the excuse of being drunk, but I didn't. And we did things we never should've allowed. You're my student, Lagan. This could cost us both everything. In the cold light of day, I'm furious with myself for letting it get this far."

"But we said this was Vegas," Lagan protested. "That we would never mention it again once we left."

"We did. Or rather, I did. But does that make it okay?"

"No," Lagan whispered. "No, it doesn't."

"Let's be honest. We may have hated each other, but that's not what's been simmering between us these last few days."

"No."

"I'm incredibly attracted to you, but even if you hadn't been my student, I still wouldn't have continued this. Whatever this is. I can't. Not ever again."

Lagan frowned. "Why not? I told you when you overheard Morris asking me for a hookup that I don't do relationships either. All I want is sex, some erotic fun."

Lagan truly seemed to believe that, not a trace of deceit on his face or in his voice. "I think that's what you tell yourself, but deep down, I'm not sure that's true."

"What do you mean?"

"Yesterday, you told your brothers they were moving on, finding love. I don't think you realized the longing in your voice when you said that. You may not be aware of it, but you're jealous. You want the same thing."

Lagan took a step back, the blood draining from his face. “No, I don’t.”

“I think you do, but for some reason, you haven’t accepted it yet.”

“What, are you a psychologist now?” It came out snappy.

Killian sighed. He’d meant well, but his timing hadn’t been smart. “I do hold a degree in psychology, but that’s irrelevant. You’re clearly not ready yet to hear this.”

“Do you have any idea how arrogant and patronizing that sounds?”

“Yes, but I still needed to say it.” Killian forced himself to relax his shoulders. “At the end of the day, whether you’re looking for mere sex or a long-term relationship isn’t even the point. It’s me. I don’t ever want to be in a situation again where someone could hurt me, and you...” He had to swallow before he could continue. “You have the ability to crush me... and I can’t let you. I’ve never reacted to anyone the way I do to you. You have this...this power over me, and you always have. It’s dangerous. Deadly. And if I don’t keep you at bay, you’ll destroy me all over again. Only this time I may not recover.”

Lagan stared at him. “That sounds ominous. I’m a little scared, to be honest. Are you sure you’re not attributing too much power to me?”

He had no clue. Lagan honestly had no idea about the effect he had on Killian. Was that a compliment, or should he be offended? Either way, the reason for Lagan underestimating his own powers was crystal clear. Killian had never told him about that fateful night nine years ago. Hell, he’d never even referred to it ...and he should. Lagan deserved to know the truth.

The timing was awful, what with Lagan having a hangover and them already having a tough conversation, but what did it matter? After this, they’d go back to being professor and student, and they would never speak about this again. It was time.

“I know you’ve wondered why I disliked you so much.”

Lagan frowned for a moment, then nodded. “It seemed so strange you had an issue with me from the moment you saw me.”

Killian scratched his chin and sighed. “You don’t remember me, do you?”

“Remember you? From what?”

“We met before you became my student. Nine years ago, on a Saturday evening in Club Pride.”

Lagan gasped. “Club Pride? The one that shut down a few years ago?”

Killian nodded. “Do you remember that?”

“No, and no offense, but you don’t seem like the type to hang out in a club like that.”

That remark only proved how much he had changed. If Lagan had met him ten, fifteen years prior, he would’ve found him in the gay clubs. Of course, Lagan had been a mere child then, but Killian didn’t want to spend too much time on that. “I was in town for a conference. On the way to my hotel, my taxi drove past the club, and I decided to see if I could score a hookup.”

“What happened?”

“You were with your brothers, I think? Now that I’ve met them, I recognize them from back then. And I saw you, and...” Killian looked away. This part was so hard to confess. “You had something magnetic about you, and I was drawn to you.”

“You wanted to hook up with me.” Lagan said it slowly, his voice filled with wonder.

Killian looked up. “I wanted to bury myself inside you, fuck you into a blubbing mess, fill you up with my load... and then do it all over again.”

Lagan made a muffled sound. “That sounds...delightful. So why didn’t you?”

“You turned me down.”

“I turned you down?”

Killian walked over to the window and stared outside as if he'd find answers there. He couldn't face Lagan right now, not when he was sharing one of his most painful memories ever. “You did.”

“Why?” Lagan's voice was soft.

“I wish I knew. I approached you, confident I had a chance. But you...”

“What did I do?”

“You laughed at me. You took one look at me, and you dismissed me out of hand. ‘Did you get lost on your way to the PTA meeting? You don't belong here.’ That was what you said.”

Lagan was quiet for a long time. “I don't remember. I'm sorry.”

Killian turned around. “Sorry that you don't remember or sorry for what you did?”

“Both? I hurt you.”

Killian sighed, scrubbing his face. “You did, but it shouldn't have hit me that hard. Everything came crashing down the week after, and I linked the two events in my head, one reinforcing the shame of the other.”

“What happened?”

Killian let out a humorless laugh. “I've shared enough humiliating experiences for today, don't you think?” He inhaled deeply, then pushed out his breath and relaxed his shoulders. “Anyway, that's why I disliked you when you became my student. You don't easily forget someone who embarrassed you like that, and as much as I wish I could claim I was the better person and took the high road, I didn't. I resented you, and that wasn't fair.”

“I don't know. Seems fair to me if I hurt you that much. I'm not sure if I should wish I remembered or not. It feels

almost worse that something that affected you so much didn't even register on my radar enough to remember it."

"I won't deny that if you'd remembered me and had shown any remorse, things might've been different for me, but that's water under the bridge. It's time for me to move on and stop allowing this memory to live rent-free in my head."

He walked over to Lagan, who was staring at him with sadness in his eyes. "I wish I knew what to say."

Killian's heart fluttered, such an unexpected sensation that he instinctively acted on it and cupped Lagan's cheek. "You don't need to say anything. I'm relieved you now know because it explains how much power you hold over me. Over the last few days, I've bent my principles for you in a way I swore I would never do again, and it scares me. I'm not blaming you. Don't get me wrong. This was my choice and my responsibility. But I don't think no one else could've made me do that but you, and that's a sobering thought. I can't do this again, Lagan. If you were to reject me again, as I'm sure you would at some point, considering you have your whole life ahead of you, whereas I'm solidly approaching a midlife crisis, I wouldn't survive a second time. I'm well aware of how awfully dramatic that sounds, like some soap series from the eighties or nineties, but it's how I feel."

"Killian..." Lagan looked devastated.

He kissed him on his cheek, then stepped back. "I'm sure your brothers can give you a ride to O'Hare. I'll catch an earlier flight. I'll see you in class...Mr. Foster."

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After Killian had walked out and closed the door of their room softly behind him, Lagan stood frozen. His feet were pinned to the floor, but his mind was spinning with everything Killian had told him. How was it possible that an experience that had been so traumatic for Killian had been deleted from Lagan's memory? No matter how hard he tried, he had no recollection of it. None.

And he didn't think *traumatic* was too strong an expression. If Killian had held on to that memory for so long and the first reaction he'd had when recognizing Lagan had been resentment, that spoke volumes. Lagan had hurt him, wounded him into the very depths of his soul. And how awful was he for not remembering. How could he so easily forget something that had damaged another person?

If he hadn't already felt so crappy from his hangover, this would've done the job. His headache had returned with a vengeance, now accompanied by a sinking feeling in his stomach. The breakfast sandwich that had tasted so good earlier now sat like a stone in his belly.

Even worse, he still had to face his brothers. Something told him that wouldn't be a fun conversation either. Apparently, he'd been in the mood to spill some truths the night before, so now he had to see what he could do to limit the damage. The challenge was that he couldn't remember what he had said other than a vague recollection about him feeling beholden or something.

He texted them in their group chat, then waited for them to come to his room. No way in hell was he venturing outside, not when even the smallest ray of sunlight still stabbed his head. He didn't have to wait long. Within minutes, knuckles rapped on the door. He let them in, then closed the door behind them.

"Where's the professor?" Hadley asked.

"He took an earlier flight." Lagan didn't feel like explaining more at all.

"How are you feeling?" Jaren studied Lagan.

"Like crap, but that was to be expected. I downed the better part of an entire bottle of Jack last night, so I now have to face the consequences."

He pulled the curtains shut and settled on the bed with his back against the headboard. Nordin lowered his frame into the creaky desk chair, Jaren picked the dirty reading chair—after putting a towel over it—and Hadley sat down on the bed next to him. If someone had asked him to predict where they would sit, that was how he would've called it.

"I feel like we need to talk about what happened." Hadley sounded apologetic. He would be, unlike Nordin, who always faced confrontations like this head on.

Lagan took a deep breath. "Look, in hindsight, I can understand you guys were hurt that I didn't tell you about my father passing away. It was a strange situation. Killian was there, and I didn't want to be a bother to you."

"Are you and Killian sleeping together?" Nordin asked, his voice lacking the usual warmth.

"I don't see how that's any of your business." Lagan raised his chin.

"You don't? Well, as far as I'm concerned, that would be the only valid reason not to call us. I can understand you wanting to be with your lover or your boyfriend or whatever the fuck you want to call him instead of us in a situation like this. But if he's not, if he's just the professor you keep telling

us you hate so much, then I don't understand how you could pick him over us."

Oh my god, Nordin was jealous. The realization sank deep inside Lagan. How had he never considered that? His reaction was more than wounded pride. Before him stood a man whose heart was broken because he felt he'd been replaced. And if Lagan had already experienced that with Jaren and Hadley after they'd found their boyfriends, how much worse would it have to be for Nordin if all three of his brothers now had a partner? He'd be the odd one out, and god, Lagan knew how awful that was.

"He's not my boyfriend, Nordin. Things are complicated between us, but we're not together. You know I'm not looking for a relationship."

"But you kissed and exchanged blow jobs," Hadley said. "At least, that was what you told us in your drunken rant."

Fuck, he'd let that slip? He winced. Killian wouldn't be happy about that. "We did kiss, even before this trip, I mean. Saturday, at the bachelor auction. I never got a chance to tell you guys because we hadn't seen each other since."

Shit, what day was it anyway? He checked his watch. Saturday. God, he had missed their weekly dinner, and it hadn't even occurred to him. His stomach sank.

"Yeah, it's Saturday morning. You missed dinner yesterday," Nordin said coolly. "But we already knew something was wrong before that."

"How did you guys find me anyway?"

Hadley shrugged. "The credit card Sebastian gave you. Because he doesn't use it himself, he had notifications set up on his phone. Once the charges started popping up, he got worried and told me. You were easy to trace, considering you booked a flight and paid for the motel here with the card. We didn't know what was going on, but we suspected something bad had happened. You wouldn't voluntarily travel to Chicago on such short notice without letting us know."

“You could’ve called me instead of showing up,” Lagan pointed out.

His brothers looked at Hadley, who had apparently drawn the short stick here. “You hadn’t mentioned anything in the chat, so we weren’t sure what was going on and if you were okay. We debated calling you, but Sebastian suggested we hop onto a plane and see for ourselves.”

“That poor guy is out a fortune because of my father.”

“He didn’t mind at all. All that matters is that you’re okay.”

Lagan let out a deep sigh and rubbed his forehead. “It all happened so quickly. I got the call when I was in class, and... Killian took care of me. I was completely out of it, and he took me home and helped me arrange for everything.”

“And you preferred his help over ours,” Nordin stated.

Lagan hesitated. How could he explain this in a way that made sense? Everything after that phone call had all been so intuitive, so emotional. He hadn’t made a rational decision one way or the other. He pulled up his knees and rested his forehead on them, wrapping his arms around his legs. “Preferring is not the right word. I didn’t want to bother you guys.”

“I’m trying really hard not to fly off the handle at that last line,” Nordin said between clenched teeth. “But I swear to god, I don’t understand how you can consider yourself a bother after all these years. We’ve had your back from day one, like you’ve had ours. And then when something like this happens, you don’t lean on us because you think you’re a bother?”

Lagan put his chin on his knees. “I’ve always felt like a bother,” he whispered. “Rationally, I know that’s not how you guys see me, but I wasn’t thinking. Even though I didn’t give a fuck that my father is dead, I was emotional, and that sent me back into a different mindset, one where I didn’t want to burden you.”

“Yesterday, you said you felt like we often take over and make decisions for you,” Jaren said. “Is that how you feel, or was that the alcohol talking?”

He’d said that? He had no recollection whatsoever. “I don’t know. I don’t think that’s how I feel, but...our dynamic is changing. Now that Reid and Sebastian have entered the picture, things are different, as they should be. But I guess it’s made me realize I’ve leaned on you too much, that it’s time for me to stand on my own two feet and make my own decisions.”

Nordin hummed. “I can see that. I’ve definitely been aware that things are changing as well and that they’ll affect me. So I understand, but what I don’t get is how that translates into you cutting us out of your life. Your father dying is such a big occurrence, and I can’t get over the fact that you didn’t even tell us.”

“Sometimes, it’s easier with an outsider,” Hadley said softly. “Because Sebastian had such a different upbringing and has a wonderfully supportive family, he’s not always aware of how loaded things can be for me. On one hand, I have to explain much more than I would to you guys, but on the other hand, it can also be a relief because if I don’t tell him, he doesn’t see it, and that means I can ignore it myself. If we had accompanied you to the funeral, my guess is your emotions would’ve been much deeper because you wouldn’t have been able to hide.”

Unexpected tears burned in Lagan’s eyes. “That’s it. I didn’t know, but that’s it. Look, I’ve...” He swallowed. “I’ve already shed too many tears for my father, for the things he did that ruined my life. I didn’t want to break down again because he doesn’t deserve it. I wanted to get the funeral over with, put it behind me, and move on. With Killian, I could. He was there, but he never asked the hard questions like you would have. We talked, but on a different level, you know? He asked questions, but he respected the boundaries I put up. He doesn’t know what things were like, how bad the group home was, or the trauma I carry with me on a daily basis. So he doesn’t know what to ask or look for, and it allowed me to grieve on a much shallower level. And I needed that. I didn’t want this to

break me because my father had done enough damage when he was alive.”

He hadn't even noticed until then that the tears had broken through once again and were now streaming down his cheeks. Hadley took his hand, pressed a kiss on it, then held it against his chest.

Nordin blew out a shaky breath. “Okay, that, I can understand. That makes sense to me.”

“I didn't mean to hurt you. I love you guys more than anything in this world. Please don't be angry with me.” A sob escaped Lagan. “I couldn't handle you being upset with me right now.”

Nordin straightened his shoulders, hurried over to the bed, and climbed on it, holding his arms out for Lagan. And Lagan went, putting his head against his oldest brother's shoulder, surrendering to the tears that didn't seem to stop.

Nordin kissed the top of his head. “It's okay. I'm sorry for being angry with you when I had no right to. I was...”

“... jealous,” Lagan whispered.

“Yeah. You choosing a man you hated over us felt like being stabbed in the back.”

“I don't hate Killian anymore.”

Nordin chuckled. “I got that impression.”

“You gotta admire a man who stays calm and classy when you puke all over his shoes,” Hadley commented. “He didn't even blink an eye.”

“He was wonderful the last few days. Absolutely wonderful. In fact...” Lagan took a deep breath and wiped away his tears. “Do you guys remember an evening about nine years ago when we were at Club Pride? Killian was there as well, and he approached me.”

“Approached you? For what?” Hadley asked.

“For a hookup, only he never got that far. I shot him down before he even said a word. I can't remember any of it, but he

does.”

“No clue,” Jaren said. “No offense, but you guys were quite popular back then, and you hooked up a lot, so I can’t remember all of them.”

“But he remembered you?” Nordin asked.

Lagan winced. “I wasn’t too nice about it. Made some kind of remark about him not belonging there and being on his way to a PTA meeting.”

Nordin sat up straight, and Lagan’s head slid off his chest. “I do remember. Jesus, was that him? He was way overdressed for the club. Don’t you recall? He was older than us. Much older. And he was wearing Dockers and a blue-and-white-checked button-down if I remember correctly. Dude, you shot him down *hard*. That was brutal.”

Lagan shrunk. “I can’t believe you remember when I don’t. I feel awful about it.”

“He stood out. You know I pay attention to people.”

He did. Nobody could read people better than Nordin, which was why he excelled at what he did.

“No wonder he hated you,” Hadley said. “That’s kind of hard to forget, a blow like that to a man’s pride.”

Lagan had rarely felt so small. “I’ve apologized, and he says he wants to move past it, but...” He sighed. “I don’t know.”

“You like him.” Hadley worded it as a statement, not a question.

“I’m so confused. Somewhere along the way, I stopped hating him and became attracted to him, and he feels the chemistry too. What we shared was special, even if it was under weird circumstances. But I don’t see how I could even fit a relationship into my life, and he doesn’t want anything to do with me anymore because I’m his student.”

And because he was scared Lagan would break him, but Lagan left out that part. That seemed too personal to share.

He was close to tears again, which had to be because of his hangover. No way had he grown so attached to Killian that he was this upset over the two of them never hanging out again. But why then had Killian's words cut so deep? He'd been so staggeringly vulnerable about how viciously Lagan had wounded him, how scared he was to get hurt again, and it still took Lagan's breath away. How did he hold such power over him?

"That's not an unreasonable concern," Jaren said. "He could be in trouble with the university if they find out."

"How was that first kiss you guys shared?" Hadley asked, his eyes going dreamy.

"Perfect." Lagan forced the words out. "Best kiss I've ever had."

The tears came again, and then all three of his brothers were holding him and touching him. It didn't take away his confusion or his sadness, but it did make him feel less alone.

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When Killian had moved to Seattle and transitioned into family law, he had taken the teaching position almost out of desperation. He didn't need the money, but he didn't think sitting at home all day would be healthy for him, especially after what had happened. He'd already been on the verge of a nervous breakdown, and too much time to ponder would only make things worse, he'd reasoned. To fight all that hopelessness and despair, he'd taken the job at the university.

He didn't mind teaching, but Lagan had made a good point that he wasn't passionate about it either. Like so many things in his life, it had become part of his routine. He simply did it without thinking about it too much. The good news was that it didn't cost much energy either. He'd been doing it for so long he could operate on automatic pilot. What that meant for the quality of his courses was something he preferred not to spend too much time on.

In the two weeks after the unexpected trip to Chicago with Lagan, everything had changed. His job, which had once held a comforting familiarity, now brought him endless stress. The reason was simple. Lagan would be in his class. He had unfailingly picked a seat in the back, which Killian was grateful for, but he still was aware of his presence. Lagan never spoke up, and Killian never called on him—he never had before, so at least that wouldn't rouse suspicion—and yet he knew he was there.

So now there wasn't just an After Armando but an After Lagan as well, and how sad was that? At least the relationship

with Armando had lasted a few months. This, this crazy intense connection he'd forged with Lagan, had gone on for mere days. Sure, if one counted their entire history, one could argue that it had started nine years ago, but that was bullshit. He hadn't known Lagan then, not truly. God, in the few days they had spent together, Killian had learned so much about who Lagan really was, and it had changed everything.

He'd swapped his hours in the legal aid clinic, making sure never to work on Thursday afternoons so he could avoid Lagan. He just couldn't handle seeing Lagan even more. Chelsea had asked him for the reason, and he'd told her he wanted to avoid all appearances of treating Lagan differently because he was his student. She'd accepted his explanation.

Even now, droning on about the process of a will going through probate, he was painfully aware of him sitting in the back, his green eyes fixed on Killian. And no matter how much Killian told himself to ignore him, he couldn't resist peeking at him time and again. Lagan had become an addiction, almost a guilty pleasure, with the emphasis on *guilt*. Why couldn't he let him go?

Finally, class had come to an end, and he dismissed the students, reminding them of their upcoming papers. Thank god that was over. Four days of mental peace before he would have to face Lagan again.

Maybe he should set up an appointment with Mike. Maybe that was what he needed to get Lagan out of his system. But even as he considered it, he knew it was useless. He could fool himself all he wanted, but Mike no longer did the job for him. Hell, he had canceled their standing appointment and hadn't contacted him since. The concept of sex with someone else had lost all its allure. He was well and truly fucked. The one way he'd had of sexual release was now impossible.

When the last student had filed out, he packed his papers into his leather briefcase and closed it with a sigh. He walked out, flicked the lights off, and closed the door behind him. His rubber soles were silent on the shiny stone floor. Mr. Fox must've just polished it with his machine. The gleam wouldn't

last long, but that never stopped the man from giving it his best efforts.

“What is up with Evans?”

Even though Morris had whispered, his voice carried through the empty hallways, and Killian stopped. Who was Morris talking to? Of course. Lagan. Who else would Morris be talking to about him than to him?

“What do you mean?” Lagan asked.

Yup, Killian had been right. Dammit. No way was he interrupting them again, not after what had happened the last time. Besides, he had no clue how Morris would react, and the last thing he wanted was to provide fuel to any theories the guy might have. He didn't like him, or was that because he knew Morris had wanted to hook up with Lagan? He balled his fists.

“Man, he used to be on your case every single class, and now he's ignoring you. He hasn't said a word more to you than strictly necessary. I don't get it.”

“There's nothing to get. Maybe he saw the error of his ways.”

