



**NO
RULES**

NO REGRETS 2



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
NORA PHOENIX

NO RULES

NO REGRETS BOOK 2

NORA PHOENIX



No Rules by Nora Phoenix

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

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NO RULES

Alex is proof that you can be tough as nails...and still be submissive.

Alex loves *servicing* others—when he's not doing his job as a security specialist. His team is investigating a puzzling case involving a spunky grandma and a dead horse at the racetracks.

Ryan, a grumpy older PI, is all too happy to make use of Alex's talents, and he seems to delight in pushing Alex's buttons. Alex is determined not to let Ryan run all over him... even when deep down, he loves it when Ryan gets all dominant and aggressive.

That's just physical attraction. Chemistry. It doesn't mean anything.

Ryan has made it clear he wants no entanglements, and Alex can't ever see himself serving only one man.

Until he can.

Until he wants no one else but Ryan.

Until he's stupid enough to fall for the one guy who'll never be able to commit.

No Rules is an MM romance featuring a sunshiny, happy-to-please guy and a grumpy cynic who's determined to keep his emotional distance. It's the second book in the high heat No Regrets series and has a suspense plot without cliffhangers.

TRIGGER WARNING

Please note this book can be triggering for some people. Sensitive topics include the death of a horse and the death of a partner (not described in detail). This book is also hella kinky and contains D/s dynamic, BDSM scenes with impact play, humiliation kink, consensual non-monogamy, and more. It's also super high heat. If that's not your thing, you may wanna skip this story because Ryan and Alex are two horny fuckers who get their kink on.

PROLOGUE

SEVEN MONTHS AGO

As soon as Ryan walked out of Albany Airport, he wanted to turn around and catch a flight back to Austin.

What the fuck had he been thinking, accepting a job in New York in the middle of winter? Cold didn't even begin to describe the icy temperatures outside. The biting wind whipped up the snow that had accumulated on the sidewalks, and a layer of salty snow-mush covered the pick-up lane in front of the arrivals exit. Jesus, he should've brought warmer clothes. He always underestimated how much he wasn't used to the cold.

A car honked and he followed the sound, raising his hand when he spotted Wander. He slung the strap of his weekend bag over his shoulder, then hurried to the car. After dumping his bag in the trunk, he slid into the passenger seat. "Fucking hell, it's like Siberia here."

Wander grinned. "And a good afternoon to you as well, sunshine. I see your disposition is as sunny as ever."

Ryan buckled up. "Pretty sure you didn't invite me because of my charming personality."

A dismissive snort was his answer as Wander pulled away from the curb, merging into the slow-moving traffic.

"You said it's a stalking case?" Ryan asked.

The grin slid off Wander's face. "Yeah, and I can't figure out what's going on. That's why I asked you for help. I hoped that with your experience as a detective and a PI, you might have a chance of finding out who's behind this."

“Gimme the Cliff’s Notes.”

Ryan had worked with Wander before on a few cases, and one thing he appreciated about the man was his ability to summarize and highlight the main points, unlike many people who got stuck on unimportant details.

“Jesse Beyer is the owner of a BDSM club here in the region called The Exchange. He’s forty-five, pansexual, divorced, and still has a good relationship with his ex-wife. He’s been receiving threatening emails and letters to his home address in which he’s accused of being a sexual deviant, with some biblical references. But they have escalated in intensity, with the threats becoming more and more personal. The cops couldn’t do much for him, and so far, my team has come up empty as well. There are no obvious suspects.”

Ryan didn’t even bother asking about business rivals or ex-partners. Wander would’ve checked out those angles first. “Is he religious himself?”

“No, and he never has been.”

Hmm, interesting. Religious fanatics weren’t as random in their targets as people often thought. Nine times out of ten, they had some personal connection to their victim. “I’m looking forward to digging into this. Sounds like a challenge.”

“It sure is, and I appreciate you flying in.”

Ryan shrugged. “I didn’t have another job lined up anyway.” He looked through his window at the white landscape. “Though I should have thought twice, what with the weather here.”

“It’s not that bad, yeah?”

“You’re from Boston, asshole. You were born in this climate.”

“You’re just weak, is what you’re saying.”

Ryan grinned. The company would make up for a lot in this case. He truly loved working with Wander. He wouldn’t exactly call him a friend, but that was more about Ryan being the quintessential loner than anything else. If Ryan had been a

different person—or if he'd met Wander before his life had gone to hell—they might've become best friends. "Tell me about your team. Anyone new?"

Wander owned a company that provided personal security for people, and over the years, he'd become the go-to guy for people involved in the kink community or with non-traditional sex lives. Wander himself was an experienced Dom, just like Ryan. Well, like Ryan had been. He no longer considered himself a Dom.

"I have one newbie, a young sub named Alex," Wander said, and Ryan blinked, refocusing.

"Still no women?"

"Not for lack of trying, but I ask a lot. I need people who are not only highly competent in personal security but also have the necessary background in kink. Or at least a familiarity with it, enough to be completely comfortable."

With his clientele, that was a necessity. "Who else is on this job? I'd like to know who I'm dealing with."

"Lowell, Jonah, and Caleb."

Lowell was a former cop, and Ryan liked his analytical approach. He was also a Dom with some interesting kink preferences. Jonah was a switch, which Ryan always found fascinating. Ryan couldn't even imagine himself as a sub, and how Jonah could switch between the two was a mystery. Caleb was a sub in training who loved serving others sexually. Ryan had happily availed himself of Caleb's mouth and ass on a previous job.

"Is Caleb still single?" he checked.

Wander laughed. "Yes, he is. But our newbie might interest you as well. Alex is a horny little fucker and an absolute slut."

Ryan perked up. "Is that so? And he's fair game?"

"He's inexperienced, so make sure to double-check consent, but other than that, yeah."

Oh, Ryan really liked the sound of that. "Good to know."

“If you wanna play with anyone, you have to get tested monthly or use condoms. If you wanna go bare, I also recommend going on PrEP, but that’s your choice.”

Going bare. It had been a while since he’d had that experience. Not since...

He swallowed.

Not since Quinton. Fuck, he couldn’t go there. It still hurt way too much.

He cleared his throat. “Noted. I’ll do the testing and go on PrEP. And you said we’re staying at the client’s house?”

“Jesse owns what I can only describe as a mansion. The place is legit massive, and we all have our own rooms.”

Ryan whistled. “Must be nice to have money. I wasn’t aware owning a club could make a man rich.”

“It’s family money. But Jesse is all too happy to have us stay with him. He also has a sub in training named David, the cutest boy you’ve ever seen...and one that can suck cock like he’s being graded on it.”

Ryan’s cock grew half-hard. “You really know how to sell me on this job.”

“I figured I had to somehow compensate for the weather, my friend.”

Three subs and a switch to serve him when he was horny? That was some compensation, all right. Maybe this job wouldn’t be so bad after all.

That evening, Ryan joined Wander and his team in the war room, a large room next to the library on the first floor. It was set up with a few conference tables, massive whiteboards, and a collection of laptops and computers. Ryan would need his own place to work as well, since he didn’t like being around other people all day, but for a start, this would do. And he was bound to find another empty room he could use. Wander hadn’t been exaggerating when he’d called Jesse’s house a mansion. Holy shit, Ryan had been in museums smaller than this.

“Jesse said he was on his way,” Alex said as he plopped down on a chair. The kid was undeniably cute with messy hair, gorgeous blue eyes, a tight body, and an ass to die for. Jesus, Ryan couldn’t wait to bury himself inside that bubble butt, but even he wouldn’t attempt that five minutes after meeting Alex for the first time. Though he had spotted a spark of interest in the kid’s eyes.

“He was just... finishing up with David,” Alex added.

Wander grinned. “Is that a touch of envy I hear in your voice?”

Alex shrugged, but his cheeks stained a delicious red. “You have to admit Jesse is easy on the eyes. I wouldn’t mind having his attention.”

“I don’t think he and David are exclusive, so maybe offer yourself to him?” Wander suggested.

Alex sat up straight. “Seriously? I thought David was his sub.”

“He is, but not exclusively. He’s in training as a service sub, but I got the impression that even though it’s a mutually enjoyable arrangement, it’s not permanent. Besides, Jesse allows David to take care of us, so I don’t see why he would set different rules for himself.”

“Different rules for what?” Jesse asked as he walked in, looking less stressed than he had an hour ago when Ryan had met him for the first time. Then again, before Ryan had even left Jesse’s office, the man had already snapped his fingers at David, telling him to be on his knees and ready for him. The sub must’ve done a good job taking care of his Dom.

David was adorable with his curls and slim body, but he was a bit too soft for Ryan’s taste. That didn’t mean he wouldn’t use his services, but somehow, Alex appealed more to him. He had a spark about him, something that promised fireworks. Ryan couldn’t wait to find out.

“Alex was wondering if you and David are exclusive on your end,” Wander said to Jesse, and Ryan grinned. Alex was in trouble now.

Jesse focused his attention on Alex, taking his time to study him. His smile was almost predatory. “Any particular reason you’re asking, boy?”

“I don’t... I mean... No, Sir,” Alex stammered.

“Tsk, tsk, tsk... Don’t lie to me, boy.”

Alex cringed a little, shooting a desperate look in Wander’s direction, but Wander shook his head. Nope, Alex was on his own here, and Ryan couldn’t agree more. The kid should know better than to lie to a Dom.

“Yes, Sir,” Alex said with a sigh. “My apologies, Sir.”

“I accept your apology. And now I’d like the truth, please. Why were you asking about me and David?”

“I was—”

“Look at me, boy.” Alex lifted his eyes and met Jesse’s hard stare. “That’s better. Now, continue.”

“I was just saying I was...envious of David, Sir. Of the attention you give him. Sir. I meant no disrespect.”

“Lying to me *is* disrespect, Alex. Telling me you want to kneel for me isn’t disrespect. It’s a compliment, one I value. Your submission is a gift, not something to hide or to be ashamed of.”

The blush on Alex’s cheeks had deepened, but his eyes lit up now. Interesting. Wander had mentioned the boy was an inexperienced sub, but Ryan was happy to see his submission confirmed. There was no other explanation for his strong reaction to Jesse’s words.

“Yes, Sir. Thank you, Sir.”

Jesse addressed Wander. “Please provide me with a schedule for young Alex here so I know when he’s off the clock. I don’t want to distract him from his duties, but it would be a waste not to take him up on his generous offer.”

Wander grinned widely. “Absolutely. It would be my pleasure. From what I’ve been told, he’s quite the cocksucker. Ask Mark. He’s already had a demonstration.”

Ryan had no idea who this Mark was, but his interest in Alex deepened. He loved a good blow job, especially if he could get rough with his sub, abuse his boy's throat thoroughly.

Well, not *his* boy. A boy. Or any guy, really. Since he wasn't a Dom anymore. At least, not officially.

Jesse raised an eyebrow, smiling. "Is that so? He comes highly recommended then." He turned his gaze back to Alex. "I look forward to evaluating your skills personally, boy."

Fucking hell, how long would this last? Ryan was hard as iron after that whole exchange, and with no immediate relief in sight—unless he availed himself of Alex's services as well—he'd much rather focus on the job.

He cleared his throat. "Now that you've whored Alex out, can we maybe get to business?"

Laughter exploded around the table, but even more satisfying was the intense blush on Alex's cheeks, especially in combination with the fire in his eyes. Did the boy have a bit of a humiliation kink? How perfect would that be?

Ryan was gonna have so much fun pushing his buttons.

He really needed to draw the line at getting fucked on a dining room table. The room, like everything else in the mansion, was richly decorated with velvet drapes and gilded accents, but all Alex could focus on was the thick cock doing a number on his ass.

He clenched his teeth as the edge of the mahogany table dug into his hips, no doubt leaving bruises. “Fuck...”

Why did it have to be Ryan who could fuck him like no one else? Jesse was nice and had a good-sized dick, but he was too gentle when he took Alex. Lowell was the right kind of rough and knew how to use his equipment, but he didn’t have that *edge* Ryan had. No, only Ryan could deliver that hard fuck and, at the same time, be dismissive and deliberately insulting enough to push the humiliation buttons deep inside Alex.

How Alex could be both turned on and embarrassed by the same thing, he’d never understand, but maybe the only explanation was that it was how he was wired, as much as he sometimes hated it.

Ryan slammed into him again, and a moan fell from Alex’s lips. He wished he could take it back because every sound he made only gave Ryan fuel. The man knew how to play Alex and never had any qualms about using Alex’s weaknesses against him. Ryan had started fucking Alex a week after they’d met, and Alex hated how much he loved Ryan’s attitude. When it came to sex, he didn’t want nice or soft. He

liked it rough and hard, preferably with that extra dose of humiliation Ryan always offered, treating Alex like the company slut he was. It was beyond fucked up, but what could he do?

Alex glanced at the ornate clock on the wall. Oh shit. Their work meeting was starting in under five minutes. If Ryan didn't hurry, the others would see Alex like this.

Hell no.

No fucking way.

He found it hard enough as it was to establish himself as a valid team member, considering he was the youngest, the newest addition, and a sub. He wasn't going to let his coworkers see him get railed like this.

"Ryan, get on with it," he panted, sweat dripping down his lean, tight body. "We don't have much time."

Instead of speeding up, Ryan slowed his thrusts and delivered a sharp slap to Alex's ass, making him yelp. "Shut up and take it, slut," Ryan growled. "You're not in charge here."

Heat sparked inside Alex. See? That was what he meant. He hated Ryan for saying that—which was why the guy did it—yet his body responded.

Every. Single. Time.

And Ryan, damn him, knew exactly the effect it had on Alex and happily used that to his advantage.

No, not happily. That man never did anything happily.

"Please, Sir..." Maybe a little begging and buttering Ryan up would work?

But Ryan bent over him, bringing his mouth close to Alex's ear as he drove his cock home with a snap. "I said no. And if you keep nagging, I'll wait until everyone is here and then finish, leaving you bent over the table with that luscious ass of yours sticking out for everyone to see. Is that what you want, hmm? Want everyone to see what a slut you are? How my cum is dripping out of your ass? How you were so needy

and hungry for my cock you needed me to fuck you at nine in the morning?”

Alex closed his eyes as his lungs seized and his cheeks burned. How did Ryan do that? How did he always manage to make Alex feel humiliated yet so aroused? He was fighting to repress his impending orgasm, for fuck's sake. That was how much those words turned him on. Alas, he wasn't allowed to come until Ryan gave him permission.

Ryan sped up again, pounding into Alex with such force he had to hold on to the edge of the table with all his might. He was close. He had to be close. Another anxious check of the clock. Jesus, three minutes left. And Wander was never late.

Ryan growled low and deep, his body jerking, and relief flooded Alex as Ryan's hot cum filled him, his release forgotten. He had bigger things to worry about. Ryan's nails dug into Alex's hips as he rode out his climax. With one final shudder, Ryan pulled out.

“Clean yourself up,” he said dismissively.

Alex scrambled to get dressed, his heart racing as footsteps approached from down the hall. As he adjusted his clothing, trying to look presentable, the door swung open, and Wander Dwyer, their boss, walked in. Jonah, Lowell, and Caleb followed on his heels.

“Christ, it smells like sex in here,” Wander said, his eyes twinkling with amusement. “Ryan, next time you fuck Alex, do it somewhere else, yeah? And if you really have to do it in this room, at least open the windows and clean the table.”

His face hot with embarrassment, Alex grabbed a wet wipe and furiously cleaned the part of the table he'd been bent over, removing the evidence of what had happened.

“Sorry, Wander,” Alex mumbled.

Wander put a quick hand on his shoulder. “I was reprimanding Ryan, not you.”

That, at least, made Alex feel a little better.

After a final swipe, Alex tossed the wipe into the waste basket and sat. The opulent room seemed to close in around him, the ornate chandelier above casting a warm glow on the polished mahogany table that no longer bore evidence of his recent escapade. He shifted in his chair, hyperaware of the lingering sensation between his legs and Ryan's cum soaking his underwear. Thank fuck he was wearing dark sweatpants that would hide the wet stains.

“All right, team.” Wander's commanding presence captured everyone's attention. “First, I want to say great job on our last assignment. Our client was pleased with our work, and that reflects well on all of us.”

Did Wander already have a new job for them? Alex was grateful for the opportunity Wander had given him and was eager to prove himself a valuable member of Dwyer Security. At only twenty-five, he was the youngest on the team—though Caleb was only a year older—but Alex was highly skilled in martial arts and marksmanship. He was hoping to put those talents to use on more thrilling assignments.

The job they'd wrapped up the day before had been a risk analysis for a state politician eyeing a run for the Senate. He'd been concerned about his sexual past, as he'd been active in the BDSM community, and he'd asked Wander and his team to assess how much of a liability his past could become. It had been interesting, but more paperwork and research than anything practical.

“Hopefully, we'll get something more exciting,” Alex said. “Not that I didn't enjoy the risk analysis stuff, but I'm more of a hands-on guy.”

“Hands-on, huh?” Ryan smirked, leaning back in his chair and shooting Alex a knowing glance. “Is that what they're calling it these days, baby boy?”

Heat crept up Alex's neck, but he refused to let Ryan's jab get to him. Instead, he focused on Wander, who appeared unfazed by the comment.

“I agree with you, Alex,” Wander said. “We could all use a more active assignment. I've got a meeting with a potential

client this afternoon, a lady who's a close friend of Jesse's neighbors."

They'd moved in with Jesse as part of their job to protect him and find out who'd been threatening him, but after they'd caught the culprit—Wander had gotten shot in the showdown—Jesse had asked them to stay because he liked their company. Since Wander had hoped to stay in the Capital District area of New York, around Albany, and they'd all loved the atmosphere in Jesse's house, Wander had accepted on behalf of the whole team.

Including Ryan, who, for some reason, had also decided to stick around. Alex had expected him to leave, especially considering how much the man had bitched and moaned about the weather during the winter, but one day, Wander had announced Ryan was now officially part of the team. Why that had made Alex so happy was something he preferred not to spend too much time on. It had to be the spectacular sex.

"Do we have any idea what the problem is the lady needs help with?" Lowell asked.

"Something to do with horse racing and a dead horse." Wander shrugged. "At this point, that's all I know."

Horse racing? That was a new one.

As the meeting continued, Alex stole glances at Ryan, whose smug grin still lingered. Ryan enjoyed pushing his buttons, but Alex was determined to prove he wasn't some submissive plaything—at least, not when it came to their work.

"All right, let's wrap this up," Wander said after discussing a few more matters. "I want all of you in the gym for some physical sparring, yeah?"

Alex rubbed his hands at the mention of hand-to-hand combat. As a mixed martial arts expert, he loved blowing off steam that way and showing what he was capable of. "Sounds fun." He flexed his muscles. "I'm always up for a good fight."

"Good, because you'll be paired with Ryan." Wander winked at Alex. "Teach him who's boss."

Alex could've kissed him, but all he gave was a wide smile.

As the team members filed out of the room, Alex took a moment to collect himself, straightening his clothes and running a hand through his messy hair. He was a security specialist, dammit, and he wasn't going to let Ryan's teasing or his own insecurities hold him back. Not even when the cum dripping out of his ass was more than a little distracting.

"Hey, Alex," Ryan called as they walked out of the room. "Nice job in there. Really showed off your...talents."

Alex forced a smile. "Thanks. But remember that on the mat, I'm the one who's the boss."

With a wink, Alex strode down the hallway, leaving a speechless Ryan behind.

He got changed, using the opportunity to clean his ass and remove the reminders of Ryan. Dressed in shorts and a tank top, he headed into the gym, where the others had already assembled.

Jesse's house had a gym room, a sizable space on the first floor. Top-of-the-line treadmills, weight machines, and free weights lined the walls. A punching bag Alex often used was hung in a corner and one wall was nothing but mirrors. Alex's favorite was the center of the room: a sparring area with a padded floor. On that mat, Alex was boss—and he intended to prove that to Ryan.

Ryan was in excellent shape, all lean muscle. Alex couldn't deny that. The man was in his early forties but had quick reflexes. No wonder. He'd been a homicide detective before he'd become a PI. He was maybe two inches taller than Alex and probably a bit heavier, but that didn't matter. The only thing that mattered on the mat was how good you were. And Alex was the best.

Ryan took position across from Alex on the mat, dressed in a similar outfit as Alex.

"Ready to get your ass kicked?" Alex taunted, bouncing on the balls of his feet.

Ryan cracked his knuckles, but his smile didn't reach his eyes. "Bring it on, kid."

As soon as Wander gave the signal, the two men lunged at each other. Alex was quick on his feet, dodging Ryan's punch and countering with a swift jab to Ryan's ribs. Ryan grunted.

"Too slow, old man!" Alex danced around Ryan.

Ryan narrowed his eyes and feigned an attack, but his gaze darted to the side he was aiming for. Alex anticipated and brought his weight forward. Ryan couldn't budge him, but because he'd leaned into it, his balance was off. With one sweep, Alex yanked his feet from under him, and Ryan hit the mat with a heavy thud.

"Is that all you've got?" Alex circled Ryan. Adrenaline pumped through him, fueling his body.

Ryan growled, rising to his feet and charging once more. Alex anticipated his strategy, blocking and deflecting each strike with ease. Ryan's eyes kept signaling what he was about to do, and his moves were too slow to be a surprise. Alex kept evading him, dancing and slipping just out of Ryan's reach.

"Come on, Ryan..." Alex ducked under a clumsy punch. "You're making this too easy for me."

"Shut up!"

"Make me." Alex landed a well-placed kick to Ryan's chest that sent him stumbling backward.

Muffled laughter rang out from the others, who were watching the fight with thinly disguised glee. Alex took a glance sideways while Ryan scrambled to his feet again. Wander stood with his arms crossed, grinning. Unlike the others, he wasn't even trying to hide his amusement.

Ryan roared, lunging at Alex with newfound determination. But he was still no match for Alex's agility and expertise. When he'd had enough, Alex brought him down to the mat again with a one-leg takedown, then forced Ryan onto his stomach and put his head in a tight lock.

"Give up yet?"

“Fine.” It came out between gritted teeth as Ryan tapped out. “You win this round.”

“Remember,” Alex whispered into Ryan’s ear, “in here, I’m the boss.”

Ryan gripped the steering wheel as he navigated the winding road to Ballston Spa, an idyllic little town he'd driven through before. The rolling hills of the Capital Region of New York lit up under the sun in a palette of oranges, reds, and yellows, showcasing the fall in all its spectacular colors. Scattered white clouds resembling puffs of cotton dotted the brilliant sky. As Ryan drove past, the dry leaves on the road swirled into the air, then drifted down again without hurry.

He'd never seen colors like this, and he now understood why people came to this part of the country in the autumn. The winters were horrific, but man, the fall was quite the show. A big difference from Texas, where fall was a game of fifty shades of brown and yellow. His fingers itched to grab his camera and take some pictures, but it would have to wait until he had time. Maybe they'd be able to wrap this case up quickly so he could set out to explore. On his own.

Ryan cast a sidelong glance at Alex in the passenger seat. "All right, let me fill you in on what I know," he said. "Our new client is Ms. Marilyn Vandervliet. She owned a racehorse that recently died after being drugged, and she wants us to find out who's responsible."

"Why'd Wander pick you to take the lead?" Alex adjusted his sunglasses.

"Because this is more a PI case than security, and since we had no other cases, he asked me to take it. He wants you to tag

along so you can learn.”

He couldn't blame Alex for this, as it had been Wander's call, but Jesus Christ, Ryan wasn't happy about Alex shadowing him. The kid was a fantastic fuck but way too young for this kind of work, which took a type of life experience Alex didn't have yet. “I'm not thrilled about training a newbie, but I'll do it as long as you prove you're serious and willing to learn.”

Alex didn't respond, and Ryan checked his expression. Yup, the kid was hurt. Just as Ryan had expected. If he wanted to succeed in this job, he'd have to grow a thicker skin.

“That's a yes on both counts. Tell me what I need to do, and I'll do it.” Alex sounded determined, so at least he had that going for him.

“Observe and listen. Let me handle the conversation. I need to get a first impression of our client, and the best way to do that is by creating an uninterrupted dynamic with her and building a relationship. So be a good boy and watch me do the work.”

“Don't play me like that. You know what those words do to me. Don't use that against me.”

Alex had said it quietly, but his words still hit Ryan hard. “I didn't mean to...”

Fuck, he had. As much as he wanted to deny it, he had deliberately appealed to Alex's submissive character. Every time he called Alex a good boy, the kid's face lit up like a fireworks show. And Ryan *had* used that against him, which was not only unfair but also bordered on unethical, especially in a professional situation.

“You're right. That was a low blow.”

“It was.”

Alex didn't back down, and Ryan respected that. “It won't happen again.”

“Good.”

Ryan cleared his throat. “I should’ve checked before we left, but you’re carrying, right?”

“Yup.”

“Good.” He sighed. “Getting a concealed carry license is no joke here.”

“Did you have to do that whole in-person course as well?”

“Don’t even get me started. Sixteen hours of sheer boredom.”

“I would’ve thought they’d make an exception for cases like yours. Since you’re a former cop and all.”

“I’m sure they would have had I been a cop somewhere in New York. I guess people from Texas are considered cowboys here.”

Alex chuckled. “You’re saying that’s without reason? No offense, but you kinda are one.”

“Do you see cowboy boots on my feet? Or a Stetson on my head?”

“No, but I would pay good money for that. And you’ve got the Texas drawl and all, especially when you’re tired. Or slightly drunk.”

Ryan laughed despite himself. Alex had paid more attention to him than he’d realized, and he liked it. “Keep dreaming, kid. I’m a cowboy at heart, not anywhere else.”

He took the turn the navigation indicated and pulled up to their destination, a sprawling horse farm between Ballston Spa and Saratoga Springs. The rolling green pastures surrounded by white fences and the farm’s barns painted in the classic red with white trim that seemed to be the colors of choice for this area made for an idyllic scene.

If not for the fall colors, it could almost have been the Texas Hill Country, and a pang of longing hit Ryan. He’d spent many hours there, driving around, looking for the perfect shot. Beautiful didn’t even begin to describe it, though he loved the city of Austin as well. He hadn’t been home in over

a year. But in a few weeks, he'd return to Austin for his mom's sixty-fifth birthday. He wouldn't miss that for the world.

As he parked and got out, the scent of freshly cut hay and manure filled his nostrils. Oh yeah, that at least was all too familiar. Ryan hadn't ridden in a while, but those smells brought back plenty of childhood memories. His best friend had lived on a small ranch, and he'd spent countless hours there, helping out and being allowed to ride their horses as a reward.

A woman in her midsixties, dressed in faded jeans, a flannel shirt, and a pair of Western-style boots, approached them. Her gray hair was pulled back into a tight bun, and she wore only a hint of makeup.

"Ms. Vandervliet?" Ryan extended his hand, offering her a handshake. "I'm Ryan Mason, and this is my colleague, Alex Beck."

"Call me Marilyn," she said, her voice strong and commanding. "Thank you for coming, and welcome to Vandervliet Farms."

Ryan looked around. "You breed horses?"

"Thoroughbreds. We sell most, but we keep a few each year to race with."

Ryan had known that already from the quick background check he'd done, but he wanted to hear everything from Marilyn herself, in her own words. "You're from this area originally?"

"My family has owned this farm since the mid-eighteen hundreds." She gestured to the main house. "Please, let's sit and talk."

They followed her inside. The living room was cozy and inviting, with worn leather furniture and shelves filled with horse racing memorabilia. One glass display cabinet showed off countless trophies and medals.

Marilyn sat in an armchair, her back straight as a rod, while Ryan and Alex sat on the couch.

“Tell us, in your own words, what happened and why you wanted to hire us,” Ryan prompted, his eyes fixed on her face as he cataloged her every move and expression.

“Are you familiar with horse racing?”

“Not at all.”

“Okay, so let me start by saying that the Travers Stakes is the most prominent race on the Saratoga Race Course. It’s a classic that’s been held since 1864, the year after the track opened. My great-great-great-grandfather was there, by the way, so that tells you how deep my family’s roots are in the track. The Travers Stakes is a Grade One Thoroughbred horse race for three-year-olds, held annually in late August. This year, I entered my horse, Sam’s Promise.”

“What does Grade One mean?”

“Races are categorized into different grades based on the kinds of horses that participate, the historical significance of the race, and the prize money offered. Grade One races are the most elite, so to speak.”

“Gotcha. Please continue.”

“Sam’s Promise was doing great during the race.” Marilyn’s eyes welled up with tears, and she took a deep breath. “But when he reached the final stretch, he...collapsed. Miguel, the jockey riding him, went down as well, breaking his clavicle and arm in the process. When I reached them, it was already too late. Sam’s Promise had died.”

“What was your first reaction?”

“Shock. Utter disbelief. But I thought it was a tragic accident, you know? It happens on occasion, no matter how well we take care of our horses and how often they’re checked.”

That much Ryan knew. He didn’t follow horse racing, but he’d seen news reports about horses collapsing or fatal injuries during races. “When did you find out it hadn’t been an accident?”

Her face tightened. “The New York State Gaming Commission suspected foul play and requested the Saratoga Police to investigate. They asked the equine pathologist to perform a necropsy, and she discovered Sam’s Promise had been doped with EPO.”

Alex had been listening while occasionally tapping something on his phone, and a quick glance sideways confirmed he was taking some notes. Smart. Hopefully, he’d written down that they’d have to look into what EPO was. It rang a bell, but Ryan couldn’t place it. “Who did the necropsy?”

“Dr. Eve Simmons, a well-respected equine pathologist. We’ve known each other for years, and I don’t doubt her conclusions. But of course the police didn’t believe me when I told them I knew nothing about it. They suspect an insurance scam, that I killed him to make money.” She shook her head, her eyes blazing. “As if I would ever kill a horse. And besides, if I wanted to do that, I sure as hell wouldn’t use EPO. It’s far too easily detected.”

Hmm, interesting. Of course she could’ve used EPO because it was so obvious, but that defied logic.

The fire went out of her eyes, and she sagged a little. “The cops are building their case and told me to expect charges against me once they have enough evidence.”

“Well, if you didn’t do it, the latter’s gonna be a problem,” Ryan said. “There can’t be evidence against you if you’re innocent, so that should buy us some time.”

Marilyn leaned forward. “I need you to find out who did this. Sam’s Promise meant the world to me, and I can’t let his death go unpunished.”

Her first thought was for the horse, not her reputation. Everything she’d said so far led Ryan to believe she was innocent—and he’d become a good judge of character over the years.

“I have to be honest with you, Marilyn. I don’t know much about horse racing or breeding.” He studied her for any signs

of doubt. “But if you entrust me with this case, I’m committed to figuring out who did this to Sam’s Promise.”

Marilyn nodded, her expression fierce and determined. “I’ll help you in any way I can. Anything you need, let me know. I’ve instructed my staff to talk to you, and you have free access to my farm, my finances, anything you want. We have a security system, and I’ve already put the footage from the three weeks before the race onto a hard drive for you.”

“Good. Then I’ll gladly take the case.”

She blew out a breath. “Thank you. I need to know who did this.”

“Do you have any documents related to this case other than the security footage? Emails, reports, news articles, anything the police gave you?”

“Of course.” Marilyn reached into a drawer beside her chair, pulled out a thick file folder, and handed it to Ryan. “I’ve gathered everything I could find since the incident because I figured you’d need it. Unfortunately, the police weren’t willing to give me a copy of the necropsy report, and the cops told me not to contact Eve Simmons, so I only know the conclusion. But if you need more information, just let me know.”

Ryan flipped through the file. God, he loved organized people. His mind raced with questions and potential leads as he tried to piece together the puzzle. “Is there anyone you suspect might be behind this? Anyone with a grudge against you or your horses? Any reason someone would want to do this? I know this is a tough question because no one likes accusing others, but it could give us a place to start.”

Marilyn hesitated for a moment, her gaze dropping to the floor. “One person comes to mind. Caroline Fletcher, a rival breeder. She’s been my proverbial nemesis for years, but I never thought she’d be capable of something like this. Still, she’s the only person I can think of who hates me enough to hurt my horses.”

“Caroline Fletcher,” Ryan repeated, filing the name away. He made a mental note to look into her background and connections as soon as possible. “We’ll look into her. Who had access to Sam’s Promise before the race?”

“Only my stable hands and Miguel, the jockey, but they’ve been with me for years. I trust them.”

The sound of the front door opening snapped Ryan’s attention away from Marilyn. A tall, attractive man walked into the room, his confident stride carrying him across the hardwood floor. He bent over Marilyn and kissed her forehead. “Sorry for being late, darling.”

Darling? The man was a good deal younger than Marilyn, and Ryan had figured he was Marilyn’s son, but the look that passed between them was anything but platonic.

The man extended a hand to Ryan. “Sam Kroll, Marilyn’s partner. I apologize for being late, but I had a difficult delivery.”

Delivery? “Ryan Mason. You’re a doctor?”

“A vet. Had to deliver a calf that was in breech position, and it took longer than I had expected.”

He shook Alex’s hand as well, then sat on the armrest of Marilyn’s chair.

“How long have you been together?” Ryan asked.

“About five years.” Sam raised his chin ever so slightly.

“Sam’s Promise was named after Sam,” Marilyn said. “He’s been such a rock for me through all this.” Her eyes shimmered with gratitude as she looked at her partner.

“Of course.” Sam kissed the top of her head. “You’re not alone in this.”

The first rule of homicides was that the closest relatives were always the first suspects, especially partners. Ryan reckoned that held true for a horse murder as well. As a veterinarian, Sam would have access to the drugs administered to Sam’s Promise. And though it wasn’t nice of Ryan, the age

gap between Sam and Marilyn made him suspicious. He was a cynical bastard, so sue him.

“So, Sam, as a vet, you know all the ins and outs of EPO, I’m sure. What can you tell me?”

Sam’s face tightened, but then he nodded. “I’m not an expert in that area, but I can give you the basics. EPO is the abbreviation for erythropoietin, a hormone naturally produced by the kidneys that plays a critical role in oxygen transport. It stimulates the production of red blood cells, which carry oxygen to all the cells and organs in the body. The synthetic version has been known to be used by athletes to enhance performance, especially in endurance sports, as the extra oxygen helps prevent muscle acidification.”

Endurance sports. That was where Ryan had come across EPO. “There have been EPO scandals in the Tour de France.”

His brother-in-law loved watching that, even though the man was a true Texas cowboy and had never ridden a bike. Somehow he’d taken a liking to the sport and watched all the big cycling races.

Sam nodded. “That’s one example. Marathon runners have also been caught using it.”

Alex cleared his throat. “Excuse me, but how long was the race Sam’s Promise was running?”

That was a good question. Ryan hadn’t thought of that, but it couldn’t have been an endurance event. Horse races were usually sprints.

“Ten furlongs, or one and a quarter mile,” Marilyn said.

“Would injecting EPO be beneficial for such a short race?” Ryan asked Sam.

Sam pressed his lips together. “I can’t say for sure because it’s not my area of expertise, but I don’t think it would have a huge effect. Maybe if the horse had been using EPO for a longer period and had been running longer distances before the race, giving the body time to build the extra red blood cells.”

“But that would mess with his training schedule,” Marilyn said. “They train for ten furlongs, not more. Longer distances necessitate a different approach. Plus, that would require multiple injections of EPO, so someone would’ve needed access that whole time.”

That made sense. Ryan had participated in track and field in high school, and he’d always focused on the endurance events because he had the build to go long but not fast. “So how did the EPO cause Sam’s Promise to die?”

“I haven’t seen the necropsy report, but my guess is a blood clot. Excessive levels of red blood cells lead to thickening of the blood,” Sam explained. “My assumption is he threw a blood clot that caused cardiac arrest.”

Ryan winced. What a sad, gruesome way for that poor horse to die. “And you said EPO is easily detected?”

“It’s on the list of banned substances,” Marilyn said. “After the race, the officials always take urine and blood samples from the winners. Standard procedure. And EPO is one of the things they check for.”

Ryan frowned. “So if Sam’s Promise hadn’t died, he would’ve been tested, and the EPO would’ve been detected anyway?”

Marilyn nodded. “If he had shown, yes.”

“Shown?”

“Come in first, second, or third place. Other horses are chosen randomly, but the three winners are always tested.”

“Would Sam’s Promise have shown?” Alex asked before Ryan could. He could hardly fault him for that, as it was, once again, a good question.

Marilyn’s eyes filled with tears. “He was in second place when he collapsed. That poor horse raced his heart out for us...and it killed him. I’ll never forgive myself for not seeing something was wrong.”

Sam wrapped his arm around her. “This wasn’t on you, darling. No one saw anything amiss, not even Miguel, and he

knew that horse better than anyone.”

Marilyn took a shuddering breath and composed herself. “I apologize. Getting emotional doesn’t help.”

Ryan waved her apology away. “I understand you’re distraught. This was a heavy, personal loss for you. We will do whatever we can to find out the truth. You have my word.”

Marilyn’s expression hardened. “I want justice for Sam’s Promise.”

“Justice is what we’re after,” Ryan assured her, his resolve steeling. By now, he was convinced Marilyn wasn’t involved, which meant some bastard had killed an innocent animal. And Ryan was determined to find out who. “We’ll review the file you gave us and start digging. We’ll be in touch again soon, probably tomorrow. In the meantime, it would help if you could give us a list of names of everyone who works here and anyone else who had access to Sam’s Promise. We’ll also need a timeline of the days leading up to the race.”

“Absolutely. I’ll get right on that.”

Marilyn escorted them outside. Before Ryan got into his car, he took one last look at Marilyn’s sorrowful expression and then turned to Alex. “Let’s get to work.”

Ryan might be an asshole and a grouch, but he was an organized one. The bedroom on the second floor of Jesse's mansion that Ryan had commandeered and turned into his office looked nothing like what Alex would've expected from a private investigator. He'd been shocked the first time he'd walked in, and even now that he'd been there a few times, it still jarred him.

It was immaculately organized and spotless, with every surface free from clutter. Neat stacks of colored folders occupied the edge of the desk, the table in the middle of the room was empty, and a massive whiteboard covered most of one wall, black magnets at the bottom waiting to be used. How could a guy who dressed like he only owned three shirts and two pairs of jeans keep a space this tidy? The man truly was an enigma.

No chaos, no full ashtrays, no cigar-smoking PI—though Ryan did have the sarcastic, gruff exterior of one. In that sense, he was almost typecast, but he'd shown a different side of himself at Marilyn's. A softer one.

Alex wasn't sure what to think of that. Was it an act? A mask Ryan put on? Or did he really have a heart buried deep inside the walls he'd built around himself? The compassion and professionalism he'd demonstrated made him seem almost human. It was a refreshing change, but Alex would rather swallow nails than admit it aloud.

“What did you think of Marilyn?” Ryan asked him, pulling Alex from his thoughts. “What were your first impressions?”

Shit, was this some kind of test? He hadn't known he was supposed to look for something in particular. “She was nice. Distraught, but that's understandable. That horse meant a lot to her.”

Ryan made an impatient gesture with his hand. “I'm talking about guilt. Did she in any way show she might be guilty?”

“Of killing Sam's Promise?”

Ryan rolled his eyes. “Obviously.”

Right. Alex thought back on the conversation, the impression Marilyn had made. “I don't see a motive for her,” he said slowly.

“Explain.”

“The cops think she did it as an insurance scam, but she has money. Your background research showed that, but you could tell by the state her farm was in. Everything was well-maintained and freshly painted. No signs of decay or lack of upkeep. Plus, she wore a diamond ring.”

“Sam could've given that to her.”

“It was too old. Looked like an heirloom ring. And she said the farm had been in her family for many generations and they have a long history in horse racing. Her whole house was filled with pictures of her family, proud people posing next to racehorses. The woman loves what she does. It's in her blood. That doesn't sound like someone who would pick such an obvious scheme for money. And she knows way too much about it to choose EPO if she wanted to kill a horse. They check for it, so she would've known she'd get caught...” He trailed off when Ryan kept staring at him. “What?”

“Nothing.”

“Then why are you staring?”

Ryan hesitated. “I was surprised. You picked up on a lot more than I had expected.”

Alex blinked. Had he heard that correctly? Had Ryan... complimented him? "Wander didn't hire me because of my looks, you know."

Ryan snorted. "He probably did because you sucked his cock the best."

Alex raised his chin. "I didn't."

"You didn't what?"

"Suck his cock."

Ryan quirked an eyebrow. "You want me to believe that our team slut hasn't had sex with the boss?"

Alex crossed his arms. "Believe what you want, but it's the truth. I wouldn't have refused if he'd asked me to, but he got involved with Burke and became monogamous."

"Yeah, don't remind me. The man's gone soft. That's what happens when you let yourself get shackled into a relationship."

Shackled. Wow, Ryan made no secret of his opinions on relationships, did he? "Anyway, all I'm saying is Wander didn't hire me for my looks or, as you put it, because I sucked his cock. I may not have your experience, but I've got skills, and I'm willing to learn whatever I need to."

Ryan licked his lips. "Oh, you certainly have *skills*."

Alex's cheeks heated. "That's two compliments today. Careful, or I may start to think you like me."

"I like the way you feel around my cock. Big difference."

It had sounded strangely forced, but nothing on Ryan's face indicated he'd been joking. Alex's face fell. Why was he always expecting Ryan to be nice to him? He should know better by now. "Whatever. Can we get back to the job?"

"I need you to do research. Immerse yourself in the world of horse racing and familiarize yourself with the terminology, the key players, everything."

"And what am I looking for?"

“Crimes like these are usually driven by money, power, or sex. Keep those motives in mind when you’re digging. Look for anything suspicious and follow your gut.”

“Money, power, sex. Got it.”

He’d damn well prove to Ryan why Wander had hired him and that it had nothing to do with his sexual skills. He settled at the table behind his laptop and dove into his research, starting with the history of the Saratoga Race Course. The famous racecourse had a rich past and was one of the oldest horse tracks in the country, dating back to 1863, when it first opened its doors. Jeez, they’d opened it in the middle of the Civil War? You’d think they would’ve had other things to focus on.

Anyway, hadn’t Marilyn said one of her ancestors had been present? Another sign of her family’s deep ties with horse racing. A woman like her would never put her reputation and that of her family on the line.

Hmm, reputation. That was linked to power, wasn’t it? Marilyn’s reputation was now in tatters. Who could’ve wanted that? Maybe that rival she had mentioned, this Caroline Fletcher. Alex wrote the word *reputation* on a notepad and circled it.

As he researched the gritty world of horse racing and learned about furlongs, geldings, the Triple Crown, and legendary horses like Secretariat, he grew intrigued by the complex web of relationships, rivalries, and secrets that seemed to define the industry.

And money. Jesus, so much money. Those horses were fucking expensive.

Plus, gambling. The total amount wagered on horse racing in the United States was around eleven billion annually, and that number continued to grow. The industry was fueled by high stakes and even higher risks, where fortunes could be made or lost in a single race. He jotted down this information as another potential angle to investigate.

Since he figured Ryan would want to know, he also researched EPO and doping in horse racing in general. The sport had had its scandals, including some famous Kentucky Derby winners who had been stripped of their crowns after getting caught doping. It only reinforced that Marilyn would've known Sam's Promise would be checked for EPO if he'd shown.

EPO had to be injected, he learned, either into a vein or the skin. That meant someone would've needed access to the horse long enough to give him one or more shots close to the race. That seemed a lot harder to do than, say, throwing something into the food or water. He'd have to check with Marilyn, but surely security around her farm was tight, especially before big races.

"Talk to me," Ryan said, and when Alex looked up from his laptop, two hours had passed without him noticing.

"I found something interesting. Gambling is huge in horse racing. Most owners bet on their own horses but so do a lot of rich people. We're talking massive amounts of money. Maybe someone would benefit financially if Sam's Promise didn't show?"

"Definitely worth looking into. What else?"

Alex shared what he'd found out about EPO.

"Good work. I've asked Caleb to look at the security footage from Marilyn's farm. He has facial recognition software he can use to create a list of every face that appears on the feed. That way, we can compile a list of everyone who was there."

"That assumes the EPO was administered at the farm."

Ryan cocked his head. "Where else would it be?"

"Before the race, at the track itself. The horses are assigned stalls where they stay until their warm-up begins. Horses traveling from farther away stay there for multiple days, but since Marilyn lives so close, she wouldn't have needed to use the stalls. But she must've had Sam's Promise at the track for several hours before the race."

Ryan tapped his fingers on his desk. “Much harder to control the environment there.”

“They supposedly have tight security, and you need clearance to access that part of the track, which is limited to owners, jockeys, trainers, support staff, veterinarians, those kinds of people.”

“That’s still a hell of a long list.” Ryan scribbled on a notepad. “Let me reach out to the track and see if they’re willing to show me the footage. I’m sure they handed it over to the cops as well.”

“What did you discover?”

“I’m running a background check on Sam right now. I already did a more thorough one on Marilyn.”

“You think Sam might be guilty?” Alex knew that looking at close relatives and friends was often the first step in any investigation, but he hadn’t picked up on any deceit in Marilyn’s partner. Had he missed something?

“Sam’s a vet, so he has access. And being Marilyn’s boyfriend, he could have motive.”

“Sam seemed genuinely in love with her,” Alex protested. Sam had been so concerned for Marilyn, so sweet to her.

“People can show you what they want you to see. You don’t think it’s a little suspicious he’s so much younger? He’s probably after her money, or maybe he’s hoping she’ll give him a leg up as a vet, connect him to the right people. You’re naïve if you think people don’t have ulterior motives. You’ve still got a lot to learn, kid.”

“Naïve? I’ve lived in more countries and seen more of the world than you ever have,” Alex shot back.

“Really?” Ryan frowned. “How come?”

“Army brat. My dad was stationed all over the world—Germany, South Korea, the Philippines, Hawaii... My siblings and I moved with him wherever he went. I spent most of my childhood outside the US.”

“Interesting. I’m sure you’ve learned a lot from that, but that doesn’t mean you’re not naïve. You still believe in the good in people. As a homicide detective, I’ve seen the very worst people are capable of, so my faith in humanity has long since vanished.”

Ryan’s face had hardened, and a flicker of pain had crossed his eyes. For some reason, talking about this was difficult for him, as if it stirred up bad memories. There had to be a reason he’d quit and decided to become a PI, but Alex didn’t dare ask.

But seeing Ryan’s pain triggered something within Alex, a strange weakness in his stomach. He had the weird urge to reach out and comfort Ryan. Not an urge he would act on. Hell no. Nothing good could come from seeing Ryan like that, and attempting to get closer to him would only end with Alex getting hurt. What they had was sex and nothing else. Alex couldn’t afford to let himself get emotionally attached, not when he knew how hard Ryan would shoot that shit down.

“What did you find out about Sam?” he asked instead.

Ryan shrugged. “Nothing special so far. He’s a respected vet, paid off his student loans, and moved in with Marilyn three years ago. No criminal record, not so much as even a parking ticket. The dude’s squeaky clean. So far.”

Alex opened his mouth, then closed it again. Arguing with Ryan was useless, so why waste his energy? They both had their own perspectives on the world, shaped by their unique experiences.

“Okay, what’s next?”

“I found the footage from the race, so we’re gonna watch that.” Ryan made a face. “Not looking forward to that.”

That was an interesting statement from a hardened homicide detective.

“I hate seeing animals get hurt,” Ryan said. Maybe he’d seen something on Alex’s face. He really needed to work on masking his emotions. “Bothers me far more than humans.”

They're defenseless, you know? And I love horses. They're magnificent creatures."

He seemed to catch himself, then cleared his throat. "Anyway, we'll watch that, and then we'll dig into the betting angle. We need to look into who would financially gain from Sam's Promise being taken out of the competition. Let's start by looking at the odds, the competition, and the most likely beneficiaries if Sam's Promise were to lose or not race at all. Also, we should check if any suspicious bets have been placed for that race, including by Marilyn herself. Though I'm sure the cops verified that as well."

"By Marilyn? I thought you'd cleared her?"

"Not definitively. I'll admit I so far have no evidence that she's guilty, but in my world, no one is innocent until proven, kid. Get used to it."

Damn, what would it be like to go through life with such dark glasses on, always thinking the cup was half empty? It would drive Alex mad.

"But first, we're gonna take a break."

"A break?"

Ryan grinned as he unzipped his pants and took out his cock, then gave it a lazy tug. "Yeah. I'm a little tense, so on your knees, baby boy."

He shouldn't. He really, really shouldn't. Not when he hated being called that and needed to make it clear once and for all that he was to be taken seriously. But he couldn't drag his eyes off that cock, which was plumping in Ryan's hand, and before he knew it, he was on his knees.

And when he had that cock in his mouth, Ryan ramming it down his throat until tears and snot and saliva covered Alex's face, it didn't matter anymore. Nothing mattered except that and how good it made him feel.

Fuck.

He was such a slut.

About the only thing Ryan liked more than sex was a good case, and this definitely qualified as one. With most cases he'd handled, either as a homicide detective or as a PI, he'd had a clear idea of where to go from the start or developed one soon after, but this one had him stumped. None of the research they'd done so far had hinted at a possible suspect or a motive, which was unusual.

Ryan loved it. It got his blood all fired up, reminding him of his days as a detective in Austin. Not that he'd ever want to go back there. Or to that job. Too many painful memories. No, he'd focus on rebuilding a life here.

When Wander had asked him to formally join the team, Ryan hadn't needed much time to consider it, much to his own surprise. He liked Wander, loved working for him, and he could hardly complain about the benefits, which included his new shadow, Alex. The kid was deliciously dirty and horny, and Ryan was here for it.

He'd expected to grow irritated by sharing a house with so many others, but he had enough alone time to make up for the companionship at mealtimes. His room was plenty big and had a little sitting area with a couch and TV where Ryan could hang out if he needed to be by himself. Which was less often than he would've guessed.

The couch was also perfect to bend Alex over, one of Ryan's favorite ways to relax after a long day. And fuck, the kid loved it just as much. He was always ready for it, always

prepped—though that was also at Ryan’s request. The last thing he wanted when in the mood to fuck was to waste valuable time prepping the boy’s ass when the kid could do that job perfectly well himself. So Ryan had made clear he expected Alex to be ready for him, and Alex had obeyed so far. One of the many reasons why they were a good match.

For sex. Just sex.

Wander had mentioned Alex needed a Dom to get more training as a sub. He’d done a few sessions at The Exchange with different Doms, experimenting with bondage and impact play, but he needed a more consistent approach. Wander had looked at Ryan when he’d mentioned that, but Ryan had pretended to not get the hint. He wasn’t training Alex or anyone else. His days as a Dom were over, even if his hands sometimes itched to get back into it.

Alex would be such a perfect sub. Ryan had no doubt about that. Breaking in a new sub was always fun, and a little slut like Alex? Ryan could think of a million things to do with him, so many ways to push his buttons and force him out of his comfort zone. He was so wonderfully responsive and so goddamn eager.

But Ryan wouldn’t have the honor of training Alex. He couldn’t do it, even when the thought of someone else training Alex pissed him off for some reason. No, he needed to keep his emotional distance from Alex. And if that meant he was sometimes a bit more cruel and dismissive than usual, even with subs who loved humiliation play, so be it. Alex couldn’t latch onto him.

Anyway, he had to focus on business rather than pleasure right now. They were on their way to the Saratoga Race Course to meet with Daisy, a friend of Marilyn’s who worked at the track and was willing to give them a tour. Hopefully, they’d also run into some other people they could ask questions.

They parked in the massive parking lot, which sat all but empty, the wind whipping up mini tornadoes of leaves. It felt desolate, even a little ominous.

“Ever feel like you’re in a post-apocalyptic movie?” Ryan asked as they walked toward the entrance. “You know, where there’s only two of us left on Earth and one of us has to repopulate the planet?”

Alex snorted. “Can’t say that I do.”

“We’ve already got the sex part down. We just need to work on our procreation skills.”

Alex chuckled at the lame joke. “Good luck with that. I think we’re missing some necessary equipment.”

“We could still practice?”

Alex was quiet for a moment. “I’m always up for that...but not today. I have my first scene with Master Mark tonight.”

Master Mark? He was a Dom Wander had met at The Exchange. Ryan had met the man twice and hadn’t hated him, which was high praise in his book. Didn’t mean he was happy about him training Alex. “Why?”

“Because I want to become a better sub, and he’s willing to teach me.”

Fuck. Wander had found someone for Alex then. Ryan could hardly be upset since he’d rejected the job himself. So why did it sting? “Have fun with that,” he said, his voice hoarse.

“Thanks. I’m not sure *fun* is the right term, but I’m sure I’ll learn a lot.”

Ryan ruthlessly shoved down the emotions inside him and focused on the case. He’d become an expert at that over the last few years.

A petite woman in her mid-thirties with wavy auburn hair tied in a loose ponytail waited for them at the entrance. “Hey there! You must be Ryan and Alex. I’m Daisy.”

Her handshake was firm. “Ryan Mason.”

She shook Alex’s hand as well, then tilted her head. “What are you looking for here?”

“We were hoping you could give us a tour of the place and fill us in on some of the history. I want to get an impression of horse racing, since we’re unfamiliar with this world.”

“Of course! I’d be happy to show you around. Please put these visitor badges on so security will know you’ve been cleared.”

They clipped the badges on and followed Daisy into the inner sanctum of the track. Their footsteps echoed through the empty area, the stands looming above them. The silence was heavy, almost a little eerie. Kinda like Ryan imagined one of those abandoned amusement parks would feel like.

“The racing season here lasts from mid-July to early September. We have various types of races, like stakes, allowance, claiming, and maiden special weight races,” Daisy explained. “There are several tracks at Saratoga, including the main dirt track, the turf course, and the steeplechase course, plus various chutes.”

“What’s a chute?” Ryan asked.

Daisy pointed to one of the tracks. “See that? That’s a chute. An extension of the main track that allows for straighter and longer races. It eliminates the need to start a race on a turn, which can be difficult for horses.”

She showed them the various tracks and the betting windows, and then they walked to a closed-off area with endless rows of stalls where the horses were stabled before and after a race. This part of the track wasn’t empty. Various jockeys leading horses to or from a training track passed them and people were milling around. The scent of freshly cut grass lingered in the air, mingling with the unmistakable aroma of horses.

Ryan’s eyes narrowed as he spotted the numerous security cameras strategically placed on walls, in corners, and even high up on poles, their sleek black domes and tinted lenses resembling the unblinking eyes of some mechanical predator. Security was much tighter than Ryan had expected, but then again, these horses were worth hundreds of thousands of dollars, if not more.

“Who’s in charge of the track?”

“The New York Racing Association, or NYRA, owns and operates the Saratoga Race Course. They’re responsible for managing and overseeing everything related to the track. We have several managers who each manage a part, like hospitality, logistics, medical care, you name it.”

Ryan gestured at a jockey walking a horse. “I thought the track was closed?”

Daisy shrugged. “In the after season, we still have some horses who train here. Mostly locals.”

When they’d circled back to where they’d started, they stopped. “I’m sure you have an opinion on what happened to Sam’s Promise,” Ryan said.

“It’s awful. Just awful. That poor horse. He was so beautiful, so graceful...” Daisy shook her head. “He had a bright future ahead of him. Would’ve won Marilyn a lot of races.”

“You think so?”

She chuckled. “It’s my job to know, and yes, I do. He was one of those once-in-a-lifetime horses. Truly special.”

Hmm, that brought a new perspective. “You’re saying whoever did this must’ve had it out for Marilyn. They must’ve picked this horse deliberately.”

“For sure. He was the best she’d ever had and, of course, even more special because he was named after Sam. And she lost everything because Sam’s Promise died. Not only will the insurance not pay out unless she’s cleared of all wrongdoing, but it cost her her reputation. She’s ruined.”

“Can you think of anyone who’d want to do this to her?”

Daisy was quiet for a long time. “I’ve asked myself that question so many times. Who could do this? All I can think is that it has to be someone who hates horses. Or at least, who doesn’t love them. Because no horse lover would ever do something as heinous as this.”

“Thank you so much for your time.” Ryan shook her hand again. “We appreciate it. Is it okay if we walk around for a bit?”

Daisy hesitated. “You’re not supposed to, but I guess since hardly anyone is here, it’s okay. Anything to help Marilyn.”

“Thank you.”

Daisy walked off, and Ryan turned to Alex. “Impressions?”

“The part about Sam’s Promise expecting to earn a lot of money was new to me. I mean, we knew he was good, but I hadn’t realized he was an almost guaranteed winner.”

He was a good listener, better than Ryan had given him credit for. “Agreed. It also drove home that this feels personal, like a vendetta.”

“Which begs the question, who hated Marilyn enough to hurt her like this?”

“Yeah. This case is more twisted than a pretzel in a tornado.”

Alex slapped a hand over his mouth, but a chuckle escaped nonetheless.

“What’s so funny?” Ryan quirked an eyebrow.

“Those expressions you always use. Who says that?”

Ryan laughed sheepishly. “My mom. She was born and raised in Texas, and her family has this weird thing about those kinds of sayings. I’ve grown so used to them they still pop out of my mouth on occasion.”

“I think it’s cute.” Alex promptly blushed.

“Cute? I’m not cute, baby boy.”

Alex raised his chin, looking all kinds of adorable with his red cheeks. “And I’m not your baby boy, but that hasn’t stopped you.”

“Touché.”

“Besides, I didn’t say you were cute. I said those expressions were cute. Not the same thing.”

“So you don’t think I’m cute?”

Alex held up his hands. “This is where I’m pleading the Fifth.”

Ryan grinned. He loved verbally sparring with Alex. “Smart.”

A jockey was walking a horse toward a stall. They waited until he’d stabled the horse, then approached him. He watched them with curious eyes.

“Hi,” Ryan said. “We’re investigating the death of Sam’s Promise. Could we ask you some questions?”

The jockey, a wiry man with sun-kissed skin and a cropped beard, nodded. “Anything I can do to help. One of the most awful things I’ve ever witnessed in my life.”

“Do you know Marilyn?”

“I sure do. I rode for her a few years ago. Best boss I ever had.”

“That so? Why?”

The jockey scratched his beard. “She’s always been good to us, you know? Respects the horses and treats everyone fairly. And jockeys get a share of the prize money they win. Can’t say that about everyone in this business.”

“You ever heard anything bad about her? Anything that could explain why someone would hate her?”

“Other than jealousy? No. No clue.”

“Okay, thanks.”

The jockey pointed at a tall guy who was hand-feeding a horse. “That’s Mike Durant, the owner I work for. He knew Marilyn well. You should talk to him.”

“We will. Thank you.”

They made their way over to Mike Durant, who assessed them with steely gray eyes. “Can I help you?”

“We’re investigating the death of Sam’s Promise,” Ryan said.

“You’re not a cop.”

He was smarter than his jockey, who hadn’t even asked who Ryan was. “No, I’m a PI. Marilyn hired me.”

“Ah, gotcha. What can I do for you?”

“You know Marilyn well?”

Mike did a quick nod. “She and I go way back. We’re both local, so we inevitably run into each other a lot.”

“What’s your opinion of her?”

“She’s a fine woman. She does right by the animals and has a good reputation around here.”

“Have you noticed any tension or conflict between her and others involved in the races?”

Mike sighed. “Well, she can come off as a bit...morally superior sometimes. She has strong opinions on how horses should be treated, and she’s not afraid to call out those who abuse them, in her eyes. But it’s because she genuinely cares about the welfare of the horses. You’d think everyone involved in this business would share that sentiment, but sadly, that’s not always the case. Some people might be happy to see her fall off her high horse if you’ll pardon my pun.”

Hmm, that was interesting. Mike was the first to state that not everyone liked Marilyn. But Ryan couldn’t see a clear motive yet. “Thanks, Mike. We appreciate it.”

“Anything else, feel free to contact me. Marilyn has my number.”

“We will. Thanks.”

They talked to a few more people, including a veterinary assistant, and they all repeated the same chorus. It was awful what had happened, and Marilyn was well respected. Nothing new there. Time to change tactics.

They made their way to the security building near the entrance. Before Ryan could knock, the door opened, and a

security guard appeared, shooting them an unfriendly look. “What are you doing here, walking around by yourselves?”

Ryan didn't want to get Daisy into trouble. “Daisy gave us a tour, but she had to leave.”

“Hmm. So what do you need from us?”

“I'm a private investigator, and this is my partner. We're investigating the death of Sam's Promise,” Ryan repeated for the god knows how manyeth time.

The guard's eyes narrowed. “Who hired you?”

“Marilyn Vandervliet.”

The guard sighed. “Seriously? Hasn't she caused enough damage yet?”

The guy clearly had an opinion, and in Ryan's experience, people like that were all too happy to share it. “You think she's guilty?”

“Fuck, yeah. Look, security here is tight, okay? People can't just walk in here, especially in the restricted area with the stalls. No one is allowed there but owners, jockeys, and veterinary staff. So how would anyone else have gotten access? No, she did it all right.”

Ryan should keep his mouth shut, but he couldn't, not in the face of this much arrogance and stupidity. “What about the people who work at the track? Do they have access?”

“Some do, but they're all screened.”

“Security guards?”

The guard made himself tall, puffing out his chest. “What are you insinuating?”

“I'm not insinuating anything. I'm establishing that your comment that the only people allowed backstage are owners, jockeys, and veterinarian personnel is incorrect. We've already identified two more groups with access, and I'm sure I can think of more.”

“What's your point?”

“My point is that if your conclusion that Marilyn is guilty is purely based on the statement that no one else had access, it’s thin evidence.”

The guard crossed his arms. “I saw the security footage from that day and the day before. No one suspicious was in that stall.”

“Any chance I could see it too?” He figured his chances were zero, but he might as well ask.

The guard harrumphed. “Not without a warrant, you can’t. The cops have it, so you’ll have to ask them.”

At some point, Ryan would have to talk to the cops, but he was hoping to wait a little longer so he could come bearing proverbial gifts for them. “Right. Let’s get back to your theory that Marilyn killed her horse.”

“It’s not a theory. The cops say she did it too.”

“Allegedly,” Ryan said sharply. “We still adhere to the principle of innocent until proven guilty. There hasn’t been a trial yet, so as of now, Ms. Vandervliet is still innocent.”

The guard’s cheeks grew red. “You a lawyer now?”

“No, but I used to be a homicide detective, so I damn well know what I’m talking about. Now, tell me why you think she did it other than your claim no one else had access.”

The guard opened his mouth, then closed it again. “I don’t have to talk to you,” he finally said and shut the door in Ryan’s face.

“I guess that’s a no then.” Ryan sighed. “Let’s go before they call the cops on us. I think we’ve worn out our welcome here.”

Alex's heart pounded as he stood in front of the full-length mirror in his bedroom, taking deep breaths to calm himself. The anticipation and nervousness were almost overwhelming, but so was the thrill coursing through him at the thought of what was to come. He rubbed his palms on his thighs, the smooth fabric of his tight, black boxer briefs clinging to his lean frame. Tonight, he'd take the next step in his journey as a submissive. He'd waited forever to find a Dom willing to train him, it seemed, and now the day had finally come.

Master Mark would take good care of him. Wander had promised him that when he'd told Alex that Master Mark had agreed to train him. Alex had met Master Mark when he'd accompanied Wander to a local BDSM club. Wander had ordered Alex to suck Master Mark off, which he had. It had been wonderful, exhilarating, and also a little embarrassing, but whatever. No one else on the team knew, so there was that.

He took another deep breath, then made his way down to the basement of Jesse's house, where the dungeon was. Master Mark had agreed to meet him there rather than at The Exchange so Alex would have more privacy for his first few sessions.

"Welcome, Alex." Master Mark's voice was both authoritative and comforting. The tall, broad-shouldered Dom stood wide-legged at the entrance to the dungeon, his black hair pulled into a ponytail. Bare-chested, with intricate tattoos on his neck and arms, and dressed in leather pants, he looked

every inch the powerful Dom as his brown eyes locked onto Alex's.

“Thank you, Master,” Alex replied, his throat tight.

Master Mark nodded and gestured for Alex to follow him.

Flickering candles cast an intimate golden glow around the space. Shadows danced across the floor, playing off the equipment, calling out to him with whispers of pleasure and pain. The scent of leather and candles filled his senses.

A St. Andrew's cross, its dark wood gleaming under the candlelight, loomed in the corner, imposing and powerful, waiting for someone to be bound to it. Nearby, a spanking bench beckoned, its padded surface inviting yet menacing. The room was a treasure trove of possibilities, and a shiver ran down Alex's spine as eagerness and apprehension about what lay ahead mixed.

“Feeling okay?” Master Mark placed a reassuring hand on Alex's shoulder, grounding him amid the swirling emotions threatening to overwhelm him.

“Y-yeah. I'm good. A little nervous though.”

“That's normal. Remember, I'm here with you every step of the way. We'll take this at your pace and won't do anything you're not comfortable with.”

“Thank you, Master.” A warmth settled in his chest at the understanding and care Master Mark showed him. It made it easier to trust him, to let go of his fears and surrender to the experience that awaited them both.

“Let me give you a tour so you understand what each piece of equipment is for. And then we'll have a brief talk. It's important we discuss our boundaries and safewords before we begin.”

He stopped by the St. Andrew's cross, imposing and alluring at once. “This is used for bondage and impact play. Restraints can be attached to the ends for a variety of positions.”

“Sounds intense,” Alex murmured, his imagination running wild with possibilities.

“Over here, we have the spanking bench.” Master Mark patted the padded surface affectionately. “A submissive can be bent over this, bound if desired, for spanking or other impact play.”

Alex couldn't wait. The St. Andrew's cross scared him a little, but the spanking bench only conjured up images of him bent over, his ass on display. Only when he pictured it, Ryan was holding him, not Master Mark. Fuck, he had to let go of this impossible hope that Ryan would agree to train him. Alex wasn't sure why Ryan was no longer a Dom, but he had to respect it. No matter how much he wished it were differently.

He shook his head, refocusing on Master Mark as he continued his tour. As they walked around the room, Master Mark explained the purpose of each device.

“Boundaries,” he said when they had seen everything, meeting Alex's gaze with warmth and sincerity. “What are your limits? Are there any specific activities you don't want to engage in tonight?”

“Umm, no blood or permanent marks, please. And well, I'm okay with humiliation play, but...not too much?”

“Understood. I have no intention of making things too intense anyway. Wander said you have little experience, so I should treat you as a newbie.”

“Correct. I've done some casual stuff, including two brief scenes at The Exchange, but I haven't had formal training as a sub yet.”

Master Mark grinned. “A newbie sub... Mmm, can't wait to break you in, boy.”

Why did that sound ominous? “Yes, Master.”

“Do you have any boundaries when it comes to sexual acts? Oral penetration? Anal penetration with an object? Can I fuck you? Tell me how you feel about all this.”

He shouldn't feel embarrassed. He was a slut, and that was okay. Besides, Master Mark had seen it all anyway. "Anything sexual is fine. And I'm lubed and prepped. I like it. Sex, I mean."

"Good. So do I, so we'll have lots of fun together. And I already know you're a good little cocksucker, so I'll definitely make use of your talented mouth." He winked at him, then explained their safewords. *Red* to stop, *yellow* to slow down, and *green* to continue. "Remember, your safewords are for your protection. Don't hesitate to use them if you need to. Trust is essential between us, Alex."

"I understand, Master." The Dom's thoroughness and caring approach were reassuring.

"Are you ready?"

"Yes, Master."

"Good." Master Mark curled his hand around Alex's neck, offering a moment of connection. The gesture sent a shiver down Alex's spine, igniting a spark within him that yearned for more. A sense of security and trust washed over him. Even as he ventured into unknown territory, he was in capable hands.

"Let's begin." Master Mark released his grip on Alex's shoulder and led the way to the St. Andrew's cross, its dark wood gleaming beneath the dim lighting of the dungeon. "Ditch the underwear."

Alex dropped his briefs where he stood.

"Stand here." Master Mark positioned Alex with his front against the cross. The Dom's authority seemed to effortlessly flow through every command, each word spoken with unwavering confidence.

"Are you comfortable?"

"Yes, Master." A flush of warmth spread across Alex's cheeks. The power dynamic between them was already taking shape, with Alex willingly submitting to Master Mark's control. It felt good. Even better than he'd expected.

“Good.” Master Mark secured Alex’s wrists and ankles to the cross with padded leather cuffs. “Remind me of your safewords.”

“Green, yellow, and red,” Alex recited, his voice wavering as the reality of the situation set in. He was bound and vulnerable.

“Excellent.” Master Mark stepped back. “You look beautiful like this, boy. So eager to learn and serve.”

“Thank you, Master.” Alex’s chest swelled with pride at the compliment.

The Dom circled Alex, his footsteps echoing in the quiet room. As he scrutinized his submissive, Alex squirmed under the intensity of the Dom’s gaze.

“Your body is so responsive.” Master Mark brushed a fingertip along the curve of Alex’s right ass cheek. “I can see how much you want this.”

Alex swallowed hard, unable to deny the truth in Master Mark’s words. He craved the Dom’s touch, to praise and to punish.

“Tell me, boy,” Master Mark whispered, leaning in close until his breath tickled Alex’s ear, “do you enjoy feeling exposed like this? Knowing I can see every inch of your body, and there’s nothing you can do to hide from me?”

“Y-yes, Master,” Alex said, his face heating with embarrassment at the confession. The sensation of being completely exposed thrilled and terrified him, the all-too-familiar mix of arousal and shame rushing through him.

“Good boy. You’re being brave, allowing me to push your boundaries like this. I’m proud of you.”

“Thank you, Master.”

“From now on, I want you to only speak when I ask you a direct question or give you a command. Understood?”

That was a direct question, right? Alex was pretty sure it counted as one. “Yes, Master.”

Master Mark stroked Alex's back with one finger, and every muscle in Alex's body contracted in response. "I want you to beg for a taste of my touch, boy. Show me how much you long for it."

"Please, Master," Alex pleaded, and the desperation lacing his voice was real. "Please touch me. I need it so badly."

"Very good." Master Mark rewarded Alex with a light caress along his shoulder. "Remember, communication is key. Don't be afraid to express your desires, your fears, or your limits."

Not a direct question, so Alex kept his mouth shut.

"Perfect, boy."

How was it possible that those two words sank so deep inside him? Like a match had been lit inside him, a fire burning warm and bright.

"We're gonna do some light impact play." Master Mark walked over to a cabinet, and Alex turned his head to watch him. "Nothing major, but to give you a first taste...and to give me an idea of the kind of sub you are."

When he took a flogger out of the cabinet, Alex's heart skipped a beat. Shit was about to get real.

Master Mark whipped the flogger through the air a few times as if testing its weight and flow, then stepped behind Alex. "Color?"

"Green."

The first crack of the flogger against his skin made Alex gasp. The sharp sting morphed into a warm, tingling sensation. Master Mark waited a second or two, then hit him again. He set a slow, steady rhythm, the leather tails dancing across Alex's back, each impact leaving small kisses of pain and pleasure in their wake.

"Tell me how that feels, boy."

"Good, Master." Tears prickled at the corners of Alex's eyes. "It hurts, but it's a good hurt."

“Excellent.” Master Mark landed another strike with the flogger. “I want you to feel the intensity but never go beyond your limits. Always remember your safewords.”

Alex focused on the rhythm of the strikes. The tight restraints around his wrists made him feel vulnerable, but funnily enough, that only heightened his arousal. He liked being helpless, at Master Mark’s mercy, which was another confirmation he truly was submissive.

As the flogging continued, Alex lost himself in the sensations, his body responding to the perfect combination of pain and pleasure. He was aware of every inch of his skin, the heightened sensitivity making each caress of the leather more intoxicating than the last.

And then it stopped, Alex’s back on fire. He’d been close to something, but what, he didn’t know. “Master Mark, please...” He wasn’t even sure what he was asking for. He only knew he wanted more.

“Oh, how pretty you are when you beg, boy... So fucking responsive. You’ve earned a reward.”

With quick hands, Master Mark released him from the restraints and led him to a kneeling bench. It was nothing more than a padded seat for the Dom to sit on, with a less comfortable pad for the sub to kneel between his legs.

Alex needed only a gentle push to his shoulders to sink to his knees. A wave of pain rolled over him as he hit the floor, and a moan escaped him.

“Color?”

“Green, Master.”

“Good. Time for your reward. Open your mouth.” Master Mark unzipped his leather pants and took out his thick cock. “You’ve earned a taste of this. Don’t make me come, boy. You haven’t earned that right yet.”

Master Mark wasn’t gentle when he pushed his cock into Alex’s eager mouth, but Alex happily took every inch. The man’s cock was perfect, and he knew how to abuse Alex’s

mouth. He'd been the right amount of rough when Alex had sucked him off that first time, not too careful and gentle.

He wasn't now either and sank deep into Alex's throat, ignoring when Alex gagged and his eyes watered. "Goddamn, you have such a talented mouth."

Master Mark's voice was thick with pleasure, and a rush of satisfaction blew through Alex. He was being a good boy, pleasing his Dom. Nothing could beat that.

He got a few seconds to catch his breath, and then that fat cock blocked his airway again. "Mmm, we'll have to experiment with breath play. I love seeing your eyes grow all wild and needy when I control your breath."

Alex was in heaven, losing all track of time and place as the Dom thoroughly abused his mouth. Finally, Master Mark pulled back with a sigh. "As much as I'd love to spill my load, we're not done yet. You've had your reward. Time for the next round, boy."

Master Mark tucked his cock back in, helped Alex rise on unsteady legs, and guided him toward the spanking bench. "I want you to bend over, hands gripping the sides."

Alex complied, exposed and vulnerable as he presented his ass for whatever Master Mark had planned. The Dom rummaged through a drawer and returned with a riding crop.

"Have you ever felt a riding crop before, boy?" Master Mark traced the leather tip along the curve of Alex's ass.

"Never, Master." Alex shivered at the tease of the cool leather against his heated skin.

"Stay as still as possible for me." Master Mark landed a precise stinging slap on Alex's left cheek.

"Ah!" The sensation was different from the flogger but equally pleasurable. The sharp pain bloomed into a warm glow, leaving him craving more.

"Good boy." Master Mark delivered another strike, to the right cheek this time. "You're doing so well. It's not easy to

trust someone with your body and submission, and I'm proud of you."

Alex couldn't bring out even a word. His teeth were locked as he bit down hard, tears streaming down his face. The mix of pleasure, vulnerability, and emotional connection overpowered him but also made him feel more alive than ever.

"Are you ready for more, or do you need a break?" Master Mark asked, pausing between strikes.

"More, please, Master."

"Good boy. Remember to breathe and let your body experience everything without holding back."

He couldn't have held back even if he wanted to, the sensations too powerful, too overwhelming. Just when he was at the point where he could take no more, Master Mark stopped.

"Color?"

Alex had to take a steadying breath. "Y-yellow."

Master Mark immediately lowered the crop. "I agree it's been enough. Jesus Christ, boy, you have the most glorious ass I've ever seen...and it looks even better all red and swollen. I bet it feels amazing too. Can I find out?"

He unzipped again and took his cock out, then waited.

Alex needed a moment to process that question. Oh, the Dom was asking about sex. "Yes, Master. I'm green for sex."

"Good boy." The blunt tip of the Dom's cock pushed inside Alex without hesitation, and he didn't stop until he was in all the way. Alex's eyes teared up again.

God, that *hurt*. It stung and burned and ached, but his cock was still so, so hard. He was full in every way, almost to the point where he'd combust if he couldn't release pressure.

"Fuck me hard, Master," he begged. "I need it. Need to feel your cock."

He wasn't allowed to speak, technically, but he didn't care. He needed him, needed this.

“Fuck yes, boy. Beg me again. Most beautiful sound on the planet, a begging sub.” But he remained motionless.

Alex had no pride left. “Please, Master.”

“Why do you need my cock, boy?”

“Cause I’m a slut, Master.”

“You sure are. You’re a horny little fuck hole, aren’t you?”

“Yes, Master.”

“I should tie you to that St. Andrew’s cross and let every man in the house take a turn with you, fuck you till the cum is streaming out of your ass. I’d bet that still wouldn’t be enough for you, would it?”

“Yes, Master. I mean, no, Master. Whatever you want, Master.”

“Damn straight, boy. You’re my little fuck hole now, aren’t you? My little slut to use and abuse.”

Oh fuck, those words set him on fire, and he shamelessly pushed his ass back. “Please, Master. Anything you want.”

“Good boy.”

Master Mark stopped talking as he took Alex hard and fast, ramming into him until Alex saw stars and not a single cell in his body wasn’t fired up. He was burning everywhere, split wide open on that fat cock, his throat still aching from that rough blow job, tears running down his snotty cheeks...and it was heaven.

Something connected inside him, like he’d found a part of himself he’d never accessed, and a pleasure unlike anything he’d ever experienced washed over him. It pushed him higher and higher, taking his breath away until he exploded. He screamed as he came, then again when Master Mark grabbed his hips and slammed his cock so deep inside Alex he couldn’t even move anymore. Everything hurt, yet he soared, the pain pushing his body beyond limits.

He wasn’t sure how it had happened, but he found himself on the couch, covered in soft blankets, with Master Mark’s

arms around him.

“Here, have some water.” Master Mark held a bottle to Alex’s lips. He gratefully sipped from it, the cool liquid soothing his parched throat.

“Good boy.”

Alex leaned against Master Mark’s strong chest, unashamed to give in to the need to cuddle. His body still hummed and tingled with the aftershocks of their play, but the embrace grounded him in reality once more.

“Are you all right, Alex?” Master Mark asked, his voice warm.

“Better than all right. I feel...alive.”

“Good.” Master Mark brushed a few stray strands of hair from Alex’s face. “You did incredibly well today, pushing your limits and surrendering to the experience. Did anything hurt too much or feel uncomfortable?”

“No, Master. It was...perfect.” Alex closed his eyes. “I never thought I could experience something so incredible. The pain mixed with pleasure, the humiliation that somehow made me feel more connected to myself than ever before...”

“Embracing your submissive nature can be a powerful and transformative experience.” Master Mark ran his fingers along the lines of Alex’s collarbones. “And I’m honored to be a part of that journey with you.”

“Thank you for helping me grow and being there for me.”

And if a small part of Alex thought of Ryan, even as another Dom held him, he’d never admit it. Not even to himself.

Gayle Tuite was sweeter than Tupelo honey and impossible to hate, and Ryan resented the fuck out of her for just that. She and her husband, Tom, were Jesse's neighbors, and they'd been the ones who had referred Marilyn to Wander. Since they were close friends of Marilyn, Ryan had thought it smart to talk to them and see what they knew. In their late fifties and married for over thirty years, Tom and Gayle were one of those annoyingly happy couples, the ones with endless rows of pictures of their five kids and nineteen grandkids on the wall.

Gayle served coffee so weak you could see the bottom of the cup—Ryan could barely prevent himself from wincing when he took the first sip—with home-baked snickerdoodle cookies. Was she entered in a Housewife of the Year contest or something? Their house—more like a mansion and one with an even grander view of the Mohawk River than Jesse's—was spotless and homey, radiating money without being ostentatious.

Ryan was perched on a pristine cream-colored sofa. Alex, who eyed the coffee with equal distrust, was to his right, and Tom and Gayle sat opposite them on the other couch, this one with a flower pattern in soft pastels. Barf.

Then again, Ryan wasn't in the best mood to begin with. Not that he ever was, but he'd awoken that morning with an angry bee in his proverbial bonnet at the thought of the session Alex had done with Master Mark. And his temperament hadn't improved when Alex had shared some of his experiences

during breakfast, gushing about how much he'd loved it. Ryan had wanted to bend him over the table and fuck that glee right out of him, but even he wasn't that cruel.

Even if he resented the fuck out of Mark having the privilege of training Alex, of marking him and fucking him. Which, of course, only pissed Ryan off more because how could he be angry about something he'd caused in the first place? If he'd wanted to train Alex himself, he should've said so when Wander offered. But he hadn't, so now he had to live with that decision.

Anyway, they weren't here for Ryan to stew on whatever was bothering him today. He had a job to do.

"How did you meet Marilyn?" he asked.

"She and I grew up together," Gayle said. "I lived one farm down from hers, and my older sister, Missy, was Marilyn's best friend." Gayle's face clouded over, and Tom took her hand. "Missy passed away two years ago. Cancer. It was swift, thankfully."

"I'm sorry for your loss," Ryan said, then waited the appropriate beat. "What was your first reaction when you heard about Sam's Promise?"

"We didn't hear it. We were there when it happened," Tom said gravely. "And let me tell you, we were in utter shock. He was such a beautiful horse, and to see him go down like that? I'm not ashamed to admit I was in tears."

"Marilyn loved that horse," Gayle said softly. "She cares a lot for her animals, but Sam's Promise was special. She'd named him after the love of her life, and she had such high hopes for him. He'd done so well in prior races, and we all thought..." Her voice broke, and she took a moment to compose herself. "We all thought he'd win the Travers Stakes, you know?"

"Did you bet on him?"

They nodded in unison. "Several bets, in fact," Gayle said. "We bet on him to show, place, and win. If he had, we would've made..." Gayle looked at her husband. "Well, we

would've made a lot of money. Not that that matters most. My father always said you shouldn't bet with money you can't afford to lose."

Must be nice to be rich enough to afford a loss like that. "Did Marilyn bet on him?"

"I didn't ask her, but she always does. It's part of her ritual by now, and horse people are superstitious people." Gayle smiled as she shook her head. "You can try reasoning with that, but it won't get you anywhere. She's a stubborn one, Marilyn."