Morris snorted. “Yeah, I don't think so. Did you say something to him?”

Lagan's answer took a while. “He and I had a good conversation. Let's leave it at that.”

“You did? I'm surprised. What did he say?”

“Which part of ‘let's leave it at that’ did you not understand?” Lagan's tone had cooled considerably.

“Jesus, calm down. I was just asking.”

“Yes, after I made it clear I wasn't open to discussing the subject.”

“Is his stuck-up attitude contagious or something? Because you act as bitchy as he is. Or I should say was. But whatever.”

Footsteps stomped off, and Lagan let out a heavy sigh. “Fucking asshole.”

Nothing about that interaction should make Killian feel as giddy as he did, but he couldn't help it. Lagan had defended him when he didn't have to, when the easiest way out would've been to throw Killian under the bus. But he hadn't. Not only had he kept his word he wouldn't mention anything to anyone, but he had also clearly been irritated with Morris.

Killian rounded the corner, then cleared his throat, and Lagan spun around. "You heard that?"

"I did. Thank you."

"No need to thank me."

"But you defended me. And you kept your word."

"Did you think I wouldn't?"

Killian shook his head. "I never doubted you, but even so, it meant something to hear it with my own ears."

When had he stepped toward Lagan? He'd been a few feet away, but now they stood close. Too close. Lagan had dark circles under his red-rimmed eyes as if he hadn't slept in days, and his fair skin was lighter than usual, pale even. The faded jeans and White Sox T-shirt he was wearing hung loosely around his body.

"Have you lost weight?" Killian frowned. "You look a little gaunt."

"I haven't been sleeping well."

"Why?"

Lagan swallowed. "You know why."

"Grief?"

"You could call it that, but it's not my father I'm grieving."

Did he mean...? But that didn't make sense. Why would he use the word *grieving*? It seems way too heavy, too dramatic. Unless he was feeling the distance between them as acutely as Killian was.

"I miss you."

The words came out so softly that Killian wasn't even sure he'd heard them correctly. But the expression of anguish on Lagan's face made it crystal clear he had. Killian's throat tightened. "Lagan..."

Lagan held up his hand. "I know. I know, but you asked. I'm not going to lie to you, not even if you only asked to be polite."

As if it had a will of its own, Killian's hand rose and cupped Lagan's cheek. He brushed Lagan's plump bottom lip with his thumb. "I didn't ask out of politeness. I asked out of concern."

"Why are you concerned about me?" Lagan leaned into his touch, pressing into Killian's hand, and Killian's belly swirled.

"You know why."

"I thought you wanted distance, that you wanted to pretend nothing had happened."

"I don't have a choice. It's self-preservation."

Tears gathered in Lagan's eyes. "I gotta admit, I'm having a hard time pretending. The memories of those days, they're..."

He didn't finish his sentence, but he didn't need to. Killian's memories played on a constant loop in his head. The realization that Lagan cherished them just as much was bittersweet. What did it bring them? Nothing but pain. Nothing but the agony of knowing that memories would be all they would ever have. How could he risk it when Lagan would undoubtedly break his heart? He couldn't go through that. Not again.

And yet he asked, "What's your favorite memory?"

Lagan widened his eyes, but then a soft smile spread across his lips. "Showering with you. The way you washed my hair. How you kissed my shoulder."

He remembered that? It had seemed so insignificant at the time. Killian had kissed him on impulse, the freckles on that creamy shoulder too irresistible to ignore. Lagan's skin had

been soft under his lips, and he'd had to fight with himself not to kiss more of him.

They were standing so close now Lagan's scent drifted into his nostrils, and Killian frowned. The fragrance was familiar. What was it? Dior Homme. He'd used that eau de toilette for a few years now, but he'd never smelled it on Lagan before, and it seemed like an expensive one for him to pick. No, he must be wrong, imagining things because of his heightened emotions.

"Killian," Lagan whispered. Damn, Killian was still caressing his cheek, his lip. God, he was so beautiful, so gorgeous.

He didn't even think but moved in, and their lips met in a sweet, almost tender kiss. Lagan made a sound, a desperate little whimper, and Killian greedily swallowed it. He slipped his tongue into Lagan's mouth, his belly heating as the familiar flavor exploded on his tongue. God, he had missed him.

He dropped his bag and walked him back until Lagan stood with his back against the wall of the hallway, and Killian sank into the kiss, pressing his whole body against Lagan's. Lagan moaned, then wrapped his arms around Killian's neck and pulled him in. He clung to Killian as if he never wanted to let him go.

The kiss grew deeper, hotter, wilder. Killian's hips undulated, grinding against Lagan, and they both grew hard within seconds. He wanted him. He wanted him so much. The little taste he'd had of him in Chicago had been nowhere near enough.

He wanted to suck him off again, eat him out, feast on him. He wanted to kiss every inch of his body, let Lagan's scent invade him, explore every nook and cranny. He wanted to make him crazy with pleasure, own every sound he made, drive him insane with lust. But most of all, he wanted to be inside him, to be so close to him that they were one body, one mind, one soul. He wanted to consume him and be consumed.

The realization was like a bucket of cold water to his face, and he froze.

What had he done?

Oh god, they were in the hallway. Anyone could've seen them.

Killian stepped back so quickly he almost tripped over his own feet. "Lagan, I'm..."

What was there to say? No words could adequately express what he was feeling right now.

Lagan stared at him, his cheeks flushed and his lips swollen. Neither of them moved. Lagan let out a soft whimper, almost a held-back sob. He spun on his heels and ran away.

Killian leaned against the wall for support, his legs too weak to carry him, and he buried his face in his hands. If he was doing the right thing, why did it feel like his heart had just been ripped out of his chest? Footsteps came in his direction. Shit. Someone was here. Had they seen that kiss?

He turned around. Mr. Fox stood right behind him, clutching his mop. One look at his face made Killian's heart sink. "I don't know what you saw, but—"

The custodian held up his hand. "If someone asks, I didn't see anything. Not a damn thing."

Killian didn't want to force his luck, but he couldn't help asking. "Why? You know I might get in trouble for this."

Mr. Fox leaned on his mop, his crinkled face all serious. "Did you know I've been a custodian all my life?"

"You have?" The man had to be pushing seventy.

"I started when I was fourteen. Even when I held other jobs, I always did some kind of custodian job on the side."

"You like it that much?"

"I love it. It's comforting to create order out of chaos, make clean what is dirty. It's fulfilling."

"I can see that."

"You know what my regular job was for most of my life?"

Killian shook his head.

“I was a welder and a damn good one at that. People nowadays look down on anyone working with their hands, but I’m telling you, good welders are rare. And the job pays well, much better than people think.”

Killian had no clue where the man was going with this, but he’d listen. “I bet. It’s a skill, a true craft, like plumbing or being an electrician.”

“Exactly. Not something you can learn off YouTube, you know? But all my life, people have looked down on me. Not everyone, of course, but especially people in white-collar jobs. They often felt better than me, even more when I was doing custodial work. And many of the students and staff here walk past me without saying a damn thing, as if I’m invisible.”

Was he serious? Killian had never paid much attention to it, but he’d always greeted Mr. Fox in the hallways. The man was doing an excellent job. “I’m sorry to hear that. That’s not how it should be.”

“You always greet me, Professor Evans,” the custodian said softly. “And you never fail to thank me if you see me cleaning the bathrooms. You’re appreciative.”

Killian shifted on his feet. “I’d think that’s normal, but apparently, it’s not. Please call me Killian. You’re not a student, so there’s no need for that formality.”

Mr. Fox smiled. “You know who else always stops to make a quick chat, Killian? Lagan. He’s one of the few students I know by name because he introduced himself to me. And when my Ida got sick last year and was diagnosed with cancer, he asked for my address and sent her a lovely get-well package. It meant the world to her.”

“He’s a good guy,” Killian said hoarsely.

“He is, and so are you. You’ve earned my loyalty. But please be more careful. Not everyone will be so understanding, and if someone else had seen you, it could’ve cost you your job.”

Killian sighed. “We... I shouldn’t have kissed him. He’s my student. I know he’s off-limits. ”

Mr. Fox shrugged. “He’s a grown-ass man, capable of making his own decisions. If he kissed you, it was because he wanted to. Now, I understand the school has rules and that they’re there for a reason. I get it. But that kiss I just saw? That wasn’t forced. That was true passion...or maybe even true love.” He winked at Killian. “Only time will tell which one, I guess.”

Killian stared after him as he walked off, whistling a soft tune. True love? Nah, that wasn’t in the cards for him. True obsession more likely. True lust. But no matter which one it was, he’d end up hurt if he didn’t nip this in the bud right now. How the hell would he get Lagan out of his system?

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When Nordin had texted Lagan to ask if they could meet for dinner that day, he had immediately agreed. He liked hanging out with his brother anyway, but a formal request like that was so out of the ordinary he'd figured Nordin had to have a purpose for dropping by. He'd worked all day and had gotten home only fifteen minutes before Nordin was supposed to arrive, but luckily, his brother had informed him he'd be bringing dinner. Takeout—Nordin wasn't a great cook—but that was fine with Lagan. Any meal he didn't have to cook himself was a win.

The bell rang right on time, and Lagan buzzed Nordin in. As soon as his brother walked in, the smell of burgers filled the room. Lagan's mouth watered. "Oh, you brought the good stuff," he said, rubbing his hands.

"Double bacon cheeseburger with steak fries. No tomato on the burger, a side of mayo for the fries."

After Hadley had eaten fries with mayo on one of his trips with Sebastian and had raved about it, Nordin and Lagan had tried it as well and discovered they liked it much better than ketchup.

Lagan took two Cokes out of the fridge while Nordin grabbed the plates. Then they sat at the small dining table across from each other, barely speaking a word as they devoured their food.

Only when his plate was empty did Nordin lean back. Lagan tossed him a wet wipe to clean his hands, then used one

himself. “That hit the spot.” He patted his belly.

Nordin nodded. “Some days, all you need is a good bacon cheeseburger, and the world is a better place.”

“Damn straight.”

“How are things between you and Killian?”

Even hearing his name hurt. “I told you there’s nothing going on between us. There can’t be.”

“I understand why it’s complicated, but you can’t tell me you’re over him.”

Lagan raised an eyebrow. “Over him? You make it sound like he broke my heart.”

“Did he? You tell me.”

“No, he didn’t. We had a mutually satisfying sexual encounter and then decided to part ways again.”

“And you’re okay with that?”

Lagan lowered his gaze. “You know I don’t want a relationship. Becoming a lawyer has always been my dream. I refuse to give that up now.”

“Who says you have to? I mean, not that I’m a relationship expert, but there’s this thing called compromising. Maybe you could make it work.” Nordin put his hand on top of Lagan’s. “It’s okay to change your mind.”

Lagan bit his lip. Could he really have it all? Or was that wishful thinking, the voice of his heart talking because he missed Killian so damn much? Which made no sense whatsoever. They had never been together. Who missed somebody after spending a few days together? He was so fucked up.

But god, the kiss they had shared in the hallway... It had broken him. Before, he’d missed Killian and hadn’t been able to stop thinking about him. But after, it had become ten times worse. He wanted more.

“I don’t know how I feel anymore. It’s all so messed up in my head. Maybe it’s grief.”

Nordin studied him. “It’s Killian. You haven’t been the same since you got back, and it’s not because of your dad.”

“How do you know?”

Nordin hesitated a moment, then said softly, “Because I have a similar situation with my dad, only I’m still close with him. You hadn’t seen him in years, Lagan, which isn’t criticism, by the way. But you didn’t visit him, didn’t have a true relationship with him, maybe even didn’t love him, and I can understand why. Losing him was more about the finality of what could have been than anything else.”

Lagan’s breath caught in his lungs. “What? Your father was in prison?”

Nordin gave a terse nod. “He still is. He has been since I was nine.”

How the hell had Lagan never known this? “I didn’t know.”

“That’s because I never told anyone. He asked me not to. He wanted me to have a fresh start and not be tainted due to an association with him.”

“A fresh start... In foster care. He had no idea, did he?”

“He thought I was back with my mom.” He sighed, rubbing his neck. “My parents were one of those ‘can’t live with or without you’ couples. They’d break up, get back together, break up again. My dad... I think you’ve figured out what I do for a living, right?”

Lagan nodded. “Wasn’t that hard, considering what my old man did.”

“I thought so. Well, I learned it from my dad. He was the best in the business and proud of it. My mom loved the money it brought, but she hated the moving around.”

“You didn’t grow up in Chicago?”

“I did for the most part, but before I was born, they moved all around the country. They lived in Houston, Miami, New York, Atlanta, anywhere where my father saw an option to play the game. My mom got tired of that, but above all, she

got scared of the risks that came with his job. That got only worse after I was born. They settled in Chicago, and he promised to quit, then got sucked back into it, so she left and took me. She returned. He promised again, yada, yada. Endless vicious circle. And then she left without me.”

“She left you with him?”

“We’d gotten close, my dad and I, and he was already teaching me the game. I had a knack for it, like he did, and we played some amazing cons together. Dude, no one suspects a seven-year-old to trick them, you know? I loved it. I loved him. My father was—is—larger than life. Everyone likes him. It’s almost impossible not to. Even in prison, he’s popular with both his fellow inmates and the guards. And so she decided I was better off with him, and she left. Five months later, he got caught.”

Lagan winced. “What was he charged with?”

Nordin’s face tightened. “He got screwed over, trusted the wrong guy. They did a job, a heist, and the others turned out to be armed. Someone got shot, and they all got twenty-five years or more. My dad got twenty-five, the lowest of all of them because he wasn’t armed, but it was his third arrest, so the judge did want to send him a message.”

“And he’s still in prison?”

“Yeah. He’s been up for parole twice now, but both times, the family of the guard who got killed testified, and it got denied. But they think he has a good chance this year.”

“But your mom never came back for you when she found out your dad was in jail?”

Nordin shrugged, but it wasn’t quite as nonchalant as he probably meant it to be. “She’d met someone else, and she was pregnant. She wanted a clean start, so she left me behind.”

“Nordin...” It didn’t often happen that a foster care story could shock Lagan anymore, but this one did. Maybe because he’d had no clue and it was his brother. “You told us your mom was dead and that your dad couldn’t take care of you.”

Nordin's eyes hardened. "She *left* me, Lagan. She walked away, left me in a foster home, and never looked back. I call her mom out of habit and ease, but that's not what a mother does. She has a whole new family, an accountant husband, three kids, a house in the suburbs, and a dog, and she never bothered to check in on me. As far as I'm concerned, she *is* dead."

Lagan couldn't blame him for feeling that way. "I get it. And your dad, you said you visit him?"

"At least every month."

"Where is he?"

"St. Louis."

"So when you're traveling, you go visit him."

"Not every time, but yeah, I usually try to stop by."

"I thought he didn't want you associating with him."

Nordin smiled. "He didn't, but you know how stubborn I am. Until I was eighteen, it was complicated, what with me being in the group home and all, but once we'd moved, I started pestering him. In the end, he gave in because he understood I had zero intention of walking away from him."

"But you still didn't tell us."

Nordin met his eyes. "I didn't, and yes, I know that makes me a hypocrite for getting on your case about not telling us about your father passing away. The irony of that didn't escape me afterward, trust me. But it's hard to open up after so many years of keeping mum about his existence."

"Plus, most of your life is a secret. It's become a habit by now, I'd imagine."

"It has. Not a good one, I know, but I'm trying to protect you all."

"But who's protecting you?"

The question slipped out, and Nordin froze, then looked away. "I'm okay, I promise."

“Okay is a low bar. Ask me how I know. I’m realizing more and more that surviving isn’t good enough for me anymore. If nothing else, the whole business with Killian has made me see that.”

Endless sadness passed over Nordin’s face. “I can’t have more, not with the life I lead. My father’s example has made that abundantly clear.”

His voice held an edge as if he was still hiding something. Normally, Lagan wouldn’t have pressed, but he couldn’t let it go so easily. “Watching Jaren and Hadley doesn’t make you long for what they have?”

Nordin was quiet for a long time. “Yeah.” His voice was hoarse. “Yeah, it does.”

“Haven’t you ever wanted that kind of connection with someone?”

“I have... There’s this...” Nordin sighed, his shoulders slumping. “It’s impossible. Even more than you and your professor.”

Lagan had never seen him so sad, so utterly dejected. “Nordin... I’m here.”

Nordin held up his hand. “I can’t talk about it, okay? For various reasons. But it helps to know you’re willing to listen.”

“Anytime.”

Nordin cleared his throat. “You must be wondering why I asked to meet, since tomorrow is Friday.”

Lagan accepted the change of subject. “I assumed you’d tell me when you’re ready.”

Nordin tapped his fingers on the table. “I’m still not sure I’m doing the right thing, but I’ve been going back and forth on it, and I don’t know what else to do.”

A sliver of worry snaked through Lagan’s belly. “Is it bad news?”

“No. Not like that.” Nordin lifted his messenger bag, opened it, and pulled out a folder. “Over the last few years,

I've kept tabs on people you guys were hanging out with. Friends, boyfriends, anyone you were forming more serious relationships with."

Wow. Lagan hadn't seen that one coming. "Why?" As soon as he asked, he knew the answer. "You're still trying to protect us."

Nordin shrugged. "It's a hard habit to break. Luckily, up until now, I found nothing so concerning any of you needed to know, so it's never been a problem."

"Until now? That suggests you've found something." But who could he have been researching? "Wait, you found something on Killian?"

"Yeah, and it's something big."

Nordin was still giving him the opportunity to say he didn't want to know. "Is it something that will change my opinion of him?"

"It might, but that's not what I'm concerned about. I think you may want to know so you can avoid hurting him again. He's fragile in a sense, and I'm not sure you realize to which degree."

Lagan frowned. "Interesting you'd be concerned about me hurting him and not vice versa."

"Oh, don't get me wrong. I *am* concerned about him hurting you. You're far more vulnerable than you realize, but I also know you're a big boy, and I need to back off. But he's different. And maybe I feel like I owe him for taking care of you when you needed it. He did it even when he thought he still hated you, and to me, that speaks volumes about his character."

Whatever Nordin had discovered, it had to be what Killian had referred to as the event that happened right after Lagan had rejected him. The way he had mentioned that I had made it seem like a big thing, like something horrible had gone down. Maybe it was connected to how he'd reacted to that best-boyfriend-ever remark? If Nordin had dug into his

background, chances were that was what he'd uncovered. "Let me guess. It's something that happened about nine years ago?"

Nordin quirked an eyebrow. "He told you already?"

"No, but he referred to it. He also said he didn't want to talk about it, so I'm not sure you should tell me. It feels like a violation of his privacy."

"I can understand that. That's your call. If you don't want to know, I won't breathe a word of this to you or anyone else. You know that. This kind of information stays with me."

Lagan held up a hand. "I know. I trust you." He bit his lip. "Do you think it's important for me to know?"

Nordin shook his head. "That's the part I can't figure out. I can make an argument for telling you but also an equally strong case for not saying a word."

What was the right choice here? Such a hard decision when he didn't know what it was about. But Killian had said something had happened that brought shame. He'd described it as everything crashing down, and he didn't seem like the type of man who would use hyperboles, so it had to be something serious.

But why would he need to know if Killian had chosen not to tell him? They hadn't spoken to each other since that kiss in the hallway that had rocked Lagan to his core. Touching Killian again, tasting him, had been everything, and if Killian hadn't broken off that kiss, Lagan wasn't sure he would have at some point. He had craved him with his whole being and on a level that had scared the shit out of him. But even with matters between them being as complicated as they were, learning about something that had been so emotionally damaging to him without his consent felt like a violation.

"Don't tell me. He chose not to share details, and I want to honor that."

Relief settled in his chest now that he had made the decision. Yes, this was the right call. He had no right to this information unless Killian told him himself.

“Fair enough. I’m glad you made that choice.” Nordin hesitated. “All I will say is this. If any news ever breaks about him, some kind of scandal, please remember it’s not what it seems like. Trust him, okay?”

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Night had fallen, and the city had lit up. Killian stared out his window at the Puget Sound, the lights of a ferry disappearing in the distance. Only a few more weeks until the longest day, those weeks when it wouldn't get dark until very late. Killian loved that about living in Seattle, though Boston had been the same. The snow, however, had been a whole different story there.

Killian sighed. He was restless. It was almost time for bed, at least for him, but he wasn't tired at all. Dinner—a tuna poke bowl with a lemon seltzer and a crispy apple as a dessert in the car—had been early so he'd make it to class in time. After class, he was usually worn out enough to be out like a light the minute he'd crawled into bed, but not tonight.

The cause for his restlessness was easy to diagnose. Lagan hadn't shown up for class twice in a row. Despite him often being late, he had rarely missed classes altogether, and Killian was worried. Had something happened? He couldn't ask anyone from the university if they'd heard from Lagan, since they wouldn't be reachable until the morning. But how could he go to sleep if he didn't know if Lagan was okay?

He pulled his phone out of the pocket of his sweatpants. Should he call him? He had his number. Normally, he wouldn't, but wasn't this a special circumstance? Killian hesitated, then hit the Call button before he could talk himself out of it. He was concerned. That was a valid reason to reach out, no?