"'Stubborn as a mule with a burr under its saddle,' as my mama would say," Ryan said, smiling at the thought of his mom.

When he looked sideways, he caught Alex staring at him with wide-open eyes and his mouth agape. When he met Ryan's gaze, he closed his mouth and looked away. What the fuck had he been so shocked about? Ryan had mentioned his mom and her love of Texas metaphors before, so what was the big deal?

Gayle chuckled. "That sounds like Marilyn, all right."

"Anyway, back to the betting. Who else would've bet on Sam's Promise?" Ryan asked.

"Anyone, really," Tom said. "There's the occasional better, the people visiting the track for a day who don't know what they're doing. They would've bet to show, most likely. But the connoisseurs, those with insider knowledge? Most of them would've bet on Sam's Promise. He was the favorite to win by a long streak."

"But that would've made the payout low," Alex piped up. "Because the odds were in his favor."

"True, but you can still make good money. If you bet ten grand and the odds are one in three, you still make twenty grand. Or people will bet an exacta or a trifecta."

Thanks to Alex's research, Ryan knew those were terms for betting on the exact horses who came in first and second,

or first, second, and third. And those odds would've been more lucrative if they'd gotten them right.

“So it's safe to say that with the death of Sam's Promise, a lot of people lost money,” Alex said.

“Yes. And we're talking big sums,” Tom confirmed.

Ryan saw where Alex was going with that. If people had lost that much money, they'd be pissed as hell at Marilyn if they found out she'd killed her horse. “When you heard about the EPO, what did you think?”

Tom's mouth set in a hard line. “I thought it was bullshit. Pardon my French. I figured the pathologist had made an error. No one in their right mind would use EPO, not for a high-profile race like this, where they know the winners will have to give urine and blood samples.”

“You didn't think Marilyn might've been involved?”

“Absolutely out of the question.” Tom's eyes were blazing as he leaned forward. “That woman lives and breathes horses. They're her whole life and her whole legacy. And she treats them better than anyone I know. She won't even allow her jockeys to use a riding crop.”

“I thought they all used one.” Ryan had seen the footage from the race and, holy shit, it had been brutal to witness that beautiful horse go down. He'd watched it several times until he'd been sick to his stomach.

“Strict regulations dictate how often you can use a crop and during which part of the race, though they vary per state and sometimes per track. But Marilyn wouldn't allow her jockeys to use one at all. She insisted on treating her horses well, and she considered using a crop abuse.” Tom's eyes softened. “You can't tell me a woman like that would kill her horse in such a horrific way.”

On that, Ryan had to agree. It seemed completely out of character. “Have you both met Sam?”

Gayle seemed taken aback. “Of course we have. He's been Marilyn's partner for five years now.”

Hmm, they had no issue with the age gap, then? “Do they seem happy to you? Are there any relational problems you’re aware of?”

Gayle and Tom shared a look. “Look,” Gayle said. “People have opinions on their relationship for sure because of their age difference, and from how you phrased your question, it seems you’re one of them.”

Oops. Maybe Gayle wasn’t quite as innocent as Ryan had thought. She’d picked up on that easy enough. “I didn’t mean to imply judgment.”

Gayle waved her hand. “Oh, I’m sure you did, but you’re not the only one. When she and Sam got together, everyone and their mother had an opinion. People called him a gold digger and her a cougar.” Gayle made a face. “Such a demeaning term. They fell in love. Yes, there’s an age difference, but in the end, does it matter? They love each other, and they’re both way above the age of consent. Other than that, it’s nobody else’s business, now is it?”

The latter was said with a sharp look at Ryan, who covered a smile behind his hand. Not quite as sweet as he’d reckoned, but he was starting to like her, which was unexpected. “I can’t argue with you there.”

“I didn’t think you would, considering you’re living with Jesse.”

Did they know what was going on inside his house? That would surprise Ryan. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

Gayle chuckled. “We know the kind of club Jesse owns, Mr. Mason. And we noticed when your team moved in...and stayed. The details we can fill in ourselves.”

Jesus, had he pegged her wrong. He’d written her off as a sweet but somewhat dumb rich housewife, but she had far more spunk than he’d given her credit for. “Feel free to use your imagination.” He winked at her, and her giggle strangely delighted him.

He grew serious again. “If you had to take a guess at who was behind this, what would you say?”

Tom stroked his chin, his forehead marred with deep lines. “Gayle and I have discussed little else since we found out. Here’s the thing. We can’t think of anyone. I’m sure Marilyn mentioned Caroline Fletcher to you. Well, that woman is vile, and a viper, and I wouldn’t trust her further than I could throw her, but do I think she’s capable of this? No. She’s ruthlessly ambitious, but she takes care of her horses. Literally, the only thing she and Marilyn see eye to eye on is that horses should be treated well. That’s why I doubt she has anything to do with this...though you should still pay her a visit.”

Ryan had already planned to do so, though he’d hoped to talk to Caroline Fletcher first. He liked going in with a blank mind and without preformed opinions. Alas, Caroline hadn’t been willing to clear her schedule for Ryan—not that he could blame her, as she was under no legal or moral obligation to speak to a private investigator—and wouldn’t have time for him until the next week. It was what it was.

“And other than her, you can’t think of anyone who’d wish Marilyn harm?” he asked.

The couple shared another thoughtful look, then shook their heads in unison.

“When it happened, can you remember anyone reacting strangely? Anything that stood out from how others responded?”

“That whole moment is a blur. I was so shocked, so upset...” Gayle shook her head. “I couldn’t believe it, you know? So I don’t even remember anything else. We wanted to comfort Marilyn, but we couldn’t get to her. Security had closed things off immediately. Understandable, under the circumstances, but it killed me that I couldn’t be there for her.”

Tom made a hmm in agreement. “Everyone was in shock. Accidents happen at the track, and it wasn’t the first time we saw a horse die. But this was so unexpected, so gruesome... I think everyone wanted to get to Marilyn and tell her how sorry they were. She’s well-liked.”

Ryan thanked them for their time and told them to reach out if they had any additional thoughts. As he and Alex

walked back to Jesse's house, he went over the conversation. How did a woman with such deep roots in the horse racing community, and who was by all accounts respected and liked, end up with an enemy who hated her enough to commit such a horrific act of violence against an innocent animal?

"Did you get anything from that?" Alex asked.

"General impressions. Nothing concrete. Certainly nothing to suggest they're hiding anything." He sighed. "I still have no clue where to look with this case. It's gonna take some more digging."

"But we're done for the day, right?"

Ryan shot him a sideways look. "Why? You got plans? Don't tell me you have another scene planned for tonight because that's stupid. You need time to recover. In fact, Mark should've checked in with you already and made sure you were okay."

"No, we don't have another scene planned, and he already texted to ask how I'm doing. What do you have against him?"

Nothing, really. Except for that irrational anger that Mark was doing something Ryan wanted for himself. "Why doesn't Wander train you?"

Alex frowned. "Because he's with Burke."

"He doesn't need to make it sexual."

"I want it to be sexual. I like serving."

Yeah, he did. Ryan had never met anyone who got such deep, filthy pleasure from submissive sex as Alex. He did whatever Ryan wanted, completely focused on Ryan's commands. A dedication like that was rare, even in a sub. "I know."

"Then why suggest that?"

"I was just..." How could he explain it to Alex when he had no fucking clue what had come over him? He was tired and frustrated, and none of that was on Alex. Didn't mean he couldn't take it out on him though. They'd reached the front

door, and Ryan punched in the code and waited for it to open. “Never mind. Why did you ask if we were done?”

Alex walked past him. “Cause I’m still hurting a little from yesterday and could use a shower and some more aloe vera on my ass before dinner.”

Ryan’s mouth ran dry at the thought of seeing Alex’s perfect ass with marks on it. Not his marks, but still. He checked his watch. Dinner wasn’t for another half hour. Plenty of time. “We’re done with work for today.”

Something in his tone must’ve alerted Alex because the kid spun around. “Ryan...”

He took a step toward him. “Drop your pants, baby boy. Show me that red ass. If you can parade it in front of your precious Master Mark, you can damn well show it to me.”

Jesus, he couldn’t believe he’d said that. Where had that come from? He’d sounded almost...jealous.

Alex’s cheeks reddened. “You can’t... I mean, I’m not sure if...”

Ryan yanked him forward and, with rough hands, unzipped Alex’s pants and shoved them down. Alex’s blue eyes were wide open, but he wasn’t saying anything, letting it happen. Oh fuck, look at that ass. Beautiful red welts covered the skin in a symmetrical pattern. Mark had used a crop, and he’d done a good job of marking Alex’s entire ass. As much as Ryan hated to admit it, he couldn’t have done a better job himself.

“How does it feel?” Ryan trailed his fingers over the red lines, which were hot to the touch.

Alex swallowed. “I like it. It’s...grounding.”

“You know what I really love?”

“I’m afraid to ask.”

“Fucking a burning red ass like that. Hands against the wall.”

“Ryan, we’re in the hallway... Can’t we at least go—”

“If I wanted to fuck you in a bedroom, I would’ve done so. Spread your legs and stick out that ass.”

He unzipped himself and took his cock out. Alex’s gaze dropped to his cock. Did the boy even realize he was licking his lips? He was always so hungry for it.

But Ryan had one line he wouldn’t cross. He always gave Alex a choice. He’d shoved his pants down, but he wouldn’t physically put him against the wall. That had to be Alex’s decision and proof he wanted this.

The battle playing on Alex’s face was so evident. He wanted this, but the thought of others seeing him was humiliating...but also turned him on. The kid had such a humiliation kink, though he hadn’t fully embraced it yet. Jesus, the things Ryan could do with that, how he could push those buttons deep inside Alex. He hadn’t even begun to scratch the surface with him.

Of course he wouldn’t be the one to show Alex. Master Mark would, and irrational anger simmered in Ryan’s veins again. That guy had better do a good job of teaching Alex, or Ryan would...

Alex made a sound, then turned around and placed his hands against the wall, pushing his ass out. That perfect, round, gloriously red ass was now Ryan’s for the taking. And oh, he would. Alex was always prepped, part of his role as the house slut, and Ryan didn’t waste time. He lined up and sank inside him.

What was it about Alex that made it so perfect? Was it how his ass jiggled when Ryan fucked him? That little bounce it gave as he slapped it? Maybe it was how tight he was, how he could work those ass muscles and squeeze Ryan’s cock. Or the sounds he made, eager little moans and whimpers that showed how much he loved being fucked. How he pushed back his ass, sometimes even holding his cheeks open so Ryan could fuck him deeper. And now, with his ass glowing, it was even better.

He was, quite simply, the best fuck Ryan had ever had... and wasn’t that food for thought?

Aroused.
Anxious.

Appalled.

Alex's head was a mixed bag of conflicting emotions as Ryan went to town on his ass. It hurt, his skin still so sensitive from the welts, but it also felt amazing, the friction and burn another layer to the pleasure Ryan gave him. The man could fuck him like no one else, but why did he always have to push Alex out of his comfort zone? A perfectly good bedroom was literally feet away, but no, Ryan had to fuck him against the wall in the hallway, where anyone could...

Oh shit.

Footsteps. Laughter amid a conversation. They were about to be discovered.

He froze. Did he stop Ryan? He'd have to safeword. They'd never discussed it, but Ryan would respect a red from Alex. That much he knew. But should he?

Shit, shit, shit.

Humiliation spread through him like wildfire, his whole body heating with it. Yet, at the same time, the idea of other people seeing him get railed like this also turned him on. His cock was like iron, leaking without him touching it. He liked this.

Correct that. He *loved* this.

He hated it, but he loved it too.

So he stood still, his eyes closed as the footsteps and voices came closer. Wander and Jesse. Of course it had to be his boss and the owner of the house Alex lived in. It couldn't have been David or Caleb, two fellow subs. Nope, just his luck.

“Mmm, will you look at that? Jesus, that's one perfect ass. Look at those marks... Master Mark did a great job. Are you enjoying that, boy?”

Alex kept his eyes closed. They had to be right next to him, but he refused to open his eyes.

Ryan stopped and slapped his ass. A sharp pain flashed through Alex, and he yelped.

“He asked you a question, baby boy. Be a polite little sub now and answer it, would you?”

Kill. Him. Now.

Alex forced his eyes open, and sure enough, Wander and Jesse were standing right there in almost identical poses. Legs spread, arms crossed, shit-eating grins on their faces. And judging by the bulges in their pants, both were hard.

“Yes,” he said between clenched teeth. “I'm enjoying this. Or at least, I was.”

He mumbled the last part, but not softly enough, and Wander and Jesse laughed. “You don't appreciate the audience?” Wander asked. “Cause we sure as fuck appreciate the free show.”

“Damn straight.” Jesse readjusted himself. “I'd better find David so he can take care of this for me.”

“Nah.” Ryan resumed fucking Alex. “I'll be done in a minute or two, and you can take a turn with our little slut here.”

What?

Jesus. Alex pinched his eyes shut.

“Ryan.” Wander had used what Alex called his Dom voice. It held an edge of steel, and no one was immune to it.

Ryan pulled out, and Alex blinked his eyes open. What was happening?

Wander stepped close and brought his mouth right next to Alex’s ear. “I’m checking consent with you, Alex. It’s fine by me if our entire team has a go at your ass, but I need to make sure you’re okay with it, that this is what you really want. And it’s okay to say no or that you’re not ready for it yet.”

Alex’s insides went soft. He had the best boss in the world. “Is it weird that I like the idea and hate it at the same time?”

“Nope, it’s a common reaction to humiliation play. But it’s another reason why double-checking consent matters. Subs can’t always sense the difference between the good kind of being humiliated and true shame, if that makes sense.”

This conversation had to rank high among the most absurd situations Alex had ever been in. Here he stood, his pants around his ankles, his ass on display after getting railed in front of his boss, and they were having a calm talk as if they were discussing the weather. But he appreciated Wander looking out for him. “I’d be okay with it another time, I think, but not now. It’s too much.”

“Completely understandable.”

“Thank you...Sir.”

Wander stepped back and smiled. “You’ll make a wicked fine sub, boy.”

He turned to Ryan, and his face hardened. “You have a choice to make. Either you’re in, or you’re out. I’ve tolerated this bullshit from you long enough. Make up your mind and choose. No more of this half-assed shit, yeah?”

What was that about? He sounded mad.

Alex couldn’t see Ryan’s face, but Ryan’s voice was tight when he said, “I hear you.”

“See that you do.” Wander made his way back over to Jesse and slapped his back. “Let’s find you a willing boy to

take care of your little problem, my friend. And once that's done, I'm gonna find my boyfriend."

They walked off, and Alex and Ryan stared after them until they were out of sight.

"Where were we?" Ryan asked, but it sounded forced.

He finished quickly after that, and so did Alex, who only needed a few tugs on his cock to come. But when Ryan thanked him and took off, Alex stood there, unsettled. Something had just happened, but what? Other than Wander and Jesse having watched him get fucked. Wander had sent some kind of message to Ryan, but one Alex couldn't decipher.

He still hadn't figured it out by the time he'd showered, put some more cream on his ass, and shown up for dinner in the large dining room. Everyone else was already there... except for Ryan. Antisocial as the guy was, he never missed mealtimes. Wander had made it clear those weren't optional, and they had to officially cancel if they wouldn't be present so Jesse's housekeeper wasn't making too much food. What was going on?

Alex tried to act normal, but his stomach was in knots, and he barely ate. When dinner was done, he approached Wander. "Where's Ryan?"

Wander's eyes softened. "I don't know, but don't worry about it."

"Did I do something wrong?" He shouldn't ask, not when it made him look so insecure, but the uncertainty ate at him. Had he fucked up somehow?

Wander put a hand on his shoulder. "No. You did nothing wrong, kiddo. This is all Ryan. He has some...personal demons he's wrestling with."

Personal demons? Alex had no trouble imagining that. "Okay."

Wander gave him a scrutinizing look, then sighed. "Why don't you wait for me in Jesse's office? We need to talk a bit more, but in private. I'll be right there."

“Yes, sir.”

Jesse’s office was empty, and Alex settled in one of the comfortable leather chairs, though even that made him wince with the sting in his ass. A few minutes later, Wander joined him, carrying a cup of tea for Alex and a coffee for himself.

“What’s going on in your head?” Wander asked. “And before you answer that, please know this isn’t criticism. I’m looking out for you, both as your boss and as a Dom.”

“Thank you. I’m...I’m confused, I guess. About Ryan. He loves fucking me, gets a kick out of pushing my buttons, but he’s emotionally completely detached, and I can’t figure out why.”

“You want more with him?”

“Not like a relationship. Hell, no. I know he’s not the type for that. But we could still be...friends, sort of? At least connect on another level than just physically. Or am I being too idealistic here?”

Wander’s smile was genuine. “You have a big heart, Alex. It’s one of the reasons I hired you.”

“For real?”

Wander chuckled. “Well, you also came with other qualifications, but I noticed your desire to connect with others. You’re a peacemaker, someone who strives for harmony, and that’s a beautiful thing.”

“Kinda funny if you consider my father’s lifelong Army career.”

“Not really. Some of the best military men in history were peacemakers. The key is to recognize when you should talk and negotiate and when it’s time to make a stand.”

“My dad always said you can’t talk about peace with people who are shooting at you.”

“Your father is a wise man. But let’s get back to you and your feelings about Ryan.”

“They’re not *feelings* feelings. It’s not like I have a crush on him.”

Wander quirked an eyebrow. “No?”

“No! Why would you think that?”

“Because it seems to bother you that he keeps you at arm’s length.”

“Yeah, but that’s because...” How did he explain this? He’d have to give Wander more context, or it wouldn’t make sense. “I spent a big part of my teenage years in Hawaii, on Oahu, because my father was stationed there.”

“I remember that from your résumé.”

“One of the things that stuck with me is the concept of *ohana*. Ohana is about family and community, but it goes far beyond blood relatives. It’s about being connected to those around you, those you choose to make part of your extended family, your chosen one, so to speak. That means everyone who comes into your life becomes part of your circle. Friends, neighbors, even coworkers.”

“That’s a beautiful way of looking at those kinds of bonds.”

“Well, that’s what our group here feels like. Like we’re an ohana circle, like a family. Right?” At Wander’s nod, he continued, “But Ryan doesn’t seem to want to be a part of it. He’s on the outside, looking in, and it’s by his own choice. I don’t understand why. Why doesn’t he want to get close to us?”

Wander leaned back in his chair, sipping his coffee as he studied Alex with a thoughtful gaze. “Ryan is a complicated man. He’s been through a lot, and it has left its scars. That’s hard for you to understand, perhaps, because you’re still so young. And that’s not criticism but a statement of a fact.”

“But he also doesn’t want to connect deeper with you or Lowell or Jesse, and you guys are all older. No offense.”

“None taken, and you’re right. He doesn’t. But it’s hard for you to understand him. Maybe because you’re polar opposites.

You're bright as the day, optimistic, and positive, and Ryan is...not. He's the night, dark and moody. He can't understand you any more than you can see life through his eyes."

"But where does that leave me?"

Wander smiled. "You're determined to break through his walls, aren't you?"

Was that what he was doing? "Not consciously, but I want him to be a part of this, of our ohana circle."

"I love that you see us as a family."

"I really do."

"Did you know my vision was always to live together with a group of like-minded people? You know, Doms and subs, people in the lifestyle. Be a family and do scenes together."

Alex hesitated. "Is that still your vision? Because...I don't mean to be rude, but Burke is not..."

Wander nodded slowly. "He's a sub, but he's not on board with a lifestyle like that yet. And to be honest, I don't know if he ever will be. Like your Ryan, he's got a past and carries considerable baggage with him."

"He's not *my* Ryan," Alex protested, though a rush had flared up inside him at those words.

"No?"

"No! What gave you that idea? I told you I'm not interested in a relationship with him. Not that he'd ever want one with me. Neither of us is the type."

Wander put his coffee down and leaned forward. "That's where you're wrong, kiddo. You are very much the type...and also very much *his* type. The only problem is that despite both of you being in the lifestyle, albeit he much longer than you, you both still think of relationships in the traditional way."

"What do you mean?" Alex had lost him.

"Being in a relationship doesn't necessarily mean monogamy. You need sex, Alex, much more than one man can

give you. Consensual nonmonogamy would be the perfect solution for you two.”

Alex blinked. “B-but we’re not together.”

“No.” Wander leaned back in his chair again and picked his coffee back up. “But I see the sparks between you two. All I’m saying is don’t stare yourself blind on the traditional definition of relationships. You can make it into whatever you want and need.”

God, the idea of being in a relationship with Ryan was crazy. Insane. Also exhilarating and enough to make his heart rate triple. “He’s not interested in me like that.”

“Oh, kiddo, you’re both so fucking blind.” Wander sighed. “Then again, so was I, so there is that. It was Ryan who needed to tell me Burke was a sub. I hadn’t seen it, too focused on training him as a Dom.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“It’s always much easier to diagnose what ails others than to take a long, hard look at yourself.”

That much Alex knew from experience. “You gave him a warning today. What was that about?”

Wander gently shook his head. “Can’t tell you that, kiddo. Not without breaking his confidence.”

“So what do I do now?”

“You keep being your sunshine self and offer yourself to him every chance you get.”

“What good is that gonna do?”

“You know how water can carve a path through a rock over time? If you hit that rock with a hammer, it would shatter, but if you do it long enough with gentle force, it’ll yield. We don’t want Ryan to break...but you can make him bend, kiddo. Be the water to his stubborn-ass rock.”

The next day, Ryan was still angry as a rattlesnake with a toothache. At first, he'd told himself it was because Wander had stepped out of line. Who did the man think he was telling Ryan how to handle a sub? As if Ryan wouldn't have double-checked consent before whoring Alex out. Besides, didn't he know better than anyone else how much Alex loved sex?

That phase had lasted a few hours, long enough to make him stay away from dinner and eat a sandwich in his room, fuming and stewing. But as night had fallen, his mood had changed. While mulling it over in his head, the deeper meaning of Wander's words had registered. It had been a warning, clear as day. Either Ryan had to step into his role as a Dom, or he needed to walk away from Alex.

Not even specifically Alex's Dom, but a Dom in general. He'd been playing with Alex without safeguards, which was risky in general but especially with a sub as new and inexperienced as Alex.

That, in a nutshell, was the reason Ryan was still furious. Not with Wander, no matter how much he'd like to place the blame on his boss. Nope, with himself. Because Wander was right. What Ryan had been doing *was* irresponsible, and Ryan damn well knew better.

He'd been trying to convince himself it was just sex, except it wasn't. Not when he was pushing Alex's boundaries,

dragging him out of his comfort zone. Not when Ryan was engaging in humiliation play...without so much as a safeword.

Jesus, how stupid and arrogant had he been? The truth sat heavy in his stomach, but he had to acknowledge it. If he didn't want to be a Dom again, he needed to stop playing with Alex. He could fuck him, but that was it. Plain, vanilla sex. In a bed. Missionary position. 'Cause that really appealed to them both. *Not.*

He'd have to think about that some more before coming to a decision, but not now, not when he was still so pissed off. No, he needed something to distract him, but it was Sunday, and Wander had made that a required day of rest when they weren't on an active protection job. Maybe he should head outside, spend a couple of hours in nature with his camera. The problem was that it was humid as fuck, and while he was used to that from Texas, it didn't mean he had to prefer it over staying inside, where the AC kept the temperature at a comfortable seventy-two degrees.

He paced through the house, tapping his fingers against his thigh as he wandered from room to room. The expensive decor and opulent furnishings did nothing to alleviate the suffocating boredom clinging to him like a second skin. He needed something—anything—to occupy his time, but for the life of him, he couldn't figure out what.

“Fuckin’ hell,” he muttered under his breath. “This place is a goddamn mausoleum.”

As he rounded a corner, soft moans echoed down the hallway, and he paused. His curiosity piqued, he followed the enticing sounds, which originated in Jesse's study. A crack in the doorway offered him a glimpse into the room, and his breath caught.

Jesse had David bent over the desk, the boy's suit pants pooling around his ankles, while Jesse fucked him hard. The sight of their entwined bodies and the delicious moans they produced held Ryan captive as the two men moved together in a primal dance of dominance and submission. Jesse's hands roamed David's body with practiced ease as he pinched,

scratched, and slapped, leaving red spots in their wake. The vivid contrast of the marks on David's pale skin sent a jolt of arousal coursing through Ryan.

"Please, Sir," David whimpered.

"Patience, boy." Jesse's voice was laced with authority. He continued teasing, tracing patterns across David's torso, then dipping lower and wrapping his fingers around David's hard length.

Ryan was unable to tear his gaze away, and his cock had hardened to an iron rod in his jeans.

"Is this what you want?" Jesse slowly stroked David. "Is this what you need?"

"Y-yes, Sir," David stammered, his face flushed.

"Then beg for it."

David's chest heaved with each labored breath, the submissive's desperate pleas filling the room in an erotic symphony.

"Good boy," Jesse praised, finally granting David the release he craved. The *slap slap* of skin against skin filled the room, punctuated by David's choked cries of pleasure.

"Shit," Ryan whispered, his entire body thrumming with need. He'd love to keep watching, but the heat pooling in his gut demanded his attention. He had to find someone—anyone—to extinguish the fire.

Alex. He needed to find Alex. That would take care of his boredom and his horniness. Ryan tore himself away from the voyeuristic scene and stalked through the house, intent on finding his temporary salvation.

He took the stairs two at a time, rounded the corner, and headed into the hallway where Alex's bedroom was. The muffled crack of leather meeting flesh halted him. He recognized that sound, but who was getting a whipping?

He followed the noise and came to another partially open door, the unmistakable sound of a man's moans spilling into

the hallway. God, he loved living here with this bunch of perverted fuckers.

Ryan peered inside. Lowell stood tall over Jonah, who was bent over the king-size bed. Lowell sliced the crop through the air with expert precision, landing on Jonah's ass, which bore the marks of previous strikes. Jonah gripped fistfuls of the comforter, his knuckles turning white as he braced himself for each blow.

"Take it like the good boy you are," Lowell commanded.

"Y-yes, Sir." Jonah gasped, his body trembling.

Lowell delivered another sharp strike, eliciting a strangled cry from Jonah. The powerful urge to join them, to dominate Jonah and quench his thirst for control, burned hot within Ryan.

"Ready for me?" Lowell discarded the crop and unbuckled his belt. Jonah nodded, anticipation shining in his eyes. Lowell moved behind him, aligning their bodies, and pushed in with a single, slow thrust.

"Ah, fuck, yes!" Jonah cried out, his raw pleasure evident.

"Such a tight, greedy ass you have," Lowell praised, setting a punishing pace that left both men breathless and sweat slicked.

Jesus, was everyone fucking someone today? The restless energy coursing through Ryan demanded an outlet, and only Alex would do. Sure, Caleb would be more than willing to help him find release, but Alex haunted his thoughts—the way he responded, the always-present hunger in his eyes.

He'd better find him before someone else did. With a sense of urgency, Ryan strode through the hallway, his footsteps echoing off the walls. As he neared Alex's room, faint music drifted toward him, a sweet, lilting melody that sounded... live? Wait, was Alex playing an instrument? A guitar? No, a ukulele. And yes, he was playing one, and now he was singing as well, some song Ryan didn't recognize and wasn't English.

Ryan pushed the door open enough to get a glimpse of Alex. He was sitting on the edge of the bed, his fingers

moving gracefully over the strings of a well-worn ukulele. He sang with his eyes closed, lost in the music, and Ryan almost felt like an intruder, witnessing something private. Alex's voice carried a deep emotion that resonated within him, stirring up feelings he didn't want to acknowledge. The sight of him, bathed in soft light and completely caught in his music, made Ryan's chest tighten.

He took a deep breath and steeled himself, shoving those unexpected feelings into the depths of his psyche where they belonged. He should leave, but instead, he leaned against the doorframe and watched. There was something mesmerizing about seeing Alex so engrossed in his music. It made Ryan forget about his earlier restlessness, the peacefulness of it soothing his raw emotions.

As Alex sang, Ryan was drawn in further, his body responding to the raw sincerity in Alex's voice. Deep inside him, the pull of emotions threatened to unravel the carefully constructed walls around his heart. As if every note was stripping away another layer of his defenses, leaving him exposed and vulnerable.

He should leave. He should walk away before it got to him even more. But he couldn't look away, caught in the spell woven by Alex's voice and the haunting melody. The music washed over him and ignited a spark deep within. For the first time in a long while, he felt alive—truly alive. He hadn't felt this way since...since Quinton had died. Jesus, what was happening here?

The final note hung in the air, and it was as if time itself had paused. Alex's fingers stilled on the ukulele, seemingly savoring the moment. With a soft exhale, he opened his eyes.

"Crap," Alex muttered, his cheeks flushing as he lowered the instrument to his lap. "How long have you been standing there?"

Ryan folded his arms across his chest. "Long enough to know you're damn good. I didn't know you played."

"Thanks." Alex glanced down at the ukulele, strumming an idle chord. "It's something I picked up while living in

Hawaii.”

Ryan crossed the room and sat in a reading chair opposite Alex. He met those kind, blue eyes and tried to ignore how they seemed to see right through him. “What was it like there?”

He had no trouble picturing a young Alex running around on the beach, all golden skin and sun-bleached hair.

“Amazing.” Alex’s face lit up. “I lived there during my dad’s last military assignment. The people were so welcoming, and the culture... I connected with it in a way I never expected. It felt like coming home.”

Ryan frowned. “How come?”

“Their philosophy on life spoke to me. Like, there’s this thing called *Aloha Spirit*. Aloha means hello or goodbye, but it’s much more than a greeting. It’s a way of life. It means kindness, harmony, and living with empathy and understanding. People genuinely care about each other on the islands. It’s not just an act.”

“Sounds too good to be true,” Ryan said.

“It’s real, I swear. I’ve experienced it myself, and it left an impression on me. And then there’s ohana.”

“Which means...?”

Alex hesitated as if he was uncertain Ryan was truly interested. “It’s what we would call found family. The idea is that you draw those close to you into your circle of found family, your ohana circle. It means caring for each other, being there when someone needs you. Looking out for each other.”

Ryan let that sink in. “I’d have a hard time embracing that. No one is that nice without wanting something in return.”

“Believe what you want, but I know it’s real. When you live like that, you’re never alone. And just so you know, you’re part of my ohana.”

The words struck Ryan like a bolt of lightning, thrilling and terrifying him all at once. “Why?”

“Because you and the others on the team, we’re like a family now. We live together, do stuff together, work together. That’s a stronger bond than most people have with their friends. Plus, I care about you...all. Everyone on the team, I mean.”

Ryan’s chest tightened, and the urge to flee from the room, to put as much distance between himself and Alex as possible, grew strong. What was that kid doing to him? “Enough of that,” he said gruffly. “You’re gonna make me all soft.”

“Wouldn’t want that, would we?” Alex teased, but he was sporting a knowing smile.

“Fuck, no. You know I don’t do all that mushy shit.”

“Yup, you’ve made that abundantly clear.”

Alex had agreed with him, so why did it feel like he was mocking him? Ryan didn’t care for that sensation at all. He rose from the chair. “I’ll leave you be so you can continue playing. It was...nice. I liked it.”

“Thank you.”

For a moment, Ryan stood in front of Alex, too many emotions fighting with each other. He had no idea which would win.

He shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans. “Enjoy your day.”

Only when he was back in his room did he realize he’d completely forgotten about wanting to have sex with Alex. Funnily enough, he wasn’t even horny anymore.

The gravel crunched under the tires of Ryan's truck as they pulled into the sweeping driveway of Caroline Fletcher's horse farm, surrounded by rolling hills dotted with grazing horses and pristine white fencing. Alex took it all in, impressed. The well-kept stables stood proudly among the lush green pastures, their red roofs contrasting against the clear blue sky, and the scent of fresh hay and horses permeated the air. A gentle breeze rustled the leaves of the trees, creating a picturesque scene that seemed almost too perfect to be real.

"Quite the place she's got here," Ryan said, parking the truck near the main house.

"Yeah, but like Marilyn's, it looks well-kept," Alex commented.

As they stepped out of the vehicle, an attractive woman in her fifties with short dark hair appeared on the porch, her posture stiff and her expression cool. She appraised them with piercing blue eyes.

"Ryan Mason, I presume?" she asked, her voice tinged with a hint of disdain. "And you must be Alex?"

"Guilty as charged," Ryan replied. "And you're Caroline Fletcher?"

"Yes. Now, I understand you two are here to discuss Marilyn Vandervliet and the horrific death of Sam's Promise?"

"Marilyn has hired us to find out what happened, yes. We appreciate you taking the time to talk with us, Ms. Fletcher."

“Please call me Caroline. Anything to help get to the bottom of this mess.” Caroline crossed her arms over her chest. “I never liked Marilyn, but that doesn’t mean I’d want anything bad to happen to her horses, and that accident, if we can even call it that, was about as bad as it gets.”

“Understood,” Ryan said. “We’re trying to gather information from everyone involved. We don’t want to leave any stone unturned.”

Caroline nodded, her gaze flicking between Ryan and Alex. “Well, let’s get on with it then. I don’t have all day. Let me give you a tour while we’re at it, if only to show you I have nothing to hide.”

As they followed her, Alex took in the immaculate grounds and the obvious care that went into maintaining the property. It was evident Caroline had a deep love for her horses, which made him all the more curious about why she hated Marilyn so much. Was it professional rivalry, or was there something more personal at stake? And could that be enough to drive someone to murder a horse that cruelly?

“Beautiful place you have here,” he remarked after she’d shown them some of the stables.

“Thank you.” Caroline’s tone softened as she leaned against the door of an empty stable. “It’s taken years of hard work to get it to where it is now, but it’s been worth it. These horses are like family to me.”

“How would you describe your relationship with Marilyn Vandervliet?” Ryan asked.

“Contentious, I suppose. I’ll tell you straight off the bat that I’m no fan of Marilyn. She’s always been a thorn in my side, and I’ve made no secret of it. We’ve been at odds ever since we first met. She always seemed to be one step ahead of me, no matter how hard I tried to beat her.”

“Did you ever have any conflicts or disputes with her?”

“It’s hard not to when you’re both vying for the same prizes and prestige. But it never got personal. It was always about the horses, the races.”

Alex studied Caroline's face, looking for any sign of deception or evasion. He couldn't detect any duplicity, but that didn't mean she wasn't concealing something.

"Can you give us an example of some of those conflicts?"

Caroline sighed, clearly annoyed. "There was this one time when Marilyn outbid me on a promising colt. We both knew he had potential, and I wanted him badly. But she had deeper pockets."

"Must've been frustrating."

"Damn right it was," Caroline snapped. "But that's the nature of the game. Sometimes you win. Sometimes you lose. You move on."

"Have you had any recent interactions with Marilyn?" Ryan narrowed his eyes. Was there more to Caroline's story than she was letting on?

"Nothing noteworthy." Caroline shook her head. "The usual run-ins at competitions and such. We've kept our distance from each other like we tend to do."

So far, Alex found Caroline surprisingly open and honest. If she was hiding anything, she was doing an excellent job of covering for herself.

"Can I ask about your whereabouts during the week leading up to the race?"

Caroline's expression remained stoic as she walked off, leading them outside. They crossed a gravel road and headed toward the fields. "I told you I have nothing to hide. I haven't missed the Travers Stakes in over a decade, but Angel's Wings, my horse that was supposed to enter, got injured two weeks prior, so I stayed home that entire week to take care of him. Never left the farm other than to run some errands. I watched the race on TV." Her face tightened. "And when I saw that horse go down, my heart broke."

"Can anyone else confirm your whereabouts?"

She chuckled. "This is a large business, so there's always people around. Plus, I have security cameras. If you want, I'd

be happy to turn over the footage so you can see me do exciting things like mucking stalls and hosing down horses.”

The sarcasm was strong, and funnily enough, she reminded Alex of Ryan. The two of them were like prickly cacti.

They'd reached one of the lush green fields where horses were grazing. They seemed to enjoy the beautiful fall weather as much as humans did, their coats shiny under the sun. When they stepped up to the white fence, the horses came trotting over, seeking out Caroline.

“They're beautiful,” Alex commented.

“Thank you.” A genuine smile crossed Caroline's face as she watched a playful foal nuzzle its mother. “They're my life. My pride and joy.”

She took her time to greet the horses that had come up to the fence, offering gentle pats and scratches behind their ears as she spoke to them softly. The deep bond she shared with them was obvious, and it was hard to imagine someone so full of love for these creatures hurting one. Would a person who ran such a business be capable of harming a magnificent animal like Sam's Promise?

“Marilyn's success with Sam's Promise must have been difficult for you, given your history. Did you ever feel jealous or resentful toward her?” Ryan asked.

“Of course I was jealous,” Caroline admitted, her eyes flashing with defiance and vulnerability. “But not to the point where I'd hurt her or her horse. I wanted to beat her fair and square. That's how I am. I would never willingly cause a horse pain. And neither would Marilyn.”

That was a surprising statement, considering the dislike between them. “What makes you say that?” Alex asked.

“Because I know her. I may not like her, and that's mutual, but Marilyn lives and breathes horses, just like I do. My guess is that the only thing she and I agree on is that we're both strong advocates for treating horses well. We have taken a firm stand on that in the past, lobbying to get more protective measures during the races to prevent more deaths.” She shook

her head, her face tight. “Every big race, one or more horses get into career-ending or even life-ending accidents, and many of those are preventable. Marilyn and I have tried to get stricter regulations passed, but unfortunately, we don’t have broad support. But that’s why I’m telling you she’d never hurt a horse. Ever.”

Wasn’t it interesting that Marilyn’s biggest rival was also her greatest character witness? To Alex, that made Caroline even more believable. Surely, if she’d been involved in all this, she would’ve cast doubts on Marilyn’s character.

“Can you think of anyone else who might’ve wanted to sabotage Marilyn’s success?” Ryan asked, his posture relaxed but his gaze sharp as a knife.

“Look...” Caroline sighed, her shoulders sagging a little. “Marilyn has no shortage of people who’d love to see her taken down a peg. But I can’t think of anyone specific who would go that far. We all have our disagreements, but at the end of the day, we’re a community. One that loves horses. For the most part, anyway. We have some rotten apples for sure, but I can’t see anyone doing something so cruel.”

“And anyone who resented Marilyn? Someone who’d want to make her pay for something?”

Caroline paused, frowning her brow in thought. “Well, there’s one person who comes to mind. Nathan Harker.”

“Who’s that?”

Caroline led them into another stable, the smell of hay and leather lingering in the air. “Nathan’s an up-and-coming jockey. Ambitious, talented...and pretty damn resentful when Marilyn passed him over to ride Sam’s Promise. I heard he didn’t take it well.”

Ryan’s eyes narrowed, and Alex could almost see the gears turning in his head. “So, he might’ve felt like he had something to prove or a score to settle?”

“Maybe, but I don’t know him well enough to say for sure. It’s something I heard through the grapevine.”

“Thanks for sharing that with us. We’ll look into it.”

“Good.” Caroline nodded, her face once again taking on that determined expression. “I hope you find whoever did this to Sam’s Promise. No horse deserves to suffer like that.”

They came up to a stall where a big sand-colored horse poked its head over the door. “This is Angel’s Wings,” Caroline said. “Hey, baby,” she cooed. “How are you feeling today?”

She reached into her pocket and fed the horse some treats as she scratched between his ears.

“What was wrong with him?” Alex asked.

“Inflammation of the tendons in his right front leg due to overtraining. It’s always a challenge to find the right balance between pushing a horse and overexerting it. This time, we pushed too hard.”

She rubbed his nose, then kissed his head. “But you’ll get to race again soon, won’t you?”

Her affection for Angel’s Wings was obvious, and the horse mirrored it. Alex had always felt animals were often much better judges of people’s characters than people themselves, so if the horse trusted Caroline, that spoke volumes.

“Thank you for giving us a tour and answering our questions,” Ryan said when they were back at their car, offering a genuine smile that showed he felt the same way about Caroline as Alex did. “We’ll do our best to find out what happened and bring whoever’s responsible to justice.”

Caroline nodded. “You do that. For Sam’s Promise and the sake of our entire racing community. And if I think of anything else that might be relevant, I’ll let you know.”

The sun dipped low in the sky, casting golden rays across the rolling hills as they drove away. Alex glanced over at Ryan, who gripped the steering wheel with a focused intensity that belied his brooding thoughts.

“Caroline was an interesting character,” Alex said. “Didn’t hold back on her feelings about Marilyn, that’s for sure.”

Ryan snorted. “Yeah, she’s a straight shooter, all right. What other impressions did you get?”

Alex had expected that question, and he appreciated Ryan giving him the opportunity to share his thoughts, even if Ryan had come to the same conclusions. “I don’t think she had anything to do with Sam’s Promise getting killed. She runs a clean, ethical business that seems to be doing well financially. Plus, her genuine love for the horses is obvious. I don’t see her capable of committing an act that gruesome.”

“Agreed. I didn’t think she was involved, but it was good to meet her and have that confirmed.”

“So I guess our next stop is that jockey, Nathan Harker? His ambition might have driven him to do something drastic.”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” Ryan cautioned. “We still need to dig deeper into everyone’s alibis, including Caroline’s. Can’t rule anyone out yet.”

“I know, but he’s a new lead we can check out. I suppose we’ll try to see him tomorrow?”

“Can’t. I’m out of town for two days.”

“Out of town?”

“Yeah. It’s my mom’s sixty-fifth birthday, so I have an early flight to Austin tomorrow to spend some time with her and my sister to celebrate.”

It was so strange to hear Ryan talk about his mom and sister with such open affection. He was revealing a part of himself that usually stayed hidden. Did he even realize how his voice changed when he talked about them? That his face lost some of its cold sternness and grew softer?

“I suppose you don’t want me to work on the case by myself?”

Ryan shot him a quick look sideways. “Not if you mean talking to Nathan Harker, no, but you can check out other stuff. Caroline’s alibi, for one, and you could do a preliminary background check on Nathan. Plus, we need information on the bets placed that day, so see what you can find out there.”

Alex fought to keep his face neutral, not wanting to show the excitement bubbling inside him. “Thank you for trusting me with that.”

Ryan glanced at him again, then stared straight ahead. “You’re doing well so far. Better than I expected.”

Sheer joy filled Alex’s insides. “Yeah?”

“Don’t let it get to your head.”

“I won’t. I promise.”

“Cockiness is dangerous in this business.”

“I know.”

“Once you’re convinced you have all the answers, you start missing important clues.”

“I understand.”

“And you still have a lot to learn.”

“Jesus, Ryan, let me enjoy the compliment, okay? I promise I won’t see it as evidence that I’m at your level. Or, you know, that you *like* me or whatever.”

Ryan’s mouth curled up in a smile. “You’re not too bad.”

Alex put his hand on his heart. “Stop. I can’t take two compliments in a day. It’s too much.”

The smile widened, and Alex’s stomach fluttered over that rare occasion. Ryan pulled up to the front gate of Jesse’s house and scanned his key card. The gate opened, and neither spoke a word until he’d parked the car.

Ryan turned off the engine. “I’m leaving early tomorrow and won’t be back until midnight the day after.”

“Okay.”

Ryan quirked an eyebrow at Alex. “You’re not gonna say how much you’ll miss me?”

Alex snorted. “I’ll be heartbroken. Inconsolable.”

“I figured. To make sure you’ll remember me, I’ll give you a goodbye present.”

For one glorious moment, Alex thought Ryan had actually gotten him a gift, but Ryan's hands went to his zipper, and Alex swallowed. Idiot. He knew better by now.

Ryan put his seat back as far as possible and pointed to the floor in front of him. "On your knees, baby boy, and open that mouth of yours wide."

Disobeying wasn't even an option, not when Ryan used that tone, so Alex wiggled himself into the small space and did as he was told. Ryan was quick this time, abusing his mouth with ruthless efficiency until he came down his throat. Alex took it greedily, sucking every last drop out of him.

When he was back in his room, he stared at himself in the mirror. His lips were swollen, his eyes still red-rimmed and teary, and his throat was scratchy. He'd loved the blow job, so why had it left him feeling so empty? Why was he starting to question if he truly wanted to be Ryan's fuck toy? Or was it possible that maybe, just maybe, he was going to miss Ryan while he was gone and that was why he was in such a weird mood?

Nah, that couldn't be. He wasn't quite stupid enough to get attached to Ryan.

Was he?

Ryan stepped out of his rental car and surveyed the small family home he knew all too well. The worn white picket fence around the familiar front yard had seen better days, just like him. The porch swing creaked lazily in the breeze, stirring up memories of laughter-filled evenings spent with his mom and Quinton, now forever gone. He shook off the pang of guilt and sadness and instead focused on the warm glow of the living room windows that spoke of love, family, and comfort.

“Damn, it’s been too long.” Ryan sighed as he approached the house. He hadn’t been back since he’d left Austin well over a year ago, and he hadn’t expected the rush of memories at seeing the house he’d grown up in. He’d played hide-and-seek with Rachelle among the overgrown bushes countless times and climbed the gnarled old oak tree that stood guard in the small front yard.

“Hey there, stranger!” Rachelle stood in the open front door, beaming at him with her arms wide open. Her dark curls framed her face, making her look eerily similar to their mom.

Ryan closed the distance between them and enveloped her in a bear hug. “I’m happy as a clam at high water to see you.”

“And I’m happier than a tornado in a trailer park,” Rachelle fired back, hugging him just as tightly.

Ryan held on for a few beats, then let go. “Clams are happier than tornadoes.”

“I dunno. I think tornadoes are having a lot of fun.”

They grinned at each other.

“What happened? Did you decide to become Santa Claus?” Rachelle playfully poked at his gray beard.

“Ha ha ha, very funny.” Ryan rolled his eyes. “Just thought I’d try something new. I think it makes me look distinguished. Where are the husband and kids?”

Rachelle sighed. “Corey’s sick with a stomach bug, so chances are, Brody will be as well today. Teddy stayed home with them.”

“Your husband is a good man.”

“I sure picked the right one.”

As he followed her inside, he took a deep breath, inhaling the scent of cinnamon and vanilla from a freshly baked apple pie. The familiar knickknacks lining the shelves, the worn but comfortable furniture, and the hand-painted wooden sign that read “Home” above the entrance all brought back memories. It was a house of love and laughter but also the place where he’d experienced heartbreak and loss.

“Ryan!” his mom called from the kitchen. She appeared in the doorway, her eyes shining with joy. She’d aged gracefully, her once-dark hair now a soft silver hue. Her smile, though, had remained as warm and inviting as ever.

“Happy birthday, Momma.” Ryan pulled her into a tight embrace, reveling in the comfort of her arms around him. “You look amazing.”

“Oh, honey, I’m mighty glad you could make it for my sixty-fifth.”

“I wouldn’t have missed it for the world.”

“Let’s sit and catch up. I’ve baked your favorite apple pie, and I made you some extra strong coffee. Three heaped spoons of coffee, just like you prefer.”

Dorothy had been right that there really was no place like home. “You’re the best, Momma.”

“Oh, I see how it is,” Rachelle teased. “He gets his favorite pie and coffee, and I get nothing?”

His mom slapped Rachelle against her shoulder. “Hush, you. You know damn well you love that pie as much as your brother does. And I made you iced tea, didn’t I?”

“Homemade?” Rachelle looked like an eager puppy.

“Is there any other kind?”

They settled at the kitchen table like they always had amid the homey chaos of his childhood home. The familiar creak of the floorboards beneath his feet was like a bittersweet lullaby. While he was glad to be here for his mom’s birthday, the memories it stirred up made him uneasy.

“How’s life treating you up in New York?” Rachelle asked.

“Can’t complain,” Ryan replied, trying to keep his tone light. “Dwyer Security’s keeping me busy. It’s a far cry from homicide detective work, but it pays the bills.”

“You like it?”

“I do. More than I had expected.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” his mom said. “I wasn’t sure how you’d be likin’ it that far up north. Those winters, brr.” She shivered. “It’s colder than a well digger’s rear in Alaska.”

Ryan winced at that descriptive visual. “Yeah, that was an adjustment for sure. And they said last winter was mild, so we’ll see how bad it gets this year.”

“And your boss, he’s nice?” his mom asked.

“He’s pretty much the best boss anyone could ask for. I wasn’t even planning on staying there after he asked for my help with a case, but I liked him and the team enough to move there.”

“How big is the team?” Rachelle asked.

“Wander is the boss, and then we have Lowell, Jonah, Caleb, and Alex. I’m teamed up with Alex now, and we’re working on a case together. He’s young but smart, picking stuff up much faster than I had expected.”

“Cute?”

Shit, his sister always saw more than he wanted to. “Very cute.”

Rachelle cocked her head. “You doing some extracurricular activities with him?”

“Extracurricular activities?” His mom snorted. “Is that what the kids are callin’ it these days?”

Rachelle patted her hand. “I was trying to protect your delicate sensibilities, Momma.”

Now it was Ryan’s turn to snort-laugh. “Delicate? Mom is as strong as an oak in a Texas thunderstorm.”

“Damn straight.” His mom sounded proud. She should be. She was the strongest person Ryan had ever met. “And don’t give me that BS with euphemisms about sex. Just call it what it is. I got pregnant at seventeen, so it’s not like I don’t know what I’m talkin’ about.”

Rachelle held up her hands. “Okay, okay. So, are you fucking him?”

Jesus, why had the good Lord seen it fit to bless him with an equally sassy sister? “I am. Nothing serious though. We’re just having fun.”

“Are you playing as a Dom with him?” Rachelle’s tone was casual, but her eyes held genuine concern.

Ryan glanced over at his mom. She could take a lot and knew about this part of his life, but he didn’t want to make her uncomfortable. But she nodded, giving her permission for the topic. He shifted in his seat. “No, I haven’t been a Dom since Quinton died.”

A heavy silence fell over them. Ryan clenched his fists. How many dark nights had he spent alone those first months, tormented by guilt and the memory of Quinton’s voice whispering sweet words of submission in his ear? It had been a never-ending nightmare.

“Ryan,” Rachelle said, “I know this is hard for you, but you can’t keep blaming yourself. You need to let go of your

guilt.”

His jaw tightened, and anger flared within him. How could they understand what he had lost? What he had failed to protect? “I appreciate your concern.” He gritted his teeth and forced the words out. “But it’s not that simple.”

His mom placed her hand on his arm for a moment. “We don’t want you to suffer. We love you, and we want you to be happy. And bein’ a Dom made you happy.”

Oh, it had. Until it had all come crashing down on him.

The air in the room seemed to thicken with tension. “You don’t understand. I should’ve been there for him. I should’ve protected him. It was my job as his boyfriend, his Dom, and as a cop, and I failed in all three roles. Quinton died because of me!”

“No, honey, he didn’t,” his mom said, her voice firm yet gentle. She reached out to touch his hand, but he pulled away instinctively, unable to bear the weight of her concern.

“Momma, please,” he growled, frustration boiling within him. “I was the one who put Quinton in that situation. If I hadn’t been so damn stubborn to go after that guy, if I’d given up when they warned me, maybe things would be different. Maybe Quinton would still be alive.”

His mom’s gaze was steady and unwavering. “You did everything you could at the time. It’s not fair to blame yourself for somethin’ you couldn’t have possibly known would happen.”

His breath hitched as he fought to maintain control over his emotions. He wanted to believe her, but the guilt had rooted itself deep inside him like an invasive vine, choking out every rational thought. “You don’t know what it’s like...” He clenched his fists as he stared at the worn wooden floorboards. “Every time I close my eyes, I see his face. Hear his screams. And I know I’m responsible.”

“You are *not* responsible for the actions of a madman. Only God himself could’ve stopped him, and last time I checked, you aren’t the Almighty.” His mom’s Texas drawl

softened the harshness of her words. “You can’t control what other people do, and you can’t keep punishin’ yourself for something you had no hand in.”

“Besides, Ryan,” Rachelle added, “Quinton wouldn’t want you to live like this. He’d want you to be happy and move on.”

The mention of what Quinton would have wanted pierced through the fog of his anger. His heart ached with longing for the man he’d loved and lost. A deep, guttural sigh escaped him as he tried to swallow the lump in his throat.

Ryan’s gaze flickered between his mother and sister, whose words chipped away at the wall of guilt he’d built around himself. Deep down, he knew they were right, but accepting their reassurances felt like a betrayal to Quinton’s memory.

“Maybe you’re right,” he admitted. “But it’s not that easy. The guilt...it’s a part of me now. I don’t know if I can ever let it go.”

“It ain’t gonna be easy,” his mom agreed. “But it starts with you decidin’ this is what you want to do.”

Did he want to let go of his guilt? It meant letting go of Quinton in a way, and was he ready to do that? Alex’s face drifted into his mind, his laughter, the sparkle in those bright-blue eyes, the way he could look at Ryan with utter adoration. If he wanted to consider a future with Alex, he had to let go of the past.

Wait, what? Since when were Alex and a future two things that came together in the same sentence? What the hell was happening?

“I’m not sure I’m ready for that...”

His mom patted his hand. “Take some time to think about it, honey. But don’t wait too long, or life will pass you by. You’re too young for that.”

“Why didn’t you ever find someone else?” he asked. He’d never even wondered before, but now it hit him that his mom had spent all her life alone, raising her kids by herself.

“Oh, it wasn’t for lack of tryin’, honey, trust me on that. Not at first. I needed to take care of you two, and I worked at the diner. Wouldn’t have survived without Nate and Amy.”

Ryan and his sister had practically grown up in the diner where his mom had worked, sitting for hours in a corner watching TV or playing, waiting until their mom was done to take them home. Nate and Amy Winslow, the owners, had always tolerated their presence, which few people would’ve done. It had allowed Ryan’s mom to work full-time and take care of the two of them.

“But you never found someone later on?” Rachelle leaned with her head on her hands as she studied their mom.

“Maybe I was too picky. I dunno. But Lord knows the last thing I needed was some man who expected me to cook and clean for him and be his momma. I had two young ‘uns. I didn’t need a third.” His mom scoffed. “And some of the men I met? Jesus, take the wheel. They were dumber than a box of rocks in the Lone Star sun. I have no need for that and zero patience to boot.”

How could you not love that woman? “You did right by us, Momma. We owe you everything.”

She waved his praise away, then got up and grabbed something from the kitchen counter. “I gave you the foundation, but you built the rest. You both used the talents the good Lord gave ya, and for that, I’m proud and grateful. Speakin’ of the past, I found some old photos while cleaning the attic. I thought you might get a kick out of them.”

She handed Ryan a small stack of faded photographs, and he couldn’t repress a grin as he flipped through the images. There he was, decked out in cowboy boots and a hat far too big for his head, pretending to be the sheriff of their small town.

“Look at that little cowboy,” Rachelle teased, peering over his shoulder. “Didn’t you want to be a crime fighter even back then?”

“Guilty as charged. I wanted to be a Texas Ranger.”

“Yeah, you always tried to arrest me and my friends for making too much noise.”

“You girls were always ear-splittingly loud. There shoulda been a law against that.”

“True, but then we also made blankets forts in the living room and invited you to our sleepovers. Well, until a certain age anyway.”

Ryan rolled his eyes. “I’ve always been as gay as they come, sister dear. I never have been attracted to a girl, not even once. That includes your friend Tamara, who had, objectively speaking, a pair of superb boobs.”

“Jesus, yes. The poor thing had a D-cup by seventh grade. That got her a lot of unwanted attention.”

“Tell me about it. She asked me to her junior prom. Don’t you remember?”

Rachelle blinked, then snickered. “You’re right. Oh god, I’d forgotten about that. You weren’t even out yet, but she felt safe with you.”

Ryan smirked. “I was the class stud, let me tell ya. Every boy in my class was jealous of me. Little did they know.”

“Those were the days.” His mom smiled fondly at Ryan and his sister. “And such joy it brings me to have you both here today.”

More family and friends would come later to celebrate, but the first few hours were for them, and Ryan enjoyed spending time with his mom and sister far more than he’d expected. He’d pulled away from them too. Not consciously, but he had. He thought he’d kept everyone at bay but them, but he’d created a distance between himself and them as well, and he hadn’t been aware until now.

As the day wore on and other family and friends arrived, Ryan opened up more and more, sharing stories from his childhood and listening to others reminisce about their youthful antics. He was surprised at how easily he fell back into the rhythm of things, chatting about everything from

sports to politics and even holding his own in a debate about the best barbecue joints in town.

He wrapped an arm around his mother's shoulders as they laughed at Rachelle's recounting of the time she convinced a young Ryan that if he swallowed watermelon seeds, a watermelon would grow inside him.

"Y'all are never going to let me live that one down, are you?" Ryan grumbled good-naturedly, his cheeks warming with embarrassment.

"Absolutely not." His mom's eyes twinkled with mirth. "It's a mother's prerogative to tease her children about their childhood follies."

For the first time in what felt like ages, Ryan allowed himself to forget the weight of guilt and loss that had been bearing down on him. With every laugh and shared memory, the burden seemed to lighten a little more.

As the party wound down, Ryan stepped onto the back porch, needing a moment of solitude. The warm Texas night enveloped him like a familiar embrace, and he leaned against the railing, taking in the quiet rustle of leaves and the distant hum of cicadas.

"Enjoying the fresh air?" Rachelle called from the doorway.

"Something like that."

She joined him at the railing, their shoulders touching as they stared into the darkness. "You know, you can't keep running from yourself forever," she said gently.

"Who says I'm running?" He knew where this conversation was headed, and part of him wanted to shut it down before it went any further.

"Mom and I love you, and we hate seeing you like this." Rachelle seemed undeterred by his defensive stance. "You've got to let go of your guilt. Quinton's death wasn't your fault, and if you're honest with yourself, you know it."

Ryan clenched his jaw, shifting his gaze skyward to avoid meeting her eyes. “It’s not that simple, Rach.”

Deep down, he knew they were right. He couldn’t keep holding on to the past, torturing himself over a tragedy he couldn’t have predicted or prevented. But accepting that reality felt like a betrayal, like admitting he didn’t care enough about Quinton to honor his memory.

“Maybe it is if you let it be.” Rachelle squeezed his hand. “You can’t change what happened, but you can choose how you move forward.”

Ryan sighed, staring into the darkness as he wrestled with his thoughts. He didn’t want to move forward. He didn’t want to let go of the anger, the guilt, and the pain that had become his constant companions. Because if he did, he’d have to face the even more terrifying prospect of vulnerability, of opening himself up to the possibility of love and loss.

Once again, Alex popped into his mind. Wasn’t it funny how he kept thinking of him, even though he’d literally seen him the day before? He couldn’t possibly miss him, not this soon. And yet everything reminded him of Alex. The boy was getting under his skin, but why? What did Alex have that others didn’t?

They were a good match sexually. He couldn’t deny that. Their kinks and needs lined up perfectly. But it was more than that because he liked working with him as well. Alex was smart and had shown far more insight than Ryan had expected from someone as young as Alex. His initial irritation over being paired with him had vanished completely, and now he actually looked forward to spending every day with him on the job. Such a weird experience.

In another universe, he and Alex might be well-matched. Alex was very different from Quinton, but Ryan could easily see himself growing attached to the boy. The problem was that he could never be the man Alex needed. Every time his thoughts went there, every time he even considered more with him than just sex, he shut that down immediately. He wasn’t good enough for Alex. Alex deserved so much better than an

eternal dark cloud that would hide his sunshine and, over time, dim it.

No, Ryan couldn't do it. He couldn't do that to Alex, and even more, he couldn't open himself up ever again. Losing Quinton had damn near killed him. If he grew attached to Alex, he'd allow the possibility of getting hurt like that again. Not even because something would happen to Alex. Ryan didn't expect him to die or anything. But at some point, Alex would grow tired of Ryan's grumpy ass and show him the door, and then what? He couldn't let his heart get broken like that a second time because he'd barely survived the first.

But damn, he missed him something fierce.

When he stepped out of his bedroom, Alex barely had time to register Ryan's presence before he pushed him back into his room and slammed him against the wall, their bodies colliding with a force that left him breathless. Ryan gripped his waist, anchoring him against the cool, unforgiving surface, then kicked the door shut.

"Ryan," Alex gasped, but any protest died on his lips as Ryan captured them in a desperate, hungry kiss. The world narrowed to the taste of Ryan's mouth, the heat of his body pressing against Alex's, and the intensity of the emotions coursing through him. Funny how Alex could go from zero to one hundred fucking percent turned on within seconds. Sex hadn't even been on his mind that morning, but as soon as he tasted Ryan, he couldn't think of anything else. An unsettling realization.

The rough texture of the wall scraped against Alex's back as their lips locked in a heated kiss. The hunger in Ryan's touch was unmistakable, a raw need that defied any attempt at restraint. Ryan's hands roamed Alex's body without hesitation, mapping out every curve and contour through the fabric of his clothes. It was maddening how Ryan seemed to know exactly where to caress him, igniting a fire that developed into a raging inferno in no time. Alex arched into the touch, desperate for more.

"Such an eager little thing," Ryan murmured against Alex's lips. He gripped Alex's thigh and lifted it to wrap

around his waist as he ground their hips together. “Always so fucking horny.”

Rough hands shoved under Alex’s shirt, finding his nipple. He gasped, yearning pooling in his lower abdomen. Fuck, he had missed Ryan. Two days had seemed like so much longer. He needed this connection, this primal dance of dominance and submission that came so naturally between them. “Ryan...”

“Patience,” Ryan chided as he leaned back. “I’m going to take my time with you. Well, as much time as possible, considering we have work to do. But I’ve gone two days without your sweet ass and mouth to please me, so I need you.”

I need you. Alex knew he shouldn’t read too much into that statement. Ryan needed him to take care of him. He needed Alex to be his fuck toy so he could release some energy. Nothing more than that. Yet the words hit deep, sinking their invisible claws into Alex until they echoed in his brain. Ryan needed him. “Whatever you want...”

“Fuck, you’re so perfect.” Ryan nipped at Alex’s bottom lip. A shiver shot down Alex’s spine. Why was that mix of praise and pain such a turn-on?

With a swift movement, Ryan found Alex’s belt, undid it, and slid his pants down. Ryan trailed his fingers down Alex’s chest, his touch featherlight as he dipped below the waistband of his boxers. Alex’s breath hitched as Ryan wrapped his hand around his throbbing cock and gave it a firm stroke.

His hips bucked forward involuntarily, seeking greater friction from those strong fingers around him. He felt exposed and vulnerable under Ryan’s intense gaze, but at the same time, there was something intoxicating about letting go and giving in to his desires.

Ryan released his cock, grinning wickedly. “Let’s kiss some more.”

Asshole. But how could Alex complain when kissing Ryan made him feel so, so good? His heart pounded as he tried to

process the onslaught of sensations coursing through him—the wall scratching against his back, the heat of Ryan’s body pressed against his own, and the intoxicating mix of excitement, fear, and arousal that was driving him insane.

Ryan tore his mouth away from Alex’s lips, a thin thread of saliva connecting them for an instant before the bond was severed. The heat of Ryan’s breath ghosted over Alex’s skin as he trailed hot wet kisses down his neck, nipping and sucking at the sensitive spots. Shivers skittered down his spine.

“Ah, fuck.” Alex arched his neck to give Ryan better access. The slight burn of pain only heightened his pleasure, as did the knowledge he’d be wearing a necklace of bruises as a reminder of this moment.

“Like that, do you?” The vibrations of Ryan’s voice against his skin sent another thrill through Alex. He wanted more. So much more. More of Ryan’s touch, more of his teasing words, more of everything they had together.

“Y-yes,” he stammered, struggling to form coherent thoughts.

Ryan dropped kisses across Alex’s collarbone while his free hand moved to the waistband of his own pants, deftly undid them, and freed his throbbing erection. Fabric rustled, and Alex’s heart raced with anticipation.

Ryan let him go, only to drag down Alex’s underwear. “Kick it off.”

Alex did as he was told.

“Hands against the wall.”

Alex hesitated only a moment, but then he turned around, spread his legs, and stuck his ass back, ripe for the taking.

“Ready?” Ryan asked.

“God, yes.”

Ryan put his left hand on top of Alex’s, pinning him in place as if he feared Alex would walk away. As if he could. Ryan positioned himself at Alex’s entrance, paused for a beat or two, then pushed inside. The sensation of being filled so

completely was overwhelming. Alex clenched his teeth, struggling to adjust to the intensity, but he wouldn't trade it for anything.

“Fuck, you feel amazing,” Ryan rasped. “Why do you always feel so fucking amazing? I missed you. Two days, and I missed you so much.”

Alex's head dazzled. He couldn't attach meaning to that. Ryan had missed the sex, nothing more. But oh, how his heart ached with it, the longing he'd experienced himself.

Ryan held himself still, allowing Alex a moment to get used to the feeling, but it wasn't long before instinct took over, and Alex squirmed, desperate for more.

Ryan withdrew slightly, then thrust back in, setting a pace that had Alex moaning and arching his back for more. The intensity of Ryan's touch captivated Alex. The press of Ryan's fingers into Alex's flesh left behind marks that seemed to brand him as Ryan's and Ryan's alone. He felt a strange sense of pride in knowing he could inspire such passion in a man like Ryan, who was always so guarded and closed off.

Ryan's thrusts became punishing, driving into Alex with such raw ferocity his entire body shook. The shift in intensity was sudden and breathtaking. Every nerve ending lit up like fireworks as their bodies moved together in perfect synchronization, the shared rhythm amplified by the slap of skin against skin.

“Ah fuck!” Alex struggled to hold his weight against the wall.

“Wait for me.” Ryan's voice was a low growl that vibrated through Alex's chest. “Don't you dare come until I say so.”

Alex whimpered at the command, his body aching to release the pressure building inside him. But he loved surrendering control to Ryan, letting him dictate the pace. He focused on his breathing, channeling all his willpower into holding back the tidal wave threatening to crash over him.

“Yes, Sir.”

The words rolled from his lips as if he'd uttered them a thousand times, feeling more natural than anything he'd ever said.

“Say it again.”

“Please, Sir...” Alex’s voice cracked with the effort it took to repress the orgasm clawing at him, desperate to break free.

“Good boy.” Ryan snaked his hand around Alex’s hip and gripped his throat, cutting off his air supply enough to make his vision swim. The added danger only made the situation more thrilling, pushing Alex closer to the edge.

“Ryan, I can’t—” Panic and pleasure swirled together in his mind as his muscles tensed in anticipation of the inevitable climax.

“Yes, you can. Wait.” Ryan continued to pound into him with relentless energy.

Alex’s thoughts were a jumbled mess, but amid the chaos, he clung to one simple truth: he had to wait. He had to obey. So despite every instinct urging him to let go, he held on, waiting for the moment when Ryan would grant him release.

As Ryan’s thrusts grew faster and harder, the room seemed to shrink around them. Their bodies moved as one, a perfect dance of desire fueled by need and trust. Ryan gasped as he pushed himself relentlessly onward, each powerful stroke driving them closer to the edge. Each thrust of Ryan’s hips sent jolts of electricity coursing through Alex’s veins, igniting every nerve ending in his body.

Alex’s control slipped away, and he teetered on the brink of surrender. His entire focus centered on the Herculean effort it took to keep from coming undone. “Can’t...hold on...”

“Almost there, baby boy.” Ryan tightened his grip on Alex’s waist as if to physically tether him to the moment. “Just a little longer.”

And then it was over. Ryan’s body tensed as he came deep inside Alex, claiming him completely. “Fuuuuuck...”

Feeling the aftershocks of Ryan's release, Alex braced himself for the final surge of pleasure. He braced himself against the wall, breathless, as Ryan wrapped his hand around his cock with an almost predatory precision. The sensation was electrifying, a mix of relief and exquisite agony as he was pushed to the very edge of his limits.

"Let go," Ryan said, his voice a low growl in Alex's ear. "Come for me, baby boy."

With a guttural cry, Alex succumbed to the whirlwind of passion that had been building within him for far too long. Every single cell in his body came alive, and fireworks exploded behind his closed eyes as the world around him ceased to exist. His vision went white, then black, and his lungs spasmed with the struggle to draw in enough oxygen.

As the last tremors of his orgasm faded, Ryan loosened his grip on him and pulled out of Alex, a trail of fluids dripping. His legs too shaky to stand up, Alex slid down the wall and onto the floor, utterly spent. His bare ass hit the hardwood floor, and he cringed at the unpleasant sensation. Ryan lowered himself beside him, and they were both panting.

Ryan reached for his pants and retrieved an object from his pocket. What was that? Oh shit. Alex's cheeks heated when he recognized the small black butt plug.

"I want you to wear this for me." Ryan held up the plug for Alex. "And keep it in until I tell you to take it out."

A jolt of excitement jerked through him. Oh, to be filled like that all day. He nodded mutely, biting his lip as he turned onto his side and offered Ryan his ass.

"Good boy." Ryan pressed the tip of the plug against Alex's entrance, and Alex held his breath, feeling nervous and exhilarated by the sensation.

Ryan locked eyes with him as he pushed the plug in slowly, inch by tantalizing inch. The pressure built inside Alex, stretching him deliciously until the widest part of the plug slipped past his tight ring of muscles and settled into

place. Funny how different this felt from Ryan's cock, even though the latter had to be bigger.

Alex settled back on his ass, pressing his lips together at the unfamiliar sensation of having a plug in his ass. Not unpleasant, per se, but strange. Almost as strange as the fact that Ryan had brought it. He must have thought of this beforehand. Or the man walked around with a butt plug in his pocket all the time, which Alex doubted.

He cleared his throat. "Am I allowed to ask why you asked me to do this?"

Ryan's expression faltered, and he glanced away as if uncomfortable with the question. "I wanted to claim you? Because we hadn't seen each other for... But that's stupid, of course. It was just two days. Maybe I thought it would be a good way to remind you of your place?"

Alex had never seen Ryan that insecure. "Remind me of my place? You mean as your submissive?"

"Shit." Ryan rubbed the back of his neck, his face flushed. "No, that's not what I meant. I'm not your Dom, Alex. I shouldn't have said that."

"Then why did you?" The question slipped out before Alex could stop it.

"Because...because sometimes I forget and get carried away," Ryan admitted, much softer now. "I like the control and the power dynamic, but you know I can't have a full-blown D/s relationship with you, no matter how much I want it sometimes."

Alex's heart swelled at Ryan's honesty. Hearing Ryan say he wanted to be Alex's Dom meant everything, even if Alex didn't understand why Ryan couldn't. Everything inside him wanted to ask why, but he knew better. If he pushed now, Ryan would retreat again, and he'd lose the fragile connection between them. "Okay. Wanna grab breakfast?"

Ryan nodded, then got up and held out a hand to pull Alex up. "Do you want me to take it out? I probably should, right? I have no right to ask this of you."

On impulse, Alex leaned in and kissed him quickly. “Leave it in. I like it.”

“Yeah?”

“I promise I’d tell you if I felt differently.”

They got dressed quickly. “I’ll clean up my mess after breakfast,” Alex said, pointing at the mess on the wall and the floor.

“Nah, I’ll do it. It’s the least I can do after...” Ryan cleared his throat. “I’ll do it.”

They went to the dining room, where everyone else had already started their breakfast. When they walked in, Wander shot them a meaningful grin, but it didn’t bother Alex that much anymore, though he did make an effort to walk normally. Knowing he’d just been fucked was one thing, but he didn’t need everyone to realize he was wearing a plug.

It felt strange but good. Alex clenched his muscles around the plug, testing the sensation it created. A jolt of pleasure rippled through him, and his knees buckled slightly.

Ryan winked as he pulled out a chair for Alex. “Careful there,” he teased, his voice low and husky. “You don’t want to get too distracted, do you?”

“Right.” Alex tried to sound nonchalant as he sat.

Had he done the right thing, keeping the plug in? Or had he handed Ryan too much power? Doubt and shame warred within him, but at the same time, a thrill of anticipation coursed through his veins. Ryan had opened up to him. Even though it was only a little, it was more than he’d ever shown before. No, Alex had made the right choice.

“Here.” Ryan set a steaming cup of coffee in front of Alex. “Drink up. You’ll need your energy for later.”

“Thanks.” Alex wrapped his hands around the warm mug. He took a sip, the bitterness of the coffee grounding him in the moment.

Lori, one of Jesse’s staff who ran the dining room, set two plates of steaming hot food in front of them. She knew their

preferences by now: huevos rancheros for Ryan and a solid stack of French toast for Alex, with eggs on the side. “Thank you,” they said at the same time.

“My pleasure. Let me know if you need anything else.”

Lori was a saint, much like all the other staff. It had taken Alex some time to get used to them, and he always made sure to thank them and make their lives as easy as possible.

“How was Austin?” Alex asked, shoveling a forkful of French toast into his mouth.

“Good. Hot and humid, but it was lovely to see my mom and sister.”

“Did she have a good birthday?”

“I think so.” Ryan grinned. “She said the two of us being there was all the birthday gift she needed, but I still got her a pair of AirPods. She loves listening to audiobooks on her walks, and she was still using an old-fashioned set of earbuds.”

“Oh, I’m sure she’ll love that.” He waved at the others as they walked out, already done with their breakfast, then refocused on Ryan. “Do you miss it? Austin, I mean?”

“Some of it. My mom and sister, of course. Not the weather though. Fall here is much better. But the food, for sure. Can’t get decent Tex-Mex anywhere here.”

He was sharing more than he ever had. At some point, he’d shut down again, but Alex couldn’t help but push a little harder. He so desperately wanted to get to know him, understand him. “Why’d you leave?”

Ryan was quiet for the longest time. He set his fork down and looked directly into Alex’s eyes. “It’s...complicated.”

Alex held his breath. If he talked now, he’d lose him. That much he knew. But if he stayed silent, maybe Ryan would...

“I lost my boyfriend,” Ryan said after the heaviest silence in history. “His name was Quinton.”

His boyfriend? “What happened?”

“I arrested a guy for murder, and his family swore revenge. They wanted to hurt me where it would hit me the hardest, and so instead of going after me, they killed Quinton. He...he was killed because of me.”

Alex’s heart clenched at the raw emotion in Ryan’s words, and he reached across the table, placing his hand on Ryan’s. “I’m so sorry, Ryan.”

Much to his surprise, Ryan allowed the contact and didn’t pull back. “He was also my submissive, so I failed as a boyfriend and a Dom. I found him... God, Alex, the blood... I’d seen murder countless times before, and I thought I’d become numb to it, but seeing him was... All I could think was that it should have been me. He paid the price for something I did. This guy’s family warned me during the investigation that I should back off or I would regret it. I’m not saying I didn’t take it seriously, but I never expected that, you know? They ruthlessly went after the person I loved the most.”

“Jesus, Ryan...” Alex breathed out. “How do you even begin to cope with something like that?”

“You don’t.” Ryan tightened his grip around his coffee mug. “You just carry it with you every goddamn day. It’s why I left the force and became a PI. Why I stopped being a Dom. Why I left Austin. Everything there reminded me of how I had failed him. As a cop, as a boyfriend, as a Dom...I couldn’t keep him safe.”

The puzzle pieces shifted into place, and Alex understood what he couldn’t grasp before. Telling Ryan he wasn’t to blame for what had happened was senseless, so he didn’t even try. “How long were you guys together?”

“Five years. And you know what’s worse? No one outside of my family knew Quinton was my boyfriend. I didn’t want the hassle of having to deal with the inevitable jokes and homophobic barbs from my coworkers, so I never told anyone. He was my dirty secret, but when he died, it turned out they all knew, but no one had said anything ‘cause I’d never officially come out. How sad is that?”

“Oh, Ryan...”

“They found him by tailing me. Out of caution, I had moved into a motel temporarily, and we had my mom and sister under protective surveillance. Quinton was staying with his parents for the time being, but he missed me. Even though I told him not to, he came to visit me one night at the motel... They must’ve followed him straight home, and when his parents went to work the next day, they...” His voice shook. “They killed him. All he wanted was to be with me, and in the end, that’s what got him killed.”

Alex didn’t think but got up, parked himself on Ryan’s lap, and wrapped his arms around him. Ryan froze but then hugged him back, burying his face against Alex’s neck. Alex had broken through Ryan’s walls, but the truth he’d been hiding was so much worse than Alex could’ve imagined. After losing his boyfriend like that, it made sense for Ryan to close himself off. Who’d willingly open themselves up again for heartbreak? No, Alex understood.

But any hope that whatever Ryan would confess would make Alex see him in a different light had been in vain. He still wanted Ryan to do with him as he pleased. He still wanted Ryan to use him. And he still wanted Ryan to be his Dom.

Maybe even more.

Fuck, he should never have told Alex about Quinton. Ryan stared at himself in the mirror after brushing his teeth. He couldn't believe he'd opened up like that. What had come over him? He knew better, goddammit. Now, Alex would never view him the same again.

Though the way he'd climbed onto Ryan's lap had been sweet and oddly comforting. Ryan had never been a cuddle person, but that had been...good. He'd needed that, and he hadn't even realized until he'd given in to the urge to hug Alex back. They'd sat like that for a long time, everyone else leaving them alone, and then Ryan had mumbled some stupid excuse and had hightailed it out of there.

Alex had texted him later that day, asking if he should keep in the plug, and Ryan—coward that he was—had told him he could take it out whenever he wanted. He should've done that himself, of course. If nothing else, Alex had deserved that. Hell, Ryan should've never inserted it in the first place, but all he'd been able to think about on the plane ride home was how much he'd missed Alex. He'd been possessed by this strange need to claim him, let Alex know he was Ryan's—which was such bullshit, Ryan didn't even know where to begin.

And now he had to face him again. Hell, he had to spend the whole day with him. How awkward would that get? Would Alex now expect Ryan to be open like that all the time? If so, he was in for a rude awakening. Ryan might've had a *moment* that morning, a temporary lapse of judgment, but he didn't do

soft and squishy. And if Alex thought Ryan had changed, well, he was about to find out he hadn't.

But when he got into the car, Alex behaved normally, not different from any previous time they'd shared a ride. They talked about the case and what they were expecting from their conversation with Nathan. And by the time they arrived at the racetrack, Ryan's emotional moment from that morning seemed like a distant memory. One he was all too eager to forget. Thank fuck for that.

The gravel crunched beneath their feet as they approached the security booth. The same burly guard they'd talked to the previous time stood with his arms crossed over his chest.

"We're here to see Nathan Harker."

"Yeah, he told us. You're cleared." The guard's voice dripped with disdain as he handed them visitor badges. "Don't cause any trouble."

"Wouldn't dream of it." Ryan clipped the badge to his shirt. He rolled his eyes at Alex, and they walked through the gates into the heart of the racetrack.

Several jockeys worked out with their horses, galloping around the dirt track with powerful strides as owners and trainers watched intently, timers in hand. The sunlight played off the horses' sweat-slicked flanks, making them shine, as the equally sweaty jockeys rode them with looks of fierce determination.

"Look at 'em go." Alex gestured at the majestic animals. "Such strength and grace."

"Horses are beautiful creatures."

A younger jockey riding a skittish horse passed them. Ryan recognized him from the picture he'd found online. The rider's calming words reached the animal, and gradually, the horse relaxed under his guidance. Ryan nudged Alex and nodded in the direction of the jockey.

"Looks like we found Nathan Harker."

The horse, calmer now, slowed to a trot, and Nathan dismounted with ease. He patted the animal affectionately, whispering more soothing words while he led him toward a stable. His movements were gentle, a clear indication of his connection with the horse.

They followed at a safe distance, not wanting to spook the horse, and waited until Nathan had handed him over to a groomer. Nathan walked up to them. Like all jockeys, he was small and thin, only reaching Ryan's shoulder. "You're Ryan and Alex, I assume?"

They shook hands. "Thanks for meeting with us," Ryan said.

"Anything I can do to help." Nathan's face tightened. "I hope I'll never have to see something that awful again."

"Where were you when it happened?"

"At home, but I was watching the race. Saw it happen." He shuddered. "That poor, poor horse. He was special. Truly one of a kind."

"What's your relationship with Marilyn?" Ryan asked, checking Nathan's body language for any hint of deception.

For a moment, Nathan's expression darkened, and he hesitated. "Marilyn and I go way back. She's a good woman. You know, I thought I'd be the one riding Sam's Promise. Marilyn and I had a great partnership, but she went with someone else." He ran a hand through his hair. "That would've been my ticket to the top, you know? That horse was a winner."

"Must've been tough to see someone else get the opportunity."

"Damn right, it was." Nathan gritted his teeth. "But what can you do? That's life, I guess. And, of course, in hindsight, I'll be forever grateful I wasn't riding him. Miguel will have to live with that trauma for the rest of his life."

"Who do you work for now?" Alex asked.

“A syndicate that owns several horses. One of them is Dolly’s Devil, the horse I just rode. He’s skittish and still has a long way to go, but when he wants to, he flies.”

Despite his frustration, Nathan’s voice was warm when he spoke about his job. “Sounds like you really care about the horses,” Alex said, sharing a glance with Ryan.

“More than anything.” Ryan heard nothing but sincerity. “To me, they’re not just tools to win races. They’re living, breathing beings who deserve our respect and care. And I love this life, love being a jockey. There’s nothing like the rush you get when you’re on the back of a powerful animal, pushing yourself to the limit. And the horses...” He paused, his gaze drifting toward the stables. “They’re incredible creatures. You form a bond with them, a trust. I don’t think there’s anything more rewarding than that.”

“Being a jockey isn’t easy, is it?” Ryan asked. What would Nathan’s perspective on the sport be?