“Killian?” Lagan sounded surprised.

“Yeah, it’s me.”

“Is something wrong?”

Killian dragged a hand through his hair. “No. I mean, not on my end. I was worried about you, since you were absent this week.”

“Oh.” A sigh. “I debated texting or emailing you, but I wasn’t sure what the etiquette was here. You said... Well, we agreed we wouldn’t... We’re supposed to be just professor and student, and I wouldn’t have messaged my other professors either.”

“It would’ve been fine. Is everything okay?”

“Yeah. I just had to work late all week. Something went wrong with a trial my boss is involved in, and it’s been chaos here.”

Tension eased out of his body. Lagan was okay. “You work for Oliver Brewer, correct?”

“Yeah.” A pause. “How do you know? You didn’t even know what law firm I worked for.”

Killian smiled. Little escaped Lagan. “I used my considerable research skills, also known as Google. Roberts, Smith & Reed have a pretty slick website with pictures and bios of all partners, and it had you listed as Brewer’s paralegal.”

“Oh. I didn’t even know that.”

“Now you do.”

He should end the conversation now. All he’d wanted to know was that Lagan was okay, and he was. Yet he didn’t want to let him go just yet. “I’ll email you the notes for this week’s classes and the assignment I handed out today. It’s not due for another four weeks, so you have time.”

Lagan chuckled, and the sound settled in Killian’s belly. God, he’d missed hearing his laugh. “Are you giving me preferential treatment, Professor Evans?”

“Perhaps, but if I am, it’s to make up for when I did you wrong.”

He’d meant it as a joke, but it had come out much more serious than he’d intended.

“Killian...” Lagan clicked his tongue. “You don’t need to do that. I mean, I appreciate it, but you don’t owe me anything. What’s in the past is done. Let’s leave it there.”

“I know.” Killian sighed. “I don’t want you to get behind because of missing class this week.”

Another soft laugh. “Look at you being all sweet. You’re hiding a big, squishy heart behind that gruff exterior.”

“Just for you.”

Killian wanted to groan. What the hell was he saying now? Why couldn’t he keep his mouth shut when it concerned Lagan? He was always sharing too much, saying the exact wrong thing.

“Killian...” Lagan said again, and Killian’s name had never sounded sweeter. Somehow, his ears were connected to his belly because listening to Lagan talk got him all warm and fuzzy inside.

“Forget I said that. I shouldn’t have said that. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize.”

Killian leaned his head against the window and closed his eyes. “I keep crossing lines with you.”

“It’s okay.”

“It’s not okay. I’m sending mixed signals, and that’s confusing for us both.”

Lagan was quiet for a long time. “I know, but you’re not the only one who’s confused.”

Killian’s heart sped up. “What do you mean?”

“You know what I’m talking about.”

“Tell me anyway.”

“I miss you.” Lagan’s voice was soft as a whisper, yet it wrapped around Killian like a warm hug. “It doesn’t make sense because I hated you, and then we only spent, like, four days together, and I miss you. How did that happen? What is wrong with me that I got attached to you that quickly? It’s ridiculous. I don’t want a relationship. You don’t want a relationship. But I can’t stop thinking about you, and I can’t stop fucking missing you. What did you *do* to me?”

He was panting, every sharp breath a shard in Killian’s heart. “I didn’t mean to.”

A long, pregnant pause. Then Lagan’s hoarse voice. “Do you miss me too?”

How could he lie to him? He forced the words out. “More than you’ll ever know.”

“What are we doing, Killian?”

“The right thing. You said it yourself. You don’t want a relationship. How would you even fit me into your life right now with everything you have going on already? And I can’t go through this again. I can’t invest emotionally in someone again, only to be dismissed. It would destroy me.”

“But who says I would dismiss you? How do you know we wouldn’t last?”

Oh, that notion pierced through everything, hitting Killian deep. How did he know? The truth was that he didn’t, and if he took a few steps back and allowed himself to analyze the situation, he knew that. But his heart, oh, his heart... His heart was convinced it would get broken again, crushed, and trampled on.

“I can’t,” Killian croaked. “I just can’t.”

They were silent, their breaths heavy on the line. “Have you met up with a sex worker since Chicago?” Lagan finally asked. “I know I have no right to ask, but—”

“No. No, I haven’t. I canceled the appointment I was supposed to have a few days after we came back. Can’t do it anymore.”

“I haven’t hooked up either. Didn’t have much interest before, but now I just can’t.”

Killian let out a dry, humorless laugh. “What are we doing, Lagan? Where do we go from here?”

“I don’t know.” Another long pause. Then, “I dream of you almost every night.”

“Yeah?”

“I dream about you touching me, kissing me the way you did in the hallway.”

Killian moaned. “That was a great kiss.”

“Mmm, it was.”

“Was that all I did?”

“No, you...” Lagan cleared his throat. “You rimmed me. I woke up on the verge of orgasming.”

Killian pressed the heel of his hand against his dick. “I love rimming.”

“I had a feeling you would. You’re so tidy and proper on the outside but so dirty underneath.”

“And horny,” Killian admitted before he could stop himself. “So fucking horny. I’ve played with myself every night, thinking of you.”

“Same...”

“Are you home?”

“Yeah. Just wolfed down some late dinner.”

“Go to bed. I’ll do the same.”

The implicit invitation was crystal clear. What would Lagan do?

“Yeah. Give me a second.”

Rustling and footsteps came over the line. Killian flicked off the lights in his living room, then went to his bedroom. He stretched out on his bed, already slipping his hand behind the

waistband of his sweat pants. “I’m wearing sweat pants. Commando.”

“Fuck, I’d love to see that. Sweat pants season is my favorite.”

Killian didn’t even hesitate but pressed the FaceTime button.

“Oh...” Lagan breathed and switched as well. His camera came on, giving Killian a view of his bedroom. Lagan panned the camera lower, showing pajama pants. “I’d already changed into my pajamas.”

“Are you wearing underwear?”

Lagan let out a low chuckle. “Of course not.”

“Mmm, I like that.” Killian positioned his phone against the lamp on his nightstand, checked the angle, and adjusted it, then propped himself up against the headboard. He slowly stroked his hard dick. “How do you like this view?”

“Very sexy,” Lagan purred. “Nice angle, there.”

“Thank you. Must be those three camera lenses on my phone.”

“I’d say it’s more the other *equipment* you’re working with, but whatever. How’s this?”

Lagan lowered the camera to his straining erection, which threatened to peep from under his pajama pants. Something flipped inside Killian as if something he’d buried deep resurfaced. The old Killian. Before Armando.

“I approve. Now show me that gorgeous cock, baby. Show me what I’m missing.”

Lagan slipped his hands under his waistband and pulled out his cock, giving it a good squeeze.

“Fuck, yes,” Killian moaned, his mouth watering. “You tasted so good. Wish I could take you into my mouth again. Tease your slit with my tongue, play with your frenulum before swallowing you down...all the way to the back of my throat. You loved that, remember?”

The words came so easily now that he let himself feel, allowed himself to sink into the sensual experience.

“Jesus, you’re way too good at this, Professor.”

Why was it so hot when Lagan called him that? He never had before when they were together, but it egged Killian on now. “How sensitive are your nipples? I never got to test that, so you’ll have to show me.”

“Show you, how?”

“Suck on your thumb and index finger for me. Yes, like that. Now pinch that pretty nipple for me. How does that feel?”

Lagan swallowed. “Good. Really good.”

“Roll it between your fingers. Perfect. Now do the other one.”

Lagan didn’t hesitate but obeyed Killian’s instructions. His nipples became tight little buds, all but begging for Killian’s touch. “If I were with you now, I’d tease them with my tongue. Maybe scrape them with my teeth. And then I’d suckle on them. I love sucking on nipples...and yours are so pretty. Do you think that would feel good?”

“Considering how aroused I get from you just describing that, I’d say yes.”

Killian chuckled. “Slide your hand lower for me. Down your belly. All the way down. Stop.” He’d reached his cock, and Killian wanted to take his time. “Go around to your balls.”

“Killian...” Even Lagan’s whine was sexy.

Killian shoved down his pants and took himself in his right hand. “Are your balls tight yet?”

“Yes, but not painfully so.”

“So if I were there, I could suck them?”

“Y-yes.” Lagan was cupping his balls one by one, rolling them in his hand as if he were weighing them.

“Take them into my mouth and suckle on them...maybe bite down just a little to see how much you can take?”

“I’m pretty sure I would let you do whatever the fuck you want, so yes.”

As aroused as Lagan was, he hadn’t lost his sense of humor, and Killian’s insides grew even softer. “I wish I could eat you out. Lap that little pink hole, maybe suck on it, nibble on it, before spearing it with my tongue. Oh, baby, I’d straight up go to town until you don’t even remember your own name.”

“Fuuuuck.” Lagan pulled his balls away from his body, hissing in pain. “I haven’t even touched my dick, and I’m close to blowing my load.”

“Suck on your middle finger,” Killian told him. “Make it nice and wet.”

Lagan sucked audibly, and the sight of his tongue swirling around that finger shot straight to Killian’s cock.

“Now what?”

“You know where that finger is going, don’t you?”

“I have a pretty good idea.”

“Rub yourself behind your balls and then go backward. Keep wetting that finger, baby, because you’re gonna need it nice and slick.”

Lagan did what he told him to, letting out a whimpering moan as he teased himself. Killian’s blood buzzed through his veins, and his cock pulsed in his hands, eager to get more action. He pressed against it to get it to calm down. A little more patience.

“When you jack yourself off, do you play with your ass, baby?”

Lagan nodded, biting his lips. “I f-finger myself. Oh shit, this feels so good.”

“I can tell. Look at your cock, all dripping. Why don’t you use your thumb to spread that around a bit? But just your

thumb.”

“You’re so mean. I’m so fucking hard.”

Yet Lagan did as Killian had asked, whimpering when he slicked his cockhead with his precum. Killian did the same with his cock, biting back a grunt of pleasure. Their panting breaths mingled as Lagan massaged his perineum, getting closer and closer to his hole.

“Breach it,” Killian ordered. “Sink your finger inside.”

His breath caught as Lagan did just that, letting out a low, long moan. “Ohgogohgodohgod, please tell me I can touch myself. I’m so fucking close.”

“Wrap your other hand around your cock. Show me how you pleasure yourself.”

“Fucking finally.” Lagan didn’t miss a beat but took himself in his left hand, fingering his ass with his right.

His phone tilted a little sideways, but Killian still had a prime view. Fuck, why was this better than any porn he’d ever watched? All he wanted was to be with Lagan, settle between his legs, and slide his cock inside him. Fuck him until that crawl under his skin was gone, until that feverish want was flushed from his system, until he could sleep and breathe and live again without constantly thinking of Lagan.

“Killian!” Lagan cried out, jacking himself off furiously while he fingered himself with abandon.

Killian gave in to his own needs, squeezing the crown of his cock. They came at the same time, moaning and grunting, both spurting their loads all over their hands. Their breaths slowed down, and their eyes met through the camera.

Silence.

“Killian...”

It sounded like a plea, and for some stupid reason, Killian’s throat tightened. “Thank you,” he managed. “Thank you for this gift.”

He ended the call.

It took a long, long time before sleep came, and when it did, he dreamed of Lagan.

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“I ’m so happy to see you!”

His sister was half a foot shorter than Killian, but she gave fierce hugs. Killian wasn’t much for physical affection anymore, but he hugged her right back. Something about her smell, her touch, always brought comfort. Maybe because she reminded him so much of their mother.

“Me too. It’s been too long,” he said, and whereas he uttered that sentiment out of politeness on a regular basis, this time, he meant it. “Come on in.”

He stepped aside and let Christine walk past him into his apartment. She dumped her backpack on the floor, kicked off her Converse, and padded into the living room, where she made a beeline for the window. “Holy shit, I still can’t get over this view. Every time I’m here, I’m in love all over again.”

He smiled as he filled the electric kettle with water. “I’ve spent hours in front of that window. It never gets old, and every season, every day, is different.”

As soon as he’d turned the kettle on, he joined her. She put an arm around his waist and leaned her head against his shoulder. “I can imagine. You couldn’t drag me away either.”

He pulled her close. “It’s truly good to see you. I missed you.”

She tipped her head back and sought his eyes. “That’s an unusual statement from you. At least, the new you. Killian 2.0.”

“It’s been nine years. That’s hardly the new me anymore.”

“I know, which is why you saying that is so extraordinary. That sounded like the old Killian.”

He sighed and let go of her. “I think the water for your tea is ready.”

He made them both a large mug of tea, not in the mood to deal with her complaining about his caffeine intake. She didn’t need to know he seldom drank tea. In fact, the last time was...

A stab of pain pierced his heart. When Lagan had been here. That had been the last time Killian had drank tea. Why did that simple memory hurt so much? Everything about it hurt, even thinking of him. It had been four weeks since they had returned from Chicago, two weeks since they had kissed again in the hallway, a week since they’d had phone sex, and every day had been hell. How on earth had he let this happen?

No, he didn’t want to think about that now. Christine was here, and she’d see right through him. She always had. Another trait she got from their mom.

He settled on the couch while she curled up in one of the chairs.

“How have you been? Judging by your pictures, you’ve had quite the trip.”

His sister took at least two big trips abroad every year to scout new products, suppliers, and ideas for the retail chain she worked for. She had just returned from two weeks in Indonesia, Thailand, and a few smaller countries he couldn’t remember. On her way back, she had planned a stopover in Seattle so she could meet up with Killian.

“It was amazing. I found some wonderful local artists in Indonesia who would be happy to work with us. They create products for a few others, but all through intermediaries, so they get paid way less than we would.”

One principle of Christine’s company was that they wanted to pay a fair living wage to everyone they did business with from suppliers to employees. It had made them popular, and

they never had any issues in recruiting and retaining personnel.

“What products do they make?”

Christine grabbed her phone and showed him pictures of pottery, fabrics, woodwork, and more. None of it appealed to him, but he could see the aesthetic value of the work. “It looks amazing. I’m sure that’ll sell well.”

“I sure hope so.” She put her phone away and sipped her tea, pulling her legs up. “How’s work been for you?”

“The same. You know me. I live by my routines.”

She quirked an eyebrow. “We haven’t seen each other in a year, and nothing has changed? No offense, but don’t you think that’s kind of sad?”

He ignored her remark, something he had become good at over the years. Usually, she’d get the hint and give up on trying to get him to open up. “I started volunteering for a different legal aid clinic. The other one changed management, and the new director was homophobic and transphobic. I didn’t want to deal with that, so I found another place that could use my help.”

“Yeah, no shit. There’s no sense in wasting your precious time and energy in a place where you’re not valued.”

“Exactly. The new clinic has a transgender director and some amazing volunteers.”

He thought he’d kept his tone neutral, but she cocked her head. “Amazing volunteers? Someone you bonded with?”

She was so good at picking up on subtle clues. “Nah, he’s also one of my students, but he excels at what he does. He’ll make a brilliant lawyer someday.”

“Is he like you? I mean, the old you?”

He frowned. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

“Cutthroat, ambitious. You know, unapologetically brilliant at lawyering.”

“God, no. Not at all. He’s... He’s wicked smart. Exceptional at making solid arguments and poking holes in weak ones. Passionate too. He’s been volunteering in the clinic ever since he started law school, and he also works full time as a paralegal. His ambition is to be a lawyer and help those who can’t afford good legal help. He’s wonderfully idealistic, but it’s to his credit.”

Oh god, he needed to stop talking about Lagan. Now.

She whistled between her teeth. “That’s quite the schedule he has. No partner?”

“No, he’s single.” He’d spoken the words before he’d realized the trap he’d walked right into. Fuck, he was getting sloppy. How could he not have recognized her line of questioning?

“Oh.” His sister packed that one word with meaning.

“Jesus, Chris, he’s my student. I’m his professor. Nothing could ever happen between us.”

“Did I ask?”

“No, but we both know it was implied.”

Christine shrugged. “I wasn’t implying anything, but since you took it that way... Is he cute?”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake. Yes, he’s cute. Very cute, okay? But he’s my student.”

“You could’ve just said yes. That would’ve been sufficient as an answer.”

He harrumphed. “Yeah, right. As if you wouldn’t have given me the third degree if I’d answered with one word.”

“True, and I have to admit this is much more fun.”

Killian’s face tightened. “It’s anything but fun. Nothing about this is fun.”

She grew serious as well. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make light of things.”

He waved his hand dismissively, letting out a deep sigh. “No harm done. I’m being overly dramatic here.”

“You’ve been a lot of things over the years, dear brother mine, but overly dramatic has never been one of them. What’s going on? You don’t seem quite yourself.”

Where did he even start? He had no clue anymore. “Let’s just say it might be time for Killian 3.0.”

“Can’t say that I’d be upset about that. It’s way past time you made some changes.”

Her reaction didn’t surprise him. She had been on his case for years about how much he had changed after Armando, and yet her remark stung. “You don’t even want to know what changes I’m talking about? For all you know, I could plan on becoming even worse.”

She frowned. “That implies a judgment on who you are now.”

“What? As if you haven’t expressed your displeasure before? Trust me, you’ve made your opinion crystal clear over the years.”

She put her tea down and leaned forward, meeting his eyes. “You realize that wasn’t meant as criticism of you, right? I was concerned about you, and I still am. I don’t think you’re happy, not truly, and that worries me. As cheesy as it may sound, I want the best for you.”

“I know.” He rubbed his neck. “And you’re right. I’m not happy. I haven’t been happy in a long, long time.”

“So what are you going to do about it?”

“It’s not that easy, Chris. I’m forty-four. I’ve already made a hundred-and-eighty-degrees change once. I don’t think I can pull that off again.”

“Who says you have to? Maybe somewhere halfway between who you were and who you are now would be a good compromise.”

“You didn’t even like who I was back then.”

“That’s not true. I took issue with your arrogance and tendency for mansplaining, but you also had a lot of things I appreciated. Your spontaneity, your crazy exuberance, your dedication to your work, your capacity for joy. All that vanished after...”

“... after Armando,” he finished for her. “It’s okay. You can say his name.”

“That in itself is a change. Before now, you would’ve taken my head off if I so much as hinted at what had happened.”

She wasn’t wrong. For a long time, even hearing his name had been traumatic for Killian. Just thinking of him had brought such shame, such soul-deep embarrassment, that he hadn’t been able to deal with it.

“Maybe it’s time to let that trauma behind me and leave it in the past where it belongs.”

“Halle-fucking-lujah. About damn time. That asshole has taken up far too much of your time and energy already.”

“You never liked him, did you?”

She studied him. “No. Neither did Mom and Dad.”

“Why? I mean, in hindsight, it’s all easy to spot, but what did you guys see that I missed?”

“Wow, it’s been ten years, and you never asked me that question before.”

“Nine, and no, I didn’t. I wasn’t ready, but I am now. I need to know.”

“Okay.” She leaned back in her chair, a frown marring her brows. “It’s hard to put my finger on it, but I want to say he was trying too hard. He was too agreeable, if that makes sense. If you meet someone for the first time, it’s normal to discover you disagree on something, that there are things you don’t have in common. I don’t know, like taste in music or favorite movie or whatever. But he seemed to adapt to our tastes. He always knew a way to subtly confirm he shared our tastes.”

“He did?” Killian had no clue what she was referring to.

“When Dad said how much he loved opera, Armando mentioned going to the opera in Florence. When you and I argued about whether Die Hard is a Christmas movie, he joined in to say it was his favorite movie. And you know how much of a Dolly Parton fan Mom was, right? Armando gave her a signed CD he’d supposedly picked up in Dollywood. Does that man strike you as the type who would go to a country-themed amusement park in Tennessee?”

Killian snorted. “Hell, no. God, the thought of him going anywhere near something country is hilarious. He was a bit pretentious.”

“A bit? Honey, he was an arrogant, conceited snob who felt better than anyone else, only he was somehow able to fool you into thinking he wasn’t. He played you like a fiddle, making you believe he was who you wanted him to be.”

She wasn’t mincing words, but maybe it was time he stopped evading the subject and faced the hard truth once and for all. “I thought I had found my forever guy,” he said softly. “I thought he and I were on the same page, that we wanted the same things. And it turned out to be all a lie.”

“You saw no warning signs?”

“Not until it was too late.” He sighed, scratching his chin. “What you said about him always adapting to our tastes? I never noticed how fake that was until you pointed it out now. I thought it was proof of how compatible we were.”

“That was what he wanted you to think.”

“Yeah, I see that now. I wanted it to work so badly, and every negative signal I did pick up on, I chalked up to people being against us, to the fact that we couldn’t be together until he was no longer my client. What I still don’t understand is the why. Why did he do this? I would’ve taken his case and defended him to the best of my abilities regardless of whether we’d become friends...and more.”

Christine shook her head. “It wouldn’t have been the same. I watched you in the courtroom, remember? You were so brilliant and passionate, and even though I disliked Armando, I

believed every word coming out of your mouth. It was like you personally vouched for him, and I think that helped persuade the jury. I mean, if I'd been on the jury, I would've acquitted him."

Maybe that stung even more than the personal betrayal. "And yet he was guilty as fuck. On all charges."

"Yeah, but you didn't know, and besides, your job was to defend him. You did that well. It's not like you've never defended anyone who was guilty before."

He had. Plenty of times. But he'd usually known whether they were guilty, and that had made a difference. At least, that was what he'd told himself. Defending Armando had been so much more personal because he'd believed Armando had been innocent, that the case against him had been fabricated, a prime example of homophobia, which he'd proven during the trial. Armando had been acquitted. At least the verdict had been overturned on appeal.

He rubbed his eyes. God, he was tired. Not tired as in a lack of sleep but tired of all the emotions, the weight of recalling every little detail. "How do you let go? How do you teach yourself to release these bad memories?"

Christine's smile was as warm and understanding as his mom's had been, and he'd never been more grateful for how much she looked like her. "You're doing it now. Talk, process, allow yourself to feel them...and then maybe get angry, throw a few things, have a cry, and that's it. But that could be just me."

He groaned. "Crying? I have to cry now?"

"I'm not saying it's required, but I always feel better after a good crying fit. Perhaps throwing things works better for you?"

"Perhaps."

"What's really going on?" Christine's voice was soft and comforting, and that got to him.

"I've met someone, but I'm scared. Terrified."

“Of what?”

“Of getting my heart broken all over again. You know what Armando did to me, how he crushed me. I can’t go through that again.”

“Oh, honey...” She got up from her chair and sat down next to him. He sagged against her, closing his eyes as she held him. “I can understand why you’re scared. He hurt you deeply. But you can’t let him ruin the rest of your life as well. You deserve happiness, and you have so much to give still. Do you really want to spend the rest of your life alone?”

No, he didn’t. That truth hit him deep into his soul. If he pictured himself living the life he did now for the next forty-five years, he could barely breathe.

He let his head slide into his sister’s lap while she hugged him with so much love. It was time to let go. He’d held on to this pain, this shame, for long enough. There was nothing left to do but accept it. He couldn’t change the past, couldn’t turn back the clock.

And Lagan was different. He wasn’t Armando, and he hadn’t approached Killian with a nefarious ulterior motive. Hell, he hadn’t approached Killian at all. Their meeting had been a coincidence, and considering Killian had traveled with him to Chicago, he’d seen with his own eyes Lagan hadn’t lied about a single thing.

And lord knew Lagan was anything but agreeable and adaptive. Even the thought made Killian smile. Fuck, they argued over everything, including what color the sky was. His throat closed. How crazy that he thought of that as a fond memory, that he could recount all the times Lagan had argued with him and laugh about it.

And most of all, how utterly ridiculous that thinking of him made his heart ache and his chest tight...and the tears drip down his cheeks.

Dammit, maybe he *did* need a good cry.

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Lagan sat in the back of the class, sunk low in his seat as if he wanted to make himself invisible. He refused to make eye contact with Killian, instead satisfying his need to watch the man by peeking at him unobtrusively from underneath his lashes.

It had been two weeks since he had one of the best orgasms of his life. Fuck, the way Killian had told him what to do on the phone, the intensity in his eyes as he'd watched, the way he'd pleased himself... Lagan had jacked off to the memory every day since then. Funny how that encounter had been more erotic than most in-person sex he'd had.

Of course, it had done zero to get over his obsession with Killian. Why couldn't he stop thinking about the man? What was it about Killian that so got to him? It made no sense at all.

Sure, on the surface, Killian had some traits Lagan had always found attractive in guys: his age, his life experience, his smartness. They had similar interests. But that was true for so many men, so why was he so hung up on the one guy he couldn't have? Was it a case of wanting him because he couldn't? Did the whole forbidden aspect appeal to him so much on a deep, dark level that it fueled his desires?

As much as he wanted to attribute it to a severe case of almost teenage rebellion, he couldn't. His fascination with Killian couldn't be so easily explained away, not in terms of wanting him just because he couldn't have him. It was something more than that, much more, but what was it?

Surely, it wasn't just because Killian had shown him kindness when he had needed it most. He couldn't be so starved for attention that such a simple act of kindness was enough to get him hooked. That would be too sad for words.

He could confide in Nordin and ask him for his opinion. Hadley, who he had always been closest to, might be a more logical option, but ever since he'd found Sebastian, Hadley had permanent hearts in his eyes. Sweet, but it didn't make him the most objective person to ask advice from. Nordin was much more clearheaded and less driven by his emotions. And he'd already guessed what was going on.

Lagan should talk to him, tell him everything that had happened, and see what he thought. Nordin excelled at figuring out what motivated people. That made him so freakishly good at what he did. Lagan did feel honored that Nordin had at least confirmed he was a con artist. Lagan had suspected it for a long time, but he had never wanted to put his brother on the spot by asking him to confirm. Well, other than that one time he'd gotten upset with him, but that had been an unfortunate exception.

"Any questions?" Killian asked the class, looking around without glancing in Lagan's direction. Not that Lagan could blame him.

Morris raised his hand. "Professor Evans, is it true that you used to practice criminal law?"

Lagan sat up straight in his chair, unease fluttering in his stomach. What kind of question was that?

Killian seemed taken aback for a moment as well but then schooled his expression. "Yes, I did."

"Why did you switch to family law?"

The flutters grew to full-on pangs. Morris was up to something, but what?

"I'm not sure why this would be any of your business, but I needed a change. I'd been doing criminal law for a number of years by then, and it was time for something different."

Killian's tone made it clear he was done talking about it, but Morris either didn't take the hint or ignored it. "So it's not because you got fired from your previous job?"

The room grew deadly quiet. What did Morris know?

"Mr. Billick, I've reached the end of my patience with your impertinent questions."

Killian's tone was icy calm, but the tensing of his shoulders betrayed his underlying panic. Did the others pick up on it as well? Or did Lagan only because he knew him so much better? He held his breath.

"So you don't think we have a right to know that you got fired for sleeping with a client?"

Fuck. This had to be what Nordin had referred to. What had he said? That the situation wasn't what it seemed like and that Lagan should trust Killian.

Lagan jumped to his feet without a second thought. "What the hell do you think you're doing, Morris?"

Morris turned around and shot him a look of surprise. "I thought you, of all people, would be interested in knowing he's as much of a scumbag as you thought he was. He lied to the university, pretending to be an upstanding, experienced lawyer, when the truth is that he got fired in a huge scandal back in Boston. They crucified him."

Killian had gone as white as a sheet, his hands trembling as he placed them on his desk. "First of all, Mr. Billick, this is not a suitable topic to discuss in public, and I will once again ask you to refrain. Second, as a lawyer, you should know to verify your facts. What you're saying is factually untrue."

Morris snorted. "What? That you got fired from your firm in Boston for sleeping with a client or that you lied to the university?"

"Both, Mr. Billick, and this is the end of this discussion. Please remove yourself from this classroom, or I will call security."

Killian's voice was shaking, and Lagan had to ball his fists to prevent himself from running up to him and standing next to him. It had to be a lie, a misunderstanding. What Morris had accused him of couldn't be true. Killian would never sleep with a client.

Furious whispers traveled through the classroom, with several students looking at Lagan, who was still standing. Morris crossed his arms and remained seated.

"Morris, you need to leave." Lagan managed to keep his voice level. "I don't care what you discovered or think you unearthed, but this isn't a conversation you should have in class. If you have concerns about Professor Evans, you should raise them with the faculty, the dean, or the student adviser. Addressing them in front of your classmates is highly inappropriate."

"Highly inappropriate?" Morris scoffed. "That's rich coming from the guy who has been bitching about Evans's inappropriate behavior toward him from the start."

"I have never bitched about his behavior toward me. Where the hell did you get that from?"

"We all saw how he treated you. He hated you from day one, and he was always on your case. You know I'm right."

Lagan fought to stay calm. "Dude, there's a difference between acknowledging how he treated me and bitching about it. I never breathed a word about it to anyone else. What you saw, that's on you. But you can't state that I complained about something when I didn't, not to you or any other student."

Fiery red blotched Morris's cheeks. "I can't believe you're defending him. Why would you defend him? You hate him."

Lagan was holding on to his temper by a thread, but it was unraveling rapidly. "Whether I hate him is irrelevant. You still don't seem to get the message. You're trying to pull me into some dubious business, and it's not gonna work. I don't want you to speak to the professor that way, and I certainly didn't ask you to, nor do you have my implicit support or agreement. You're skating on dangerously thin ice here, and I'd be careful

if I were you. I hate to point it out, but Professor Evans is, after all, a lawyer, and you are not. If he is the experienced criminal lawyer you claim him to be, I'd be concerned about him pursuing legal action against you. Seems like he would have an open-and-shut case of libel unless you have cold, hard evidence to support your claims."

Dead silence.

"You know, Lagan, you really will make an excellent lawyer," Joel then said, slow-clapping him. Much to Lagan's surprise, others joined him. He might not have persuaded the whole class to turn against Morris, but he had more than half of the students in his corner.

Morris shoved his chair back, almost toppling it over, and grabbed his backpack. "I see how it is. All you guys need to do is one stupid Google search, and you'll know I'm right. I'll be reveling in your groveling apologies."

With a last dirty look at Killian, he stalked out the door.

"Well, that was distinctly unpleasant," Killian said, his voice wavering a little. "Mr. Foster, I owe you my thanks for defending me. I have to agree with Joel that you have all the makings of a superb lawyer. If you stand up for your clients with half the skill and passion you just showed, you'll be more than successful. Class dismissed."

Everyone filed out quietly, soft whispers mixing with shuffling feet. Lagan hung back, hoping to catch Killian, but for once, Killian didn't wait until everyone had left. He rushed out after the first students had left the classroom, not looking back.

"Oh my god, that was brutal," Joel said to Lagan.

"I know, right? What the hell got into him?" Lagan had to play this right, or everything would still crumble to dust.

"Do you have any clue what he was talking about?"

Lagan shook his head. "But I think a lot of us are about to hit Google in the next few minutes."

“Yeah, no kidding. And I meant what I said about your defense. It speaks to your character that you’d stand up for him after the way he treated you.”

Did Lagan imagine the scrutinizing look Joel shot him? He wasn’t sure, but he wouldn’t take any chances. “Thank you. He’s not all bad. When I got the news about my dad, he reacted pretty cool.”

“True. Anyway, I gotta run. See you next week.”

“You too.”

Lagan packed his stuff and headed out, turning the lights off as he left the room. In the hallway, Mr. Fox was sweeping the floor, with half an eye on the door as if he was waiting for him.

“What happened?” he asked, concern painted all over his wrinkly face. “Professor Evans ended the class much earlier than normal, and he seemed to be upset when he stormed past me.”

Lagan sighed. “One of the students was nasty to him. Real nasty. I don’t know what got into him, but it wasn’t pretty.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. He’s a good man.”

“Professor Evans?” Mr. Fox was defending him? Interesting.

“Yes, Killian.”

Why would he call him by his first name? That assumed they knew each other beyond the occasional run-in at school. “He’s a good professor.”

Mr. Fox smiled. “I’m sure he is, but that’s not what I said. I said he’s a good man, and you know I’m right.”

What was he hinting at? Oh my god. “You saw us.”

“Like I told Killian, I didn’t see anything if anybody asks me.”

The man’s loyalty humbled Lagan. “Thank you.”

Mr. Fox clicked his tongue. “You and the professor, you’re both thanking me for what I consider normal. You treat me with respect. I do the same to you. Now, please tell me you’re going after him.”

“Going after him? You mean now?”

Mr. Fox put a surprisingly strong hand on Lagan’s shoulder. “He needs you, son.”

Did he? Did Killian really need him? The thought sent a flare of burning warmth through him. Killian had been there for him when Lagan had needed him. Now he would do the same for him.

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Killian had no recollection of how he'd come home. He must've driven. He remembered walking up from the parking garage to his apartment, but he couldn't recall anything from the drive. Not something he wanted to spend time thinking about.

No, he'd much rather go over the whole confrontation in class over and over again in his head. What could he have done differently? What should he have said? He came up empty. All he knew was that Lagan had saved his ass. He'd been on the verge of losing it, and Lagan had stepped in and calmly confronted Morris with the facts. In hindsight, Killian was amazed he'd even possessed the wherewithal to thank Lagan for defending him.

But how the hell had Morris found out? It wasn't public knowledge, so he must've dug deeper than a simple Google search. Of course, now that the other students knew, they would look for all the gory details. His secret was out. Thank god he'd been honest with the university from the start. He'd presented them the facts, and they had hired him anyway.

And now he sat on the chair in front of the window, staring outside but, for once, not taking in the view. What would happen now? The university wouldn't fire him. Hell, they couldn't. He'd been honest with them and had the receipts to prove it. Besides, they'd never take the risk, not when they knew what he had done to his firm in Boston. But would he lose all credibility with the students? Would this story spread like wildfire and tarnish his reputation again?

He closed his eyes, bitterness rising in his throat. Nine years later and here he was in the same place. How could that one stupid mistake define him in such a way that he couldn't live his life in peace? Was it his fate to be punished forever for one error in judgment?

The ding-dong of the doorbell disrupted his thoughts. He frowned. Who could that be? With a sigh, he got up and walked to the video doorbell system, then stopped. It couldn't be, could it?

With a trembling finger, he pressed the button. The video appeared, and yes, there he was, looking straight into the camera. "Killian?"

He didn't even hesitate. "Come on up."

Two minutes later, the elevator doors opened, and Lagan stepped out. Killian leaned against the door frame. "Hey."

"Hey yourself."

Lagan stuck his hands into his pockets. He had his messenger bag slung over his shoulders, so he must've come straight here from the university. Come to think of it, how had he made the trip this quickly? He still didn't have a car, did he? "How did you get here so fast?"

Lagan shrugged. "I took an Uber."

"You shouldn't have."

A smile tugged at the corners of Lagan's lips. "Why don't you let me decide what I should or shouldn't do?"

Killian held up his hands in surrender. "Fair point."

"Can I come in?"

He stepped aside. "Of course."

"I wasn't sure if you wanted my company."

He always wanted his company, but he didn't say that. "I appreciate you checking in on me. Can I get you something to drink? Tea?"

"I'll take a mug of tea, please."

As Killian made his way to the kitchen, Lagan followed him. “How are you feeling?”

How was he feeling? That was a good question. He turned the kettle on, then leaned against the kitchen counter, facing Lagan. “Angry. Worried. Sad. It’s a mixed bag.”

“I can imagine. Morris was way out of line.”

“He was. It was inappropriate and rude.”

Lagan would ask him about the details now. He had to be curious about the truth, right?

“I was happy to see about half the class agreed he was in the wrong,” Lagan said instead.

Why wasn’t he asking for an explanation? “Your defense was brilliant, and I’m sure that contributed to the unexpected support I received. It’s not like I’m popular. But you’re not going to ask whether he was right?”

Lagan stepped closer, his green eyes meeting Killian’s straight on. “No matter what you did or didn’t do, a confrontation like that is never okay. Even if you had been the biggest scumbag of all, there’s a process that needs to be followed, and that does never include a dramatic confrontation in class. Also, I don’t need to know the details to be one hundred percent confident that you didn’t get fired for cause.”

“How would you know?” Killian managed, even though his throat was tight.

“Because I *know* you. A man who refuses a fling with me, even though I’m far past the age of consent and more than willing, just because I’m his student is not a man who would ever get fired for sleeping with a client.”

Killian reeled back. “You have that much faith in me?”

“I guess I do.”

“What if the whole reason I don’t want to sleep with you is that I refuse to make the same mistake twice?”

Lagan shrugged. “If that were the case, you must’ve had a good reason. Maybe you were in love with this client. I don’t

know. But you'd never risk it all for some seedy affair."

How did this man have such trust in him? It was mind-blowing. Other than his parents and sister and two very close friends, no one had believed in his innocence. Sure, some had told him they did, but he'd seen the truth in their eyes or their behavior. Others had been crystal clear that they were enjoying his fall from grace. And how could he blame them when once upon a time, he might've felt the same way about someone else getting his ego checked?

"And if I want to talk about it?"

"Then I'll listen without judgment until I have all the facts."

The kettle switched off, indicating that the water was at boiling temperature, but Killian ignored it. "I'm afraid you'll never look at me the same way again once you know the whole truth."

"No one is perfect, Killian. Trust me, I haven't put you up on some pedestal, thinking you're without faults. I used to hate you, remember? I can find plenty of things to dislike if I wanted to."

Despite everything, Killian laughed. "Thank you, I guess?"

"Make the tea, and then you can decide how much you want to share."

Lagan turned around and walked into the living room. Killian poured himself a mug as well and put a few different flavors on a little dish. Lagan had found a seat on the couch and now patted it. "Why don't you come sit down next to me? I don't know what's coming, but I can tell it won't be easy for you."

Killian shook his head as he put the tea down on the coffee table in front of Lagan, then placed his own mug right next to it. "Sometimes I wonder how I got you so wrong. I made the mistake of judging you by one interaction and never giving you a chance to show me who you really were."

He sat next to Lagan, and when Lagan took his hand, he didn't protest. "I thought we'd decided to leave that in the

past.”

Killian clung to his hand, taking a deep breath. Here went nothing. “I worked for one of the most prestigious law firms in Boston. The environment was high paced, competitive, cutthroat even. I loved it. I adopted their culture, and in return, they embraced me. I was unapologetically ambitious, and they rewarded me for it. I started at the bottom, of course, but the promise of a fast career was implied. All I had to do was work hard and shine.”

“It sounded like you were offered an incredible opportunity.”

Killian nodded. “I was. And god, I did shine. I worked sixty, seventy hours a week, sometimes even more. Seven days a week, never taking time off other than to hang out with other lawyers or hook up. Sex had always been my way of relaxing, my outlet for my energy, and I scored easily. I was young, successful, had money, and the fact that I didn’t look bad worked in my favor as well. It sounds arrogant to say men were lining up for me, but they were, in a manner of speaking.”

Lagan chuckled. “I’d imagine they still are. Like Christopher Meloni, you’re one of those men who gets more attractive with age.”

Killian smiled at the memory. “Without the bald head, that is.”

“Thank god. I’m rather fond of your hair.”

Funny how such a casual remark could mean so much to him, warming him up on the inside in a way nothing else could.

Lagan squeezed his hand. “But anyway, you were talking about hooking up.”

“This was the life I’d dreamed of, and I loved every second of it. When my family started expressing some concerns about my lifestyle, I chalked it up to indirect homophobia, even though they’d never given me any signs of being less than completely accepting of my sexuality.”

“You got lucky there.”

“I did, in more ways than one.” He took a deep breath. “By then, I’d moved up the ladder from associate to senior associate and then to nonequity partner. It was the fastest career anyone had ever seen in the firm, and I was making money like you wouldn’t believe. I was promised full-equity partnership within four years, provided I’d continue my success. And then I met Armando.”

Nine years later and he still struggled to talk about it. Where did he even start? “Armando approached me with the request to defend him in a trial. Even now, I can’t tell you everything because of attorney-client privilege, but he was charged with drug trafficking. Possession of fentanyl with the intent to distribute. I’d done similar cases and had been successful, so I was interested in taking his case.”

He hesitated, then took out his phone. With a few swipes, he pulled up the one picture of Armando he had kept, maybe in some sort of masochistic punishment. Not that he looked at it often, but every time he did, shame assaulted him all over again.

“That’s him?” Lagan asked.

“Yeah.”

“He’s hot.”

“He is. Or I should say, he was. I haven’t seen him in nine years, and he’d been in prison for eight of those, so I have no idea what he looks like now.”

He could remember the first time he’d seen him clear as day, though. The way Armando had swaggered into his office, dressed in a Tom Ford suit, a gold Rolex on his wrist, exuding money. Due to his Mediterranean heritage, his skin had been a beautiful golden, his hair dark and wavy, and his eyes hazel. He’d possessed the body Killian had gone for: slender, small, sensual. And god, he had known how to use it.

“Anyway, Armando presented his case in a way that made it sound like the cops had been out to get him because of him being gay, and considering my previous experiences with the

Boston Police Department, I didn't think that impossible. Some older cops especially are conservative and known to be homophobic. After exiting a club, he'd gotten pulled over, and they searched his car, claiming that they had witnessed him dealing drugs."

"Did he consent to the search?" Lagan asked.

Killian smiled. "You're already thinking like a lawyer. No, he didn't, and we had that on body camera footage from the officer who arrested him. The problem was that when searching his car, they did find drugs. Fentanyl. Armando claimed it had been planted, even during his arrest, and the footage of the body cam was ambivalent enough that it could've been possible. Because they'd seen him deal drugs, they charged him with possession with the intent to distribute, a.k.a. drug trafficking. He was released on bail, and that's when he contacted me to defend him."

"If they charged him with drug trafficking, they must've had more evidence than the drugs in his car. I can't imagine the DA pressing charges on that without more."