Nathan chuckled. “Far from it. It’s physically demanding, of course, but don’t forget the mental aspect. You’ve got to know when to push a horse and when to hold back. Your instincts have to be sharp, and you can’t let fear control you. One wrong move and you could be injured or even killed.”

Yeah, no kidding. Miguel had gotten off with a broken clavicle and arm, but things could’ve been so much worse for him.

“Then there are the politics,” Nathan continued. “Jockeys fighting for rides, owners playing favorites, trainers focused on their bottom line. It’s a constant battle to stay ahead and make a name for yourself.”

“Sounds intense,” Alex remarked.

“Sometimes it feels like you’re walking a tightrope, but when you’re out there on the track, everything else fades away. It’s you and the horse, working in perfect harmony. There’s nothing quite like it.”

The way he spoke about horses reminded Ryan of Caroline. She’d been equally passionate. The dedication and

love Nathan had for his job seemed genuine, which made it hard for Ryan to consider him a suspect in the death of Sam's Promise. Still, he had to ask the tough questions. "If you had been his jockey and he would've won, how much money would that've made you?"

"Around fifty thousand."

Ryan whistled. "That's a lot of money."

Nathan shook his head. "I didn't want it for the money. I wanted it for the honor, for being at the top of my field."

"Do you have any idea why Marilyn chose someone else?"

Nathan looked away and sighed. "Yeah, I do. She flat-out told me. She'd seen me ride another horse and use the crop on him, and she was furious. I was following that trainer's instructions, and it wasn't like I was abusing him, you know? Everything was well within the guidelines. But she wouldn't hear it. Said I should never have done it, even at the risk of losing my job." Nathan scoffed. "That's easy for her to say, isn't it? I mean, she's got money. Old money. But I have a family to support and can't afford to be that principled."

Ryan had dug into Nathan's background and discovered he had a wife and three young kids. Apparently, he'd gotten his girlfriend pregnant in high school, and they'd stayed together, built a family. Good for him. "The view from the bleachers is always different from the sky box, isn't it?"

"Exactly."

"But before that, you and Marilyn got along well?"

Nathan leaned against the stable door. "She was tough but fair. Demanding, but she had a good heart. She always looked out for us jockeys, you know? Made sure we got our fair share of winnings, proper medical care, all that. But you had to abide by her rules. She wouldn't stand for any mistreatment, even if it was considered standard practice. She had her standards, and they were high. Impossibly high. In fact, she's reported a few people over the years for abusing their animals."

"Not everyone must've appreciated that," Alex said.

“That’s an understatement.” A gust of wind whipped up Nathan’s short dark hair. “In fact, she had some run-ins with other owners and trainers over the years about her stance on animal welfare.”

“Any names you can give us?” Alex asked before Ryan could.

“Let me think...” Nathan said. “There was one trainer, Darren Hartley. He and Marilyn had a nasty falling out after she reported him for abusing a horse. She got him banned from the track for a while.”

“Interesting.” Ryan made a mental note to look into Darren. “Anyone else come to mind?”

“They always say in TV shows to follow the money, right?” Nathan shrugged. “The money is in the gambling. Sure, the horses cost a fortune, but it’s nothing compared to the money made and lost in betting on the races.”

“Thanks for talking to us, Nathan.” Ryan extended a hand to the jockey. “We appreciate your insight, and it has given us a better understanding of the world you and Marilyn operate in.”

“Happy to help.” Nathan’s gaze drifted back to the horse he had been riding earlier, now peeking his head over the stable door. “I hope you can find whoever’s responsible for Sam’s Promise’s death. That horse didn’t deserve what happened to him.”

“If you think of anything else, don’t hesitate to contact us.”

As they walked away from Nathan and the bustling activity of the racetrack, Ryan’s thoughts raced alongside the pounding hooves of the horses. Nathan was innocent. Ryan was almost one hundred percent convinced. But where did that leave them? Every lead they’d investigated so far had been a dead end.

Nathan had given them another name, but would a trainer stoop that low to get back at Marilyn? The motive seemed too thin. Sure, in movies and on TV, revenge always played an important role, but in reality, it was hardly ever the only reason

for a crime. In that sense, Nathan had been right. It often came down to money. So, where was the money in this case?

“Alex,” Ryan said as they made their way to the car. “I want you to dig up everything you can on this Darren Hartley. And did you get anywhere with your research into suspicious gambling activity involving Sam’s Promise?”

Alex shook his head. “Can’t get any information. Everyone I’ve talked to has claimed confidentiality, which makes sense.”

Ryan rubbed his temples. “If we don’t get anywhere with Darren Hartley, we may have to do something I avoid like the plague.”

“What’s that?”

“Talk to the cops. The Saratoga Police has more information than we do, and so far, we haven’t been able to even make a dent in this case. If they’re willing to share...”

“That’s a big if.”

Ryan started the engine. “Yeah, but it’s worth a shot. I’d have to talk to Marilyn first though. This is not a step I’d ever take without her permission.”

Warm light flickered from the fireplace, casting a cozy glow over the living room. Plush seating arrangements surrounded a low table laden with wine, cheese, crackers, and other delicious bites, providing fuel for the evening's conversation.

Alex lounged in an overstuffed armchair, his long legs stretched out before him as he sipped from a glass of red wine. This had been a brilliant idea of David's. He'd organized a sub hangout where all the subs in the house could spend an evening together. The Doms had been forbidden from entering, creating a rare opportunity for the subs to speak freely.

Even Burke had shown up, bringing their total to five. Jonah was a switch, but he'd promised to be in sub mode tonight. Though they came from different backgrounds and had varying experiences, they all shared a common bond as subs. As they laughed and chatted, warmth filled Alex, a sense of belonging and profound gratitude. These men understood him, accepted him without judgment, and that meant more to him than anything.

"So there I was." David grinned as he recounted a recent scene he'd done with Jesse. "I never thought I'd find myself trussed up like a Thanksgiving turkey and loving every minute of it."

The others joined in the laughter, each man sharing amusing anecdotes from their lives. Caleb complained about

Lowell's habit of teasing him mercilessly until he begged for release, while Burke's eyes sparkled as he described Wander's penchant for surprising him with new toys.

Alex mostly listened, though he did share his experiences during his first scene with Master Mark. "I'm still in the early stages of my journey as a sub, so I don't have your experience yet."

Burke cleared his throat. "I consider myself a newbie as well. It took me a while to figure out I was submissive and not Dominant, and Wander has been taking things slow with me for that reason."

Honestly, Alex was surprised Burke was even sharing that much. He seemed to be a very private person.

"So, what does it mean to you guys to be submissive?" Alex asked.

"Submission is different for everyone, I think." Jonah leaned back in his chair, his green eyes thoughtful. "For me, it's about surrendering control and trusting my Dom completely."

"Trust is a big part of it," Caleb agreed, nodding. "But submission also brings out a vulnerability in me I don't often show to others. It's like letting someone see the truest version of myself, even if it's only for a moment."

David chimed in, his voice soft yet steady. "I've always seen submission as a way to channel my energy and focus. When I submit, it feels like all the noise and chaos of the world fade away, and all that's left is the connection between me and my Dom."

Alex took a deep breath. "For me, it's about discovering my limits and exploring the depths of my desires. It's an ongoing journey that challenges me yet brings me closer to who I am at my core. But it's scary."

David nodded. "Fear is a constant companion for me. Master Jesse is so good at pushing my limits that I often face that internal battle of wanting to submit but being afraid of it

at the same time. But Master knows how to push me enough to grow without breaking my spirit.”

Caleb’s eyes twinkled. “Lowell is so attentive and intuitive. He always seems to know what I need before I realize it myself.”

Jonah hummed. “Very true. It’s a little more complicated for me because I have that Dominant side as well, but Lowell seems to sense when I need to let my submissive side out. He has this amazing ability to make me feel seen and valued.”

“Being with Wander,” Burke said, his gaze distant and thoughtful, “is like having someone who understands every part of me. He can read my mind, anticipate my needs, and guide me toward my growth.”

Alex thought of Ryan, how his gruff exterior concealed a tender side no one else saw. Their relationship was still evolving, complicated by Ryan’s refusal to embrace his role as a Dom. But there was something about their dynamic that felt undeniably right.

“What about you, Alex?” Caleb asked. “You and Ryan seem to have some serious chemistry.”

Alex swirled the wine in his glass as he considered the question, searching for the words to describe their unique dynamic. “He’s...intense, passionate, and rough. But there’s also this surprising tenderness beneath it all. It’s like he’s testing me, pushing my boundaries while still somehow protecting me from myself. It’s...complicated.”

“Complicated can be good.” Caleb gave him a reassuring smile. “It means there’s room for growth and exploration.”

“Or it can be scary,” Jonah added. “But that’s okay too. You’re pushing your boundaries and getting outside your comfort zone.”

“I don’t know where things will go. Ryan is... He’s not an easy man.”

Caleb snorted. “That’s an understatement. The man can fuck though.”

Alex grinned. “That, he can. No offense to Jesse and Lowell and even Master Mark, but none of them can hold a candle to Ryan.”

David sighed. “I have to agree, but I haven’t had the privilege for a while, unfortunately. He hasn’t sought permission from Master Jesse to use me in a while.”

“Same.” Caleb shrugged. “Not sure why, but it is what it is.”

Alex frowned. Ryan hadn’t had sex with Caleb or David recently? “What about you?” he asked Jonah, who shook his head.

Huh, weird. Ryan had shown enough libido with Alex. Did that mean the man was exclusive? That was a heady feeling, but he squashed it. Nope, he shouldn’t allow himself to go there. It was probably a temporary thing. Nothing to attach too much meaning to.

Although he hadn’t sought out anyone else either, not since the scene with Master Mark. And come to think of it, they hadn’t asked for his services either. Jesse and Lowell were pretty reliable in approaching him, but they hadn’t. Strange.

“Master Mark, on the other hand...” Caleb fanned himself. “Now there’s a man with a sex drive. And a fantastic cock.”

“Lowell’s is nice too. It’s not as long, but it’s thick,” Jonah said.

“Sex with Wander is like coming home.” Burke’s eyes shone with love, and for a moment, they all stared at him.

“You’re not talking about sex,” Alex said softly. “You’re talking about making love. That’s on a whole different level.”

David nodded, a dreamy look in his eyes. “One day, I hope to find that.”

Why was Ryan the first person Alex thought of? He should know better. Ryan wasn’t relationship material. He’d made that abundantly clear, and after learning about his boyfriend’s death, how could Alex doubt that? Yet he thought of him first, those brown eyes staring at him, the way Ryan’s face lit up

when he allowed himself to smile, how intense he could be on the job. The man was a fascinating study in contrasts.

“So, Alex,” Jonah asked, looking at Alex with genuine curiosity. “How come Ryan hasn’t volunteered to be your Dom yet?”

The question hung like a tangible mist, and Alex’s chest tightened. How could he explain without betraying Ryan’s confidence? Ryan didn’t want others to know about Quinton, that much Alex was certain of. He hadn’t said it in so many words, but Alex wasn’t stupid. And now he felt torn between wanting to share his thoughts with his friends and protecting Ryan’s privacy.

“Look, guys, I can’t get into specifics. But Ryan’s got some demons he’s working through. And he’s not ready to be a Dom right now.”

Caleb nodded. “That makes sense. We’ve all got our wounds to heal.”

“Exactly,” Alex agreed. “And I don’t want to push him into something he’s not ready for. No matter how much I might want it myself.”

Longing settled deep within him at the thought of submitting to Ryan, the intoxicating blend of power and vulnerability that came from surrendering to someone he trusted. But he couldn’t force Ryan to confront his past before he was ready, no matter how much he wished they could move forward. Maybe if he worked hard at becoming a better submissive, Ryan would take him on after all? If he saw how good Alex could be for him?

David hesitantly spoke up. “If Ryan isn’t an active Dom, are you sure you two have the necessary boundaries and communication in place? I mean, the dynamic between a Dom and a submissive is important. It’s what keeps both parties safe, emotionally and physically.”

Alex frowned. His relationship with Ryan was far from traditional, and their lack of defined roles sometimes left him feeling adrift. But at the same time, he felt a deep connection

with Ryan that went beyond labels and expectations. “I...I don’t know. I just... I trust him, you know? And I don’t want to push him away by demanding something he’s not ready for.”

“Nobody’s saying you should push him, Alex,” Jonah said. “But if I may put my Dom hat on for a moment, I can’t help but see the dangers here. If your dynamic isn’t defined, do you have safeguards in place?”

Alex shifted in his seat, chewing on his lower lip. Was that what Wander had meant when he’d addressed Ryan in the hallway? When he’d told him to make a choice? It hadn’t changed much, though, had it?

Burke leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “I agree with Jonah, and this is also coming from someone who did train as a Dom. It’s great you trust Ryan, but you need to make sure you’re both on the same page. D/s relationships are built on trust, communication, and clear boundaries. Without those, there’s potential for harm.”

Caleb nodded in agreement. “It’s not only about protecting yourself either. It’s also about Ryan understanding what you expect from him as a Dom. If he’s not willing or able to fulfill that role, it’s better to know now than to find out when you’re invested.”

Oh, that ship had sailed ages ago. Ryan might not be Alex’s official Dom, but he thought of him in that role regardless. He hadn’t even replied to Master Mark’s email about a second scene. He’d told himself it was because he’d been busy, but he damn well knew the truth. He was still harboring hope Ryan would change his mind and agree to be his Dom after all.

He was such an idiot.

As he looked around the room, his friends’ faces all showing concern and empathy, Alex knew they were right. He couldn’t keep doing this, couldn’t keep putting himself—and Ryan—at risk. “I’ll talk to him. I just... I need a little time to figure out what I want to say.”

“Take all the time you need, man.” Jonah clapped him on the back. “We’re here for you, no matter what.”

“Thanks, guys.”

As they moved on to lighter topics, Alex was lost in thought, his mind racing as he tried to untangle the complex web of emotions regarding Ryan. Was he invested in Ryan, or was it the thrill of submission that had captivated him? Were his feelings for Ryan that different from what he’d experienced when submitting to Master Mark?

The answer came to him with startling clarity. They were different. Very different. He cared deeply for Ryan, far more than he’d allowed himself to admit.

Fuck.

There was only one solution. He had to stop playing with him. He had to commit to working with Master Mark and forget about Ryan ever becoming his Dom, or he’d never walk away unscathed.

Though it was probably already too late for that.

Ryan was in a pissier of a mood. Not that exceptional by any standards, but the dark cloud that always seemed to hang over him was even darker and cloudier than usual.

It was probably because they weren't getting anywhere with the case. They'd checked out Darren Hartley, but he'd moved to Kentucky a few months prior and hadn't even been anywhere close during the race. In a phone call, he'd had some choice words when asked about Marilyn, but he'd also had an ironclad alibi, so that was another dead end.

He'd have to talk to Marilyn to update her, as he'd done almost daily, and discuss the option of talking to the cops. Chances were it wouldn't get them anywhere, but on the off chance that the cops might be willing to share information with them, they had to try.

He wanted to discuss it with Alex, who had a sharp mind and excellent insights into people's motivations and paid attention. But it would have to wait till tomorrow because Alex had another scene with Master Mark. When Alex had told him that morning, he'd looked at Ryan funny, almost as if he'd expected Ryan to protest.

He hadn't. How could he? Did he think Mark was slicker than snot on a doorknob? Abso-fucking-lutely. Though technically, it wasn't even that. Mark was a fine Dom, and when Ryan wasn't so fucking annoyed with himself and the whole world, he could admit that.

But today was not that day. Today, he felt that Alex deserved better, that Mark wasn't good enough for him, that the man didn't know Alex well enough to read him, and that was only the beginning of a long list of objections Ryan had against the whole thing. And yet, he'd kept his thoughts to himself.

He couldn't exactly protest Alex wanting to be formally trained, and he had no leg to stand on with his objections against Mark. Ryan didn't want the job himself, so he should keep his mouth shut. Even if the whole thing irritated him more than a scorpion with an itch on his tail in the dead of summer.

And the worst thing was that he couldn't even let out his frustration by fucking Alex. Oh, Caleb or David would volunteer in a heartbeat, but somehow, they didn't appeal to him at all anymore. He wanted Alex, dammit.

God, he was such a sore loser.

When he rounded the corner, he came to a halt. Alex. Completely naked and attached to a leash held by Master Mark.

What. The. Fuck.

"Whoa," Ryan said before he could think better of it. "What do we have here?"

Mark glared at him, giving the leash a slight tug as Alex stumbled forward. "We're in the middle of a scene here, Ryan."

Ryan's eyes flicked back and forth between Alex's submissive posture and Mark's stern expression. Alex's cheeks were fiery red—from arousal or embarrassment? Maybe both. It made sense, considering Alex's feelings about humiliation play, and yet something felt off, something Ryan couldn't put his finger on.

"What are you planning to do with him?"

Mark tightened his grip on the leash. "I don't think that's any of your business. Also, you're interrupting a scene."

“Cut the crap,” Ryan shot back, his protective instincts kicking into overdrive. “Alex is part of my team, and I’m responsible for his well-being.”

Mark pulled Alex even closer to him. “You’re not his Dom, Ryan. You enjoy having him around to fuck when you please. Don’t act like you give a shit about what happens to him.”

Anger boiled inside Ryan, threatening to erupt in a violent outburst. He forced it down. Losing control wouldn’t help himself or Alex. “I may not be his Dom, but I still feel responsible for him.”

He studied Alex again, who had been watching the exchange silently, his blue eyes wide. What was it about him that had Ryan so on edge? What was he picking up on?

“Don’t you think you’re pushing his limits too hard?”

“It’s okay for you to fuck him in public, but not for me?”

Ryan blinked. Fuck Alex in public. That was it. He saw the same fear in Alex’s eyes as when he’d fucked him in the hallway and then offered him to Wander and Jesse. If Wander hadn’t stopped everything to check consent with Alex, Ryan would’ve done it himself. He’d gotten caught up in the moment, but even he had realized Alex hadn’t been ready for that yet. And as much as he’d fucked up by playing with Alex without safeguards in place, he would’ve never gone through with sharing him without explicitly checking his consent.

“Is that what you’re planning for this scene? Just a public fuck?”

If that was the case, Alex would be able to handle it, but somehow, it still didn’t feel right to Ryan.

Mark’s eyes narrowed. “You’re discussing this with me in the middle of a scene? There’s a time and a place for conversations like this...and it’s not in front of a sub.”

He wasn’t wrong, but no way in hell was Ryan backing down now. He crossed his arms. “I’m happy to take you aside and talk to you outside hearing distance.”

“We’re in the middle of a scene.” Mark spat the words out, and on some level, Ryan couldn’t even blame him for being furious. He would’ve felt the same had another Dom interrupted him like that, yet he couldn’t stop, couldn’t help himself. He had to protect Alex.

Alex’s eyes met Ryan’s for a split second, surprise and gratitude mingling in their depths before being replaced by the familiar submissive mask. But that brief moment of connection was all Ryan needed to know he was doing the right thing.

“Then explain to me what you’re planning to do with him. Please.”

The last word cost him, but he forced it out.

“Fine. I’m pushing Alex’s limits in humiliation play,” Mark said, his voice cool and measured. “I want to see how far he can go, test his boundaries. And, of course, I discussed it with him.”

“I need more details.”

“Very well.” Mark sighed, clearly growing impatient with Ryan’s persistence. “I plan on having him perform various acts in front of others, including some of our...associates. It’s all consensual, of course.”

“Is it?” Ryan asked Alex, who looked at Mark.

Ryan’s heart went soft. Alex was such a good sub, even now seeking his Dom’s permission to respond.

“You may answer, Alex,” Mark said.

“I did consent.”

“What did he tell you?” Ryan wasn’t taking his word for it.

Alex shuffled his feet, staring at the floor. “He was gonna p-parade me around like this. Then offer me to others.”

Fuck, that was hot. Seriously hot. And right up Alex’s alley...in the future. It felt like too much at this stage. And knowing Alex had agreed didn’t make much of a difference in

how Ryan saw it, but what could he do? If Alex had consented...

“Consensual or not, you’d better not take things too far,” Ryan warned. Fuck, he hated the idea of Alex being humiliated in front of strangers. It felt wrong. Ryan didn’t know why, but it wasn’t right. Mark shouldn’t be doing this.

Mark studied Ryan. “Your concern is touching but unnecessary. Alex knows what he signed up for, and he’s more than capable of handling himself.”

Ryan’s jaw tightened at the dismissal, but he refused to back down. “Humiliation play can be tricky, and I don’t want Alex getting hurt. You can’t blame me for wanting to make sure everything’s above board.”

Mark tugged on Alex’s leash. “Don’t worry. I know what I’m doing. Now, if you’ll excuse us, we have some... preparations to make.”

With that, he turned on his heel and pulled Alex down the hallway, leaving Ryan alone, his chest heaving with barely contained fury. Ryan clenched his fists, knuckles turning white as he stared at Mark’s retreating back, Alex meekly following him. The hallway seemed to stretch on, the dim lighting casting shadows that danced along the walls.

A gnawing worry clawed the pit of Ryan’s stomach. Interfering in their dynamic wasn’t his place, but could he let this go forward, even though it felt so wrong? He’d always trusted his instincts, and the one time he hadn’t, he’d paid a high price.

“Dammit...” He raked a hand through his hair. Should he follow them? There was nothing more he could do without overstepping his bounds. With a heavy heart and a surge of resentment, Ryan walked away, his mind racing with conflicting emotions.

He couldn’t shake the image of Alex, naked and vulnerable, being led away by Mark.

Wrong.

Everything about it felt wrong.

He couldn't let this happen. Every cell in his body was screaming at him to interfere. He had to speak up, had to say something.

Fuck it. He turned on his heel and hurried back. If Mark intended to offer Alex to others, they'd be in the living room. As he approached, muffled sounds reached him—laughter, low murmurs, and an unmistakable moan.

He threw open the door. Wander and several other team members stood with their eyes fixed on the scene before them. Mark had positioned Alex over the back of a couch while Lowell was unbuckling his belt. Apparently, he had taken him up on his offer to use Alex. The sight of Alex bent over the couch, vulnerable and exposed, ignited something fierce within Ryan.

“Red!” he barked, his voice booming like a gunshot. Everyone froze, turning to him with wide eyes. “I’m calling red.”

“Ryan, what the hell are you doing?” Wander snapped.

“Putting an end to this scene.” Ryan strode across the room to stand between Mark and Alex. The air shimmered with tension, but he refused to back down. “You’re not doing this to him.”

“Who the fuck do you think you are?” Mark growled, his eyes spewing fire. “I’m his Dom. I decide what happens to him.”

“Ryan...” Alex’s small voice almost got lost in the heated exchange between the two men. His eyes were wide and pleading. “Don’t... You can’t...”

“Yes, I can. And I will. I’m taking over.”

“Are you seriously challenging me?” Mark sneered, taking a step toward Ryan.

“Damn right I am,” Ryan replied, his tone ice-cold. “And if you have a problem with that, you can take it up with Wander.”

“Enough, both of you!” Wander slapped one hand on Ryan’s chest and the other on Mark’s. “This isn’t a pissing contest.” He shot Ryan a piercing look that would’ve made lesser men pee their pants. “You serious about this?”

“Yes.”

“You understand this is a nonrefundable deal, yeah? If you do this, you can’t back out again. I will not permit it.”

Ryan gritted his teeth, his jaw tightening as he locked eyes with Wander. The challenge in Wander’s gaze was clear, questioning whether Ryan could handle the responsibility of being a Dom again. “Yeah, I know. I’ll take care of Alex, and I won’t have second thoughts about it. You have my word.”

Wander slowly nodded. “The decision is up to Alex. So, what do you want, kiddo?”

“Alex,” Ryan said more gently than he’d ever thought himself capable of, “the choice is yours. You can choose me as your Dom, or you can stick with Mark. I won’t hold it against you either way.”

Alex hesitated, his gaze flicking between Ryan and Mark. He swallowed hard. “You swear you want to be my Dom?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

Oh, fuck. Alex wasn’t gonna make this easy on him, was he? And he had every right to be suspicious of Ryan’s motives.

“Because I know you better than anyone else here. I can read you like a book, baby boy. You know that.”

“That doesn’t explain why you want to be my Dom all of a sudden when you didn’t want to before.”

“I...” Hell, he didn’t know how to explain what he didn’t even understand himself. “I changed my mind. I want you to have the best Dom possible...and that’s me. Not for anyone else but for you. I’m the best Dom for you.”

Jesus, he was babbling. Had that even made sense?

Alex took a deep, shuddering breath. “I choose you... I choose Ryan.”

Sweet relief filled Ryan. “Thank you, baby boy.”

“Fine.” Wander sighed, running a hand through his hair. “Mark, I apologize for this drama. Ryan is not only rude and a complete dick, but he also has the worst timing in the world. To help you blow off some steam, I’m going to send Caleb with you. He’s more than willing to play by your rules.”

Caleb, who had been standing on the sidelines throughout the conflict, stepped forward with an eager smile. Oh, smart move on Wander’s part. Nothing would lessen Mark’s annoyance more than a sub willing to take his frustration.

“Is that so?” Mark’s irritation dissipated, replaced by curiosity. “Caleb, you up for it?”

“Yes, Master.”

“Get on your knees, boy,” Mark said, his voice dark and authoritative. Ryan couldn’t blame him for needing to reestablish his dominance, not after what Ryan had done. Caleb complied without hesitation, sinking to the floor with an obedient grace.

“Mmm, perfect, boy.” Mark assessed him with a predatory focus. Caleb’s breath hitched under the intense scrutiny, but he didn’t back down. Instead, he met Mark’s gaze with a challenging look.

“Good,” Mark murmured, a slight smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. “You may just be what I need right now.”

Ryan blew out a soft breath. Looked like those two were a good match. Phew. He owed Wander for that. Big-time.

“Thank you, Sir,” Caleb whispered, his eyes shining with excitement and submission.

“Let’s go, boy. Down to the dungeon.”

“Yes, Master.”

As soon as they left, the tension in the room evaporated.

Wander turned his attention to the rest of the team. “All right, everyone, show’s over. Give them some space.”

The team members dispersed, and Wander stepped close to Ryan until their foreheads almost touched. “Fucking took you long enough.”

What did he mean by that? “To do what?”

Wander sighed. “Never mind. Ryan, I swear to God and everything holy, if you mistreat that boy, if you don’t step up and take your role as Dom seriously, I will not only kick your ass myself but fire you, yeah?”

He deserved that. “Crystal clear.”

“Good.”

Wander stalked out, leaving Ryan and Alex alone in the now-empty room. As Ryan approached Alex, he straightened, his cheeks flushed.

“Are you sure about this?” Ryan searched Alex’s eyes for any sign of uncertainty. “No take-backs on this one, baby boy.”

“Positive.” Alex offered him a small smile. “But can I ask you the same?”

“I gave my word. I won’t ever go back on that.”

Alex’s eyes softened. “I know, but I have the right to ask. Only a couple of days ago, you told me you couldn’t be a Dom anymore. And now you say you changed your mind. What happened?”

“You did.” An unfamiliar tenderness filled Ryan, and he brushed Alex’s cheek. “Seeing you with Mark... It felt wrong on every level. I don’t know why, but it did.”

“He did have my consent.”

Ryan leaned his forehead against Alex’s. “I know. And I know you love that shit. But it still felt wrong, like you weren’t ready for something that intense yet.”

“Okay.”

“That’s enough of an explanation for you?”

Alex’s smile was as sunny as ever, like he had turned on a bright light in a dark room. “I trust you.”

The weight of that trust was surprisingly light, more like a deep awareness than a burden. “Thank you, baby boy.” He grabbed his chin and forced eye contact. “From now on, you’re mine, understood?”

Alex swallowed. “Exclusively?”

“I decide if and when you play with others, but for now, it will be just us.”

“Okay.”

“Okay, what?”

Alex’s eyes sparkled. “Okay, Sir.”

“Good boy.”

Going back to work as if nothing had happened wasn't easy after that scene. Alex had been awake for hours, running through every moment in his head again and again. What had happened for Ryan to change his mind? He'd said the scene had felt wrong... How had he picked up on what Alex hadn't even fully figured out himself?

Because it had been wrong. Ryan was right that Alex had been uncomfortable...and he should've never consented when Master Mark had asked him. If Ryan hadn't safeworded, Alex would've gone through with it...and he would've regretted it later.

Ryan had saved him from making a big mistake, and Alex couldn't wrap his mind around it. How had Ryan seen what Alex had hidden even from himself in that moment? Maybe he really did know Alex better than anyone else, including Alex himself.

But he'd have to figure all of that out later. He had a job to do, and that had to come first now. It helped that Ryan had shifted back into professional mode as well. They had an appointment with the cops to see if they could get some cooperation there.

As they approached the Saratoga police station, Alex studied the building. Considering the charm of the little town, the police station wasn't the prettiest, was it? Built on an incline, it had a top half that consisted of red bricks, while the bottom had much bigger square gray bricks that looked more

like concrete. The cracked pavement didn't offer much to look at either. The single yellow line warning people about parking there was so faded it blended in with the asphalt, and the road itself showed wear from the harsh winters.

"It's not the most welcoming place," he commented.

Ryan snorted as he pushed the glass door open. "Police stations rarely are."

The police station hummed with activity as they entered, officers hurrying past them, phones ringing, and the faint scent of stale coffee lingering in the air. "We're here to see Detective Baxter," Ryan told the receptionist.

"Do you have an appointment?"

"Yes, ma'am. He told us to stop by sometime this afternoon."

"Okay. Let me call him for you."

After only a minute, a middle-aged detective with thinning hair and a weary expression appeared. He shook their hands firmly as they introduced themselves. "Follow me," he said, leading them to a desk where piles of paperwork threatened to topple over. "Don't mind the mess. They're replacing our filing cabinets, so I can't put the stuff anywhere else at the moment."

They sat in the two seats across the desk, and Baxter lowered himself into a creaky desk chair. "So you're the private investigators Ms. Vandervliet hired, huh? Gotta say I'm not sure what you think you'll find that we haven't already covered."

"We're not here to step on any toes," Ryan said, using a placating tone. "We want to make sure every angle's been explored. Marilyn deserves a fair shot at proving her innocence."

"Her innocence?" Baxter scoffed. "I hadn't pegged you as that naïve, considering your experience."

Experience? Oh, the detective must've looked Ryan up and discovered he'd been a homicide detective back in Austin.

But Ryan didn't take offense. He chuckled. "Naïve? I can't remember the last time someone called me that. No, Detective, it's not about being naïve. It's about following the evidence. Just because there isn't an obvious other suspect doesn't mean Ms. Vandervliet is guilty. She has a solid reputation as an animal lover and advocate for animal rights. She's donated a lot of money to animal welfare organizations for years, and she's been known to go above and beyond to ensure the well-being of her horses. Now, why would someone like that harm one of her prized racehorses? It doesn't make sense."

"How's money for a motive? She would've made a tidy sum from his death had the insurance paid out."

"Insurance money wouldn't even come close to covering the potential loss in winnings and stud fees," Alex said.

Baxter shrugged. "Maybe she knew something we didn't, like him having some kind of health issue that would've prevented him from being that successful."

"Did the necropsy find any evidence of that?"

"No."

"Even if he did, she could've still used him to breed," Alex pointed out. "That would've made her far more money than the insurance payout."

Baxter sighed, rubbing a hand over his face. "I have to admit that part has us stumped as well."

"Have you considered any other suspects?" Ryan asked.

Baxter threw up his hands. "Do you think we're rookies here? Of course we did. We checked out every possible lead, but none of them got us anywhere. There's no one else with a motive to harm that horse...except for Marilyn Vandervliet." He narrowed his eyes. "Unless you've stumbled across something?"

At least he was now considering the possibility they might've found something he and his colleagues had overlooked. That was progress, right?

“We’re still exploring several avenues,” Ryan said smoothly. “And we haven’t ruled anything out yet...other than that, we don’t believe Ms. Vandervliet is guilty. And we’re not expecting you to change your mind right now. All we’re asking is that you give us a chance to explore other possibilities and keep an open mind while we look into other suspects. Maybe we find something you missed, and maybe we don’t. But either way, at least we can say we tried.”

Baxter eyed them both, and Alex could almost see the gears turning in his head as he weighed their request. “What are you asking for, exactly?”

“Any documentation you can legally share with us. The necropsy report would be a good place to start. Ms. Vandervliet never received a copy despite requesting it several times.”

For a long moment, Baxter stared at them. “I can do that. What else?”

“Information on the bets placed that day. We’re not getting anywhere without a warrant, but we’re sure you’ve looked into this.”

“I’d have to black out the names.”

“That’s fine. Even better would be to code them so we can at least see if someone made multiple bets.”

“We looked into the betting angle, you know.”

“I’m sure you did. We always follow the money.”

Ryan was smart, connecting with Baxter like that. If the man started seeing Ryan as a fellow detective rather than a PI, he’d be much more likely to be in a cooperative mood.

Baxter nodded. “And there’s a lot of money involved in these races.”

“Did you find anything suspicious?” Alex asked.

“Nothing out of the ordinary. Lots of bets and a few people made good money betting against Sam’s Promise, but none of them had motives.”

Alex frowned. “But if they made money from betting against him, wouldn’t that be motive? What amounts are we talking about?”

“Under fifty thousand. Not worth the risk of getting caught.”

Unfortunately, Alex had to agree with Baxter.

“But I’ll see about getting you those reports once I’ve found someone willing to code them,” Baxter said. “And if you give me a minute, I’ll run a copy of the necropsy report for you.”

“Thank you.” Ryan sent the detective a warm smile. “We appreciate the professional courtesy.”

He could be so slick when he wanted to be.

Baxter held up a finger. “On one condition. If your investigation comes up empty, I expect you to back off and let us do our job.”

“Fair enough,” Ryan agreed. “We’ll keep you updated on our findings.”

“Good.” Baxter stood up to signal the end of their meeting. “Let me make that copy, and then I have work to do.”

A few minutes later, Baxter handed them a thick manila envelope. “I find out you shared this with anyone else, we’re gonna have a problem.”

Ryan nodded. “Is it okay to show this to our client?”

“Yeah, I can live with that. It was her horse, after all.”

As they left the police station, Alex figured they’d gotten what they came for. They’d managed to plant a seed of doubt in Detective Baxter’s mind, and that was one step closer to proving Marilyn’s innocence. Plus, he’d agreed to share some important documents with them.

Once they were back in the car, Ryan tore open the envelope. This was their first real break in the case, and Alex couldn’t help his excitement despite the grim contents of the

report. He glanced over at Ryan, who was already engrossed in the report, his brow furrowing.

“Anything interesting?” Alex asked, trying to keep his voice casual.

“There’s a lot of medical terminology I’ll have to look up, but from what I can understand, Sam’s Promise died from a massive EPO overdose,” Ryan replied, his eyes still scanning the pages. “The dosage was so high, it caused his heart to rupture.”

“Damn,” Alex whispered, sick to his stomach at the thought of the poor horse’s suffering.

“Whoever did this knew what they were doing. This wasn’t some amateur mistake. This was calculated, and it was cruel.”

“So he wasn’t administered EPO to enhance his performance. He was deliberately overdosed with the intent to kill him.”

“It looks that way, but to know for sure, we need to talk to Dr. Simmons, the equine pathologist.”

Ryan already had his phone in his hand and had started the call. After being transferred a few times, he managed to get a hold of Dr. Simmons, who agreed to see them. “But if it’s urgent, you’d have to come over now, as I’m leaving for a trip tonight and will be out of town for a few days.”

“We’re on our way,” Ryan said.

When they arrived, a receptionist greeted them and directed them to Dr. Simmons’s office. As they stepped inside, the scent of antiseptic and old leather filled Alex’s nostrils. One wall consisted of floor-to-ceiling bookcases, all crammed to the max with books. Dr. Simmons sat behind a gleaming mahogany desk, the wall behind her holding her framed diplomas as well as some beautiful anatomical drawings of horses.

“Dr. Simmons, thank you for seeing us on such short notice,” Ryan said as they shook hands.

“Of course.” She gestured for them to take a seat. “I’ve known Marilyn for years, and I’m as eager as you are to get to the bottom of this.”

At least they didn’t have to convince her of Marilyn’s character. That was a plus.

“Great,” Ryan said. “We have the necropsy report here, and we’re hoping you can help us understand it better.”

Dr. Simmons took the report from Ryan and explained the findings in detail. As she spoke, an odd mix of fascination and unease filled Alex. Understanding the report was crucial to proving Marilyn’s innocence, but listening to the grisly details of how Sam’s Promise had suffered was difficult.

“Dr. Simmons, do you have any insights that might help us find out who did this?” Ryan asked once she finished her explanation. “I’m sure the cops asked you the same thing.”

She hesitated for a moment. “Well, I can’t say they asked me that specific question, but I did go over the report with them as well. And there’s one thing that strikes me as odd.”

“What’s that?” Ryan leaned forward.

“The dosage of EPO administered to Sam’s Promise was extremely high. Far beyond what any responsible individual would have used.”

That confirmed what Ryan had said. “What does that mean, in your professional opinion?” Ryan asked.

“I can’t imagine anyone who knows anything about horses administering this amount intentionally. They had to have known this would kill him.”

“You’re saying this was murder, not doping.”

She pushed her glasses back up her nose. “In my professional opinion, yes. Either that or it was administered by someone who had no clue what they were doing.”

Ryan leaned back in his chair again. “You know Ms. Vandervliet well, correct?”

Dr. Simmons nodded. "I've known her for years. I started as a veterinarian, and I've been to her farm on multiple calls. And since then, we've run into each other from time to time."

"What's your opinion of her?"

"Why are you asking?"

"I'd like to know if, in your opinion, based on your experiences with Marilyn Vandervliet, she would be capable of killing Sam's Promise in such a way."

"Given Marilyn's reputation and history with animal welfare, it seems unlikely she would ever intentionally harm a horse," Dr. Simmons said slowly. "And I've told the police the same thing. It's not my job, of course, but I felt they should know."

"How did they respond?" Alex asked.

She sighed. "By telling me to stay in my lane...as men are prone to do whenever faced with a competent woman who holds strong opinions."

"You're not wrong about that," Alex said, and even Ryan nodded.

But something tickled the back of Alex's mind. People kept saying how strong Marilyn's stance had been on animal welfare. What if that had been the very thing to get her into trouble? What if she had reported someone, and they'd suffered a financial loss as a result? Wouldn't that be a strong motive?

"Dr. Simmons, if we wanted to investigate animal abuse reports Marilyn made against other horse owners or trainers, where would we look?"

Ryan sharply turned his head.

Dr. Simmons blinked, then took off her glasses. "You think that may have had something to do with it?"

"It's a thought. If she reported someone and it cost them financially, that would be a good reason for that person to get revenge and do it in a way that would ruin Marilyn's reputation as well."

“It would have to be someone who doesn’t give two shits about horses, pardon my French,” Dr. Simmons said.

“Or someone who is about as sharp as a bowling ball in a cactus patch,” Ryan said.

Dr. Simmons chuckled. “That’s one way of putting it.” She grew serious again. “But to answer your question, you’d have to reach out to the New York Racing Association to ask about any reports filed against horse owners. They’re a nonprofit organization, so under the Freedom of Information Act, they’re required to give you those files.”

Ryan winced. “They’re gonna stonewall us for sure.”

“They might, but try them anyway. If they do, contact me again, and I’ll see what I can do.” Dr. Simmons handed Ryan her business card. “This has my direct number on it.”

Ryan rose from his chair, and Alex followed his lead. “Thank you, Dr. Simmons. You’ve been most helpful.”

“You’re welcome. Please keep me updated on anything you find. As you may understand, I have both a professional and a personal interest in this.”

“We will.”

Back in the car, Ryan turned to face Alex. “Your idea about the animal abuse reports was brilliant.”

Alex’s insides lit up. “Yeah?”

“Your theory combines money, status, and revenge. That’s a powerful cocktail for committing a crime.”

“Thank you.”

Ryan studied him for a moment more, then ruffled his hair. “Good job, baby boy.”

The dungeon was dimly lit, the flickering candles casting shadows on the walls. Ryan meticulously arranged the equipment he'd chosen, ensuring each item was within reach when needed. Despite his calm demeanor, his heart was racing. His first scene since Quinton died. He had no doubt he could do it, but would he be able to provide Alex with what the kid needed?

Alex was so... Jesus, Ryan didn't even have the words to describe him. Alex was fucking sexy. That mouth of his was driving Ryan crazy. He'd never met a man he wanted to kiss as much as he wanted to kiss Alex. And then use that mouth for other purposes.

His body was perfect. Sleek, smooth muscles like a panther, and equally deadly. Ryan rarely misjudged people, but he sure had with Alex. He'd pegged him as a wannabe, a kid way in over his head on the job, but he'd proven Ryan wrong every step of the way, hadn't he? He was smart, dedicated, and he'd been the one to come up with their latest theory, one Ryan had a good feeling about.

But he couldn't think about the job now. This was all about Alex, about showing him what submission looked like and bringing him all the pleasure. Well, Ryan would make sure he'd get his own fair share of ecstasy as well, but with Alex, that was easy. The kid lived to please him, and Ryan would make good use of that.

Footsteps alerted him to someone coming, and seconds later, Alex stepped into the room, his eyes wide. Bare-chested and dressed in a pair of faded jeans, he was mouthwateringly sexy. Ryan wanted to eat him...and maybe he would.

He crooked his finger, and Alex came close. “How are you feeling?”

“A bit nervous.”

“Nervous is okay as long as you’re not scared.”

“Not even a little bit.”

“Good. You ready for this?”

Alex straightened his shoulders. “Yes, Sir.”

They’d talked about safewords and limits during dinner that night, so they were all set. Not that Alex had told Ryan anything he didn’t know already, but it was always good to cover all the bases. “Then let’s start. Strip.”

He watched with a mixture of fascination and hunger as Alex took off his jeans, leaving him in a pair of black, tight briefs, then stripped those off as well, revealing his lean, muscular body.

“Good. Now kneel.”

Alex dropped to his knees gracefully, clasping his hands behind his back and keeping his eyes trained on the floor.

“Bow your head.”

Alex obeyed, his hair falling across his forehead. The flush rising on his cheeks stirred something deep within Ryan. He wanted to use him, dominate him...but also protect him. The latter was unexpected. Everything with Alex was different. It would be a struggle to keep his emotional distance, but he had to. Being Alex’s Dom was one thing, but more than that was impossible. Ryan was not opening himself up to that level of pain ever again.

He refocused on Alex. “Good boy. Tonight, you’re mine to control, and I will push you. But remember, you can always use your safewords.”

“Thank you, Sir,” Alex murmured.

“What are you hoping for?”

“Sir?” Alex didn’t look up, which earned him points, since it was such an automatic reaction.

“What do you want me to do to you?”

“W-whatever you want, Sir. Whatever brings you pleasure.”

“Mmm, you want me to use you, boy?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Look at you,” Ryan drawled, circling Alex like a predator sizing up its prey. “So eager to please, aren’t you?”

“Y-yes, Sir,” Alex stammered, the blush on his cheeks intensifying.

“Would you kiss my ass if I asked you to?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Eat me out?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Let me use you as my personal little cum dumpster?”

“Y-yes, Sir.”

Mmm, he liked that last option, didn’t he? Such a horny little shit. The kid was too perfect. Ryan wanted to dirty him up a bit. He reached down and gripped Alex’s hair, yanking his head back. “I’m going to use that mouth of yours for my pleasure. Take the edge off so I can have some fun with you tonight.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

Fuck, what a perfect answer. The kid was so deeply submissive. Not even a trace of resistance or hesitation.

“Open up,” Ryan commanded, unzipping his leather pants and pulling out his hard cock. Alex obeyed, parting his lips. Ryan slid inside, not giving him a chance to adjust before he thrust roughly into his mouth.

“Take it all.” Ryan forced himself deeper into Alex’s throat. Alex gagged, tears misting the corners of his eyes, but he didn’t pull away. Instead, he relaxed, fully submitting to Ryan’s will.

Ryan tightened his grip on Alex’s hair as heat built inside him, the overwhelming sensation of being in control driving him closer to the edge. He’d been horny before Alex had shown up, and somehow, his submission and willingness made Ryan so fucking turned on.

He abused Alex’s mouth, holding his hair with one hand and his throat with the other. Jesus, feeling his cock there was the filthiest thing ever. He sank as deep as possible, then stopped, closely watching Alex. His face was ruddy and covered with saliva, but even as panic filled his eyes, he stayed still, submitting wholly.

Ryan pulled back. “Good boy.”

Alex gasped for breath, raspy and wet, and Ryan allowed him a few beats to recover before sliding deep into his throat again. “Such a sexy mouth... Yeah, slut, suck me off good. You know this is what you were born to do. Suck my dick.”

Much to his surprise, he was close to his release already, a testament to the effect Alex had on him. Should he slow down? Draw it out? He had other stuff planned though. Plus, he’d wanted to take the edge off—and establish his dominance at the same time—so there was that. Nah, no need to delay. He could allow himself to come.

“You’d better swallow every drop.” With one final thrust, he came, his release flooding Alex’s mouth.

Alex choked and coughed but did as he was instructed, not spilling anything. A dark satisfaction filled Ryan, knowing he’d asserted his dominance in the most intimate way possible.

“Good boy,” he murmured, running his fingers through Alex’s hair as he pulled out. Their eyes locked, and for a brief moment, Ryan felt a flicker of something beyond lust, something much softer. But he pushed it away. This was about

control, not emotion. And as long as he reminded himself of that, he could maintain his distance.

“That was satisfactory. Now, let’s see how you handle this.” Ryan had laid an assortment of toys for their scene on a nearby table, and he picked up a pair of nipple clamps, their metal teeth glinting under the dim light.

He approached Alex. “I want to see how much you can take for me.”

The words were harsh, but he’d monitor Alex, ensuring he wouldn’t push him too far.

“I can take whatever you want me to, Sir.”

A thrill went through Ryan at the acknowledgment of his authority and the way the word *Sir* had escaped Alex’s lips like a prayer.

“Stay still.” Ryan pinched Alex’s left nipple between his thumb and forefinger before attaching the clamp. Alex gasped at the sudden pressure, flinching slightly. Ryan repeated the action with the right nipple, securing the second clamp in place.

“Such a pretty sight...” Ryan admired the way the clamps bit into Alex’s flesh. “You look so good like this, all helpless and under my control.”

Alex’s chest heaved as he squirmed as if adjusting to the clamps, his face a mixture of pain and pleasure. He didn’t respond, but the flush spreading down his chest told Ryan everything he needed to know about how much Alex was enjoying this torment.

“How does that feel?”

“It hurts, Sir, but it feels so good.”

A shiver shot down Ryan’s spine. They were treading a fine line between pleasure and pain, but seeing Alex surrender to the sensations was intoxicating. “Embrace the pain. Let it fuel your pleasure.”

He reached out and gave the chain connecting the clamps a gentle tug, eliciting a moan from Alex that was equal parts

agony and ecstasy. “I want you to count for me. Every time I pull on this chain, I want you to tell me what number we’re at.”

“Y-yes, Sir.”

As Ryan pulled the chain, Alex inhaled sharply. “One.” He breathed out.

“Very good,” Ryan praised, pulling the chain once more.

“T-two.”

The mix of emotions on Alex’s face was both beautiful and dangerous. Ryan knew he was pushing boundaries not just physically but emotionally as well, but in this moment, as Alex yielded to him, he couldn’t bring himself to care.

“Three.”

By the time they got to ten, Alex’s eyes had grown distant and dreamy, as if he’d retreated into himself. Alex’s flushed face and trembling body, his nipples clamped and tormented, were a beautiful sight. Waves of fierce arousal rippled through Ryan again, fueled by the intoxicating power he held over his sub. Alex’s cock was hard and leaking, and the desire to push him further was overwhelming.

“Look at you,” Ryan murmured, his voice thick with lust. “You’re so fucking beautiful like this, all desperate and needy.”

It took Alex a second or two to respond, proving how deep he’d sunken into himself. “Thank you, Sir.”

As much as he wanted to continue, he couldn’t. Alex was new at submitting, and both his body and mind weren’t ready yet.

“This is gonna hurt.” Ryan took off both clamps at once.

Alex blinked. “Jesus fuuuck... Sir. Oh god, sorry, Sir. It hurts so much.”

He could forgive him for that under the circumstances. “But you’ll bear it for me, won’t you?”

“Yes, Sir.”

Mark had flogged him during that first scene. Ryan had seen the marks on Alex's ass. So another flogging made little sense and wouldn't let Alex experience new things...and yet he couldn't help himself. The evidence of Mark's handiwork was long gone, and still, Ryan wanted to put his marks on that perfect ass as if that would erase the previous ones. He'd debated long with himself, but in the end, he'd lost the battle with this need, whatever fueled it.

"Follow me," he told Alex, who meekly stayed on his heels as he led him to a flogging post. "Do I need to secure you?"

Alex hesitated, then nodded. "I don't trust myself yet not to move, Sir."

Pride filled Ryan. "Thank you for being honest."

He looped Alex's hands around the post and tied them with a simple knot he could release with one tug. Simplicity and safety always trump aesthetics.

He tilted Alex's chin up. "Color?"

"Green, Sir."

Ryan strode to the wall where Jesse kept his collection of implements and, with a practiced eye, selected a leather flogger. The weight felt comfortable in his hand, even after all this time. He'd yielded similar ones countless times before, both in pleasure and punishment. But with Alex, everything seemed different, charged with an intensity that made Ryan's skin tingle.

"Remember your safeword," Ryan reminded him. "If it becomes too much, don't hesitate to use it."

"Understood, Sir." Alex's breath hitched as Ryan ran the tails lightly across his back, the leather teasing his skin.

Ryan stepped back, gauging the distance between them, then swung the flogger, the tails landing on Alex's back with a satisfying thud. A gasp escaped Alex's lips, and his muscles tensed beneath the impact. Ryan checked Alex for any signs of distress, but the kid relaxed again.

“You want more?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Ask me nicely,” Ryan ordered.

“Please, Sir. Please flog me again.”

The vulnerability in Alex’s voice lit a fire in Ryan’s belly, and he complied, striking Alex’s back and ass with measured force, alternating between gentle caresses and sharper blows. The sound of leather against skin mingled with Alex’s moans and whimpers as he breathed through each strike.

“Fuck, you’re doing so well for me,” Ryan praised.

The pattern he was laying across Alex’s back and ass was perfectly symmetrical, a work of art. Neat lines, all at equal distances, crisscrossed his flesh as Alex’s body shuddered and arched beneath the flogging. The sight fueled Ryan’s desire, his absolute dominance surging through his veins with potency.

When Alex’s breaths turned into sobs, he eased off. As much as he wanted to push Alex further, to test their connection and see how far it could go, his responsibility as a Dom went beyond indulging in his own desires. Alex had to come first, even if it meant denying himself the thrill of taking things one step further.

“Enough.” Ryan set the flogger aside and untied Alex, who sagged, his legs buckling. Ryan caught him and lowered them to the floor, then wrapped his arms around a trembling Alex. “You did so well, my beautiful boy.”

“Thank you, Sir.” He leaned into Ryan’s embrace, seeking comfort.

Ryan nuzzled his hair, content to sit on the floor and hold him. He’d been so turned on, so intent on fucking Alex right after the flogging, and now all he wanted to do was sit and cuddle. What the fuck was happening? Why did everything feel so different with Alex? Why did their connection defy all of Ryan’s attempts to maintain emotional distance?

Ryan couldn't ignore the truth any longer. Alex was changing him, and there'd be no going back.

It scared the shit out of him.

Alex paced in his room, his heart pounding like a wild drumbeat as he reread his father's text. His fingers twitched with the urge to strum his ukulele, wanting to seek solace in the familiar melodies that always brought him comfort. What the fuck was he going to do? He couldn't refuse to see him, but his father was no dummy. If he so much as caught a glimpse of the stuff happening in Jesse's house, he'd know what was up. And Alex couldn't bear the thought of his father's disapproval. They'd always been close, and losing that connection would cut like a knife.

"Hey, baby boy." Ryan's rough voice cut through Alex's thoughts. Startled, he turned. Ryan was leaning against the doorframe, tattoos peeking out from beneath the rolled-up sleeves of his shirt. Why did the man always look so damn sexy? "You look like you're trying to wear a hole in the floor."

"Sorry, I didn't hear you come in." Alex attempted a weak smile.

Ryan frowned as he pushed off the doorframe and crossed the room. "What's wrong?"

Alex swallowed. "My father is stopping by this afternoon."

"General Beck is in town?"

Alex wasn't surprised Ryan knew who his father was. He'd counted on Ryan doing background checks on all of them, including Alex. "He had meetings yesterday and this morning in the Pentagon, but he's catching a train right after to come see me."

“And you’re worried about him discovering what’s going on here.”

“Can you blame me? He’s always been accepting of me being gay, but this is on a whole nother level.”

Ryan put his hands on Alex’s shoulders. “I’ll talk to everyone, make sure they behave.”

Hope filled Alex’s heart. “You’d be willing to do that for me?”

“All part of my services as Dom.”

“Thank you.” Some tension left his body. “I appreciate it. He...he doesn’t know I’m a sub, and I’m not sure I want to tell him.”

“That’s your choice, but do you think he’ll have an issue with it?”

Alex bit his lip. “He’s a one-star general in the US Army. They’re not known for being progressive. Hell, he had a meeting with General Flint yesterday, and we all know where that man stands on gays in the military.”

Ryan sighed. “Yeah, no kidding. Doesn’t mean your dad is the same though.”

“True. I just... Does he need to know? Does your mom know?”

“About my relationship with Quinton? Yeah, she does. I told her ‘cause I wanted her and my sister to know in case something ever happened to me.” His face tightened. “Never in a million years had I imagined it would be him instead of me.”

Alex put a hand on Ryan’s arm. Words were superfluous, so he didn’t even try.

Ryan took a sharp breath. “Anyway, we weren’t talking about me. The choice is yours, but if you think your father could be okay with it, it might not be the worst idea. Also, for safety reasons.”

“Safety reasons?”

“When people who aren’t in the lifestyle discover the marks from a scene, they don’t always understand those are consensual.”

Right. That made sense. “I’ll think about it.”

“Look, your old man’s gonna have questions, no doubt,” Ryan said, his Texas drawl becoming more pronounced. “But that doesn’t mean he won’t accept you for who you are. And hell, if he’s got a problem with it, he can take it up with me.”

“That’s...oddly comforting,” Alex said, a small laugh bubbling up. Warmth spread through him. “You’re much better at this whole support thing than I would’ve expected.”

“Who knew?” Ryan shrugged, a playful glint in his brown eyes. “Now, come on. We’ve got some time before your dad shows up. Let’s get some work done.”

They focused on paperwork, and the time went by faster than Alex had expected. Before he knew it, they’d retreated into the living room, and the doorbell rang. Alex’s heart leaped in his throat. His father was here. He blinked away the anxious haze clouding his vision and glanced at the others. Ryan had done as he’d promised, instructing everyone to be on their best behavior, and they all sent him encouraging nods.

“Deep breaths, Alex,” Ryan murmured beside him. “You’ve got this.”

As Alex opened the door, his father stood tall on the doorstep, dressed in full uniform with his gray hair neatly combed back. “Dad!”

Alex hugged him tightly, closing his eyes when his father’s arms circled him. “I’m so glad to see you, kiddo.”

Wasn’t it funny that his dad and Wander both called him kiddo? Thank god Ryan didn’t, or things could get confusing. “You too, Dad.”

His dad let go and ruffled his hair. “You look good, kiddo.”

“Thank you. So do you, all dressed up.”

His father chuckled. “Not much choice when I’m meeting with the brass, especially General Flint. That man is a stickler

for protocol.”

Alex pulled him inside and closed the door behind them. “Can I introduce you to everyone?”

“I’d love to meet your team as long as we can also spend some time together to catch up.”

“Absolutely, Dad.”

He led him to the living room. “Everyone, please meet my father, General Frank Beck. Dad, this is Jesse, who owns this house, and that’s my boss, Wander.”

Both Jesse and Wander got up. “Welcome, General.” Jesse extended his hand. “I’m Jesse Beyer. It’s an honor to have you in my home, and thank you for your years of dedicated service to our country.”

“Thank you, Jesse. I appreciate your hospitality.”

“Wander Dwyer.” Wander shook his father’s hand next. “And I can only second Jesse’s words.”

“Thank you. I’m glad to meet Alex’s boss. He’s told me a lot of good things about you.”

Wander shot Alex a warm smile. “That’s mutual, General. Alex is an absolute joy to have on our team, both for his skills and his personality.”

Jesus, if they kept that up, Alex would never stop blushing. His father grinned at him. “I’m glad to hear that, though I’m not surprised he’s doing well. He’s always excelled at adapting to new environments.” His smile faded. “Probably a consequence of being an Army brat.”

“You know I never minded, Dad.”

“I know. Doesn’t mean I can’t look back and consider if it was always the best thing for you and your siblings.”

“Can I offer you something to drink?” Jesse asked. “And a snack, perhaps? You’ve traveled by train from DC, from what I understand.”

“I would love a good cup of coffee. The crap they served on the train was so weak that I spit it out after the first sip.”

Jesse laughed. “A man after my own heart. We take coffee seriously here, General, so we’ve got you. Why don’t you and Alex make yourself comfortable in the library, where you’ll have a bit more privacy? I’ll have coffee and snacks brought in a moment.”

“Thank you,” Alex and his dad said at the same time, then grinned at each other.

“Follow me, Dad.”

Alex led him to the library. Thank god Jesse had solved his problem of wanting some privacy with his dad.

“Your mother sends her love,” his dad said as he removed his jacket and folded it over the back of a reading chair. “It made little sense for her to accompany me on such a brief trip, but she’s eager to see you again.”

“I know, but it’s hard to find the time to get away. Maybe after we’ve wrapped up this case.”

They settled on couches opposite each other. “Can you tell me what you’re working on?”

“I’ve been working with Ryan Mason, the private investigator on the team, on a case involving a dead racehorse.” Alex told his father the basics of the case, stopping briefly when one of the housekeeping staff brought a tray with coffee and some sweet and salty snacks. He didn’t need to tell his dad to keep the details to himself. The man had no other setting than discrete after his long career in the Army.

His dad whistled between his teeth. “Sounds like you guys got your work cut out for you. Which one was Ryan?”

Shit, he’d never even introduced Ryan to his dad, too nervous about the whole meeting. “The older guy with the silver in his hair.”

“I figured as much. He had that sharp look. He’s former law enforcement?”

“Homicide detective in Austin. I’m learning so much from him.”

“You seem happy, kiddo. I told you that when I first saw you, but it’s true. You have this glow about you that tells me you’re doing well.” His father narrowed his eyes. “Or is there someone in your life? If you want to tell me, that is.”

Shit. What did he do now? He flat out refused to lie to his dad, and denying there was someone would be a big, fat lie. He might not have figured out all the complex layers of his relationship with Ryan, but he’d become far more important than just a coworker—so had developing his submissive nature. If he was ever going to be honest with his father about who he was, now was the time. His heart raced as if it might burst through his ribcage at any moment.

“Dad, I’m... I don’t know how you will feel about this, but I want to be honest with you.” He took a deep breath. “I’m submissive, Dad. And I’ve found a Dom to train me and help me develop that part of myself. Ryan. I’m kinda with him, but it’s complicated.”

His father’s eyes widened. Shit, had he made a mistake sharing this with him? What if he took it the wrong way? Alex could see the wheels turning in his father’s head as he processed the information. When the silence stretched between them, becoming almost unbearable, Alex braced himself for an outburst of anger or disappointment.

“Son, I have to admit this is...unexpected.” His father’s tone was cautious but not unkind. “I don’t know much about this lifestyle other than what are probably stereotypes. Can you explain it to me?”

Alex exhaled. “Being a submissive means I willingly give control to someone else, my Dominant, because it fulfills a deep need within me. It’s about feeling cared for and protected, about letting go and allowing someone else to take over.”

His father listened intently. “And this person, your Dominant, what do they do?”

Alex was pretty sure his father didn’t want nor need a play-by-play of the scene he’d done with Ryan, but he also understood his father had a hard time picturing what it looked

like. “Right now, we’re still experimenting to figure out what I need and how I respond to various things. So we’re trying impact play, for example, and other types of...play.”

“I’m sure ‘play’ is a euphemism here for a lot of things we’d both rather not discuss, but is it safe?” The concern in his father’s eyes was genuine.

“We have rules and boundaries, which we’ve both agreed upon. All I have to do is say one word, and everything stops immediately.”

“A safeword.”

“Yes. Everything we do is consensual, and we always have a safeword in place. If I ever feel uncomfortable or overwhelmed, I can use that word.”

“I won’t pretend to understand all this, Alex, but I love you and want what’s best for you. If this is what makes you happy and fulfilled, I support you.”

The wave of relief washing over Alex made him dizzy for a moment. He hadn’t realized how much he’d needed to hear those words until his father had said them aloud. “Thank you, Dad.”

A weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

“I’m not sure how to tell your mom though.”

“Does she need to know? Maybe we can keep this between us?”

“I think that would be for the best. Not sure your mom would want to know this.” He cleared his throat. “Have you talked to your brother lately?”

Alex’s older brother, Cole, was a fighter pilot in the Air Force. “Yeah, Cole and I spoke last week. He told me he’s gearing up for deployment.”

“His squadron will be deployed to Europe, training with our NATO allies.”

“Not the worst place to spend some time. I’m sure Ashley is relieved.”

Alex's sister-in-law had just announced she was pregnant with their second, so knowing they'd be staying in a country with first-class medical care would matter a lot to them.

"Yeah, she is. She's hoping it'll be Germany, as she has fond memories of spending a few years there as a kid."

Ashley was an Army brat herself, which made her the perfect partner for Cole. She knew what she'd signed up for with him.

"Fingers crossed. And I talked to Tessa last month. She said she's on schedule to graduate in June."

His father smiled. "Can't believe my little girl will have her master's degree in international relations. She's so freaking smart. She called me the other day to ask some questions, and I swear to God, I had to work hard to keep up with her line of reasoning."

"Yup, smarter than all of us combined."

"I'm proud of all three of you. I hope you know that."

"I do, Dad. So, how was your trip to DC? Was it all meetings?"

"No, I was also invited to speak at a conference about maintaining strong international alliances in an increasingly unpredictable world. People seemed receptive to my ideas. More receptive than General Flint, I can tell you that. That man is..." Alex's father rolled his eyes.

Alex laughed. "He's always been the bane of your existence."

"God, yes. Though I have to admit he's abandoned his viewpoint on gays in the military. That was a shocker."

"He has?"

"According to the scuttlebutt, it's because of his son coming out as bisexual and being in a relationship with more than one guy. I haven't heard it confirmed, but that's what the rumors are saying."

Could it hurt to confirm it? Probably not, since Alex knew they were open about it. Besides, the information was safe with his dad. “It’s true.”

“How do you know?”

“Wander did a job for Noah Flint and his boyfriend. Or boyfriends, plural. I’m a little hazy on the correct terminology there, but he’s in a poly relationship with more than one man.”

“I’ll be damned. Well, that explains it.” His father sighed. “I always tell people they should be careful who they hate ‘cause it could damn well be someone they love.”

“Makes me so grateful you and Mom never gave me any crap when I came out.”

“By that time, it wasn’t a surprise to us, but even if it had been, we love you the way you are. Gay and all. Doesn’t make a difference to us, and you know it.” He leaned forward. “And neither does you being submissive and engaging in BDSM or whatever you call it. Though I would like to meet this Ryan if that’s possible.”

Alex groaned. “Dad... You can’t grill him like he’s one of your subordinates.”

“No? Hmm, we’ll see about that. If he’s responsible for my son, he’d damn well better be able to handle some heat.”

Fuck, there was no way out of this, was there? He sighed. “Let me go get him. If you’re gonna try to intimidate him, you can at least do it where no one else can witness it.”

With lead in his shoes, he went back to the living room, where Ryan sat chatting with Wander. “Ryan, my dad wants to meet you.”

“Should I be concerned?”

Wander snorted. “The man can get highly trained killers on your ass with one phone call, and you ask if you should be worried?”

“I’m sorry. I told him about being a sub, and he insisted on meeting you. He’s protective of me, I guess.”

Ryan got up. “It’s not a bad thing for a dad to want to protect his son, baby boy.”

“Please don’t call me that in front of him...”

“No? And what will you do for me in return?”

“Anything.” Alex wasn’t even kidding. “I will literally do anything you want.”

Ryan put a hand on his shoulder. “Relax. I know how to behave myself, I promise.”

With Ryan on his heels, Alex returned to the library. “Dad, this is Ryan Mason, the private investigator I’ve been working with on the Sam’s Promise case...and my Dom.”

The words came out more confident than he felt.

Alex’s dad gave Ryan a thorough once-over.

“Nice to meet you, General.” Ryan extended his hand.

“All right then, Ryan,” Alex’s dad said as he shook hands with Ryan, not missing a beat. “I want to be clear about something. My son means everything to me. If you’re going to be a part of his life, in whatever capacity that may be, I expect you to take good care of him.”

The intensity in his father’s gaze made Alex’s heart swell with love and gratitude. His father was willing to accept and even protect his newfound lifestyle despite not understanding it, and how could he not be grateful for that?

Ryan didn’t back down. “I understand perfectly, General. You have my word. I’ll do everything in my power to keep Alex safe and help him grow.”

The sincerity in Ryan’s voice sent a warm shiver down Alex’s spine.

“Thank you.” His father’s expression softened. “That’s all I needed to hear.”

“Thank you, Dad,” Alex murmured, his voice choked with emotion. “It means everything to me you’re trying to understand.”

His father laid a hand on Alex's shoulder and squeezed it reassuringly. "I'll always support you, kiddo. No matter what."

When Alex looked at Ryan, he caught the man staring at him with a mix of affection, protectiveness, and something harder to define. Something softer, more tender.

A glimmer of hope sparked within him.

That didn't look like a man determined to keep his emotional distance.

That looked like a man who'd already lost the battle.

Meeting Alex's dad had been...unexpected. Ryan wasn't easily intimidated, but General Beck had made an impression—and not because he'd been in full uniform. He'd been kind and sincere in his affection and care for Alex, and that had hit Ryan hard. Maybe because he'd never had a father himself? His mom had done an amazing job raising Ryan and his sister, but he'd missed that male influence at times. Meeting Alex's father showed him what he could've had if life had turned out differently, and it had made him think.

He appreciated how protective the man had been of his son, especially considering he'd only learned about Alex being submissive minutes before. Few parents would've been instantly a-okay with that, but Alex's father had been. It spoke volumes about the kind of relationship Alex had with his parents...and it explained a lot about why Alex was the way he was. If he were honest, Ryan had thought his Hawaiian-influenced philosophy of *ohana* was BS, but now he could see how Alex had come to embrace it.

Anyway, he needed to kick himself out of his melancholy state and get some work done. Alex's suggestion about the animal reports had been an excellent one, and it was time to start digging. Ryan leaned back in his chair, legs stretched out and crossed at the ankles, as he dialed the number for the New York Racing Association. He listened to the rings, absently picking at a loose thread on the hem of his jeans. Finally, someone picked up.

“NYRA, how can I help you?” The voice on the other end sounded bored, like he’d been answering calls all day.

“Hey there,” Ryan drawled, injecting some Texas charm into his tone. “I’m looking for information on animal abuse reports regarding racehorses in the last three years. What would I need to do to get those records?”

“Excuse me?”

“Animal abuse reports. For horse races. In New York State. In the last three years.” Maybe if he spelled it out, the dude would get it?

“I’m not sure if... Do we have that information?”

“I would hope so. Maybe you can connect me to someone else? Say, a supervisor?”

“Yeah. I mean, yes, sir. I can. I will. Have a nice day.”

Ryan rolled his eyes. “You too.”

After about a minute, a woman came on the line. “Barb Harwell, how may I help you?”

Ryan repeated his request. “Can you help me with that?”

She hesitated. “We’re not supposed to give those to outsiders. Not without a warrant.”

“I understand, but for obvious reasons, I can’t procure a warrant, seeing as I’m not law enforcement. What I am, Ms. Harwell, is passionate about the health and well-being of racehorses, and I’m determined to find out everything I can about the circumstances of the horrific death of Sam’s Promise. I’m sure you can find sympathy for that.”

“What happened to that poor horse was awful. Plain awful.” She lowered her voice. “But I’m still not supposed to send out these reports.”

“What if you sent them to Dr. Simmons, the equine pathologist who performed the necropsy? Would that be permissible?”

“I’m sure that’s justifiable. After all, she’s a professional and already involved in the case, right?”

“Exactly. Here’s her email address.” Ryan rattled off the email address from the business card Dr. Simmons had given him, then spent another minute to butter Barb up. Who knew if he’d need another favor from her?

When he hung up, he turned toward Alex with a triumphant smile. “Done. All I need to do now is call Dr. Simmons and ask her to forward them.”

“You know, it’s almost eerie the way you handled that woman.”

“Eerie? Why?”

“Because it’s like you turned into this other man. There’s the grumpy, gruff Ryan we know, and then this Barb person gets this whole new side of you that’s all charming and smiley. Like I said, creepy.”

Ryan snorted. “It’s called being able to play a part to get what you need.”

“Call it what you want. I still maintain it’s creepy as fuck.”

“Whatever. Let me call Dr. Simmons, and then we can dig into these reports.”

Within minutes, the reports appeared in their email, and Ryan brought them up on the big monitor. Alex got up to roll his chair over, but Ryan shook his head. “Too tight. Come sit on my lap.”

“We’re working.”

“And we can’t multitask? Come sit on my lap, baby boy.”

Alex swallowed. “You’ve never mixed work and play.”

“There’s a first for everything.”

How could he explain this strange need to be close to Alex? It wasn’t even about fucking him—though he’d never object to sinking his cock into that slick, tight ass—but he wanted to hold him, feel him, touch him. It had to be because he was his Dom now. Like a proof of ownership or something. Not that he owned him...but damn if that thought didn’t stir up something deep inside him.

He was spared from thinking about what that meant. Alex had decided to follow directions and parked himself on Ryan's lap. Ah, so much better. He indulged himself for a moment in the sensation of that round butt snugly against his crotch. "Okay, let's have a look."

"It's not a spreadsheet, so we can't sort," Alex said.

"That would be too easy. No, we'll have to do this the old-fashioned way and read them."

He opened the first report, skimmed through it to see if Marilyn's name popped up, then moved on to the next one. On the fourth one, they had a hit.

"Louise Steed," Ryan said.

Alex snorted. "Funny last name for someone in the horse business."

Ryan chuckled. "I hadn't even realized that, but you're right. Anyway, Marilyn filed a report against her for inhumane conditions at her stalls." His smile disappeared as he read through the report. "Maggots in the stalls and the feed, contaminated water... Jesus, was this woman trying to kill her horses?"

"I don't understand how people can treat animals like that."

Ryan's heart grew strangely soft. "Wait till you discover how humans treat other humans."

"I know they do, and I don't understand that either. Child abuse especially. How can you hurt a child? They're innocent and powerless."

"That's why they do it. Because something inside them wants to corrupt that innocence and establish their own power."

"It's sick." Alex spat out the words.

"It is, baby boy. It is."

Another deep sigh. "Anyway, I'll write down her name and see what I can find about her while you keep searching."

He made a move to get up, but Ryan grabbed his waist. “Don’t. Stay.”

“It’s more efficient my way.”

“It’s more fun my way.”

“Is everything always about fun with you?”

Ryan brushed his cheek. “Indulge me.”

“You’re in a weird mood.”

“I know. I’ll be back to my grumpy ass self later, I promise.”

Alex leaned in, then did something he’d never done before. He gently kissed Ryan. “I like it.”

Why that made Ryan’s insides light up, he had no idea. “You do?”

“Yeah. I like it when you’re affectionate with me.”

Somehow, that hit Ryan right in the feels, in itself a rare occurrence. Had he been so stingy with his approval that even this little gesture meant so much to Alex? That thought didn’t sit well with him. But like everything else, he pressed it down so he wouldn’t have to think about it too much. Instead, he took Alex’s mouth in a kiss that was supposed to be brief and sweet but quickly turned heated. Jesus, the slide of Alex’s tongue against Ryan’s alone was enough to make him hard. Add to that the fact that Alex still had that glorious ass pressed against Ryan’s junk, and he was in trouble.

With reluctance, he let go of his mouth. “As much as I love kissing you, we gotta focus on the case,” he whispered against Alex’s wet lips. “But I promise that once we’re done for the day, you and I are gonna spend some quality time together.”

Alex kissed him one last time. “Can’t wait.”

With a deep sigh, Ryan pushed him off his lap. “Gotta let you go, baby boy, or I won’t be able to get any work done.”

“Told you,” Alex said smugly.

Ryan slapped his ass. “Nobody likes a know-it-all.”

Alex grinned. “Oh, but you do. You like me.”

He did. He really did. This was getting complicated, yet Ryan didn't want to walk away. He'd work it out and get himself back on track. Back to his grumpy self, as he'd told Alex. Though it was damn hard to hold on to darkness with a bright ray of sunshine like Alex near him.

“Let's go through the reports one by one,” he said and forced himself to focus.

When they'd finished combing through all the reports, they'd found five formal complaints Marilyn had made against fellow owners of racehorses. Two reports could be easily dismissed, as one of the owners was dead and the other had moved to Florida, but the other three warranted more digging. It took a few hours of online research and various phone calls to find details, but finally, Ryan leaned back in his chair. “I think we're onto something with this one.”

Alex spun his chair around. “Talk to me.”

“Owner's name is Charles Jeffries, and Marilyn filed an animal abuse report against him for mistreating a horse called Lucky Lady's Gamble. The report stated Jeffries used multiple forbidden practices to boost the horse's performance, including electroshocks as a punishment.”

Alex's eyes widened. “Electroshocks? You're telling me this guy tasered his horse?”

“Yeah.” Ryan rubbed his beard. “And what's more, an investigation concluded Marilyn had been right. Jeffries was fined a hefty sum.”

“But would that be enough to send him into such a rage?”

“No, but get this. Jeffries had been about to sign a lucrative syndication deal with Lucky Lady's Gamble when those accusations were filed and proven true. It cost him the deal.”

He'd had to look up what a syndication deal meant in the horse business, but it came down to a bunch of people being willing to pay a lot of money to own a part of that horse. If Lucky Lady's Gamble had been successful, they would've easily made their money back.

Alex whistled. “That would’ve been worth millions.”

“Yep, but instead, he got sued for breach of contract and lost that case. That poor horse ended up retiring from racing, and Jeffries lost everything. From what I can tell, he’s drowning in financial problems.”

“That’s a plausible motive to go after Marilyn and get revenge.”

“The problem is that Jeffries had no horse racing in the Travers Stakes, so he wouldn’t have been allowed backstage. So how could he have gotten access to Sam’s Promise?”

Alex slowly nodded. “Good point. Marilyn would never have let him onto her farm.”

“Nope, and besides, Caleb analyzed all the security footage Marilyn gave us, and nothing suspicious turned up. If Jeffries had been at Marilyn’s farm, he would’ve shown up on the cams.” He studied the picture he’d found online. Jeffries was a balding man in his late fifties with pale blue eyes, a big nose, and a unibrow. He looked familiar, but Ryan couldn’t place him.

“So he would’ve needed someone else to administer the EPO. Someone with backstage access.”

“Yeah.”

Alex tapped a pen against his chin. “Nobody does anything for free, but if the guy was bankrupt after Marilyn’s complaint, how would he have been able to pay someone?”

“Good question. Maybe he paid in another way?”

“Did he still own any horses? He could’ve used those as payment.”

“Racehorses have ownership papers and everything. That would’ve left a trail all too easy to follow.”

They looked at each other, both frowning. “How would Jeffries have been able to get his hands on money?” Ryan wondered.

“Wait.” Alex put the pen he’d been holding down with force. “Betting. If he knew Sam’s Promise was going down in that race, he could’ve placed a bet and won big-time.”

Damn, that was smart thinking. “You’re right. He could’ve used that money to pay off his accomplice. So, how do we get proof he placed a winning bet? You dug into the whole betting angle. Explain to me how that works. Is it all in person?”

“No, you can also bet online.”

“He wouldn’t have shown his face there that day,” Ryan mused. “He would’ve wanted to stay as far away as possible and set up a solid alibi. So he would’ve bet online. Can you do that anonymously?”

“Somewhat, but they won’t pay out large amounts without identity verification ‘cause the IRS wants their share, so if he won, he would’ve had to prove his identity anyway.”

“There’s no way we could get those records.”

“No, but the cops could.”

Dammit, the kid was right. The cops would be able to get a warrant, providing they could establish probable cause. Ryan disliked that option, but he’d swallow his pride if that was what it took to solve the case and get justice for Sam’s Promise. “Has Baxter sent over those betting records yet?”

Alex shook his head. “But he said they’d have to black out the names, so that may take a day or two.”

“True. The problem is that we don’t have enough evidence against Jeffries yet to mention him to the cops. All we have is speculation. We need more.”

“What would we need?”

“His accomplice. We need to give them the name of the person who drugged the horse. They’ll be able to verify that, since they have access to the security footage. Once they have that, they’ll be able to get a warrant for Jeffries and get everything they need.”

“Okay.” Alex had a determined expression that made Ryan want to kiss his pretty, pouty lips. “So we find his

accomplice.”

Ryan quirked an eyebrow. “And how do we do that?”

“It has to be someone with backstage access, so we do some research into Jeffries’s background and see who he’s associated with in the past. Security guards, stable hands, veterinary assistants, everyone. And then we dig into their backgrounds one by one until we find a connection and a motive.”

Jesus, was that pride Ryan felt? It was, and what an unexpected sensation. But he couldn’t help it. Alex was doing so much better than Ryan had ever expected, taking to this line of work like a fish to water. How could he not be proud of him?

“Sounds about right. But we’ll start on that tomorrow.”

“We’re done for the day?” Alex’s face lit up.

“We are, baby boy.”

“So we can move on to...other things?”

Ryan licked his lips. “We sure can.”

“Good.” Alex whipped his shirt over his head, kicked off his shoes, and dragged down his pants and underwear, leaving that tan, sleek body on full display. “Cause I’m in a mood.”

Ryan swallowed, his cock hardening in an instant. “Are you, now?”

“I need you, Ryan.”

If there were more powerful words on the planet, Ryan wouldn’t know them. “I got you, baby boy.” He yanked down his jeans and underwear, letting them pool at his feet, and sat on the chair again. “Ride me.”

Alex didn’t hesitate but climbed onto his lap and lowered himself. Fuck, the look of concentration on his face as he took Ryan in inch by inch. He’d never looked more beautiful.

Ryan brushed a lock of hair off his forehead, then tipped his chin up. “Kiss me.”

And Alex did. The frantic sex Ryan had fantasized about all day turned into something else, a languid, slow exploration as they kissed and kissed and kissed while Alex rode him, rocking his hips and driving them higher and higher until they saw the stars.

What the fuck was happening here?

Wander had set high standards for his team, which meant they had to keep improving their skills. This included a monthly session at a nearby shooting range, and it was Alex's favorite day of the month. He'd learned how to shoot as a young teenager—his father had wanted him to know how to handle firearms safely—and he'd not only taken a liking to it but had shown talent. All through high school and college, he'd competed in sharpshooting contests, and he'd loved it.

Ryan had claimed shotgun, so Alex sat in the back while Wander drove, but he didn't mind. He was too excited to spend some time on the shooting range, and besides, he knew his place as the youngest team member. He'd managed to impress Ryan, a feat Alex was proud of, but he still had to earn his place on the team as a whole, and he was okay with that. At least on the shooting range, he'd be the best. Just like on the mat.

When they'd parked and were walking toward the entrance, Alex carrying his gun case, Wander slapped him on the shoulder. "You excited?"

Alex grinned. "Always, and you know it. Any day I get to fire a weapon in practice is a good day."

"Let's have some fun then."

They signed in and made their way over to the lanes Wander had reserved. The shooting range sprawled out before them, a vast expanse of packed dirt and gravel dotted with

targets at varying distances. The air was alive with the sharp crackle of gunfire, punctuated by the occasional metallic clang as a bullet found its mark on a steel plate. The heavy, acrid scent of gunpowder mixed with the cloying aroma of sweat, and a familiar thrill coursed through Alex's veins.

"Connor!" Wander called out, and the two men who'd been walking in front of them turned around.

Alex recognized them right away. Connor and Josh were two guys they'd met on a previous assignment when they'd provided security for their extended family. They were all a bunch of kinky fuckers—by their own admission—and Alex had loved every second he'd spent in their house, watching all their sexual activities. Connor was a Dom, and Josh, his husband, was his sub.

But Josh also had a boyfriend, Indy, who was also married to a guy named Noah—General Flint's son. What Noah and Connor were to each other, Alex had never managed to figure out. They all shared a bedroom, but other than that, he had no clue. Not that it mattered. They were good people, and that was what counted.

Connor, who had a similar standard gruff expression as Ryan, smiled. "Wander... It's good to see you guys."

They exchanged hugs and, in Ryan's case, manly slaps on the back. The guy was *so* not a hugger.

"Small world, huh?" Josh said as he hugged Alex. His slim build was a striking contrast to his husband's bulky, muscular frame. "How have you been?"

"Good." Alex let go of him. "Glad we got to stay in the area. I like it here."

"You guys are still at Jesse's house?"