"They did have more. But let me back up a step. I had already decided to take his case. It seemed like a quick and easy win, based on the first facts. But Armando... He started coming on to me. Not in an obvious way, at first, and that was why I didn't recognize his behavior as intentional. He subtly communicated attraction, and I was flattered. We spent time together, preparing for his trial. More time than I should have. I usually would've delegated a lot of it to my assistant or one of the paralegals, but I insisted on meeting with him myself. And every time we hung out, we grew closer. I discovered we had a lot in common, or so I thought. The short and simple of it is that he played me, knew what to say and do to get to me. It sounds hard to believe someone like me would fall for his tricks, but I did. Maybe because after all these hookups and my fast-paced life, deep down, I was ready for something more. I wanted that connection with someone, and he gave me what I'd been craving without even realizing it. We became friends, started spending time together outside of office meetings, and slowly but surely, I fell in love with him."

“Oh, Killian,” Lagan said, his voice emotional. “I’m so sorry.”

“You don’t even know what happened next.”

“No, but the fact that he deceived you like that is enough to make me feel sorry for you. Nobody deserves to be lied to like that. That’s playing with someone’s emotions, and to me, that’s about as low as you can go.”

He’d been so scared of Lagan’s reaction, and here he was, not even knowing the full truth yet, and he’d already made it clear where he stood. “Thank you. I can’t tell you how much you understanding means to me.”

“What happened next?”

“Armando pushed for more, claiming he was as much in love with me as I was with him. But I resisted, knowing that sleeping with a client could not only cost me my job but might also get me disbarred. In hindsight, I still don’t know how I clung to that principle, but I did. We exchanged hundreds of texts, thousands of them, and the pattern was clear. He was pressing me into more, and I was resisting him, telling him we’d have to wait until after the trial. He never gave up, not even when the trial had already started. In hindsight, I’d gotten a little uncomfortable with it, but I refused to admit it to myself. After all, how could this man who claimed to love me and who I was in love with be anything but perfect?”

He buried his face in his hands for a moment, dreading the next part, then raised his head again. “During the trial, the DA presented more evidence that proved Armando had been distributing drugs, and not only that, but that he had others working for him. In his home, they’d also found a gun he had no license for. They used that to add possession of a weapon to the charges. All in all, he was looking at a minimum of seven years in prison, also because he had a prior for possession of drugs. He claimed that had been a minor transgression, back when he’d been young and stupid, and, of course, I believed him. It’s amazing how you can rationalize facts away when you want to believe somebody.”

“You were in love. That’s what people who love somebody do. They want to believe the best.”

“I should’ve known better. Anyway, that trial was one of my finest moments in terms of legal successes, if I do say so myself. I got the evidence from the search of his vehicle thrown out by claiming they didn’t have probable cause. The cops had said they had witnessed him dealing drugs in the club, but their stories didn’t line up on some crucial details, and I caused doubt whether it had been him they had seen. I suggested their allegations had been fueled by homophobia, and my luck was that two cops made some stupid statements on the stand that seemed to prove that. The judge agreed with me, and all that evidence got thrown out. That caused a whole chain reaction because the search of the car had been the basis of many of the other charges. Suddenly, Armando’s claim that the drugs had been planted didn’t sound so farfetched anymore. He testified under oath the gun was for personal use, and even when he was cross-examined, he stuck to that story. In cross-examination, he also mentioned he was promised leniency in exchange for substantial assistance, which would’ve led to a reduction of his sentence, but he refused because he was innocent. They’d offered him a plea deal before, which he had also refused. All in all, we managed to put enough doubts in the minds of the jury to get him acquitted on all charges. I was elated, ready to celebrate with Armando. Finally, we could be together, right? God, I was so stupid.”

Lagan didn’t say anything, just squeezed his hand again.

“The day after the trial, when we met up for dinner and what was supposed to be our first real night together, he told me I had served my purpose and we were done. I didn’t understand him at first, thought he was breaking up with me, and so he explained everything he’d said and done had all been a lie. He flat out admitted he’d played me, seduced me so I would take on his case. I was...shattered. Heartbroken but also humiliated to my core. My only consolation was that nobody, other than my family, knew Armando had been more than my client. I had introduced him to my parents and sister, though I’d told them he was just a friend. They saw right through me, of course, but again, in the end, that saved me.”

He had to swallow away the bitterness that had risen in his throat. “Armando hadn’t paid the final bill, which was a substantial amount. I told him he’d still have to settle it, and he refused. When I made it clear I had no choice but to let our collections agency pursue it, he threatened to tell my boss about our affair. Knowing he didn’t have any evidence of an actual affair, I called his bluff. Well, he called mine. He went to my boss, presented him with some sob story about me forcing him to do sexual favors for me in exchange for his defense, and he showed heavily redacted and edited texts and pictures as proof. My boss fired me on the spot.”

He held his breath. What would Lagan say now?

“What? After all that time in your stellar performance, he fired you just like that? He didn’t even give you an opportunity to defend yourself?”

God, he could’ve kissed him for that reaction. “He was so concerned for the reputation of the firm that he reported me to the State Bar, suggesting that they should disbar me.”

“What an asshole. I can’t believe they treated you like that after everything you did for them.”

“It’s a cutthroat world. As soon as you lose your usefulness, they get rid of you.”

“Please tell me you didn’t take it on the chin just like that.”

“At first, I did. Rumors started to spread, and I was mortified. I lost my friends, none of my coworkers wanted to talk to me, and I had become persona non grata in the legal community. The whole situation had destroyed my reputation. And I was so shocked, so crushed by it all, that I didn’t do anything. Until my father gave me a stern talking to and said I should sue the bastards. And so I did.”

“Oh my god, you sued your own firm?”

Killian nodded. “I did, for wrongful termination, and we threw in emotional suffering. I had the evidence to back up my claim. Not only had I not slept with Armando, but I could also prove all the allegations of sexual misconduct were fabricated. The firm turned down our offer to settle, maybe out of a sense

of pride and refusal to admit they'd gotten it wrong or because they thought I'd never let it get that far. It was excruciatingly humiliating to see everything play out in the open during the trial. Former friends of mine, lawyers I had worked with, and people from the legal community attended the trial, and some of them reveled in my downfall."

"Did you defend yourself?"

"I'll admit I was tempted to, but again, my father advised me not to. He said I needed an objective third party, and he was right. One of his best friends took on the case, and he did the best job he could ever have done. Calm, cool, convincing the jury with his expertise and seniority, he took apart their supposed evidence one step at a time. By the time he had finished his closing argument, everyone knew it was a shoo-in. The jury didn't need even an hour for the deliberation and decided in my favor. I was awarded a large settlement, mostly for punitive damages. The jury understood my reputation had taken a big hit and that I might not recover from it. That's when I decided to move to Seattle and start over. I bought this condo with the money, and I have enough in the bank to live the rest of my life very comfortably without working another day if I don't want to."

If he'd known he would feel this light after telling his story, he would've done it ages ago. Sweet relief filled him, and with it, once again, came tears. Only this time, he had Lagan holding him, and what a difference that made.

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It all made sense now, the puzzle pieces falling into place in Lagan's head. Killian's heart had been stamped on. No wonder he had pulled up walls, trying to prevent himself from getting hurt again.

"Come here," he said softly, opening his arms.

Killian hesitated a moment, but then he crawled into Lagan's arms, the tears streaming down his face. What a disconcerting sight to see this proud, confident man crumble, so stunningly vulnerable, as he showed his true self to Lagan. He wrapped him tightly in his embrace and buried his face into Killian's hair.

"None of this was your fault," he whispered right next to his ear. "You fell for him, but you still held on to your ethics. That's admirable, and in the end, that's what saved you."

God, poor Killian. This Armando had to be a coldhearted bastard to be able to pull this off. Lagan couldn't imagine anyone playing someone like that, building lie upon lie and watching them believe it, knowing you were about to pull the rug from under them. How could the guy live with himself?

"I feel so much better now that I've told you," Killian said hoarsely. "Like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders."

"Were you concerned I wouldn't believe you?"

Killian leaned back, his blue eyes wet with tears. "I was afraid you would never look at me the same way again, that I'd lose your respect."

Lagan kissed his forehead. “You haven’t. In fact, I only gained more respect for you. You did the right thing, going after your firm.”

“Not according to many others. I burned a lot of bridges by suing them, especially in the legal community in Boston. Nobody would’ve hired me after that if I hadn’t moved.”

“I know it sounds like a cliché, but that says a thousand times more about them than it does about you. You did nothing wrong, and they should’ve seen that.”

Holding Killian felt surprisingly good. Knowing he was a comfort to him, that he could give back some of what Killian had provided him, filled him with gratitude. At least, he supposed that was what those warm and fuzzy feelings inside him were. Happiness and gratitude, mixed with excitement to touch Killian again, to be close to him. He’d missed him so badly.

“So in the timeline, where did meeting me in that club fit in?”

“The trial was over, and he’d already told me everything had been a lie. I was in the process of trying to get him to pay his legal bills. That Monday, I told our collection department to go after him. Tuesday, he went to my boss with the false allegations, and everything came crashing down.”

Lagan winced. “No wonder my rejection hit you so hard. That was the worst timing ever.”

Killian let out a deep sigh and wiped away his tears in an adorable fashion. “It was, and you could’ve been nicer about it, but I wouldn’t have taken it so hard if not for everything else.”

“Still, I can’t tell you how sorry I am for hurting you like that. I never meant to.”

“I know. I clung to that pain and humiliation for too long, almost basking in it. That wasn’t healthy. I’m relieved to put that behind me too.”

Killian snuggled closer to Lagan, and it brought a smile to Lagan’s face. Apparently, the man liked to be held. Lagan

knew the feeling.

Killian was quiet for a long time, but then he said, “I don’t know what’s going to happen now. If Morris tells everyone what he found, my position at the university may become untenable. Technically, I did nothing wrong, but my reputation will get a serious blow, and I’m not sure it’ll recover from it.”

“Would it really be so bad if you had to resign?” The words were out before Lagan could think better of them.

Killian lifted his head and met Lagan’s eyes. “What do you mean?”

“You don’t love your job. Now that you’ve told your story, I can understand better why you took it, but you don’t love it. Family law isn’t your passion, and neither is teaching. If you have the money, why not do something you’re truly excited about?”

Killian stared at him as if he had suggested jumping out of a plane without a parachute. Had Lagan been too honest? Was Killian not ready yet to hear this? Maybe his timing wasn’t ideal, presenting Killian with this choice after what he had shared. Well, he couldn’t take the words back.

Killian’s body relaxed again, and he let his head fall back against Lagan’s chest. “Armando changed me. I was never the same again after him.”

A bit of a strange segue, but Killian must have a point with it, so Lagan hummed but otherwise kept quiet.

“When I told you in Chicago I wasn’t always such a control freak, you said it was a common reaction to a life-changing event. Well, that was my response to what happened with Armando. Before that, I was much more spontaneous and, as my sister pointed out recently, had more capacity for joy. I might’ve lived life in the fast lane, but I was enjoying myself more too. After moving to Seattle, I rebuilt my life, one routine at a time. I got scared that if I was spontaneous, I’d follow my heart and end up in a similar situation, so I did everything I could to prevent that.”

That made complete sense, but holy cow, how sad was that. For nine years, Killian had lived in fear of making a similar mistake when the first one hadn't even been his fault in the first place. "That morning, after I fell asleep on your couch, you mentioned something about me hitting a nerve with a remark about you getting up early. Does that fit into what you're describing?"

"I was used to getting up ridiculously early. Back in Boston, my days were packed, so I always got up at five, and I was in bed before midnight. Sleep was more of a luxury than a necessity. Not healthy, I know. But after moving here, I held on to that rhythm, thinking it would help me find a sense of normalcy. That never happened, but the routine stuck, and now I can't sleep in anymore, even if I wanted to."

He was lonely. Why had Lagan never realized before Killian was lonely? He had closed himself off from everything and everyone out of fear, and as a consequence, he had lost that necessary human connection. "I can see that. I also understand now why you use sex workers rather than hook up."

Killian was quiet for a long time. "Yeah, though it's lost all its appeal now. I was too scared to get my heart broken again."

In Chicago, Killian had mentioned that in his good-bye speech. Lagan saw those words in a whole different light now. "You said I had power over you and the ability to crush you."

Killian's body tensed, but he stayed where he was. "You do. Somehow, you got through my defenses, formidable as I thought they were."

They were standing on an edge, and they had a decision to make about which step to take. Both of them. Forward or back? Could he consider a future with Killian in it? What did he want? For the first time, Lagan dared to ask himself that question. What did he truly want?

God, that was a scary idea to contemplate. For so long, he'd focused on what he needed to do to get to the next phase. Get a bachelor's degree so he could go to law school and ultimately become a lawyer. Hold on to his job as a paralegal

so he could pay his bills. His whole life was one big routine as well, checking off one requirement after the other so he could get where he wanted to be. But was that what life was about?

“You and I are not that different,” he said. “My life is built on routines as well. For different reasons maybe, since I don’t think I did it to avoid getting hurt. In my case, it’s more about always preparing for the next step, thinking that once I reach that, I’ll be happy. That I’ll be able to finally live rather than exist. Except I’m twenty-nine, and I feel like I’m still going through the motions, grinding, surviving rather than thriving.”

Killian untangled himself from Lagan’s arms and pushed himself up into a sitting position. “Considering your background, I can understand that.”

“So can I, and I don’t even have a degree in psychology. But I’m tired of it, Killian. This can’t be what life is about. There has to be more than this.”

“There is. My life before Armando wasn’t perfect, and I regret some of the choices I made back then, but I was full of life. Then Armando happened, and something inside me died. And for the last nine years, I’ve been walking around like a zombie, alive but dead inside.”

Lagan let out a dry chuckle. “That’s a pretty apt description of how I feel as well. I have my brothers, and they’re the joy in and of my life, but other than that, I’m rather pathetic.”

“You’re too young for that, Lagan. I know I have no right to talk, but I want more for you. In fact...”

When he stayed silent, Lagan quirked an eyebrow. “In fact what?”

“You’re the one who woke me up. Meeting you and spending time with you reminded me of what I’m capable of feeling. For nine years, I was numb, dead, but you made me feel alive again.”

His voice broke near the end, and Lagan’s throat tightened. “That’s... I think that’s the most beautiful thing anyone has ever said about me.”

Killian took his hand and laced their fingers together. “I mean it. I’ll always be grateful for that.”

“You’re saying that as if this is good-bye.”

“Lagan...” Killian hesitated. “You’re twenty-nine. You have your whole life ahead of you. I’m in a different phase. Even if I’ve slowly come to realize I’m ready to risk my heart again, I don’t know if I would be the man you need.”

This was it. Lagan had to make a choice now. After what Killian had shared, how vulnerable he’d been about his fears that Lagan would break him, he had to decide. Was what he felt for Killian enough to take the risk and jump in with both feet? If he did, he couldn’t walk away again easily. He’d bear responsibility for how that would affect Killian. So was the connection they had enough?

“Remember what you told me in Chicago? That you thought I wanted something more than hookups?”

Killian nodded.

“You were right. I do. I didn’t realize it until you pointed it out, but I do. I just didn’t allow myself to feel that way because I had no idea how to fit it into my life. How could I make the time for a relationship when I barely had time to sleep?”

“What are you saying?”

Lagan swallowed, then raised his chin, the decision suddenly crystal clear. “I’m saying we want the same thing, Killian. I’m done with playing the field and hooking up. I’m done with going through the motions and slugging through life in an endless fight. I’m done with feeling numb, or as you put it, like a zombie. I’m done.”

“What do you want?” Killian asked in a breathless whisper.

“You.”

“Lagan, I...”

“We have something, something special. You make me feel things I’ve never felt before. You make me want things

I've never wanted before. You *changed* me, but in the best way, and I want more. I want you."

Killian's eyes darkened. "You're sure?"

"I've never been more sure of anything in my life. I can't promise I won't hurt you, but it'll never be on purpose. I won't lie to you, and I'll never play you. You have my word on that."

Killian cupped his cheek. "I know that."

"Then trust me and take the jump with me. You won't regret it."

He held his breath for one, two seconds, but then Killian moved in and kissed him. "Yes," he whispered against his lips. "Yes, yes, yes."

He pushed Lagan backward, and they stretched out on the couch, their lips meeting in a frantic, almost desperate kiss. His tongue found Killian's in a messy tangle that lacked coordination and finesse but more than made up for it in passion. Lips bruised, teeth clanked, and a chorus of growls and sighs, wet gasps and slick sucking filled the room.

Between passionate, heady kisses, Killian peeled him out of his clothes with so much ease Lagan hardly even noticed. He sure as fuck realized when he was naked, though, the bare-on-bare skin contact sending a flare of heat through him. Killian had undressed as well.

He unashamedly rubbed himself against Killian, reveling in the sexy growl Killian let out. "I want you to fuck me," Lagan moaned.

He knew how seriously Killian took consent, so he might as well be ahead of him and express his wishes, right?

"Yes." Killian's answer came between deep kisses that left Lagan lightheaded. "I'll fuck you so good and deep you'll feel me for days."

"Promises, promises."

Laughing, Killian flipped him onto his back and settled between his legs. "I've waited nine years for this. We're gonna do this my way."

“Always so bossy...”

“You like me bossy.”

Lagan’s insides went all soft. “I do.”

“So maybe let me take the lead here, hmm?”

“Just this once.”

Killian was still chuckling when he kissed him again, and Lagan had never known he could laugh and kiss at the same time, that sex could be this much fun. Killian’s warm fingers curled around his neck, pulling him in closer, and he went willingly. His taste was familiar by now, and yet he wasn’t done exploring him. Their tongues rubbed against each other, sliding and dancing, and desire rushed through Lagan.

“Killian,” he pleaded.

Killian’s answer was to keep kissing him and wrestle his hands around Lagan’s ass to flip both of them so Lagan lay on top. Oh, he liked this. He rutted against Killian. Killian put both hands on Lagan’s ass cheeks and boldly squeezed them. Fuck yes. Finally, they were moving in the right direction.

Lagan spread his legs and canted his hips, and Killian’s hard cock slid between his legs, bumping against his hole. His dry, aching hole, which craved Killian’s cock. “Yes, that’s more like it.”

When he tried to sit up, Killian stopped him. “I’m not taking you on the couch.”

How Killian managed to sound so goddamn proper in a moment like this was a miracle, but he did. “You’re not fucking me at all so far, so what’s the problem?”

That earned him a sharp slap on his ass, and he laughed. “You into spanking now?”

“I have never been, but I swear to god that if you don’t get off the couch and into my bedroom within the next five seconds, I’ll turn your ass a bright red. Move.”

“Aw, because you asked so nicely.”

He rolled off him just in time to escape a second SWAT, and he stumbled away from Killian, giggling. “You’re too slow, counselor.”

“I’ll show you slow,” Killian said and, with surprising speed, chased Lagan into the bedroom, where they fell onto the perfectly made bed.

His bedroom was spacious, with dark blue black-out curtains, a California King box spring, and two elegant mahogany night tables. In the corner, a reading chair in the same dark blue stood next to a small mahogany table. The effect was almost that of a hotel room. An expensive, characterless hotel room. “We need to talk about your taste in decorating.”

Killian quirked an eyebrow. “Now?”

Lagan reconsidered. “It can wait.”

“I would hope so.”

“Well, at your age, multitasking can become a challenge.”

“You’re such a brat.” Killian moved in and settled between Lagan’s legs.

“You like me bratty.”

Killian looked up, his eyes soft. “That, I do.”

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Lagan always looked beautiful, but now he was utterly gorgeous. Killian loved seeing him all messy and well kissed. Puffed-up, red lips, splotches on his cheeks, and his eyes a tad glassy and lowered to half-mast. The hunger in his gaze was unmistakable, and as if to drive that message home, he licked his lips as he watched Killian. Impatience was sexy. Irresistible.

Killian opened the nightstand drawer and took out lube and condoms. He stared at them. Should he...? He'd never done it without, with one exception, a quickie in a club fifteen years prior when he'd forgotten to put one on. The weeks he'd waited for the all clear had been excruciating, and ever since, he'd never gone without.

“Killian?”

He took a deep breath and faced him. “I have condoms, and I’ll use them if you want, but... I haven’t had sex since a few weeks before Chicago, and I get tested monthly. If you’re good too, we could... If we agreed to be exclusive?”

He was stuttering and fumbling his way through this, but in his defense, he’d never been in this position. He’d never even considered it. Even with Armando, when he’d pictured their first time, it had never even been a consideration to go bare.

Lagan pushed himself up, their faces inches apart. “As far as I’m concerned, we *are* exclusive. I’m in this for real.”

The sense of relief was almost overwhelming. “So am I.”

“But I haven’t been tested since I last had sex, so for now, we’ll need them. I’ll take care of that ASAP. I promise.”

Killian nodded. “I’d love that.”

“Me too. I’ve never gone bare.”

Oh, he loved that he got to share this with Lagan, something neither of them had experienced before. Hopefully, it would be one of many firsts they’d get to do together.

After another quick kiss, Lagan fell backward again, and Killian settled between his legs. Jesus, how long had it been since he’d been in this position? Once again, nine years. Almost ten. The sex workers had always come prepped, which had made for easy, if somewhat clinical sex, but now he had to do the prep, and he was lost. How did he get started? He felt like a virgin all over again.

“I’m out of practice on this bit,” he confessed. “It’s been a while since I had to do this.”

Lagan pushed himself up on his elbows. “Want me to do it myself? I can. No problem.”

Killian shook his head. “No, I’m good. I’ve just forgotten where to start.”

Lagan’s smile was sweet. “Just touch me. It’ll come back to you.”

Killian slid his hand up Lagan’s thigh, so smooth and tight, trembling a little under his touch. Then the other side. His cock lay weeping on his stomach, the head dark red with excitement. His balls were firm, perfect orbs against his body, and Killian weighed them in his hand, admiring the silky texture.

And it all came back to him, and he stopped thinking about it. He squeezed some lube onto the fingers of his right hand and tapped Lagan’s hole. Lagan chuckled. “Jackpot,” he teased.

“Shut up,” Killian said mildly, but he couldn’t help the grin that spread across his face.

He massaged the rim with his slick fingers, then pushed his middle finger into Lagan, who let him in with ease. He carefully pressed deeper, but Lagan had done this often enough to help his body along, and it didn't take long for Killian to be able to add his index finger.

“Ah, yes.” Lagan sighed happily and moved his hips, sinking down on Killian's fingers. He curved them on instinct. Lagan froze, then shuddered. “Right there.”

He opened him steadily, Lagan helping him, moaning every time Killian brushed his happy spot. Sweat had broken out over Lagan's body, and he shifted restlessly now. “Enough. Killian, please. I need you.”

Those words had the effect of flipping a switch inside Killian. Lagan needed him. He pulled out his fingers and opened the packet, then rolled the condom on. It settled with a soft snap. At least that was something he still knew how to do.

He lowered himself on top of Lagan, taking the time to kiss him again first. How could he not when those lips looked so delectable? Their mouths stayed connected as he held his cock with one hand and pressed the thick mushroom head against Lagan's entrance. He slid inside him without resistance, sinking in with steady, circling thrusts until he bottomed out.

Their panted breaths mixed, their eyes finding each other. “Finally,” Lagan whispered. “Fuck, it's like coming home.”

The weight of that statement didn't escape Killian, but he couldn't think about that now. He'd fucking lose it, and he was already fragile as glass. He needed to focus on what they were doing, or he'd be lost. “You feel so fucking good.”

“You're big.”

Killian preened. What man wouldn't after such a compliment? “And I know how to use it too.”

“And so modest.”

He snorted. “Modesty is for beginners.”

“Better put your dick where your mouth is, then.”

Wait, what?

Lagan laughed. “That sounded more logical in my head. I meant—”

“Stop topping from the bottom. I’ll take it from here, thanks.”

Killian retreated, then thrust back in, and Lagan’s breath whooshed out of his lungs. After three careful movements, Killian had found the right angle. He grabbed Lagan’s hips and set a steady rhythm of deep strokes. His lips found Lagan’s neck, and he sucked, first softly but then harder. The crazy urge to mark him was a new one, but he gave in to it. He needed to feel him, to know Lagan was his. He’d waited so long for him. Half his life, it seemed, though it hadn’t been quite that long.

But god, the experience of being with Lagan, of being inside him, was everything he had imagined. His ass was tight as hell, so snug around his cock, and the pressure was insane. But what made it so special was how Lagan looked up at him with those hooded eyes. So full of want, of trust, of...

No, he was going too fast. That couldn’t be the case yet. They had a connection, but they weren’t ready yet for more. He couldn’t push or force this. If he did, he risked losing Lagan forever.

He kept up the brutal rhythm, the muscles in his ass and hips protesting, burning, but he was unwilling to change position. He ignored the pain, and the pleasure that spread out from the base of his spine throughout his body more than made up for it.

Lagan held out his hand in front of Killian’s. “Spit.”

He did it without thinking. And again. Lagan brought his hand to his cock and took himself in his hand. Damn, that was hot. He was jacking himself off with Killian’s spit as lube.

Lagan held pace with Killian’s strokes, and the effect was mesmerizing. The pressure inside Killian built steadily, his balls pulling up, his muscles tensing, his whole body preparing to fly. The corners of his vision closed in, and his breath came

out in pants, chugging from his lungs. His skin felt too tight, too hot, itching with the sensations flooding his body.

He rose, unable to do anything but snap his hips and drive into Lagan again and again as the pressure became unbearable. But Lagan was right there with him, his cheeks flushed and his eyes dark and glassy, an endless litany of moans and whimpers falling from his lips. “So good... Jesus, yes, like that... OhgodIloveyourcock...”

His hand sped up, and Killian watched in rapt attention as Lagan brought himself off, his body tensing as he spewed his load all over his hand, moaning without inhibition. “Fuuuuuuck... Fuck, yes, that was good.”

Killian gave him a few seconds to recover, then bent his head and thrust into him hard. His vision tunneled even more, and his head buzzed as something inside him broke free. For years and years, he'd held himself back, had locked this part of himself away, but with Lagan, he could be himself.

“You're beautiful like this,” Lagan whispered as he encouraged Killian with his eyes, his body, with everything. “Show me how much pleasure this brings you.”

Killian snarled, straight up snarled, and he threw his head back and grunted, his whole body convulsing in pleasure as his cock pumped out his release into the condom. For a few seconds, his body was so tense he couldn't even breathe, but then he sucked in a raspy breath, and his cock jerked again.

He went boneless and had to prevent himself from dropping his dead weight on top of Lagan. Moving cost effort, but he forced himself to hold on to the condom and pull out. Lagan whimpered in protest. “I hate that feeling.”

“I know. Let me get something to clean us up. I'll be right back.”

His body was heavy as he moved, the bone-deep satisfaction of an orgasm that had wrung him out. He wetted a washcloth with hot water and cleaned himself first, then hung it over the edge of the bathtub and got a fresh one for Lagan. He lay as Killian had left him, his cheeks rosy and his eyes

drifting shut. Killian smiled as he cleaned him, including his hands. After hanging out that washcloth as well, he walked back into the bedroom.

“Let’s get under the covers so we don’t get cold,” he whispered.

Lagan obediently moved, though he made a minimal effort, and Killian snuck under the covers and pulled him close. With a deep sigh, Lagan settled his head on Killian’s shoulder.

A shock tore through him. This, too, was new. He’d never held anyone like that after sex. All his sexual experiences pre-Armando had been quickies, often in bathrooms, hotel rooms, a stranger’s bedroom. He’d rarely brought someone home, and if he had, they’d always left right after. Or he’d made them leave.

But now he was in bed, holding Lagan in his arms, and his heart was at peace. He wasn’t sure what the future would bring after this, but he was okay with it. Lagan let out a soft sigh, and his body went lax. Killian lay unmoving for a few minutes, focusing on the sensation of the sleeping man in his arms, the soft rise and fall of his chest, the little smacking sounds Lagan made. A miracle. It was nothing short of a miracle.

He’d fought this for so long, but it was useless. Their connection was too strong, too real. And now that Lagan felt it too, that he’d admitted he couldn’t stop thinking about Killian either, that he wanted to take the jump with him and see where they’d end up... Everything had changed.

Oh, the fear was still there, simmering deep inside him, make no mistake. Killian was certain that if he allowed it to rear its ugly head, it would make him second-guess everything, but he wouldn’t let it.

He’d thought that sticking to routines, preventing himself from doing anything spontaneous, keeping himself closed off would keep his heart safe. In the end, all it had brought was loneliness. And he hadn’t even realized how numb he’d become until Lagan had made him feel all the things again. He

was a different man with him, much more like the old Killian, Killian 1.0—though sans the cocky arrogance, hopefully.

Being with Lagan would change things, maybe change his whole life, but the weird thing was that it didn't scare him nearly as much as he thought it would. Even the concept of losing his job had lost its power to devastate him. This mattered more than anything else, and if there was a price to be paid, well, then he would hold his head high and pay it. Lagan would be worth it. He was worth everything.

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The next morning, his body pleasantly sore from Killian's cock, Lagan did something he'd never done before. He called in sick. Truth be told, he was exhausted, which wasn't all that strange, considering how many hours he'd put in that week already, but in any other case, he would still have shown up. But waking up in Killian's bed, in Killian's arms? That had been too special to cut short.

Killian ordered breakfast—who knew you could have breakfast delivered to your door?—and they ate deliciously flaky croissants in bed. “God, these are good,” Lagan said as he put a dollop of raspberry jam on his third one.

“They're the best. I've tried a lot of different places to find croissants like they make them in France, but this place wins hands down.”

Killian looked adorable with some croissant flakes on his chin, and Lagan leaned in to kiss them, then licked off the crumbs. “Just keeping you clean and tidy, as a good boyfriend would.”

“Boyfriend...” Killian said it slowly, as if he had to hear himself say it. “Did you know I haven't had a boyfriend since high school?”

“Neither have I.”

“Really?”

“Really. When I was a junior in high school, I briefly dated this guy who was a big nerd, captain of the chess club and the

robotics team, but he was super sweet. My first time anal was with him. We were a bit clumsy and fumbling, but we made it work, and we both got a rush out of it. As with most things, we got better over time.”

“Why did you guys break up?”

Lagan winced. “I did, preemptively. We had decided we’d move to Seattle as soon as I was done with school and that we’d leave Chicago behind us, so I broke things off with him before we got too serious. He was heartbroken, but he got over it. As did I.”

“My first time was at the yacht club.” Lagan couldn’t hold back his eye roll, and Killian chuckled sheepishly. “Yes, we were members of a yacht club. I loved sailing, and my instructor was a tall, blond Viking god named Eric who featured heavily in my dreams from when I was fifteen or so. A couple of days after I turned eighteen, we hooked up in the locker room after closing.”

“That doesn’t sound very comfortable.”

Killian laughed. “It wasn’t, though we did put towels on the wooden benches. I was so honored he’d waited until I was of age, but it turned out it was his idea of an initiation ritual. He’d fucked half the boys and girls in that club, but he was smart enough to wait until they were eighteen.”

“Oy. Was he at least good?”

Killian wiggled his hand. “Meh. Not a bad experience, but it didn’t make me eager to try again. Turned out I liked topping much more anyway, though I have bottomed for men on occasion.”

“Luckily, your topping skills are stellar,” Lagan joked. “I’d give them a ten out of ten, would definitely recommend.”

“Are you sure? Maybe you should test again to make sure.”

They were still laughing when their lips met. The kiss was uncoordinated, a bit off, but they got the angle right and sank into each other’s mouths. Funny how he’d never associated

sex with laughter, and yet with Killian, the two were inseparable.

The kiss grew heated, the croissants forgotten, as they clung to each other until they ran out of breath.

“You’re so beautiful,” Killian said hoarsely, caressing Lagan’s smooth chest with the flat of his hand. “I can’t get enough of you.”

His perusal felt as much of a touch as the way his hand moved down Lagan’s body, and Lagan couldn’t find words to respond.

“Turn onto your side and face me?”

When Killian asked it like that, his eyes so dark with want and his voice so low and sexy, Lagan would do anything for him. It scared him a little, the degree with which he wanted to please this man he’d convinced himself he hated for so long. He turned onto his side, pulled up one leg, and planted it firmly on the mattress, pushing his ass out. Killian inched closer so they were lying chest to chest, their mouths not even an inch apart,

Killian slid his fingers down his spine, almost teasing. Lagan shivered, and Killian chuckled. “Sensitive there?”

“Sensitive everywhere when you’re touching me.”

Killian let out a low, appreciative hum, repeating the movement. This time, he didn’t stop at the base of Lagan’s spine but dipped his fingers into the crack of Lagan’s ass. How could that simple touch feel so good? It was like Killian’s fingers fired up every nerve they touched, and Lagan arched his back, wordlessly begging for more.

Killian kissed the back of his neck, stretched out beside Lagan. “Can’t wait to be inside you again. You felt so good.”

“So did you, so feel free to hurry up.”

Killian’s rumbling laugh sent a thrill through Lagan. What was it about this man that everything he did was so sexy?

“Trying to tell me what to do again?”

“Just trying to help, as it seemed you were a little uncertain about what to do next.”

“I plan on taking my time with you, is what I’m going to do. Kiss, lick, explore every inch of your body until I know it inside and out.”

Oh fuck, Killian was gonna drive him wild, wasn’t he? The man was nothing if not thorough, and Lagan had a love-hate relationship with that aspect of his character.

“I promise you’ll love it,” Killian whispered in his ear, and shivers rolled through Lagan’s body.

“I know I will.”

Their lips met again, and Lagan surrendered to the kiss, to Killian. Killian grazed his jaw, then peppered kisses down his neck. When he reached Lagan’s shoulder, he sucked hard, then soothed the sensitive spot with his tongue, only to repeat his movement. He was marking him with an old-fashioned hickey, and fuck, why was that so hot?

His nipples were next. Killian bent in and kissed them, then took Lagan’s right nipple between his fingers and rubbed. “So pretty. You have such an amazing body,” Killian all but hummed.

He flicked the nipple, and Lagan hissed at the sharp sting that coursed through him. But then Killian’s mouth was on him, sucking and licking, and the pain dissipated. The other side got the same treatment, with Killian twisting and sucking, even biting down gently until Lagan lay squirming on the bed.

Killian rolled away and grabbed supplies from the nightstand, and even for those brief seconds, Lagan felt his loss. It was strange how much he needed him, as if his feelings had multiplied now that he’d allowed himself to experience them and give in to them.

His body was buzzing with breathless excitement, almost as if he was nervous about something he was about to do for the first time, with those wild flutters in his belly and his cheeks burning. When Killian turned back to him, he let out a breath.

Killian picked up where he'd left off, latching on to one of Lagan's nipples and sucking while his hands got busy. Slick fingers curled around Lagan's cock, and he moaned at the unexpected touch. Maybe Killian was going to move faster than he'd announced. As good as Killian's hand felt, Lagan wouldn't object to a quicker pace. He was about dying to have him inside him again.

His cock jumped in Killian's hand, and Killian chuckled. "Always so impatient."

"Take it as a compliment."

"Oh, I wasn't complaining."

"You'd better not be, considering you're in bed with me and you're about to fuck me again. I hope?"

Killian's grin widened. "I'm sure we'll get to that at some point."

"That's encouraging," Lagan muttered, rolling his eyes. But that eye roll turned into his eyes rolling into the back of his head when Killian squeezed his cock upward and in a tight corkscrew. "Oh, fuck, yes..."

"Believe it or not, I know what I'm doing."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever. Just get on with it, would you?"

Killian kissed him again. Lagan didn't complain. It was a little bit easier to stay patient when Killian's mouth was on his, their tongues dueling and sliding against each other until he didn't know where he ended and Killian began. And meanwhile, Killian was firmly stroking his cock, never so fast it brought Lagan to the edge, but enough to make him move restlessly into his touch, seeking more.

Killian let go of his cock and cupped his balls. Funny how that almost felt more intimate, the way he rolled them in his hand, gently squeezing. He slid his fingers behind Lagan's balls, rubbing that sensitive spot without reaching farther backward. Tease. But how could Lagan protest when every touch built up the tension in his body and he rose higher and higher?

Lagan spread his legs wide to give him all the access he needed. Okay, so maybe it was also a rather blatant demonstration of his impatience. Not that Killian seemed impressed by it or inclined to move any faster.

When he finally did venture farther back and brushed his hole, Lagan let out a sigh. Fucking finally. It shouldn't take Killian long to open him up. They'd had sex the night before, and Lagan was still loosened enough. Killian's first finger slid in with ease, and the second wasn't an issue either, but then all progress came to a screeching halt.

Killian moved his fingers in and out of Lagan's hole unhurriedly, as if they had all the time in the world. "I'm ready for a third," Lagan tried.

Killian's only response was to kiss him again, which seemed to become his method of shutting Lagan up. Kinda hard to complain when you had a tongue shoved into your mouth. As strategies went, it was effective. And it offered another minute or two of distraction as Killian ceased with the teasing and slicked up his own cock.

When Killian nudged him, Lagan turned onto his belly. "Spread your legs for me, baby," Killian whispered as he rolled on top of him. "Make room for me."

Fuck, the sensation of Killian's hard body on his was amazing. There was something to be said for being pressed into the mattress so every inch of his skin made contact with Killian's. Lagan hadn't often fucked in this position because it required quite a bit of trust. But god, he loved it.

Killian slid his slick cock into Lagan's crack, moving up and down without putting pressure on it. With every pass, the head caught on the rim of Lagan's hole, and every time, he held his breath. What did he need to do to make Killian finally fuck him? Beg? If that was what was necessary, he'd do it. He didn't care anymore. He needed him inside, and if a few words could make that happen, he was all for it.

"Please... I'm ready. I'm more than ready. I'm the readiest that ever readied."

On the next pass, Killian pushed. He gave Lagan a second to adjust, then sank in all the way, not stopping until he'd bottomed out. It was as if he'd shifted gears because where Lagan had expected a continuation of that slow pace, Killian went much faster. He wrapped his arm around Lagan's neck, pulling his head up in a near choke, and slammed his cock into him, splitting him wide open.

"Jesus!" Lagan's eyes crossed.

"That better?" Killian grunted.

Even if Lagan had wanted to, he wouldn't have been able to answer. He had no words left in his brain and not a whole lot of oxygen in his lungs either. Killian set a relentless pace, pushing Lagan's body into overdrive, nailing his prostate with every thrust, eliciting sounds from him he'd never made before.

Killian's cock stretched him so perfectly, and he was so gloriously full, filling an emptiness he hadn't been aware of. The sting of the intrusion only contributed to the ecstasy coursing through his body. Humming, buzzing, burning until every cell was alive and responding. The pleasure spread out from his ass into his balls, his cock, and then farther outward. Even his scalp was tingling, as were the tips of his toes.

His cock pulsed and throbbed, and if Killian kept this speed up, he'd come hands-free for the first time in his life. He'd rub against the mattress if he could, but Killian had him pinned down in a way that made it impossible to move an inch—and Lagan loved it.

Killian wrapped his hand around Lagan's throat, and he opened his mouth, thrusting out his tongue, seeking Killian's fingers. Killian got the hint and slid his index and middle finger into Lagan's mouth. He closed his lips around them and sucked, keeping pace with Killian's tempo as he fucked him. Killian was everywhere now. In his ass, in his mouth, flush against his body. He surrounded Lagan, invaded him, possessed him.

Every stroke was hard, Killian pulling out halfway, then slamming back in. Powerful. Precise. Perfect. The sounds of

him pounding Lagan echoed through the room. How could that alone be so erotic? Fuck, he couldn't even think anymore, his brain fried by the overload of sensations.

He moaned around Killian's fingers, and Killian brought his mouth close to Lagan's ear. "Are you about ready to blow, baby?"

"Sfckcl..."

Killian chuckled and pulled his fingers out of Lagan's mouth. "What was that?"

"So fucking close..."

"Me too. Fuck, you feel so good. So goddamn tight."

He switched pace, grinding into Lagan in circles, as if he wanted to be inside him even deeper. If Lagan could, he would let him into the depths of his body. His need to be consumed by this man was unparalleled.

"Killian... Need you... Please."

He wasn't making sense, but Killian seemed to understand anyway. "I've got you, baby. Trust me."

He did. He trusted Killian—more than he'd ever trusted anyone in his life. As Killian sped up, pushing Lagan closer and closer to the edge, overwhelming joy, unlike anything he'd ever felt, rolled through him. And then he flew, his body, mind, and soul completely free and blissful.

“I want to take you on a date,” Killian said after they had showered together, then taken the linens off the bed and put them in the washing machine. The stains from the raspberry jam and the croissants would probably not come out, but whatever. He’d buy new sheets. Totally worth it.

“A date?”

“Yes. I paid a good deal of money for it, and I’m collecting my debt.”

Lagan grinned. “I would’ve gone on a date with you if you’d asked. No need to fork over that much money.”

“In hindsight, I think I was jealous,” Killian confessed. “The idea of you with Sebastian LeClerc sent me into a fit.”

Lagan clicked his tongue. “Somehow, I can’t picture that. You’re way too classy for an ordinary fit.”

“Killian 2.0 is, but Killian 1.0 knew how to throw one, trust me.” At seeing Lagan’s confused face, he chuckled. “It’s how my sister and I refer to how much I changed after Armando. Killian 1.0 was the old me, the wild and ambitious one. Killian 2.0 was the safe, controlled version. The boring one.”

“Ah, gotcha. And Killian 3.0, what does he look like?”

The wave of sappiness that rolled over Killian was so intense he didn’t even attempt to hold back. “That’s the man who wants to be worthy of you.”

“Damn.” Lagan sighed. “That’s an excellent answer.”

“I mean it.”

“I know, which makes it even better.”

Killian pressed a quick kiss on his lips. “What are we doing today?”

“You tell me, since you wanted to take me on a date.”

Right. What did he want to do? Strolling around Seattle could be fun, but what if they ran into someone they knew? Or someone from Lagan’s work? It seemed too risky. They’d have to venture out of the city, but where? “Have you ever been to Port Townsend?”