"You know him?"

"We visited his club a few times."

"Connor must've loved that." The man was a total exhibitionist, much like Ryan, for that matter.

“He loves the public sex, but he’s still a little sensitive about”—Josh lowered his voice—“the Beast.”

Ah yes, the Beast. Connor had a monster dick the size of which Alex had never seen in his life. Not a problem for Josh, but apparently, Connor had gotten some shit about it in the past, so it was a sensitive issue for him. Alex had loved watching the guy as he fucked Josh straight into subspace, but he wasn’t sure if he’d be willing or able to take a cock that size himself. Luckily, he didn’t need to. Ryan was enough for him, thank you very much.

“All right, enough reminiscing.” Wander rubbed his hands together, his grin promising he was up to something. “It looks like we have the perfect group for some friendly competition. What do you guys say?”

Connor and Josh looked at each other, and then Connor nodded. “What did you have in mind?”

Before anyone could say anything, Josh cleared his throat. “How about Doms versus subs?”

Connor groaned. “Baby, you’re not playing fair.”

Alex frowned. What did he mean?

Josh’s eyes twinkled as he shrugged. “You’re saying that three bad-ass Doms can’t beat two little subbies?”

Alex didn’t want to deceive the others. Wander knew how good a shot he was, but he’d never trained with Ryan before, and of course, Connor and Josh didn’t have a clue either. But when he opened his mouth, Josh grabbed his hand and tugged it, so Alex closed it again. Why didn’t Josh want him to speak up?

Wander’s eyes narrowed. “I’ll take that line-up.”

“Perfect.” Josh stood up straight, and Alex did a double take. The introverted man was radiating a confidence he’d never seen from him. What was going on here? “What do the winners get?”

“You seem awfully confident you’re going to win,” Ryan commented, studying Josh. So he, too, had picked up on

something being off about this. But what?

Josh crossed his arms. “Scared to take me on?”

Ryan snorted. “Never.”

“Then name the prize.”

“A week of unlimited orgasms for the subs if they win,” Wander said. “And if you lose, your Doms will get to lock you up for a week.”

Ryan’s eyes lit up. “Oh, I like that. I’m in.”

Connor grumbled. “We’re so gonna regret this, but you’re on.”

“Okay. Half an hour practice, and then we’ll start the competition,” Wander said. “You guys take lane four, and we’ll stay on five.”

“Deal.” Josh slung his arm around Alex’s shoulders and pulled him to the next lane.

“Josh, what do you know that I don’t?” Alex asked when they were out of hearing range. “I’m an excellent shot, but I don’t know if I can beat Connor. He’s a Marine, for fuck’s sake.”

Josh’s face split open in a wide grin. “Former Army sniper, baby. We’re gonna smoke these guys.”

Army sniper? Holy shit. “I’ll take any tips you’ve got.”

“I was hoping you’d say that. Okay, let’s get some practice in so I can see what you’ve got.”

They started with handguns, both shooting a 9mm, then a .45 Magnum. Not Alex’s favorite, though he was proficient with them. They both did well, though Josh wasn’t exceptional.

“My specialty is rifles, for obvious reasons,” Josh told Alex when they were reloading. “So let’s do one more round, and then we’ll move on to those.”

Once they had switched, Josh went first, his face a mask of concentration as he prepared for his shot. He was in his own

world, it seemed, not reacting to the hustle and bustle around them. He squeezed the trigger and hit the center dead on. Then again. And again. And when he sent the target farther back—much, much farther back—he still hit his target every single time.

Alex's mouth dropped open. Holy shit. He'd never seen anything like this.

“Now I know why Connor was reluctant to compete against you,” he said when Josh was done and had taken out his ear protectors.

Josh laughed. “He knows they're gonna lose. He's doing it to make me happy.”

“He's a good man.”

Josh's eyes turned dreamy. “The very best.”

“All right, my turn,” Alex said. “But don't expect me to match those results.”

“I don't, but I'm eager to see what you've got.”

Alex did well, he thought. Only one shot was way off target, but the rest were at least close, even at the larger distances. He took out his earplugs and turned to Josh. “What do you think?”

“You're good. Better than I expected. Wanna hear some pointers?”

“Yes, please.”

“Okay, we'll start with your breathing. You're doing well when you're shooting handguns, but with the rifle, your breathing is too choppy.”

“Choppy?”

“You gotta get to a place where you only take four to six breaths a minute. Slow that heart rate way, way down, and get your body and your mind to a state of complete peace. When you manage that, your body will be relaxed while still holding tension, but your breathing won't affect your shot.”

His voice was calm and surprisingly authoritative as he demonstrated. What a difference with his usually shy demeanor. He was clearly in his element here.

“Good.” Josh stepped closer. “Watch your left shoulder. It’s tensing right before you squeeze the trigger. I know it’s instinctive to protect against the recoil, but it alters your trajectory by a millimeter. Over longer distances, that’s enough to send a bullet wide. Try again.”

“Got it.” Alex took a slow, measured breath as he raised the rifle and aimed downrange. He adjusted his grip and dropped his shoulder, seeking that perfect balance between control and relaxation before he squeezed the trigger.

Josh offered a small nod of approval whenever he was satisfied with Alex’s progress.

“That’s it!” Josh gave him a big smile after Alex had fired another ten rounds. “Better. One more round of ten.”

Alex nodded and reloaded. He positioned himself again and exhaled slowly, the tension in his body dissipating as he focused on the task. The steady rhythm of his heartbeat drummed in his ears, and he felt as though the world had narrowed to just him, the rifle, and the target. He squeezed the trigger, and the gun bucked in his grip, the report echoing across the range. The bullet impacted the center of the target with a satisfying thwack, and he couldn’t repress a grin.

The half hour flew by, the scent of spent gunpowder heavy in the air as Alex focused on implementing Josh’s advice. With each shot, his movements became more fluid and instinctive, the result of honing his technique under Josh’s watchful gaze. He’d thought he was an expert shooter, but Josh was on a different level.

“Man, I remember my first time at a shooting range,” Alex said as they took a break, gulping some water. “I was so nervous my hands were shaking like crazy.”

“Really? You’re a natural with it.”

“Thank you. What about you? What’s your fondest memory of being on the range?”

Josh didn't reply right away, his eyes distant. "In sniper school, we had this one sergeant who was a real hard-ass. He'd walk up and down the firing line, yelling in our ears while we tried to shoot, shouting insults at us. And when we'd gotten used to that, he used sound effects. Explosions, screaming, sirens, anything you could think of."

"Sounds intense."

"It was." Josh chuckled. "But it taught me how to perform under pressure. In battle, it's not exactly quiet either, and I learned how to take a shot, maintaining focus, even when the world around me was exploding into flames."

When Wander announced the competition was about to start, Alex was ready. He'd been somewhat confident he'd at least be able to beat Wander and Ryan, but after Josh's lessons, he could maybe even take on Connor and come out victorious.

"Okay, we'll do six rounds," Wander said. "Two handguns, one rifle, each at two different distances. Best of three shots per person, all in the same lane to keep it as fair as possible. May the odds be ever in your favor."

"All right then, let's do it," Ryan said, a smirk tugging at the corners of his lips. "Prepare to be amazed, boys."

The competitive energy crackled as they prepared for the showdown. Each man took turns shooting at the target, each gunshot echoing through the range like a drumbeat leading to victory. Or defeat, but Alex didn't think so. Not with Josh.

The first round with the 9mm went as expected. Both Ryan and Wander did well here, with Alex close on their heels. Connor and Josh still hit the target, just a little less accurately than the others. When the distance increased, Alex's knuckles grew white with determination, but his hands were steady as a rock, each bullet finding its mark with unerring accuracy. When he saw the target sheet, he high-fived Josh. With each round, the competition grew more intense, the air thick with anticipation. It was clear that neither team was willing to concede without a fight.

As Alex aimed and fired his rifle, he focused more intently than ever before. Gone were the distractions; all that remained was him, his weapon, and the target. His breath came in a slow rhythm that barely had his body moving as he squeezed the trigger, sending bullet after bullet toward the bull's-eye.

"Nice shot!" Josh complimented him and pulled the target sheet forward. He whistled between his teeth. "Look at that beauty..."

Alex's heart skipped a beat. He'd hit dead center all three times.

"Holy shit," Ryan said. "That's..." He glowered at Alex. "I didn't know you were that good."

"I told you he was a sharpshooter," Wander said calmly, preparing for his first round with his rifle.

"Yeah, but not at this level."

Alex's whole body buzzed with that unexpected praise. Somehow, earning Ryan's approval mattered most. Josh, unsurprisingly, delivered a target sheet that had just one big hole in it. He'd sent all three bullets into the exact same space.

"Fucking hell," Ryan said. "What the actual fuck? How...?"

Connor sighed. "Josh was an Army sniper."

"A fucking sniper? And you didn't think that was relevant information for us to have before accepting the bet?"

Connor shrugged. "I told you we'd regret it."

Ryan spun around and faced Wander. "Did you know?"

"Of course. You know I always do my research into clients."

"So how come you...?" Ryan's shoulders sagged. "Oh, I see how it is. You all conspired against me. You have nothing to lose, Wander, since your sub isn't part of the deal. And Connor will find a different way to punish Josh, I'm sure, so that leaves Alex and me..."

Alex smiled sweetly. “And I’m going to enjoy that week of unlimited orgasms.”

“In your dreams,” Ryan muttered.

“You wouldn’t violate the terms of the deal we made, would you?”

“He won’t.” Wander’s tone held an edge. “He should’ve known better than to step into a bet with this many unknowns.”

“Traitor,” Ryan said under his breath.

“Whatever.” Wander didn’t seem affected at all. “Last round.”

The Doms went first, and while they did well, Ryan’s shots especially were off from the center. Josh and Alex had to be able to beat that, right?

Josh, predictably, nailed every single shot, so now it was down to Alex. If he did well, they’d beat the Doms, but would he be able to keep his nerves in check?

“Last three shots, Alex. Make them count,” Josh said as Alex was loading his rifle. “Remember your breathing.”

Right. He settled into his position, taking his time to make himself comfortable. He didn’t need to rush. Okay, perfect.

Breathe in.

Relax.

Hold.

Relax.

Breathe out.

Hold.

Squeeze the trigger.

Repeat.

A low buzz hummed in Alex’s ears as he breathed to center himself, focusing on the target before him, and then fired his last shot. From this far away, he couldn’t see if it had

hit, but he knew. How, he couldn't explain, but he knew he'd hit the target dead on.

Wander, Ryan, and Connor were waiting for the target sheet to roll forward, faces tense with the anticipation of the outcome. And when Alex saw the sheet, he whooped and hugged Josh.

"We did it, Josh." Alex had to fight to keep his emotions in check. This mattered, though he couldn't explain why.

Josh smiled warmly, clapping Alex on the back. "Yeah, we did. Great job, man."

"Thanks to you. Couldn't have done this without you helping me."

"Anytime. You've got a real talent for this."

"As expected, our winners are Josh and Alex," Wander said. "And I'm sorry to announce it wasn't even close. You guys annihilated us."

Ryan sighed. "Thanks to Josh being a sniper."

"Actually, Alex did almost as well as Josh." Wander held up two target sheets side by side. "See that? They're only a few millimeters apart."

"Damn." Ryan looked from the target sheets to Alex, wonder filling his eyes. "Good job, baby boy."

Alex practically floated. When Ryan looked at him like that, he could do anything.

Ryan perched on the edge of his desk, staring at the whiteboard where they had plotted out all the evidence they had collected in their investigation. Alex stood beside him, a thoughtful frown creasing his pretty face as he studied the information they had so far. Lines and arrows connected the different people with additional info added in Alex's neat handwriting, and Alex had attached pictures of each of the players.

"Jeffries has motive..." Ryan played with the whiskey glass in his hand. They'd assisted Wander with a different assignment all day, so they hadn't been able to focus on their own investigation until after dinner. That warranted a glass of Lagavulin, right? "But everything we have on him is circumstantial at best. We need something more solid if we're gonna bring him down."

"I know." Alex tapped the whiteboard. "But there has to be something we missed. Something that connects him to Sam's Promise's death."

Ryan narrowed his eyes as he studied Jeffries's picture. He'd been racking his brain, trying to remember where he'd seen the man's smug, calculating expression before. It annoyed the crap out of him he couldn't place him. "Gimme his picture again."

He held out his arm for Alex to hand him the photo. As Ryan's fingers brushed against Alex's, a spark of electricity passed between them, and they both faltered. Heat pooled in

Ryan's belly. Would his desire for Alex ever wane? It showed no signs so far, which was unusual.

He refocused, holding the picture at various distances to test if it triggered anything. "Where the hell have I seen this guy before?"

He used an old trick, covering the bottom half of Jeffries's face, then the top. This could help if a suspect had been wearing a disguise. The eyes often betrayed them.

And then it hit him like a freight train barreling down the tracks. "Son of a bitch! I've seen him on the race footage from the day Sam's Promise went down!"

"Really?" Alex practically bounced. "That would put him at the scene of the crime, right?"

"Sure as shit would." Ryan downed the rest of his whiskey and slammed the glass on the table. "Let's go over that footage again. We need to find Jeffries in it and see if we can spot anything else suspicious."

"All right." Alex's fingers were flying across the keyboard as he pulled up the race footage. Ryan sat next to him, and as they watched the video, their shoulders pressed together. His heart raced as hard as the horses thundering down the track, their powerful muscles straining, their hooves pounding the earth. He imagined the adrenaline surging through their veins, the raw determination pushing them to their limits. And then there was Sam's Promise, a beautiful animal brought down by human greed and cruelty. Only this time, when the poor horse went down, Ryan focused on the spectators.

"Here." He pointed to the screen. The smug, calculating expression on a man's face was unmistakable. "That's Jeffries in the crowd. Son of a bitch was right there. Probably wanted to see everything went according to plan."

Alex shook his head. "That takes some serious balls to attend the race where you know a horse is gonna get killed."

"You know how many arsonists can't resist the opportunity to watch the fire they started? That's often how they get caught. It's like a compulsion."

“It’s sick, is what it is.”

Ryan affectionately brushed Alex’s hair. “I know, baby boy.”

Alex leaned into his touch, almost purring like a kitten. The boy loved to be touched, and Ryan couldn’t get enough of touching him. So weird. Alex had become an addiction.

Alex sat up straight. “If he was there in person, does that mean he could’ve placed his bets in person?”

Damn, Ryan hadn’t thought of that. “It could. If he was bold enough to show his face, he might’ve been careless enough to do that. But even then, we know from the papers Baxter sent us that none of the bets paid out over fifty thousand.”

Alex’s face fell. “True. Though I gotta say, that’s still a lot of money. And if he did make a bet, we could at least see who he bet on, right? Didn’t Marilyn mention she had a friend who worked the betting windows? Maybe they’d remember if Jeffries placed any bets that day.”

“She did.” Ryan riffled through the papers. “His name was...Clyde Watson. But I don’t have his number, so let me call her and ask for Clyde’s contact info.”

Ryan dialed Marilyn’s number, his jaw clenched. “Hey, Marilyn,” he said when she picked up. “I need a favor. I need contact info for your friend Clyde Watson. We’re hoping he can tell us more about the betting activities that day.”

“He can’t tell you much because of confidentiality issues, but I’m sure he’ll be willing to share what he can.”

Marilyn gave him the details, and Ryan thanked her, then disconnected the call. “Got it. Let’s do this.”

Ryan dialed Clyde’s number and put the phone on speaker.

“Hello?” Clyde’s voice came through the speaker, wary and uncertain.

“Hey, Clyde, my name is Ryan Mason. I got your number from Marilyn Vandervliet, who hired me to investigate the

death of Sam's Promise. I was hoping I could ask you some questions about betting activities that day."

"I'm not sure how much I can tell you," Clyde said. "I have a confidentiality clause in my contract, and they can sue me if I break it."

"No one will know it came from you, and also, I only have a few very specific questions."

Clyde hesitated, and Ryan could almost hear the wheels turning in his head. "What kind of information are you looking for?"

"We believe a man named Charles Jeffries might be involved, and we were hoping you could tell us more about him."

"Jeffries? Yeah, he hangs around the track all the time," Clyde confirmed, his voice tinged with disdain. "He's not exactly a stand-up guy, if you know what I mean, and not someone you want to mess with. He's got connections in this business, and he doesn't like people poking their noses where they don't belong."

"Can you remember if Jeffries placed a bet on the day Sam's Promise died?"

"He did. He went all in against Sam's Promise, who ran as a favorite."

"You must have an exceptional memory if you can remember everyone's bets on a busy day like that." Ryan didn't want to blindly assume Clyde was telling the truth.

"Nah, no way, but like I said, Jeffries is a regular. He's always going big on the races, trying to make a quick buck. And that day, he won big. Like, really big. One of the biggest sums I've ever handed out. That's why I remember it. He had multiple tickets that needed to be paid out. I had to get my boss to sign off on it, but it was all legit." Then he gasped. "Wait, are you saying he knew...? Holy shit, if he knew Sam's Promise was gonna die, he rigged that bet."

"Yeah. And that's the least of the crimes he would've committed that day," Ryan said. "Was there anything unusual

about his behavior that you can remember? Anyone he hung out with?"

"I thought it was a little strange he was cashing multiple tickets, especially since they were pretty much the same bets. He didn't place his bets with me that day, so I don't know if he did multiple in a row or what. But I do remember he wasn't alone. There was another guy with him, a dude I'd seen before. Can't for the life of me remember his name though."

"Damn," Ryan muttered under his breath. "Anything you can tell us about this dude? Height, hair color, anything?"

"He's a regular at the track too. In fact, he's a... He had a red pass, so he had back access. Gimme a sec. I'm trying to remember."

"Take all the time you need."

"I was in my booth," Clyde mumbled. "When he cashed the bet, this dude was with him but stayed in the background. He didn't come up to the window. Jeffries was in a good mood, joking. I remember because he never does that. It took us longer than usual to pay out because of the accident. The track was shut down for at least an hour. So when we opened, there was a long line of people wanting to cash their winnings, and Jeffries had to wait a while. Even that hadn't soured his mood."

Ryan patiently waited. Clyde was clearly playing the events from that day in his head, which would hopefully help him remember more details.

"He was wearing a dark blue polo shirt, the other guy. With a... He had a white coat under his arm. Thornfield, that's it. Victor Thornfield. He's a vet."

"A vet? And you're saying he had back access before the race?"

"Yeah. He had a red pass, so that means he would've been allowed in the back. Probably because he's a vet. He's a regular at the track too, or at least, he used to be." Clyde made a sound of sympathy. "Poor guy lost bet after bet. I was getting

a bit worried, what with the amounts he was gambling away, but I guess he can afford it, huh?”

Or not, but Ryan kept that thought to himself. “That’s so helpful, Clyde. Thank you so much.”

“You’re more than welcome. Anything I can legally do to help Marilyn.”

Ryan ended the call. Another piece of the puzzle had slotted into place. “All right, baby boy.” He turned to Alex. “What did we learn from this?”

“Multiple bets... Does that mean he asked others to place bets for him? Because otherwise, the cops would’ve seen it and combined his total winnings.”

“I had the exact same thought. Let’s see what we can dig up on this Victor Thornfield.”

“Already on it.” Alex tapped away on his laptop. Together, they delved deeper into Thornfield’s life, piecing together a picture of a desperate man with nothing left to lose. Clyde had been right. The man was a vet, and he specialized in racehorses. His credentials showed various articles in magazines, and he’d worked with some big-name owners. Even more interesting were his financials. He was dead broke with massive debts to his name. In fact, the bank was about to default on his home.

“Clyde mentioned Thornfield had had some losses in the past,” Alex said. “Looks like he was right. He’s been drowning in debt.”

Ryan rubbed his beard. “So not only is he connected to Jeffries, but he’s also got a motive. If Jeffries promised him money, that would’ve been a way for Thornfield to keep his house, get out of debt.”

Their case was finally coming together, but they needed a last bit of evidence they wouldn’t be able to get. But the cops would. If Detective Baxter believed them, he could obtain a search warrant for Thornfield’s house, hopefully finding evidence of the EPO, and he could dig into Jeffries’s financial

transactions to see where the money he'd won that day had gone.

He looked over at Alex. "We need to take this to Baxter. Let's gather everything we have on Thornfield and Jeffries, every scrap of evidence that ties them to Sam's Promise's death."

"Should I give him a call? See if we can set up a meeting?" Alex asked, looking up at Ryan with his bright, hopeful eyes. He was so fucking cute, like a lighthouse that kept drawing Ryan in.

"Go ahead." Ryan forced himself to step back from the warmth radiating off Alex. The case had to come first now. They were so close to solving it. He couldn't delay now and risk Jeffries and Thornfield getting away with it.

"Okay." Alex dialed the number on his cell phone. After a brief conversation, he hung up and turned to Ryan. "He's agreed to meet with us tomorrow morning at the station."

Tomorrow. Ryan blew out a breath. Maybe he could indulge himself in a little relaxing time with Alex tonight. "Good."

"We're getting close, right?"

"We are."

"It feels exciting."

"There's nothing like the thrill of solving a case."

Alex cocked his head, a devious grin on his face. "Nothing?"

"Almost nothing. Come here, baby boy. Let's make sure you have my load inside you when you go to bed tonight."

"You'd better let me come though. Josh and I won fair and square yesterday."

Ryan chuckled. "Not sure about the fair, considering his former profession, but you sure did win. I was proud of you."

"Yeah?"

Fuck, there was that softness again filling his insides. What the hell was going on? Alex was doing something to him, and Ryan wasn't sure he liked it. The problem was that the thought of putting a stop to it made it hard to breathe for reasons he preferred not to think about, so he'd have to learn to deal with it. "Yeah, I was. I am. You're..." He swallowed. "You're making me proud."

Hell hath frozen over.

They'd spent the day going over everything they had so they could present Detective Baxter with a comprehensive file. Hopefully, that would convince him of Marilyn's innocence and get him to make a move against Jeffries and Thornfield. Alex had had a hard time relaxing with this constant nervous buzz running through his system, and apparently, he'd not only been driving himself crazy but also Ryan, who had snapped at him to get it together. But then he'd grown softer and had suggested they do a scene to help Alex let go. He'd immediately agreed.

Their second scene. What did Ryan have in store for Alex this time? He didn't even care. All he wanted was to release the whirlwind of thoughts and emotions inside him and focus on nothing else but obeying Ryan. It came so easy, so natural.

Alex stepped into the dungeon, his heart racing with excitement, nervousness, and anticipation. The thrill of surrendering to Ryan was intoxicating.

Ryan stood near a table draped with a black tablecloth, the shapes underneath suggesting an array of mysterious items.

He locked eyes with Alex, his piercing brown gaze intense. "Are you ready for your second scene, baby boy?"

Funny how the name he'd hated so much when Ryan had started using it now had such a different meaning. It had become an affectionate pet name, devoid of the sarcasm Ryan had uttered it with in the beginning, though Alex wasn't sure if Ryan even realized that himself? The man was, softly put, not

the most self-aware. Denial was a thing for him, but Alex was patient.

“I am, Sir.”

Ryan crooked a finger, and Alex stepped close. “Remember your safewords and use them when needed.”

“I promise.”

Ryan brushed his cheek, then startled as if he realized what he'd done and straightened, dropping his hand. “Do you relinquish all control to me during this scene?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Close your eyes.”

Alex obeyed, taking a deep breath. His body hummed, aching for Ryan's touch and the sweet release of submission.

“Settle your breathing, baby boy. You're panting.”

He focused on the rhythm of his breathing, each breath slower and slower as he quelled the torrent of thoughts swirling in his mind. All he needed to do was stay present in the moment, trust Ryan, and embrace the sensations awaiting him.

“Mmm, that's better,” Ryan said, his voice like black velvet.

“Undress.”

As Alex took off his underwear, Ryan's predatory gaze swept over him like he wanted to devour him. Alex repressed a shiver, still not used to the sensation of being exposed. Being scrutinized was thrilling and unnerving, though Ryan's gaze held more than lust as he let his eyes roam over Alex's body, letting his gaze linger extra long on Alex's ass. It held a softness, a warmth that hadn't been there before.

“Follow me.” Alex stayed on Ryan's heels as he led him to a table. “Lie on your back.”

Alex climbed onto the table, and as soon as he'd positioned himself, Ryan approached, holding a few ropes. “Arms up.”

Without hesitation, Alex raised his arms above his head. Ryan expertly tied down his right hand, then his left. The smooth texture of the ropes contrasted with the rough calluses on Ryan's fingers grazing Alex's skin, and he shuddered. Alex focused on the sensation of the silk tightening around his wrists, his body tingling with a mixture of vulnerability and excitement. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath to center himself again.

His ankles came next, and then he was restrained.

"Gorgeous," Ryan said. His slow, thorough gaze felt like a physical touch, sending shivers down Alex's spine. "Close your eyes."

Ryan blindfolded him. Wasn't it crazy how everything became ten times more intense when he couldn't see? Every sound was harder, sharper, and he was aware of every cell in his body.

"Open your right hand for me."

He did, and something cold was pressed into his hand.

"I'm going to gag you, so if you want to safeword, drop this bell, okay?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Open wide."

As soon as he did, a ball gag was stuffed into his mouth. He was now tied down, blindfolded, and gagged. The only thing he had left was his hearing, and thank fuck Ryan hadn't taken that away from him as well. Holy shit, things were about to get intense. Alex's anticipation built like a wave cresting to break.

Fabric rustled. What did Ryan have prepared?

Oh, fuck! Cold, cold, cold. Ryan was rubbing an ice cube over Alex's nipples, and it hurt far more than he would've expected. Instinctively, he attempted to draw away from the cold, but he couldn't move, couldn't even protest with the gag in his mouth. The cold seeped into his skin, melting against the heat of his body. Water trickled down, tickling his side.

The cold disappeared, then returned. With deliberate slowness, Ryan traced an ice cube—the same one or a new one?—along the curve of Alex’s collarbone, droplets forming in its wake and dripping down his skin. He didn’t know what to do with the sensations. It hurt and tickled, but it also felt strangely good.

“Such a beautiful reaction,” Ryan murmured, smoothing the ice down Alex’s chest, past his belly button, then following his happy trail and...

Oh! Fuck, that felt... Ryan was now teasing Alex’s cock with ice. Did it hurt? Yeah, but it also felt good? Sort of? Alex wasn’t sure. It was confusing, almost as if not being able to see what was happening made it harder to process.

He was shivering as far as the ropes allowed him, his skin covered in goose bumps. His erection waned, and his balls shrank when Ryan held the ice against them.

A hot blob landed on his belly.

“Ngh!”

What the fuck was that? It burned, stung, and sizzled on his cold skin, heating it. Hot wax. He smelled it now and braced himself. Ryan was just getting st—

A drop hit his nipples.

Jesus fuck!

Fuck, fuck, fuck, that hurt!

Ryan trailed the hot wax over his chest, then traveled south. He wouldn’t dare to...

Oh, he did. Thick heat hit Alex’s cock, which hardened, much to his surprise. Wait, did he *like* this? But it didn’t feel good. Or did it? Fuck, he had no clue anymore. All the contradictory signals confused him. But his cock had a mind of its own, it seemed, growing harder with each drop of hot wax.

“If it’s too much, release the bell in your right hand,” Ryan instructed.

Too much? It was, but not like that. More mentally than physically, his mind trying to process and label everything he felt.

Something soft tickled his shoulder. A feather. It danced across his skin, but every brush seeped deep into his core, the sensations intensified because of his sensitized skin. He tried to focus on it, predicting where Ryan would move it next, but he had a hard time concentrating. His thoughts were becoming weightless, refusing to be directed and funneled. They wanted to drift free, roam wild.

He was panting around the ball gag and drooling like crazy. God, that couldn't be sexy, but he couldn't help it. The feather caressed his cock, and he jerked, straining against the ropes.

“So responsive...”

Sharp teeth dug into his skin, and his eyes crossed behind the blindfold. The pain clawed into his body, and it took his sluggish brain a few seconds to figure out what was happening. Ryan was using a Wartenberg pinwheel, rolling over his arms and his legs.

Fuck! Ryan boldly ran it over Alex's cock, and of course it grew even harder. Traitor. How could it? It hurt, yet his cock was all on board with the pain.

The feather came back, and Alex breathed a little easier. His relief was short-lived, however. Ryan was now using both implements, the feather and the pinwheel, following each other in a pursuit across Alex's body, driving him insane.

Then the ice was back, an almost welcome sting that cooled his heated skin. Oh, it felt good now. Not hurting anymore but soothing, refreshing.

Alex's thoughts drifted away like a cloud in a clear blue sky.

A soft cloth dried his skin. Velvet. Like a caress. It touched him everywhere, wrapping around his cock, giving it a few tugs. Huh, he was close to coming, and he hadn't even realized.

“You can’t come yet.” Ryan’s voice penetrated his mind as if coming from far, far away.

“Yes, Sir,” Alex said. But he had a gag in, so how could he talk? Maybe he had only thought it? It didn’t matter.

Ryan knew what he meant. Ryan always knew what Alex meant. Ryan was perfect. Ryan was—

Holy shit!

Fuck, what the hell was that? Ryan had wrapped a hand around Alex’s cock, but it was rough, grating against his skin. Almost like...

Sandpaper. Ryan was using sandpaper to jack Alex off. Alex gritted his teeth as tears burned in his eyes behind the blindfold, and his drifty state was gone, evaporated by this next-level torture. Why would he do that just when Alex was in his happy place?

Ryan chuckled lowly. “That got your attention, didn’t it, baby boy?”

It sure had. Bastard.

Wait. His cock was still hard? The cruel treatment hurt enough to make him cry, yet his cock was embracing it. How on earth did that make sense?

His whole body was on sensory overload, completely confused over the contrast between hot and cold, soft and rough, pain and pleasure. It was maddening.

“Don’t fight it, baby boy,” Ryan said softly. “Don’t try to figure it out. Just let your body decide. It knows what it wants.”

It did. Apparently, it wanted whatever the hell Ryan was dishing out.

Alex took a shuddering breath. His chin had become wet from his drool, and the blindfold was growing clammy by the second from his tears, even though it had stopped hurting. Or maybe it hadn’t, and he just wasn’t registering anything anymore. None of it made sense, but somehow, he found the

strength to do as Ryan had told him. He stopped thinking and surrendered, submitting wholly to the experience.

Alex's mind drifted again, wave after wave of pleasure and pain washing over him like an ocean with Ryan as his lifejacket. He synchronized his breaths with Ryan's, allowing the steady rhythm to anchor him as he gave himself over to the whirlwind of sensations. The room seemed to shrink around them as if all that existed was this space where Ryan took complete charge of his body and mind.

“Good boy,” Ryan whispered. “Such a good boy.”

Alex smiled. That was all that mattered, wasn't it? Nothing else was important except what Ryan said. What Ryan thought. What Ryan commanded him to do.

The last bit of resistance melted away, and he flew.

The silk ropes loosened, and his wrists were freed from their tight confines. The ball gag was removed, his chin cleaned with a wet wipe, and the blindfold came off. Alex blinked, but everything was still dark. Ryan must've turned down the lights. The air in the dungeon seemed to lighten, like a mist dissipating under the warmth of the sun.

“Come on, baby boy,” Ryan said, soft and gentle. He wrapped Alex in a soft blanket that enveloped his body like a warm embrace, then lifted him and carried him to the couch, where he sat, Alex draped against him.

“Drink a little.”

He drank from the water Ryan held up, sucking on the straw until he was too tired to take another sip.

“You did so good, baby boy. So good.”

The tenderness in Ryan's tone was a balm to Alex's frazzled senses, an oasis of calm after the storm of sensations he'd endured. But when he tried to speak, nothing came out.

“Hush, it's okay. You went deep, so it's gonna take you a while to recover. Take your time.”

He drifted between subspace and reality, his thoughts still hazy. As they lay entwined on the lounge chair, Ryan stroked

Alex's hair, each tender touch pulling him closer to the present. A warm cocoon of safety formed around them, shutting out the rest of the world.

Alex listened to the steady rhythm of Ryan's heartbeat, letting its cadence anchor him. Their breathing synchronized as the adrenaline ebbed, leaving behind a serene stillness. There was something profoundly comforting about being held by this man, who had seen him at his most vulnerable and had been there to guide him through it all. He'd never felt so connected to another person, so intimately bound by trust and surrender. This experience had been everything he'd hoped for and then some on his journey as a submissive.

"You back, baby boy?"

"Yes, Sir," Alex reluctantly replied, not wanting to break the spell of this intimate moment.

"Tell me how you're feeling right now."

"Grateful, Sir." Alex was choked with emotion. "Overwhelmed...in the best way."

"Mmm, good. You responded so beautifully. I've never had a sub like you. Your submission is so natural, so intuitive. It's a powerful experience for me as Dom."

"Not even Quinton?" Alex dared to ask.

Ryan was quiet for a long time, but he hadn't reacted in any other way, so Alex remained motionless. "Quinton was... He was submissive but in a different way. Far more bratty than you. Getting him to submit was a struggle at times. A fun one, not gonna lie, but I was a different Dom with him than I am with you. You make it so easy for me. All I want to do is make you fly."

Wait. "Did I come?"

Ryan chuckled lowly. "You did, and that you don't even remember tells me everything about how far gone you were. That's a heady responsibility, baby boy, but also an incredible joy."

“You made me feel safe,” Alex admitted without hesitation, his eyes fluttering closed. “Cherished, even. I never knew I could feel this way with someone.”

Again, Ryan was quiet for a long, long time, but just when Alex had given up hope he’d respond, Ryan whispered, “Neither did I.”

Ryan and Alex stepped out of their car, the sun glinting off the Saratoga police station's glass front door. A gust of wind tousled Ryan's hair as he pulled his coat collar up against the chill. The temps had dropped significantly the last week, and the first snow wouldn't be far off. Once that dreaded white stuff fell, he'd be longing for Texas winters. Maybe he could manage a trip there over the winter. He could even take Alex so he wouldn't have to interrupt his training as a sub. 'Cause somehow the thought of spending a week or two in Texas without Alex seemed...unappealing.

Ryan wasn't sure when he'd grown attached to Alex, but he had. The scene they'd done the evening before had only cemented that. Jesus, the way the boy had submitted, completely surrendering without holding anything back. Was there a more heady feeling for a Dom? And a bigger compliment? It showed the depths of Alex's trust in Ryan—a trust he wouldn't betray.

Ryan had made clear to everyone else in the house that Alex was off-limits to them—at least for now. In the future, that might change, but Ryan wanted to train Alex a bit more before allowing others to use him. When he'd told Alex, the cheeky shit had asked Ryan if that rule applied to Ryan as well. He'd easily agreed since he hadn't been with anyone but Alex for a while now...though he hadn't even done that consciously. Weird.

He glanced over at Alex, who seemed unfazed by the cold, his sunny disposition shining through whatever the weather.

“Ready for this?”

“Absolutely,” Alex replied with a confident smile. “We’ve got some solid leads to share, and I have to believe he’ll take them seriously.”

“Let’s hope Baxter’s in a listening mood.” Ryan strode toward the entrance with Alex close behind.

As they entered the station, Detective Baxter stood waiting for them, leaning against the front desk with a steaming cup of coffee.

“Detective Baxter.” Ryan didn’t think they needed to shake hands again, and Baxter seemed to agree, making no moves either.

“Mason, Beck, good to see you both. Let’s talk in my office.”

They trailed behind Baxter, passing desks cluttered with paperwork and computers with screensavers displaying family photos or sports logos. Stacks of case files were still piled on every available surface in Baxter’s cramped office. The detective cleared a couple of chairs for them, setting aside papers that threatened to avalanche to the floor. “New cabinets still haven’t arrived. It’s a pain in the ass.”

Ryan would go insane if he had to work in chaos like that. “I can imagine.”

Ryan and Alex settled into the chairs across from Detective Baxter’s desk, the worn leather creaking under their weight.

Baxter sat and took a sip of his coffee. “I assume you had a reason for wanting to talk to me?”

“Damn right we do,” Ryan said. “Our investigation has turned up some interesting connections.”

“Talk to me.”

Ryan had been on the other side of this situation plenty of times, and he knew how important it was to present a solid case. That was why he and Alex had prepared a comprehensive file for Baxter, in which they had laid out

everything they had found. But he'd give him the highlights first. "Have you come across Charles Jeffries in your investigation?"

"Name vaguely rings a bell, but fill me in."

"Marilyn Vandervliet reported him for animal abuse last year. As a result, he lost a lucrative syndication deal and ran into financial problems."

"You think he wanted revenge?"

"Exactly." Ryan leaned forward. "We think he used a vet named Victor Thornfield to get access to Sam's Promise. Thornfield allegedly has a gambling habit and has lost a lot of money, which landed him in financial trouble as well. And since he was working for Jeffries when that complaint for animal abuse was filed, his reputation took a nose dive. He lost some big-name clients."

"I recognize Thornfield as one of the people who had backstage access," Baxter said, putting his coffee down.

"We have a witness who saw the two of them together when Jeffries cashed his bets. He won big betting against Sam's Promise."

Baxter quirked an eyebrow. "How big?"

"Our source said it was one of the biggest sums he'd ever paid out."

"It doesn't show up on the list of bets. A sum like that would've caught my attention."

"He placed multiple bets, either himself or through others, but he cashed them at the same time. Our source remembered him, since he'd been a regular. And, of course, he could've used that money to pay Thornfield."

Baxter turned to his computer screen and tapped a few keys. "He never made it onto my radar. I see from my notes that I've come across his name in the investigation, but he was never a suspect. How'd you find him?"

"Alex had the idea that the case might be related to Marilyn's outspoken stance on animal rights, so we combed

through the reports filed with the NYRA last year and focused on the ones mentioning her name. That's how we found Jeffries. He was at the track that day. We identified him in the footage."

"Ballsy," Baxter said. "Showing up at the scene of the crime. That proves he's either confident enough not to get caught or stupid. Maybe both."

"Jeffries had motive, means, and opportunity," Ryan said. "Thornfield would've had access to the EPO and Sam's Promise before the race."

Baxter nodded. "I agree. Your timing is interesting, as the DA has returned the case to us due to a lack of evidence against Ms. Vandervliet. At this point, they're not prosecuting her."

Ryan repressed a triumphant smirk and glanced over at Alex, whose face lit up, then back at Baxter. "That's because she's innocent."

Baxter snorted. "You're allowed to say 'I told you so' because you did."

"I'm not interested in playing games for the sake of being right. All I want is justice for Marilyn and for her horse. You have tools at your disposal we don't, like the ability to check for financial transactions between Jeffries and Thornfield."

"You think they'd be stupid enough to send a payment like that?"

Ryan shrugged. "They were stupid enough to show up at the scene, Jeffries especially. And Dr. Simmons said the amount of EPO was ridiculously high. So high that anyone with two brain cells would've known it would kill Sam's Promise and not merely boost his performance."

"That was one of the reasons the DA sent the case back to me. She didn't like that either. Said it made no sense for someone with Ms. Vandervliet's experience to use that much. She said it either had to be a mistake made by someone else or a deliberate dose to kill the horse. I argued that Ms.

Vandervliet had done it herself, but the DA disagreed...and I have to admit my evidence was weak.”

Wow, there was a first time for everything, wasn't there? Ryan rarely encountered cops who admitted they'd been wrong, but he had now. “It's to your credit you admit that.”

“Look,” Baxter said, “I never liked Ms. Vandervliet as a suspect, but my boss was convinced it was her. He's tight with some hotshots in the NYRA and at the racecourse, so I had my orders.”

“Gotcha. I've been in similar situations, and it sucks.”

“Sure does.” He took a deep breath. “I'll cross my t's and dot my i's by digging into the truth of that animal abuse report Ms. Vandervliet made against Jeffries and how that affected him, since that would establish motive.”

“That would be a good start,” Ryan agreed.

“And I need to check the security footage from that day again and see if Thornfield was near Sam's Promise at any time. We reviewed it before and didn't see anything suspicious, but we didn't know to look for him, so hopefully, we'll be able to see more now.”

Ryan nodded.

Baxter jotted something down on a notepad. “We can also confirm Jeffries's betting activities, since that area has cameras. We should be able to see if he's cashing multiple tickets.”

“Yup, and once you have that evidence, it should be enough to convince the judge to get a warrant for both their financial records and, in Thornfield's case, his purchases as a vet. He must've bought the EPO, either legally or illegally, so that should somehow show up in his records.”

Baxter wrote some more down, then leaned back and steepled his fingers. The overhead light cast a harsh glow over his features, emphasizing the lines of concentration etched into his brow. “The money problems they had should be easy enough to confirm if you were already able to do that, and a payment from Jeffries to Thornfield should stand out.”

Ryan held out the file they had put together. “Here’s everything we’ve found on Jeffries and Baxter. I know you’ll need to confirm it, but it’ll give you a solid head start.”