“Once, but it was a long time ago. I’d be down for that.”

“Perfect.”

Fifteen minutes later, they were in the car on their way to the ferry terminal. The weather was lovely, a blue sky, seventy-three degrees, and a gentle breeze, which made the ferry crossing a delight. They hung out on the top deck, nestled against each other as they leaned against the railing and gazed out over the blue waters of the Puget Sound.

Funny how the displays of affection that had always irritated him from others were now something he craved. Holding Lagan’s hand. Playing with his fingers. Exchanging quick kisses. Hugging him from behind as they watched Bainbridge Island grow close. He was such a hypocrite, but he couldn’t help himself.

The drive from the Bainbridge Island ferry terminal to Port Townsend wasn’t the most scenic one, but time flew by as they chatted in the car. Luckily, the charming center of Port Townsend wasn’t too busy, and Killian found a parking spot right off Water Street, the main street that formed the heart of the historic center.

“I’d forgotten what a cute place this was,” Lagan said as they strolled down Water Street.

“It’s renowned for its well-preserved Victorian architecture. Unlike a lot of cities, many Victorian buildings

weren't torn down here, so a great number of houses and buildings are listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Once a year, they organize a Victorian festival. I often visit then and take a tour of buildings that are usually closed to the public." Killian pointed to his left, where the higher part of the town lay. "There's a gorgeous Victorian Inn uptown where I love to stay, a classic Queen Anne from the 1890s. It has a steep roof with cross gables, and the spindlework—that's the three-dimensional wood trim—is incredible. It has these gilded-gold accents around the house that gleam in the sun. It's magnificent."

Lagan chuckled. "I love it when you go all geeky about architecture."

"As long as you promise to tell me to shut up when I bore you to death."

Lagan held him back by his hand, and Killian stopped. "You're not boring me."

"Just in case. You know, for future reference." Killian had a hard time looking him in the eye. Why was he so self-conscious about this?

"I doubt I'll ever ask you to stop talking about something you're clearly so passionate about. Your whole face lights up when you explain architecture to me. I love it."

A warm glow spread inside Killian. "Thank you."

As they continued walking, he pondered Lagan's words. Why did this mean so much to him? Was it because after Armando, he'd become so scared of trusting people's motives? Did he fear on some subconscious level that Lagan was pretending? He hoped not because that wouldn't be a good basis for their relationship. Then again, this was his first relationship after Armando, and finding trust again would take time.

They strolled through the town center, browsing through stores, commenting on the stunning buildings, and reveling in the view over the water. A sea lion was sunning on a concrete pillar, turning onto his other side every now and then as if he

wanted to make sure he got evenly tanned. Tired from their explorations, they stopped for lunch. The food was excellent, as was the glass of wine they indulged in, and after, they continued their exploration of Water Street.

In a small boutique shop, Lagan admired their collection of exclusive pens. “They’re almost too pretty to write with.” He pointed at a gorgeous Mont Blanc fountain pen in a beautiful blue-patterned design.

“But they’re so comfortable and stylish,” Killian said. “I have two, and I love them. It makes writing by hand a joy.”

“Oh, I bet, but I could never spend that much money on a pen.”

Killian checked the discreet price tag. At just over a thousand dollars, it wasn’t the most expensive pen by far, but not exactly cheap either. He could afford it, but should he offer? Lagan was proud, and Killian had already noticed he didn’t easily accept help, let alone what he might consider charity, so how could he bring this up? Definitely not in this store, that was for certain.

When they were outside again, strolling hand in hand, Killian looked sideways. “I’m not entirely sure how to bring this up, but one big difference between us is the gap between the money you and I have at our disposal.”

Lagan’s mouth pulled up at the corners. “That’s an elegant way of saying you have a lot of money and I got nothing.”

“Well, I didn’t want to be rude, but yes, that’s pretty much it.”

“What about it?” The hint of defensiveness in his voice didn’t escape Killian.

“What if I want to buy you a present or treat you by paying for a meal or an experience or something like that? Will you let me?”

Lagan was quiet for a long time. “You wanted to buy me that pen, didn’t you?” he finally said.

“I did, but I realized it wouldn’t be fair to you to have that discussion in front of others, so I didn’t offer to buy it.”

Lagan halted them, turning toward Killian. “How much money do you have, exactly?”

“The seventy-five thousand I dropped on you in the auction was no big deal, though I have to admit that if Sebastian had outbid me, I would’ve had to bow out way before him. I don’t know the exact amount off the top of my head, but I own my condo outright, and I’m still a millionaire a couple of times over. Not in the least thanks to my smart investor who does a great job multiplying my wealth.”

Lagan let out a deep sigh. “Of course you are. Goddammit.”

“Excuse me?” It was hard not to feel a little offended by that.

“It’s just that I’ve been struggling with Jaren and Hadley having wealthy boyfriends and being able to afford all kinds of stuff we could never do before, and here I am in the exact same situation. How the hell am I gonna tell you you can’t buy me anything when the money doesn’t mean anything to you?”

“You tell me...”

Killian wouldn’t make this decision for Lagan. Up to a certain point, he could understand pride and respected it too. But Lagan had to work through his thinking process himself. Killian couldn’t do it for him.

“Why did you want to buy me that pen?”

Killian shrugged. “Because you seemed to be enamored by it, and I wanted you to have it. I imagined how you would look and feel using it, and that made me happy.”

“You said your sister had bought you that expensive tea. Do you buy stuff for her as well?”

Killian frowned. What did that have to do with anything? “As a matter of fact, I do. She has a weird love for socks, and so I constantly buy her special pairs of socks. That, plus hats.

She has a gazillion of them, but she's always excited to get a new one."

Lagan groaned. "It's your love language because, of course, it is. Fuck me sideways."

"My love language?"

Lagan nodded. "It's your primary way of expressing your love and care for people. You buy them gifts. Others might do it through touch or words or acts of service."

A love language. Huh, he'd never heard of that term, but it made complete sense. "I guess it is."

Then the deeper meaning of it hit him, and he gasped. A love language implied the relationship between them was based on love. Warm, happy sparks exploded inside him with how right that felt. Could one fall in love that quickly? Apparently so, because how could this not be love, this overwhelming sense of softness, of tenderness and care and protectiveness? Not only did he have a solid dose of lust, but he also wanted to wake up with Lagan and grow old with him and always have him by his side. He loved him.

"What's wrong?" Lagan touched his arm, a frown marring his forehead.

"Nothing. I mean, there's something, but I'm not telling you. Not because I don't want to, but because you may freak out, and we're having such an amazing day. Also, I'm going way too fast, and I don't want to scare you off."

Of course, that rambling attempt at an explanation only made things worse, and Lagan's frown intensified. Then he froze, and understanding dawned in his eyes. A slow blush spread across his cheeks. "I'm... You're... I get what you're saying."

"Am I going too fast?"

Lagan met his eyes, and all the panic and fear disappeared, replaced by a softness that reflected how Killian felt inside. "No. No, you're not."

Oh god, he could say the words. He'd never said them, not even to Armando. He'd wanted to wait until they were officially together. But now, looking back, what he'd felt then hadn't been love. It had never even come close to this overwhelming, all-consuming, mind-boggling sensation. And he got to tell Lagan, knowing he wouldn't be rejected.

"I'm in love with you," he whispered. "Hopelessly, head over heels, 'I barely recognize myself' in love with you. You're everything I've ever wanted in a man, and being with you feels more right than anything in my life has ever done. I know it's fast and that we have things to learn about each other and figure out how we'll fit our lives together, but I'm willing to do whatever to make it work. All I want is the chance to be with you. Forever."

Lagan's eyes had grown moist, then overflowed. He grabbed Killian's cheeks and pulled him in for a kiss. "Thank you. I don't even know what to say other than that was beautiful and perfect and romantic, and nothing I say could even come close. But I feel the same way. You're..." He smiled. "You're nothing like I thought I wanted, and yet you're everything I need. I want to build something beautiful with you, and I'll do my very best to make you happy."

Killian wiped a stray tear from his eyes. "You already do, baby."

Lagan had never known he could feel like this, his heart full to bursting. Sure, he'd felt elated before, and he'd experienced plenty of moments he remembered with fondness. But he'd never been this overwhelmingly happy, so filled with love and joy and softness that he couldn't find words to describe it. What a miracle. And all that because of Killian, the man he'd thought he hated.

They headed back to Seattle around four, since Lagan didn't want to miss dinner with his brothers. After forgetting all about it for the first time ever in Chicago, he'd felt so guilty he'd even set reminders again. He'd already texted them, asking if he could bring Killian to their boyfriends' night, and the answer had been a resounding yes.

He'd also sent them a few pics he'd taken of Port Townsend, including a corny selfie of him and Killian. The chat had exploded with reactions, a healthy mix of love, support, and teasing, as always. But they were excited to meet Killian again, under better circumstances this time, and Lagan couldn't wait to introduce him as his boyfriend. Funny, but he wasn't even nervous about bringing him. Killian would fit right in.

"Where are you guys meeting tonight?" Killian asked as they got out of the car on the ferry and made their way up to the deck.

"At Sebastian and Hadley's place. Their house is epic, with a ten-million-dollar view."

“I wouldn’t be surprised if that’s what he paid for it,” Killian said dryly.

“You’re probably right, and that might even be on the low side. But the house is amazing, so roomy and gorgeous, and they have this perfect deck to sit outside. With weather like this, Hadley will fire up the grill, so I’m looking forward to some great steak tonight.”

“Did you know that Sebastian warned me right after I had won the auction? He said that if I hurt you, I’d have to deal with him. It made no sense to me at the time, but in hindsight, it’s rather sweet he was so protective of you.”

Lagan smiled. That didn’t surprise him one bit about his brother-in-law. “He’s a good guy. He can come across as brusque and grumpy, but his heart is in the right place, and I can take a lot from a guy who is so clearly in love with my brother. If he’s being an ass, one look from Hadley has him change course nine out of ten times.”

Killian quirked an eyebrow. “Interesting. I would’ve put my money on Sebastian being the dominant one in that relationship.”

Lagan snorted. “Fat chance. Hadley might look like a cinnamon roll, but he’s a bossy little shit, and Sebastian loves him for it. They’re a perfect match.”

“But not as perfect as us.” Killian clasped his hand over his mouth as if he couldn’t believe he’d said that out loud.

Lagan took his hand and pressed a kiss on it. “But not as perfect as us.”

The breeze ruffled Killian’s hair, and with his cheeks ruddy from walking outside all day and his blue eyes so full of love, he was gorgeous. Lagan’s stomach swirled, like a thousand butterflies took wing all at the same time. He raised his head, and Killian took him up on the offer, kissing him until Lagan’s whole body buzzed. They stood the rest of the ferry side by side, Killian’s arm around Lagan, Lagan resting against him. Few words were spoken, but they didn’t need to, and nothing had ever felt so right.

They were the last to arrive due to some heavy weekend traffic they encountered once they'd gotten off the ferry. Sebastian had given all the Foster brothers an access code to his house, and Killian punched in the digits Lagan rattled off. The heavy, iron gates opened, and they parked in the massive driveway behind Jaren's car. As Lagan had expected, they'd all gathered outside.

As soon as they stepped onto the deck, his brothers quieted. Lagan took a deep breath, and then his throat closed up unexpectedly, his eyes misting over. Why was he so emotional? He cleared his throat, squeezing Killian's hand when he shot Lagan a worried look. "Sorry, having a moment here, not quite sure why. Anyway, this is Killian...my boyfriend."

In a matter of seconds, he was engulfed in the warm embrace of his brothers while Sebastian and Reid gave him a firm handshake. Hadley pulled Lagan into his arms and held him tightly. "It's because deep down, you never allowed yourself to believe that you could have it all, but you can. And I'm so, so happy for you."

"He's in love with me," Lagan said hoarsely, so soft only Hadley could hear it. "He's in love with me, and I'm in love with him. I don't even know how it happened, but here we are."

Hadley kissed his cheek. "You deserve it. You deserve all the love and happiness in the world."

Damn, he needed to stop with that sappy shit, or he'd be bawling like a baby. Luckily, Hadley let him go without saying anything more. Everyone was chatting, Sebastian and Reid pulling Killian into a conversation on investments, of all things, while Hadley turned his attention to the food, with Jaren helping him.

That left Nordin, and Lagan stepped up to him. Nordin hated public displays, and so Lagan only bumped his shoulder. "You good?"

Nordin met his gaze, his eyes so full of sadness Lagan almost started crying all over again. "You want the polite

answer or the truth?”

“The truth. Always.”

Nordin leaned against him, putting his head on Lagan’s shoulder for a moment. It was such an uncharacteristic move for Nordin, who never leaned on anyone. Lagan’s heart ached for him. His brother was hurting, and Lagan’s money was on it having something to do with the person he’d mentioned he couldn’t be with. And of course, watching all his brothers with their partners only increased his pain.

“I can’t,” Nordin said, his voice a whisper. “I can’t talk about it, but even if I could, I don’t have the words to tell you how this feels. It feels like I’m being ripped apart, and I don’t know what to do.”

“Follow your heart. That’s what you always told us when we had to make a decision. You taught us we had all the knowledge and wisdom to make the right decision inside us already, and all we had to do was be brave enough to follow that path.”

“Yeah...” Nordin’s voice broke, and then he hugged Lagan tightly. Over his head, Lagan caught the concerned stares of Jaren and Hadley, and he subtly shook his head. If Nordin wasn’t ready or willing to talk, they’d have to respect that. At least he was opening up some, right?

Nordin let go of him, took a deep breath, and then the mask slid into place, hiding his emotions and showing only what he wanted them to see. “I’m ready for some steak,” he announced, a little too forced, but no one commented on it.

Dinner was delicious, perfectly grilled ribeyes accompanied by baked potatoes, several kinds of greens, fresh baguettes with herb butter, and a tomato-watermelon salad that was incredibly good.

“So, not to be rude, but how are you guys planning on solving the obvious problem of you being professor and student?” Hadley asked.

Lagan looked at Killian. “To be honest, we haven’t discussed that yet, but yes, that’s a definite challenge.”

“Is it illegal?” Jaren asked.

Killian shook his head. “Frowned upon, yes, and I’m sure the university faculty will have a strong opinion, but technically, it’s not illegal. And I doubt they’ll be willing to sue me, since I’ve gone after a previous employer before who had fired me without cause.”

Nordin tapped his finger on his lips. “But wouldn’t your position be untenable?”

“It would be, yes.” Killian’s eyes softened as he met Lagan’s. “But Lagan needs to finish his degree, so that’s the most important thing to me.”

“Are you willing to quit your job?” As always, Nordin asked the hard questions.

Killian hesitated. “I don’t know. It feels like defeat to me, even though I know it wouldn’t be. But I don’t need the money, so...”

Nordin cocked his head. “You don’t need the income, and yet you’re hesitant to quit? Why?”

“Nordin,” Lagan protested, uncomfortable with the direction the discussion was taking. The last thing he wanted was for Killian to feel like he was in front of a firing squad.

Killian took his hand. “It’s okay. He’s not wrong about asking me about my motivation. The truth is that I care a lot about my reputation, and I’m concerned that quitting would have consequences for how people see me.”

“So it’s fair to say you don’t care that much about the job, just about what it would mean for your reputation?”

“Yes.” Killian let out a deep sigh. “I took the job because it gave me a certain standing, the respect that comes with teaching at a university. I needed that after a deeply personal crisis that made me question who I was, and yes, I do realize how sad that is.”

“No, that’s not sad. I can understand that. But to stay in those terms, the job has served its purpose, so isn’t it time to

move on? Do you really still need it for your sense of self-worth?"

Silence descended.

"I don't," Killian finally said. "But I can't sit home all day either. I'd go mad."

"No one is expecting you to, including me," Lagan said.

"Do you want me to quit?"

Lagan shook his head. "That's not my decision to make. Only you can decide that."

"But what would you do if I didn't?"

Lagan didn't even hesitate. "I'd transfer to a different program. I can't be in your classes when we're dating. It's wrong, and I wouldn't ever feel like I'd earned my grades."

"You mean your measly B minus?" Killian teased him, grinning. "As if anyone would suspect me of giving you preferential treatment."

Lagan laughed. "Good point, but still. I couldn't face my classmates."

Killian straightened his shoulders. "That makes it an easy decision, then. I'll quit. I'll contact the dean on Monday and let him know."

"Killian..."

"No, this isn't up for debate. Being a lawyer is your dream, baby, and you're so damn good at it. I'm not taking that away from you. I'll quit so you can finish law school. We'll figure it out."

Lagan leaned in, the need to kiss him too strong to resist. Of course his brothers teased him instantly. Payback for how often he'd complained about them being affectionate. But he ignored them, taking his time to kiss Killian, who responded with equal enthusiasm. After what seemed minutes, Lagan ended the kiss, his lips tingling.

"I have an idea," Sebastian said.

“What?” Lagan needed a moment to switch gears.

“I have an idea,” Sebastian repeated. “For a job for you, Killian.”

“You have what? A job for me?”

“Well, we’d have to work out the details, but yes. How would you feel about managing my charity donations? I need someone who will help me donate to the right charities after doing their due diligence, and I’m thinking that having a lawyer do that might not be a bad idea to cover my ass. It’s not a full-time job, but you’d definitely be busy a few days a week, and I’d imagine it’s fulfilling work. I mean, I always like giving money away, especially to LGBT charities, and my accountant is always pushing me to donate more, but I just don’t have the time. And yes, I do realize how incredibly stupid that sounds.”

Everyone laughed, including Lagan, who was grinning from ear to ear. This sounded right up Killian’s alley, but would he feel the same?

One look at Killian and Lagan had his answer. His boyfriend looked stunned for a moment, but then his face broke open in a wide smile. “Making a job out of donating money? Where do I sign?”

More laughter ensued.

“As your lawyer, I feel obliged to remind you to read the entire contract before agreeing, including all the small print, and please keep in mind that in many situations, a verbal agreement is binding,” Lagan teased.

“I’ll make sure to have you look everything over, Counselor,” Killian said. Lagan had to kiss him again, of course.

Wasn't it interesting how you could go your whole life without ever fully realizing how much you needed something until you got it? Killian had never thought he'd craved being part of a family again until Lagan's brothers welcomed him into their group with so much ease and acceptance.

Killian had Christine, of course, but with them living in different parts of the country, they didn't get to see each other that often. Plus, his sister had such a busy life, and now that their parents were gone, the bond between them had changed.

Lagan's family was close by, and they were tight. Knowing he'd see these men every other week and that they were genuinely happy to include him warmed his heart, almost to the point of giddy, and that was an emotion he'd never thought himself capable of. Killian 3.0 had made his debut, and god, he wanted this more than anything.

"What did you think of Sebastian's job offer?" Lagan asked him as they were in the car on their way back to Killian's place.

"As Sebastian said, we'll have to work out the specifics, but I'm really intrigued. I've never considered a job like that, but now that he's mentioned it, I can't stop thinking about it."

"I hope you'll save some brain energy to think about me as well," Lagan teased him.

"Basically, every other thought is about you, so you're good. No worries."

“Oh, brilliant answer, Professor.”

Professor. It still gave him a kick when Lagan called him that, but would that change when he quit his job? The prospect didn't scare him nearly as much as he had expected it to.

“Are you sure you're okay with leaving your academic career behind you?” Lagan asked. Had he guessed where Killian's thoughts had gone?

“I think so, yes. Nordin made a valid point that I don't need it anymore for my self-worth. He's wise.”

“Yeah, he is.”

“Is he okay? I saw you two having a moment.”

Lagan sighed. “I hope so. It's not like him to be so vulnerable. I love him to death, but he keeps a part of himself hidden, even from us. Seeing him this open shocked me. Not gonna lie.”

Killian knew better than to ask what Lagan thought was going on. Lagan had stated that they couldn't discuss Nordin's job, and he'd respect that. It was crystal clear how much Nordin loved his brothers, so Killian could accept a lot from him. Killian would never come between Lagan and his brothers. On the contrary, he was beyond grateful for the bond they had forged and the way they took care of each other. And he felt honored to be a part of their family.

“Thank you,” he said to Lagan in the elevator up to Killian's condo. They'd made a quick stop at Lagan's place to pick up some clothes and other stuff he'd need, but Lagan had happily agreed to spend the night at Killian's place.

“For what?”

“For bringing me tonight. Your brothers and their boyfriends are amazing men, and I'm honored to be included.”

Lagan's smile was sweet. “They loved you. You fit with us.”

Killian's throat went tight. “I can't tell you how much that means to me to hear you say that.”

“Were you worried that you wouldn’t?”

“I am quite a bit older, so yes, I was.”

Lagan studied him. “You know, I didn’t even consider you’d be nervous. You always mask it so well when you’re uncomfortable.”

Should he take that as a compliment? It was kind of a double-edged remark, right? “I yearn to be myself with you, but it may take a while before I’m fully able to.”

He opened the door, and they walked in, and Lagan closed the door behind them. “Every time you say something like that, I just want to hug you, you know that? I don’t know how I ever thought you were cold and arrogant.”

“I’ll never turn down a hug,” Killian said, and Lagan smiled as he closed the distance and wrapped his arms around Killian.

“I’ll always have a hug for you.”

Killian reveled in how perfectly Lagan fit into his arms. God, he could hold him like this for hours and never get bored. “How about a kiss? Will you always have a kiss for me as well?”

“Always,” Lagan promised, and their mouths met in a sweet, slow kiss. Killian took his time roaming Lagan’s mouth, sucking on his tongue, kissing him until he ran out of breath, and even then, he didn’t want to stop.

“Let’s get more comfortable,” he suggested.

They kissed their way into the bedroom, only letting go of each other long enough to turn on a light and kick off their shoes. Next to the bed, Lagan sank to his knees and reached for Killian’s belt. He looked up at Killian as he loosened his belt, then unzipped his pants. Killian was half-hard, but one touch from Lagan and he hardened in his hands. Lagan’s appreciative hum when he took out Killian’s dick finished the job.

“I love your cock,” Lagan said hoarsely. “It’s just so goddamn perfect.”

What man wouldn't preen a little hearing that?

Lagan stroked softly, then licked the head with the tip of his tongue. Killian moaned. How could one little swipe of a tongue feel that good?

He suckled on the head, wrapping his right hand around the base and pumping, and Killian about lost it. "Fuck, baby, that's perfect. I love your mouth on me."

"I love sucking you off," Lagan said, then went back to business.

Killian carded his hands through Lagan's hair, pulling him onto his cock. Lagan opened wide and took him in, swallowing him down with ease and relaxing his throat as Killian sank deep inside. God, what a picture he made on his knees, his lips stretched wide around Killian's cock, his eyes moist, and his hair all messed up from Killian's hand raking through it. Stunning. Breathtaking.

He pumped into that sinfully hot mouth, going slow and careful out of fear of hurting him. But Lagan took his cock eagerly, even moving into Killian's thrusts as if he couldn't wait to have him deeper into his mouth. When Killian pulled out almost entirely to give Lagan a chance to catch his breath, Lagan moaned in protest and looked up at Killian, moisture clinging to his lashes. "I'm good."

Killian trusted him to speak up if he wasn't, and so he went back to business. For minutes, he fucked Lagan's mouth until his cheeks were wet with tears and his chin covered in drool. Why did he like that look on Lagan so much? As Lagan had pointed out once, it made little sense, and yet he couldn't get enough of him. He could do this for hours if not for the telltale signal in his body that he was getting close. Plus, at some point, Lagan would start hurting, especially his jaw.

He took a breath and pulled out. "Wanna come inside you. Your ass," he said when Lagan was about to say something. Something smartassy, no doubt. Killian hoisted him up, then cleaned his mouth and chin, licking and sucking until he was presentable again.

He turned him around, dragged down his pants and underwear, and pushed him until Lagan got the message and bent over the bed. Lube was still on the nightstand, and within seconds, Killian had a slick finger inside him, working him open. Prepping him was quick, which was good because Killian was impatient.

He didn't undress all the way, and as soon as Lagan was ready, he sheathed up and positioned himself. He put his hands on Lagan's hips and pressed against his hole. Lagan pushed back, letting him in, and he worked his way inside with shallow thrusts.

He'd done a bit of a rush job on the prep, and so he went slow until Lagan relaxed around him and he could sink in all the way. The sense of urgency that had taken over earlier had evaporated, and in its place came tenderness.

He bent over Lagan, wrapping his arms around him from the back and nuzzling his neck. His hips rolled smoothly as he fucked him in corkscrew movements, never pulling out far before driving back into him. Lagan turned his head sideways, pressing his cheek into the comforter. Killian kissed him, then made a trail of kisses across his cheek and jaw toward his ear.

He traced the shell of Lagan's ear with his tongue, and a shiver tore through Lagan's body. He had to say the words because his heart was just too full to hold them back. "I love you... God, I love you so much. I can't believe you're mine, that you want me as much as I want you."

Lagan smiled, his eyes a tad glassy. "Love you too. Never thought I'd fall in love this hard, but I'm so in love with you."

Killian kept whispering sweet nothings into Lagan's ear as he made love to him. That was what he was doing, wasn't it? Not merely fucking, as glorious as that could be, but something much sweeter and deeper, a connection that rose far above the physical.

Taking Lagan from behind wasn't enough anymore, no matter how good it felt. He wanted to see him, *needed* to watch every emotion on that expressive face, so he pulled out. "Turn around for me?"

Lagan scrambled onto his back and spread his legs again. Killian pulled him down toward the edge so he'd have the perfect angle, and he sank into him again. His happy grunt mixed with a similar groan from Lagan as Killian sought his mouth.

Every breath Lagan took became Killian's. He drank in Lagan's sounds, the little gasps and sobs he made whenever Killian bottomed out. And in between, with their lips almost touching, Killian kept telling him how good he felt, how beautiful he was, how much he needed him. But above all, words of love poured out, as if he was now free to release all the repressed feelings he'd stored up for years.

"I love you," he said again and again, but Lagan didn't seem to grow tired of hearing it and said it right back, and with every word, Killian's heart recovered a little more. The wounds Armando had caused were finally healing—for good this time. Killian would leave his past where it belonged, in the past, and face the future with excitement. All because of Lagan. All the good in his life was because of Lagan.

Their slick bodies slid against each other, panted breaths mingling as Killian's body got tenser and tenser. His muscles contracted, his balls pulled up, and his orgasm rolled over him. He emptied himself inside Lagan, shuddering with every spurt that came out of his cock. Would he ever grow used to this? Please, god, no. He never wanted to take Lagan for granted.

He rose and circled Lagan's weeping cock, purple with impatience. "I'm gonna watch you come, baby. Show me your pleasure. Wanna see you and hear you."

He loved that moment when Lagan lost control of himself, surrendering to the pleasure inside him. He shamelessly fucked himself into Killian's hand, head thrown back and mouth open, his back arched. And the sounds he made, so uninhibited and erotic. Every one wrapped around Killian like a caress, and his heart soared.

And when Lagan came, shouting out Killian's name as he unloaded all over his hand, Killian Evans was the happiest man in the world.

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EPILOGUE

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ONE YEAR LATER

They stumbled through the door, crashing into the table in the hallway, and only with a mad grab could Lagan prevent the expensive vase from smashing onto the floor. He tried to set it back, but Killian kept kissing him, his fingers loosening Lagan's tie. The vase wobbled, then toppled over, hanging on by a thread as it rested against the wall.

Killian didn't pay attention to it, too focused on Lagan. Deft hands found Lagan's belt and loosened it. His pants were yanked down, and his underwear followed suit.

"You were so fucking hot," Killian growled against his ear, and a shiver rolled through Lagan's body. "All I could think of as you were addressing the judge was how badly I wanted to be inside you."

"He didn't look like the type who would've approved of that," Lagan choked out, then moaned loudly as Killian's fingers brushed his hole.

"Judge Aaron? He'd get a heart attack on the spot, the bigot that he is."

The lube packet crinkled, and Lagan braced himself. Cold, slick fingers pushed inside him. "You can take two," Killian told him. "I fucked you this morning."

Oh yes, he had. Like he did almost every day. One year in and the passion between them had shown no sign of weaning. They were both catching up because of their self-imposed celibacy, Killian kept assuring him, but Lagan doubted that

was the case. He figured Killian's sex drive had returned, and Lagan was more than fine with it.

Killian made quick work of the prep, familiar enough with Lagan's body to know what he could take. With Killian, that was a lot.

Killian lined up behind him and shoved Lagan against the wall. Lagan spread his legs as wide as his pants pooling around his ankles allowed and pushed his ass back. In one smooth movement, Killian breached him.

"Fuuuuuuck," Lagan moaned as that perfect cock split him open. He might still have been loose from their early-morning fuck, but it stung nonetheless. Strangely enough, he preferred it that way. That little edge of burning and biting only contributed to his pleasure.

"You can take it," Killian whispered in his ear. "You can take whatever I give you, baby."

He sure as fuck could, and he closed his eyes and surrendered to the ecstasy flowing through him. After winning his first-ever case in court, he'd been horny as all get out, and the way Killian had fondled him on the drive back, one hand on the steering wheel and one hand massaging Lagan's cock, had only made his need more urgent.

"Not gonna last long," he warned his boyfriend.

"Don't need you to."

Thank fuck. Still, Lagan held back. Killian did sometimes need a bit more time to get to the same point, but not this time, apparently. He focused on Killian's perfect cock sliding in and out of him, the little grunts Killian made as he pushed into him, the warm breath of Killian's pants on his skin.

Killian's hands were on Lagan's hips, holding him with enough force it would leave bruises—and Lagan was more than fine with it. His man loved marking him. Subtly, but Killian was never hornier than after seeing his hickeys on Lagan's body. He was considerate enough to do it where no one else would see it, and Lagan wore them with pride.

Killian snuck his hand around him and circled his cock, then pumped him with the head in a tight grip. Lagan moaned again, the pressure in his balls building rapidly. A shiver danced down his spine, and sweat broke out all over his skin. The fact that they were both still dressed only made it feel better.

His body tensed, and he lost all coherent thought as he neared the edge. His whole being exploded in bliss, and he hovered there for one, two seconds, then toppled over.

“Unngh,” Killian moaned, jerking behind Lagan as he filled him up.

They stood like that for a few beats, their heart rates slowly coming down. “That was so fucking perfect,” Lagan said with a happy sigh, turning his head sideways for a sloppy, uncoordinated kiss.

“It was.”

Killian pulled out, and Lagan whimpered. If he could skip that part, he would. But if he got lucky, Killian would... Oh yes, fuck yes. Killian was already shoving his fingers inside Lagan, pushing the cum back. Lagan kicked off his shoes, managing to get his pants and underwear off as well, while Killian kept fingering him, humming, as he played with Lagan’s ass.

As soon as Lagan was naked, Killian sank to his knees and spread Lagan’s ass wide open. “The most beautiful sight in the world,” Killian said hoarsely, his hot breath tickling Lagan’s wide-open hole. “Looking at my cum drip out of that pretty pink hole is my favorite pastime.”

How could Lagan complain about that? Especially when he knew what the next step would be. Killian lapped the top of his crack first, then worked his way down, burying his mouth and tongue between Lagan’s ass cheeks and straight up making love to his hole with his mouth the way he’d done earlier with his cock.

He fucked him with his tongue until Lagan was trembling with the effort it took to stay still. Sometimes, he’d even come

a second time. Not today, though. They'd already had a thorough round of fucking that morning, but that was okay.

When Killian was satisfied Lagan was clean, they made their way to the shower, losing the last items of clothing along the way. And in the shower, they continued kissing and making out. Neither of them needed to come again. Just being together was enough.

Lagan hadn't waited long before moving into Killian's apartment. Six weeks after they'd made it official, he'd rented a U-Haul and had transported everything he owned two blocks down. Sebastian had put up the condo for sale and had sold it at a nice profit, so everyone was happy.

In the beginning, Lagan had been worried about how fast everything was going, but those doubts were long gone. Killian and he fit together much easier than he'd ever expected. They loved to banter and bicker, but they rarely had a true argument, and they had merged seamlessly. Lagan couldn't imagine his life without Killian anymore.

Lagan had finished law school and had taken a job with the legal aid center, working as their full-time lawyer—a job made possible by funding from the LeClerc Foundation Killian had set up to funnel Sebastian's charities through. He loved running it, and he and Sebastian had become close friends, which had thrilled Lagan and Hadley. That meant they got to spend a lot of time together.

After showering, they settled on the couch. Killian had ordered tapas from their favorite restaurant, and they ate and talked, cuddling for a long time. Finally, Killian got up. "I'm gonna grab something, so stay right here. I got you a little something for winning your first case."

"You didn't even know I'd win!" Lagan called after him as Killian walked into his office.

Killian looked over his shoulder and rolled his eyes. "Really?"

He came back holding a rectangle box wrapped in shiny navy-blue wrapping paper with a tidy little bow on top. He sat

down next to Lagan again and held out the present to him. “This is to show how incredibly proud I am of you for realizing your dream. You kicked ass today.”

Lagan’s cheeks heated. Even after all this time, he still wasn’t used to Killian singing his praises. “Thank you.”

He unwrapped the present, and as soon as he saw the logo on the box, he knew. Killian had gotten him a Mont Blanc pen, probably the one he’d admired in Port Townsend. He opened the box and sighed with happiness. On a white inset rested the beautiful blue pen. “Thank you. Thank you so much. I love it.”

He’d become better at accepting Killian’s generosity. Giving presents was the man’s primary love language, and how could he rob him of that joy?

“You’re welcome. Take it out.” Killian sounded strangely nervous.

Lagan lifted the pen from the satin lining, and a small piece of paper fell out. His heart skipped a beat. Oh god. He unfolded it. It only contained two words.

Marry me?

His eyes filled with tears as he looked up at Killian. “Yes. A thousand times yes,” Lagan whispered.

Killian’s face lit up, and then his eyes became moist too. “Thank god. I wouldn’t know what to do without you. I love you so much, Lagan Foster.”

They exchanged a tender kiss.

“I propose one change to that sentence,” Lagan said.

Killian frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Lagan Foster Evans sounds better, don’t you think?”

His husband-to-be took his mouth in a toe-curling kiss. It seemed he agreed.



WANT to read Nordin's story? Preorder [Nicked - Nordin](#) now!

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BOOKS BY NORA PHOENIX

The Foster Brothers

Growing up in foster care, four boys made a choice to become brothers. Now adults, nothing can come between them...not even when they find love. The Foster Brothers is a contemporary MM romance series with found family, sweet romance, high heat, and a dash of kink.

- [Marked - Myron](#) (free prequel as part of the Your Book Boyfriend's Boyfriend giveaway)
- [Jilted - Jaren](#)
- [Hired- Hadley](#)
- [Loathed - Lagan](#)
- [Nicked - Nordin](#)

Irresistible Dragons Series

A spin off series from the Irresistible Omegas that can be read on its own. With dragons, mpeg, stubborn alphas, and a whole new suspense plot, this is one series you don't want to miss.

- [Dragon's Mate](#)
- [Dragon's Honor](#)
- [Dragon's Fight](#)

Forty-seven Series

An emotional daddy kink duology with a younger Daddy and an older boy. Also includes first time gay, loads of hurt/comfort, and best friend's father.

- [Clean Start at Forty-Seven](#)
- [New Daddy at Forty-Seven](#)

White House Men Series

An exciting romantic suspense series set in the White House. The perfect combination of sweet and sexy romance, a dash of kink, and a suspense plot that will have you on the edge of your seat. Make sure to read in order.

- [Press](#) (a press secretary and a reporter have an impossible attraction)
- [Friends](#) (a beautiful friends-to-lovers romance between an FBI agent and a Secret Service agent)
- [Click](#) (a sexy first-time romance with an age gap and an awkward virgin)
- [Serve](#) (a high heat MMM romance with age gap and D/s play)
- [Care](#) (the president's son falls for his tutor; age gap and daddy kink)
- [Puzzle](#) (a CIA analyst meets his match in a nerdy forensic accountant)
- [Heal](#) (can the president find love again with a sunshine man half his age?)

No Regrets Series

Sexy, kinky, emotional, with a touch of suspense, the No Regrets series is a spin off from the No Shame series that can be read on its own.

- [No Surrender](#) (bisexual awakening, first time gay, D/s play)

Perfect Hands Series

Raw, emotional, both sweet and sexy, with a solid dash of kink, that's the Perfect Hands series. All books can be read as standalones.

- [Firm Hand](#) (daddy care with a younger daddy and an older boy)
- [Gentle Hand](#) (sweet daddy care with age play)
- [Naughty Hand](#) (a holiday novella to read after Firm Hand and Gentle Hand)
- [Slow Hand](#) (a Dom takes in two abused boys and discovers they need a Daddy)
- [Healing Hand](#) (a broken boy meets the Daddy he needs)

No Shame Series

If you love steamy MM romance with a little twist, you'll love the No Shame series. Sexy, emotional, with a bit of suspense and all the feels. Make sure to read in order, as this is a series with a continuing storyline.

- [No Filter](#)
- [No Limits](#)
- [No Fear](#)
- [No Shame](#)
- [No Angel](#)

And for all the fun, grab the [No Shame box set](#) which includes all five books plus exclusive bonus chapters and deleted scenes.

Irresistible Omegas Series

An mpreg series with all the heat, epic world building, poly romances (the first two books are MMMM and the rest of the series is MMM), a bit of suspense, and characters that will stay with you for a long time. This is a continuing series, so read in order.

- [Alpha's Sacrifice](#)
- [Alpha's Submission](#)

- [Beta's Surrender](#)
- [Alpha's Pride](#)
- [Beta's Strength](#)
- [Omega's Protector](#)
- [Alpha's Obedience](#)
- [Omega's Power](#)
- [Beta's Love](#)
- [Omega's Truth](#)

Or grab [the first box set](#), which contains books 1-3 plus exclusive bonus material, and [the second box set](#), which contains books 4-6 and bonus materials.

Ballsy Boys Series

Sexy porn stars looking for real love! Expect plenty of steam, but all the feels as well. They can be read as standalones, but are more fun when read in order.

- [Ballsy](#) (free prequel)
- [Rebel](#)
- [Tank](#)
- [Heart](#)
- [Campy](#)
- [Pixie](#)

Or grab the [Ballsy Box Box Set](#), which contains all books and an exclusive, never before published bonus novella.

Kinky Boys Series

More sexy porn stars! This is a spin off series from the Ballsy Boys, set in Las Vegas...and with some kink!

- [Daddy](#)
- [Ziggy](#)

Ignite Series

An epic dystopian sci-fi trilogy where three men have to not only escape a government that wants to jail them for being gay but aliens as well. Slow burn MMM romance.

- [Ignite](#)
- [Smolder](#)
- [Burn](#)

Or grab the [Ignite box set](#), which includes all three box, bonus chapters, and an exclusive bonus novella about a sweet alien named Pax.

Stand Alones

I also have a few stand alones, so check these out!

- [Professor Daddy](#) (sexy daddy kink between a college prof and his student. Age gap, no ABDL)
- [Out to Win](#) (two men meet at a TV singing contest)
- [Captain Silver Fox](#) (falling for the boss on a cruise ship)
- [Coming Out on Top](#) (snowed in, age gap, size difference, and a bossy twink)
- [Ranger](#) (veteran suffering from PTSD falls for a sunshine animal trainer, cowritten with K.M. Neuhold)
- [Every Shade](#) (collection of shorts and novellas)

Books in Other Languages

Most of my books are available in German, French, and Italian as well, and if they're not, they'll be translated soon!

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AUDIO BOOKS BY NORA PHOENIX

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- Dragon's Honor: coming soon!

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- [No Limits](#)
- [No Fear](#)
- [No Shame](#)
- [No Angel](#)
- [No Shame Series: the complete series](#) (all five books with bonus materials)

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- [Heart](#)
- [Campy.](#)
- [Pixie](#)

Kinky Boys Series

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- [Professor Daddy](#) (sexy daddy kink between a college prof and his student. Age gap, no ABDL) Narrated by Kenneth Obi.
- [Coming Out on Top](#) (a toppy twink and a gentle giant get snowed in). Narrated by Kenneth Obi.
- [Captain Silver Fox](#) (falling for the boss and age gap on a cruise ship) Narrated by Tim Paige and Liam DiCosimo.
- [Out to Win](#) (a coming out for you set at a singing competition). Narrated by Charlie David.
- [Ranger](#) (veteran suffering from PTSD falls for a sunshine animal trainer, cowritten with K.M. Neuhold) Narrated by John Solo.

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MORE ABOUT NORA PHOENIX

Would you like the long or the short version of my bio?

The short? You got it.

I write steamy gay romance books and I love it. I also love reading books. Books are everything.

How was that?

A little more detail? Gotcha.

I started writing my first stories when I was a teen...on a freaking typewriter. I still have these, and they're adorably romantic. And bad, haha. Fear of failing kept me from following my dream to become a romance author, so you can imagine how proud and ecstatic I am that I finally overcame my fears and self doubt and did it. I adore my genre because I love writing and reading about flawed, strong men who are just a tad broken..but find their happy ever after anyway.

My favorite books to read are pretty much all MM/gay romances as long as it has a happy end. Kink is a plus... Aside from that, I also read a lot of nonfiction and not just books on writing. Popular psychology is a favorite topic of mine and so are self help and sociology.

Hobbies? Ain't nobody got time for that. Just kidding. I love traveling, spending time near the ocean, and hiking. But I love books more.

Come hang out with me in my Facebook Group Nora's Nook where I share previews, sneak peeks, freebies, fun stuff, and much more: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/norasnook/>

My weekly newsletter not only gives you updates, exclusive content, and all the inside news on what I'm working on, but also lists the best new releases, 99c deals, and freebies in gay romance for that weekend. Load up your Kindle for less money! Sign up here: <http://www.noraphoenix.com/newsletter/>

You can also stalk me on Twitter: @NoraFromBHR

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