Baxter took it and flipped through it. “Thank you. Looks like you did a thorough job.”

“Alex compiled the file,” Ryan said, which earned him a huge smile from Alex.

Baxter’s mouth pulled up in the corners as well. “Looks like Alex has a talent for this job then.”

“He sure does.” Ryan’s heart swelled with pride, one of the many new emotions he was experiencing lately.

“I’ll start digging.” Baxter narrowed his eyes. “If you find anything new, keep me updated, and I’ll do my best to follow up on it.” His gaze flicked to Alex, then back to Ryan. “But remember, this is still an open police investigation. Don’t do anything reckless or illegal. Got it?”

“Understood.”

“Good.” Baxter stood, signaling the end of the meeting. “I’ll be in touch if anything comes up on my end. And like I said, you do the same.”

“Will do.”

“Appreciate your time, Detective.” The chaos in Baxter’s office was getting to Ryan, and he was eager to escape the police station.

“Thank you, sir,” Alex said.

Detective Baxter gave a curt nod, then turned back to his cluttered desk.

The moment they stepped out of the office, Ryan breathed out with relief. “All right, baby boy, let’s get the hell out of here,” Ryan said. Alex fell into step beside him as he strode down the corridor. The fluorescent lights overhead flickered, casting eerie shadows on the linoleum floor.

As they pushed through the heavy double doors leading to the parking lot, the bright afternoon sun momentarily blinded

him. Squinting against the harsh light, Ryan took a moment to inhale the crisp air.

“What’s next for us?” Alex asked as they walked back to the car.

“We keep digging. We’ve got a hell of a lot riding on this, and we can’t just sit back and twiddle our thumbs while the cops do their thing. We can talk to Marilyn again, ask her if she has any information on Jeffries and Thornfield, and hit up the contacts we already talked to and see what they can add. There’s bound to be something that can help us connect the dots even more.”

“Works for me.”

They got into the car and turned to each other. “But remember, we’ve gotta tread carefully. We don’t want to tip them off that we’re onto them,” Ryan said.

“We’ll be smart about it.”

Ryan shifted the car into Drive and pulled out of the parking lot. “Damn right, we will.”

Alex was antsy. Restless.

It had been three days since they'd talked to Baxter, and while they'd been busy tracking down anything they could find on Jeffries and Thornfield, the case wasn't consuming Alex the way it had before. They knew who'd killed Sam's Promise, and it was torture to have to wait for the cops to catch up.

They'd talked to Marilyn again, and she'd confirmed knowing both Jeffries and Thornfield and had been shocked when they had told her they suspected them of being the culprits. Luckily, Sam had been with her, so she'd had someone to lean on. They'd promised to let her know as soon as they heard something. But how long that would take was anyone's guess.

"You getting bored, baby boy?"

Alex looked up and found Ryan studying him with a grin. "Yeah, sorry."

"I feel ya. I hate being in limbo as well. Wanna get out of here?"

"Hell, yes. Where?"

Ryan looked away, clearing his throat. "Jesse mentioned a state park nearby called Lake Moreau that's supposed to be nice. It's about a half-hour drive. I guess it would've been prettier in the early fall with all the colors changing, but supposedly, you can do a nice walk around the lake. And from

atop one of the mountains, you can see all the way to Vermont on a clear day. Anyway, I was thinking we could maybe head there. I dunno. Go for a walk? We could even climb that mountain if you want.”

Alex blinked. Ryan never rambled. Ever. “You want to go for a walk?”

“Yeah.” Ryan got up from his chair, shoving his hands into his pockets. “If you want to. Or we could go for a drive or something. Whatever you want.”

“Whatever I want,” Alex repeated slowly. Who was this stranger, and where had the grumpy Ryan he knew gone?

“Yeah.”

Alex had no clue what was happening, but he wasn’t about to turn down an offer like this. “That park sounds good.”

A smile spread across Ryan’s face. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. Just need to change.”

“Me too. I’ll meet you at the car in five.”

“You guys heading out?” Wander asked when Alex ran into him as he was storming down the stairs again after having changed.

“We’re going to Lake Moreau.”

“Lake Moreau? To do what?”

“Enjoy the scenery.”

“Wait, hold up. Ryan is taking you to Lake Moreau?”

“Yeah.”

Wander shook his head. “I’ll be goddamned.”

Alex shrugged. “I don’t know where this came from either, but I’ve learned not to ask too many questions.”

Wander patted his shoulder. “That’s smart. Have fun.”

Alex and Ryan chatted on the way over, which was a simple drive north on the Northway. They parked at the

entrance and grabbed a paper trail map from the ranger's office. "Which trail do you wanna take?" Ryan asked.

"If you're game, let's head up to that overlook point. It should be pretty clear out, so we should have a nice view."

"Sounds good."

They both carried a small backpack with some emergency supplies, food, and, of course, water. With temps hovering in the forties, they wouldn't sweat their asses off, but extra water was always a good idea, even in a park with natural water sources.

The narrow trail started at the parking lot and wound through a forest that smelled wet and green. The huge piles of rotting leaves covering the forest floor and the various half-overgrown toppled trees were a sure sign they used a hands-off approach and let nature do its thing.

"I wonder if there's any wildlife here," Ryan said as they took a breather and drank some water.

"Black bears, maybe? They have them in the Adirondacks Park, which is just north of here."

"Bears? Aren't they hibernating yet?"

"They'll head to their holes around this time, so if there's one lurking around, it'll be fat and not very hungry."

"A fat bear. Great. Just what I was hoping to encounter."

Alex chuckled. "You don't like bears?"

"Not my type," Ryan said dryly. "I'm more into sexy things like you. So why don't you take the lead so I can watch your ass?"

Alex grinned as he set off again, and when he looked over his shoulder, Ryan's eyes were indeed glued to his ass.

After a few minutes, the trail widened enough to walk side by side. Every now and then, they caught a glimpse of the lake through the trees, the sun reflecting off the blue water. They'd picked a perfect day to go for a scenic hike.

“Does Wander have a next assignment lined up yet that you know?” Alex asked.

“Not sure. I think he may be headed back to Boston for a while.”

“Boston? Why?”

“Something’s up with his brother. He’s a DA there, and Wander mentioned he was in some kind of trouble. Wouldn’t surprise me if he pulled us all to protect his brother.”

Boston. That could be nice for a change. Alex had never been there. “I hear it’s a nice city.”

Ryan snorted. “Not in the winter, baby boy. We’ll be shoveling snow for months on end.”

“I don’t mind snow.”

“No? I’d think you’d hate it after spending so much time in Hawaii.”

“Nah, not really. As much as I loved Hawaii, there’s something to be said for having four distinct seasons.”

“I’m fine with three seasons. We can skip winter as far as I’m concerned.”

They had to step from rock to rock now, careful not to slip on the wet and mossy surface. The path had grown muddy, but Alex’s waterproof boots had no issue with the soggy ground. They passed a few hikers on the way up, all coming down with big smiles.

“We should be almost there.” Alex panted a little from the exertion. “Look how high up we are.”

“The view had better be good for the effort we put in.”

Oh my god, Ryan was so adorable when he was grumpy. He could moan and bitch with the best of them, but Alex knew underneath beat a tender heart, and he found it more amusing than anything else. It was cute, and it only made him love Ryan even more.

Wait, what? He tripped over his feet but steadied himself with fast reflexes, saving him from falling.

“Careful, baby boy. Don’t want to have to carry you down this mountain.”

He cleared his throat. “Yeah. Sorry.”

“You okay? You look as if something spooked you.”

Spooked? That wasn’t the right word. More like shocked. How had he not realized he’d fallen in love with Ryan? All the signs had been there, but he’d been blind to them, maybe on purpose. Because what good could come from this when Ryan would never see him the same way? Ugh, he cared for Alex, that much he was convinced of. He’d become more than a fuck toy for Ryan. But the gap between fuck toy and love was wide, and it would never be bridged.

“I’m fine. Lost in thought for a moment.”

Ryan studied him for a beat more, then shrugged. “Okay.”

Shit, what did he do now? Could he continue the way they had, pretending nothing had changed? What choice did he have? Telling Ryan how he felt was a surefire recipe for disaster, with the potential for Ryan breaking off things between them. No, he couldn’t risk that. And what reason would he have for telling him when he knew it could only change things for the worse? Pretending was easier. Safer. And it wasn’t like he needed to try to protect himself from the emotional pain when things would inevitably end. Too late for that.

“Look.” Ryan pointed ahead. “That’s gotta be the summit.”

Alex shook his head, refocusing. “Yay, we’re almost there.”

A minute later, they stood side by side, taking in the vista in front of them. Far below them was Lake Moreau, a tiny blue puddle from this height, surrounded by forests. As far as they could see, mountains stretched out into the distance, most of them with white caps. The higher elevations had already gotten the first snow, then, which didn’t surprise Alex.

“Damn, this view is pretty spectacular,” Ryan said. “Though I’m not sure which way is Vermont.”

Alex grabbed the compass he had clipped to the strap of his backpack and checked their bearings. “We’re looking straight east, so to the northeast is Vermont and the White Mountains, and to the southeast should be New Hampshire and the Green Mountains. We can’t see in that direction, but to the north, straight to our left, is Lake George.”

“Damn.” Ryan did a slow pan from left to right. “Never knew New York was this beautiful.”

Alex grinned. “You’re genetically wired to dislike anything other than Texas.”

“True, true. But I gotta admit this is impressive.”

They sat on a rock, so close their shoulders almost touched, and Alex dug into his backpack, pulled out some meal bars, and handed one to Ryan. “Here.”

“Thank you, baby boy.”

“I’ve always wondered why you started calling me that.”

“What, baby boy?”

“Yeah.”

Ryan shrugged. “Because it pissed you off. You had this whole innocent look of a sugar baby looking for a Daddy.”

“A Daddy? Not quite my kink, but thank you. Also, I’m very much not a sugar baby.”

“Yeah, so I’ve noticed. I had you pegged wrong.”

Alex quirked an eyebrow. “Did I hear that correctly? Did you just admit you were wrong? The great, infallible Ryan Mason admits he’s wrong?”

Ryan shot him a dark look. “Don’t be an asshole about it, okay? Or I’ll figure out some fitting punishments.”

“Oh, are you gonna spank me if I’m bad, Daddy?” Alex teased him.

“Jesus, I should’ve kept my mouth shut.”

“Yup, you’ve awakened the brat in me.”

“We’ll see how long that lasts when I smack my crop on your ass, boy.”

Ryan’s threatening tone sank its claws deep into Alex. Images flooded his brain. How pretty his ass had looked with Ryan’s marks on it. How amazing it had felt when Ryan had fucked him when he’d still been red and hot from the crop. How proud he’d been to bear his marks. Hell, his cock hardened, and how ridiculous was that?

He swallowed. “If that was meant as a deterrent, it didn’t work.”

Ryan’s mouth curled up. “No? You like the idea of me reddening your ass again?”

“Yeah, I do. I really do.”

“I can make that happen. Tonight. If you’re a good boy today.”

Now, see, that was far more effective, using it as a possible reward instead of a punishment. Ryan had his number, didn’t he? “Okay.”

They sat munching on their meal bars.

“If we’re heading to Boston, are you coming with us?” Alex asked.

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“Cause you hate the snow?”

“I’d have snow here as well, baby boy. Not much difference. Why?”

Why? How about because the thought of Ryan leaving was making it hard to breathe? “I wouldn’t want to have to get used to a new Dom.”

“You like me as a Dom?”

What kind of question was that? “I chose you, didn’t I?”

“Yeah, over fucking Master Mark. Not exactly a contest, was it?”

“He’s a good Dom.”

“I’m sure he is, but he wasn’t right for you, baby boy.”

No, he hadn’t been, but for different reasons than Ryan thought, probably. “I like working with you. As my Dom, I mean. Though I also like working with you on the job. I learned a lot these last weeks.”

“Yeah?” Ryan sat up a little straighter.

“For sure. I’m hoping I can assist again on the next case.”

“I’d be okay with that. I liked having you around. More than I had expected. You did good.”

Alex bumped Ryan’s shoulder. “Be still my beating heart. An apology and a compliment within five minutes? Where’s my grumpy, gruff Ryan?”

“I don’t know. Being around you has had a strange effect on me. As if that sunshine attitude of yours is contagious.”

What did Ryan mean by that? Was it a compliment or...? “Is that a bad thing?”

Ryan was quiet for a long time. Had Alex said something wrong? Shouldn’t he have asked that? But why not? It couldn’t be that sensitive for Ryan, right?

“No, it’s not a bad thing,” Ryan finally said, his voice soft. “It’s just...” Another long pause. “Things are changing, and I don’t know how I feel about that. I’m not myself anymore, but then again, maybe I never was. I don’t know.”

None of that made sense, but Alex was reluctant to ask questions. What if he dug too deep and Ryan closed himself off again? But he also didn’t want to pretend Ryan hadn’t said anything. “Are you okay with it?”

“Surprisingly so. I think...” A deep sigh. “I haven’t been myself in a long time, not even when I was with Quinton. I was so scared my coworkers would find out I was gay that I hid that part of myself, as well as my Dominant side. Only Quinton got to see that. And then after he died...I changed. Something broke in me, or maybe it died, and I wasn’t the same. But that man also wasn’t who I am. And now... Yet another version of me is emerging, and I barely recognize

myself.” He looked sideways at Alex. “It’s you. Your sunshiny disposition is rubbing off on me. It’s damn hard to be grumpy and dark when you’re exposed to pure joy and sunshine all day.”

Pure joy and sunshine. That didn’t sound like Ryan minded at all. In fact, that sounded like... “Thank you. I think that’s one of the sweetest things anyone has ever said to me.”

“Then you’re hanging out with the wrong people. You’re precious, baby boy, and don’t make me repeat it, ‘cause I might gag.”

Despite everything, Alex laughed. “Duly noted. But thank you. Coming from you, it means a lot.”

Ryan put his hand on Alex’s knee. “Don’t ever let me bring you down, okay? I don’t want to find out I dragged you into my darkness.”

Alex leaned sideways and put his head on Ryan’s shoulder. A fire had been lit inside him that wouldn’t be doused anytime soon. “Don’t you worry about that. Not a chance in hell.”

“You’re saying you’re immune to me?”

“Not to you. Not by a long shot. But your darkness? It doesn’t threaten me or scare me. I like you just the way you are, Ryan.”

“Good.” Ryan’s voice cracked as he pressed his cheek against Alex’s head. “That’s good.”

When the phone rang and the caller ID popped up on the screen, Ryan's heart skipped a beat. "It's Baxter," he mouthed at Alex, then picked up and put it on speaker. "Mason. I have you on speaker so Alex can listen in."

"Detective Baxter here. I have some good news for you and your partner."

"Hit me with it." Ryan held his breath. No matter how many cases he'd closed, this part never got old.

"We found the proverbial smoking gun that links Jeffries and Thornfield to the murder of Sam's Promise. Several, in fact."

Alex pumped his fist, and Ryan let out the air in a long *whoosh*. They had them. "What did you find?"

"You were right about Jeffries landing in financial trouble after that report on animal abuse Ms. Vandervliet filed. Jeffries was set to sell that horse for half a million, so he was furious. We have several witnesses who can testify to his rage and him threatening Ms. Vandervliet." Baxter sighed. "The man's not the sharpest tool in the shed. He even hired a lawyer to sue her for slander."

Ryan snorted. "That's gonna be hard to prove when her allegations were found to be true."

"Yeah, no kidding. It turns out that about ten years ago, one of Jeffries's horses got caught after a race with EPO in his system. Jeffries maintained he had no clue how that had

happened and threw his vet under the bus. She got a slap on the wrist, he got a monetary fine, and that was that.”

“That may be where he got the idea,” Ryan said.

“Could be. Anyway, Jeffries was near bankruptcy after Ms. Vandervliet’s claim. Thornfield wasn’t doing much better, though, in his case, because of an expensive gambling addiction that had already cost him his marriage. He, too, was getting desperate, so when Jeffries offered him two hundred thousand to kill that horse, he took it.”

Ryan whistled. “Two hundred thousand? That’s a lot of money if you’re destitute.”

“Jeffries made Thornfield an offer he couldn’t refuse, to use Don Corleone.”

“You found proof of the payments?”

“No, he was smart enough to pay him cash...but dumb enough to have Thornfield with him when he cashed his winnings. From what we can tell, Jeffries made seven bets in total, all through different people, and Thornfield was one of them. But the idiot cashed them all himself that same day, which stood out. We talked to Clyde Watson, who confirmed he was your source as well. Everything he said checked out. Jeffries won close to seven hundred thousand dollars that day.”

“Holy shit!” Alex whispered, then slapped his hand over his mouth. He was so adorable.

“Thornfield ordered EPO four times in the last three months. Each of them was a low legal dose, but combined, it was enough to kill Sam’s Promise.”

“So they planned this,” Ryan concluded.

“Well in advance. We’ve got the warrant from the judge, so we’re on our way to pay Thornfield a visit first, then headed straight to Jeffries. But I wanted to give you a heads-up.”

“Thank you, Detective. That means a lot.”

“Don’t thank me. You’re the ones who cracked the case.”

“Can we inform our client?”

“Yeah, as long as she doesn’t spread the word. Then again, two hours from now, none of it will matter anymore because we’ll have executed our warrants and have all the evidence we need.”

“We’ll make sure to mention that. Again, Detective, thank you for all you’ve done to solve the case.”

“No problem. Justice will be served, and any day that happens is a good day in my book.”

They ended the call, and as soon as he’d put the phone down, Alex jumped into his arms. Ryan barely had time to brace himself, then wrapped his arms around him and held him close. “We did it, baby boy.”

“I can’t believe we solved the case,” Alex whispered into his ear. “What a rush.”

Ryan leaned back and met his eyes. “You know what’s even better?”

“That we get to tell Marilyn?”

“That we get to tell Marilyn. Come on, let’s go.”

“Should we call her?”

“Nah, let’s surprise her with the good news.”

As they stepped outside, flurries of dreamy snowflakes drifted down. “I think it’s pretty,” Alex said.

Ryan looked around. The snow wouldn’t stay, as the ground wasn’t cold enough yet, but Alex was right. It was kinda pretty, especially on the trees. “Before you know it, we’ll have a winter wonderland.”

Alex looked at him funny, then got into the car, heading for Marilyn’s farm. They chatted on the way over, discussing all kinds of things ranging from football—Ryan was a Texans fan while Alex cheered for the Patriots, for fuck’s sake, something Ryan intended to correct—to Alaska in the winter, Texas longhorns, and more. Ryan was always surprised by how easy conversations with Alex were. The kid had broad interests and an insatiable curiosity, always asking questions. Ryan didn’t mind answering, not even when Alex asked about his

experiences as a detective in Austin. Funnily enough, the memories didn't hurt as bad as they used to.

"I think this news will be bittersweet for Marilyn," Alex said when Ryan was slowly navigating the winding country roads leading to Marilyn's place. "I'm sure she'll be relieved to find out she's no longer a suspect, but it's gotta be hard finding out someone hates you so much they'd do something this awful."

"From experience, I can tell you that victims always appreciate the closure it brings when the perp is caught. It doesn't fix anything or take away the pain of their loss, but it does bring closure, and without it, people often can't move on."

"Did they catch the guy who killed Quinton?"

Ryan swallowed. He loved how easily Alex mentioned Quinton's name, unlike most people who knew what had happened. They all walked on eggshells, and maybe with reason. Ryan had blown up for a long time whenever someone had brought his boyfriend up, but Alex seemed fearless. And it felt good to hear Quinton's name mentioned, to no longer erase him from Ryan's life like he'd done himself.

"Yeah, we did. He was sentenced to life in prison."

Alex put his hand on Ryan's thigh. "That doesn't bring Quinton back."

"No, but justice was served, and it matters. I don't take pleasure in putting people away, but with him, I didn't have a moment of doubt or concern. He deserved every day he got." Ryan took a calming breath. "And thank you for asking. That, too, matters."

He turned onto the narrow road leading to Marilyn's house. As soon as they rounded the corner, majestic oaks greeted them, their bare branches like skeletons against the gray sky. The horses had been brought inside from the icy green fields dotted with white. Thoroughbreds were not built for the cold winters here, though Marilyn had said they went

outside sometimes in the winter but were covered with warm blankets.

In the distance, the elegant white farmhouse stood proud, its wraparound porch adorned with rocking chairs that swayed in the wind. Marilyn's red pickup truck was parked next to the house, and Ryan recognized the dark-blue truck as Sam's. But who did the white Silverado belong to?

He took his foot off the gas. Something felt off, but he couldn't pinpoint what.

"What's wrong?" Alex asked.

"Whose truck is that?"

"The white one? No idea. Maybe one of Marilyn's employees?"

"They wouldn't park next to the house. She has an extra lot behind the stalls."

"She could have friends over."

Ryan slowed down even more. "The front door is ajar. Something's wrong."

"That is weird, I agree."

He parked the truck alongside the road. "Let's check it out."

They both got out of the truck, guns drawn. "If we come from this way, we can't be seen from the house." Ryan pointed at the stalls. It would take them longer to get there, but he wasn't risking getting spotted. They ran to the stalls, their footsteps silent on the snowy grass, then took cover behind the building.

No one was outside, and a quick check confirmed none of the windows in the main house looked out on this side of the farm. He gestured at Alex, who stayed on his heels as they snuck past the stalls and approached the house. An eerie silence hung in the air like a malevolent fog, and his instincts kicked in.

He cautiously moved toward the porch, motioning for Alex to follow. As they got closer, the muffled sound of raised voices reached their ears. Ryan peered through the cracked door, and his heart skipped a beat. Jeffries was holding Marilyn and Sam at gunpoint, his face twisted with rage. “I will fucking kill you, you fucking bitch!”

Shit.

He turned to Alex and made the gesture of making a call. “Nine-one-one,” he mouthed.

Alex nodded and ran back to the stalls. Smart. That way, he’d be out of hearing range. But would the cops get here fast enough? Ballston Spa fell under the Saratoga County Sheriff, not the Saratoga Police. They had a station in the charming little town of Ballston Spa, but how quickly would they get here? Ryan didn’t doubt Alex would convey the urgency of the situation, but for all they knew, the nearest deputy could be a fifteen-minute drive away. Did Marilyn and Sam have that much time? Jeffries had bound their hands, and they were defenseless against him.

He had to try and talk Jeffries down. The man was too agitated, getting more and more wound up. Maybe he was high on something? It wouldn’t surprise Ryan. But he’d never forgive himself if something happened to Marilyn and Sam while he stood here, waiting for the cops to arrive. No, he had to see what he could do. And he didn’t have the time to wait for Alex.

Taking a deep breath, Ryan steeled himself for the confrontation ahead. The stakes were high, and every second counted. He stepped forward and pushed open the door. “Let them go, Jeffries,” he called out, trying to draw the man’s attention away from Marilyn and Sam. “You don’t want to add any more mistakes to the ones you’ve already made.”

Jeffries spun around but kept his gun trained on Marilyn and Sam. Dammit. “Who the fuck are you?” His gaze fell on the gun Ryan aimed at him. “Oh, wait, you must be that PI who’s been going around asking everyone these fucking questions.”

If Jeffries already knew, Ryan saw no reason to deny it. “Yup, that’s me. Ryan Mason, former homicide detective from Austin.”

“Austin? You shoulda stayed in Texas, asshole, and minded your own business.”

The air in the room was thick with tension, the acrid smell of sweat and fear filling Ryan’s nostrils. Every muscle in his body was tensed, ready to spring into action at a split second’s notice. He had to be careful though. One wrong move could spell disaster for Marilyn and Sam. “Yeah, well, that ship has sailed. I’m here now, and I’m a witness to whatever desperate plan you’re trying to execute, Jeffries. The cops are on their way. Put down the gun, or this will end badly.”

“Shut the hell up!” Jeffries snarled, his eyes wild as he grabbed Sam by the shoulder, yanked him in front of him, and pressed the gun against Sam’s temple. “You think you can just waltz in here and tell me what to do? You know nothing!”

“Jeffries, listen to me.” Ryan forced himself to remain calm despite the pounding of his heart. “Killing Sam or Marilyn won’t solve anything. It’ll only make your situation worse.”

“Like I give a damn!” Drops of spit flew from Jeffries’ mouth. “This is all her fault. If the stupid cunt hadn’t stuck her nose where it didn’t belong, none of this would’ve happened.”

Desperate fear filled Sam’s eyes, and Marilyn trembled, her face pale as a ghost. The weight of their lives rested on Ryan’s shoulders, and he couldn’t afford any missteps. His first goal was to buy time. “Look, we can work this out. Just let them go, and we can talk about it.”

“Too late for that,” Jeffries growled, his finger twitching on the trigger. Ryan’s stomach churned. Nothing he said seemed to have any effect other than making Jeffries angrier. If Jeffries wasn’t willing to talk now, how would he respond when the cops showed up? His words slid off Jeffries like the man was made of Teflon. He wasn’t getting through to him, and he was running out of options.

“You’ll go away for murder,” he said. “Is that what you want? To spend the rest of your life in prison?”

“I’m going to prison anyway because of you, so I might as well take my revenge while I have the opportunity.”

“You’ll get maybe ten years for killing Sam’s Promise, but if you kill any of us, you’ll be there for life. Is that really worth it?”

“At least I won’t be the only one suffering.”

Ryan caught movement behind Jeffries through the windows. The cops? No, Alex. He stood there, gun in hand, meeting Ryan’s eyes. Waiting. Waiting for Ryan to give the “go” signal.

Shit. Alex was the only one who could take Jeffries out, but not while the man had Sam in front of him. If Alex took the shot now, he’d hit Sam as well. Ryan needed to turn Jeffries just a little. Not so much he’d spot Alex, but enough for Alex to have a better angle. He wouldn’t miss. Ryan didn’t have any doubt about that, not after what he’d seen at the shooting range.

“I understand how angry you are,” Ryan said placatingly, taking a small step sideways. “Trust me, I do.”

“What the fuck do you know?”

Another small step. More of a shuffle, really, and Jeffries didn’t seem to notice. “Maybe I don’t. Maybe you’re right, and I have no clue what’s going through your mind. So tell me.”

“You want to know what’s going through my mind?” Jeffries moved his hand away from Sam’s temple. “I’m furious. Enraged. More pissed off than I’ve ever been in my life.”

Ryan inched a bit farther sideways. “Because you lost all that money.”

“Because thanks to that cunt”—he gestured at Marilyn with the gun—“I lost everything.”

Almost there. One more step. “And you had it all recouped with your winnings, betting against Sam’s Promise.”

Jeffries frowned. Was he picking up on the fact that Ryan had moved? But then he did what most humans did without thinking about it. He angled his body toward Ryan as he addressed him, turning sideways just enough. And he had the gun trained at the floor, still gesturing wildly with his other hand. “I had it planned perfectly. One race. One race was all I needed to get back into the game. But you had to ruin it, didn’t you?” He pointed at Marilyn. “You just couldn’t keep your fucking nose out of my fucking business.”

His hand moved upward, and Ryan’s breath hitched in his lungs. Now. He nodded at Alex.

Bam! Bam! Bam!

Three shots were fired in rapid succession, and Ryan dove for Sam, dragging him out of harm’s way. They fell onto the floor, Ryan’s elbow taking the brunt, and he grunted in pain. Marilyn screamed, the cry mingling with a shout from Sam and a dull, loud thud as Jeffries’s heavy body hit the floor.

Silence. The acrid scent of gunpowder lingered, and Ryan’s ears rang.

Ryan looked up, straight into the lifeless eyes of Jeffries. Alex had taken him out with clean shots. It was over.

“Sam!” Marilyn sagged onto the floor, and Ryan let go of Sam, who crawled over to Marilyn. They sat on the floor, awkwardly leaning into each other with their hands still bound, crying. Ryan scrambled to his feet. Jesus, his elbow hurt. But if that was the worst...

Alex stormed into the room, gun still in hand. “He’s dead,” Ryan said, his voice flat.

Alex put his gun away, wrapped his arms around Ryan, and hugged him. “I was so scared,” he whispered.

“I wasn’t. I knew you’d make the shot.” Still, Ryan clung to him, taking a couple of deep breaths as his adrenaline came down.

He let go and kissed Alex hard. “You saved lives today, baby boy. You did good. You made me so proud.”

He used his pocketknife to cut the ties around Marilyn’s hands, then freed Sam. They fell into each other’s arms, tears still flowing freely. No wonder. That had been an awfully close call.

Tires crunched on the gravel. The cops were here. “Let’s step outside and, to be sure, keep our hands up. We don’t know if these cops will recognize us as the good guys right away.”

They didn’t, and honestly, Ryan was glad. He’d seen cops get killed for making the wrong judgment in similar situations. The cops handcuffed them, but when Marilyn and Sam came out and explained, the cops released them, apologizing.

“All good.” Ryan shook the deputy’s hand. “Glad you guys took this seriously.”

The cops headed inside, and Ryan and Alex stayed outside with Marilyn and Sam. Tears streamed down Marilyn’s cheeks, and her voice was shaky as she spoke. “Thank you, both of you. I don’t know what would’ve happened if you hadn’t shown up when you did.”

Sam, his arm protectively around Marilyn’s shoulders, nodded in agreement as his eyes welled with tears as well. “You two are heroes.”

“We’re grateful we were here in time to prevent a tragedy,” Alex said, and Ryan couldn’t have put it better himself.

It took a while for the cops to take their statements, collect evidence, and announce they were free to go. By that time, Ryan was drained, and Alex looked like he could keel over any minute.

“Let’s go home,” Ryan said, and Alex nodded.

Home. When had Jesse’s house become a home for Ryan?

When they got back to Jesse's house, Alex went to his room and took a long, hot shower. He needed to wash off the grime, even though he wasn't that dirty. Maybe it would help him relax a bit because his mind was in turmoil.

He couldn't believe he'd shot a man. He'd killed a human being. Not that he regretted it, but it felt strange that he'd ended a life today. Jeffries had deserved it, and Alex had no doubt that if he hadn't taken Jeffries out, the man would've killed Marilyn, Sam, and maybe even Ryan. So yes, he had the moral conviction he'd done the right thing. But still.

The shower did little to wash away his anxiety.

"It sounds like you two had an eventful day," Wander said as they all sat together for dinner. Ryan had given them a recap of what had happened, and everyone had listened in rapt attention.

"How are you feeling, kid?" Wander asked him, and Alex blinked.

"Strange."

"You did the right thing."

"I know, but..." He shrugged. "It feels strange."

"Taking someone's life isn't easy," Ryan said softly, reaching for Alex's hand and threading their fingers. "No matter how justified it is."

“I agree,” Lowell said. “I killed one guy in the line of duty, and it was the worst day of my life. He was holding his ex-wife hostage and threatening to kill her, so I had no choice, but it took me a while to move on from that.”

“You’ll keep an eye on him, yeah?” Wander asked Ryan. “And if he needs counseling or to talk to someone, we can arrange that.”

Ryan nodded. “Won’t let him out of my sight for the next few days...and nights.”

He’d be spending the night with Ryan? That was a first. Ryan had always been of the “wham, bam, thank you” variety, parting ways as soon as he was done with Alex. Well then, there was an upside to this whole thing.

After dinner, they retreated to the living room, where they watched a movie. Alex couldn’t have told anyone what it was about had they asked him, but no one seemed to mind he wasn’t saying much. One by one, the others left, leaving Alex and Ryan by themselves.

The warm and cozy living room was bathed in soft lighting. Jesse had lit the fireplace, and the flickering flames danced against the walls, creating an intimate atmosphere. Alex sank into the plush cushions of the couch, closing his eyes and letting out a shaky breath.

“Are you okay?” Ryan asked.

“The whole affair keeps replaying through my mind. I killed someone.”

A part of him felt relief that everyone was now safe, but another part couldn’t shake the guilt gnawing at his insides. He’d taken a life, and it was a burden he didn’t know how to bear.

Ryan wrapped his arm around him and pulled him close. “I know. But you had no choice, baby boy. He would’ve killed someone if you hadn’t. You have to keep telling yourself that.”

“I just... I don’t know how to let go of this, how to get rid of the image of Jeffries’s lifeless body on the floor,” Alex said,

his voice barely above a whisper. “I feel like I’ve crossed a line I can’t come back from.”

Alex stared at his trembling hands, seeking solace in the comforting warmth of Ryan’s embrace. He tried to focus on the gentle glow of the fire flickering in the hearth, the softness of the couch cushions beneath him, and Ryan’s warm breath against his skin, but his thoughts kept circling back to Jeffries.

“Hey.” Ryan brushed Alex’s cheek and turned his face toward him. “Look at me.”

After a moment’s hesitation, Alex met Ryan’s unwavering gaze. There was something so soothing about his eyes now, a sense of safety and reassurance Alex needed.

“Killing Jeffries doesn’t define you, baby boy,” Ryan told him. “You’re still the strong, compassionate, sunshiny person I know and care for. That hasn’t changed.”

Ryan cared for him? How sad that out of everything, those words meant the most to him. “Thank you.”

“I’ve taken lives too, and it never gets easier. But sometimes, it’s necessary to protect others. I’m proud of you, Alex.”

“Were you worried I’d miss?”

Ryan shook his head. “Not even a little bit. I knew you’d make the shot.”

Alex snuggled close to him, resting his head against Ryan’s chest. “Thank you for having faith in me.”

“Not something to thank me for. You earned it. Every day, you’ve shown me what you’re made of.”

“Careful there, Ryan, ‘cause you’re starting to be all nice and soft again. Wouldn’t want you to ruin your reputation.”

Ryan kissed the top of Alex’s head, a gesture so unexpected Alex froze for a moment. “You seem to bring that out in me, baby boy...and it’s okay. With you, I don’t mind.”

Alex’s heart filled with love, like a wave rolling over him, swallowing him whole. How could he keep something of this

magnitude to himself? It didn't matter if he told Ryan or not. It wouldn't change how he felt. Even if he never spoke the words, he'd love him just the same, so why not be brave and tell Ryan the truth?

Taking a deep breath, Alex gathered his courage. He sat up straight again and turned toward Ryan. "I love you. I'm in love with you. Head over heels, all in, that kind of thing. And I don't expect anything from you. Nothing needs to change. I just... I needed you to know."

Ryan seemed unable to speak, his brown eyes widening. With a shaky exhale, he leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees and looking away from Alex. "Alex..." His voice was thick with emotion. "I don't know what to say. Do I even deserve that kind of love?"

At least he hadn't insulted Alex by telling him he was imagining things, that he wasn't truly in love. That would've crushed Alex more than anything. But man, his heart ached at the pain behind Ryan's words. "Everyone deserves love. Especially you."

A sad smile tugged at the corner of Ryan's mouth as he shook his head. "You have no idea how much it means to me that you feel that way, but I'm terrified, baby boy. I've been hurt before, and I don't know if I can handle that pain again."

Ryan's eyes held a vulnerability Alex had never seen. It was a powerful sight, this strong, grizzled man allowing his walls to come down, revealing the tender soul beneath. "I know, and I understand."

"I don't often let people in. I push them away because it's easier that way. But you...you make me want to break down those walls. I haven't felt this close to anyone in a long time. And it scares the hell out of me."

"There's no pressure here, no expectations. You have all the time in the world to figure things out...and I'm not going anywhere."

As Ryan looked up at him, gratitude shining in his eyes, hope rose inside Alex. He understood the demons that chased

Ryan, his fears and insecurities, but Ryan was changing. Bit by bit, he was opening up and showing more of himself, and for now, that was enough. “Thank you, baby boy,” Ryan whispered, grasping Alex’s hand, his touch warm and reassuring. “For loving me and for being here with me.”

“Always,” Alex promised, squeezing Ryan’s hand in return. And as they sat together, basking in the warmth of the fire and the promise of their newfound connection, the hope inside Alex only increased.

A weightless silence settled between them, the crackling of the logs the only sound. Their emotions, so heavy before, now dissipated like bubbles on a breeze, bringing joy and lightness.

“I’m glad you told me,” Ryan said. “I promise I’ll be careful with you.”

Alex nodded, and Ryan did something unexpected. He reached out and cradled Alex’s face with one rough hand, but his touch was gentle. A simple gesture that spoke volumes, conveying care, affection, and maybe even the beginnings of love. As the silence stretched between them, the atmosphere shifted, something electric, charged with their unspoken desires.

Ryan leaned in, giving Alex ample time to pull away if he chose to. As if. Alex closed the distance between them, and their lips met in a tentative, almost shy kiss, which was a far cry from their previous encounters, where passion and lust had driven them forward. This connection spoke to the deepening bond between them. Alex scrambled onto Ryan’s lap, straddling him, his hands on Ryan’s shoulders. Before, Ryan would’ve grabbed Alex’s ass with both hands, but this time, he kept cupping Alex’s face, his fingers soft as a breeze.

The kiss grew bolder, more insistent, as they explored each other’s mouths, tongues dancing together in a sensual rhythm. Warmth spread through Alex, but not the all-consuming fire from before. No, this burned much slower yet deeper, coming from a different place inside him. He didn’t want to show Ryan how much he wanted him. He wanted Ryan to

understand how much he loved him. He wanted to worship him.

“God, I want you,” Alex whispered against Ryan’s lips, his voice shaky with desire. When had he ever wanted someone this much? It was intoxicating, overwhelming, and utterly terrifying all at once.

“You already have me, baby boy. I’m right here with you, and there’s nowhere else I’d rather be.”

The man was saying all the right things, and Alex’s heart grew soft. “I love you,” he said again. “I love you so much.”

Ryan rested his forehead against Alex’s. “Thank you. Your love is a gift, baby boy. I hope you know that.”

Alex didn’t need more than that. “Kiss me some more.”

Their lips met again, and Alex poured himself into that kiss, not holding back anything. Ryan’s hands slipped under Alex’s shirt, and they broke off the kiss so he could pull it over his head. Fuck, he loved the way Ryan touched him. As if he owned him. He knew Alex’s body, maybe even better than Alex did himself. He played him like an instrument, knowing where to caress him, where to scratch and pinch and flick to bring that touch of pain that intensified the pleasure a thousandfold.

Alex arched into Ryan’s touch, desperate for more contact. They were still wearing way too many clothes for what Alex wanted. Luckily, Ryan seemed to feel the same way, and between heated kisses, they came off. Ryan’s shirt. Alex’s pants and underwear. Socks, jeans, until they were naked, Alex still on Ryan’s lap.

“Did you prep?” Ryan asked.

Alex shook his head. “Not after I showered. I cleaned myself out of habit, but...”

“It’s okay. I’ll take some more time.”

“I can take the pain.”

“Not today, baby boy. Today, you can’t. I want to take care of you. Let me make you feel good,” Ryan said, his voice low

and rough. “That’s all I want, baby boy.”

How was that not a declaration of love? Tears filled Alex’s eyes. Ryan loved him. The man didn’t even realize it, but he did.

“Make me yours, Ryan. Please,” Alex said, his eyes locked on Ryan’s. “I need this. I need you.”

“Oh, baby boy, I need you just as much.”

As they kissed again, Alex marveled at the way their bodies seemed to communicate on a level beyond words—instinctive, primal, and undeniably powerful. Their journey together might have moments of pain and heartache, but the truth shone brightly inside Alex: Ryan Mason was worth fighting for. He was worth loving. And Alex would love him till the day he died.

Everything felt different. Ryan couldn't put his finger on what had changed, but every touch and kiss had a new meaning. A deeper one. He wanted so much more, for himself but above all for Alex. He wanted to make Alex feel good, to make him forget about the horrors he'd experienced that day, to wipe his memory of all the bad things and replace them with pleasure.

"Drape yourself over my lap," he told Alex. "Wanna see that ass of yours."

Alex's cheeks grew red as he obeyed. His response to such remarks fascinated Ryan. How could Alex be shy about the very thing he craved? That contrast was so much fun to tease him with, to play with, and to push his buttons with. And Ryan would. But not now. He had other plans.

"Spread your legs a little. Good boy." Ryan grabbed the lube out of the drawer under the coffee table. Wasn't it handy that Jesse had stocked lube everywhere in the house? Ryan coated his fingers generously. He never cared much for this part—one of the reasons why he demanded Alex always be prepped and ready. Nothing was more frustrating than to be in the mood for a fast and hard fuck but to have to take the time to prep first.

But now? He couldn't object when he loved touching Alex so much. He traced his slick fingers down Alex's crease, smiling when the boy shivered. Jesus, Alex's ass was so fucking perfect. Lush, round, with that jiggle that was so damn

sexy. As he pressed a slick finger against Alex's opening, the familiar heat of desire coiled in his belly. Would Ryan ever grow tired of it, of him? Somehow, he didn't think so. He'd fucked him countless times, but every single time, he wanted more of him. He wanted all of him.

What an unfamiliar feeling. Had Alex's declaration of love had that effect on him? The weirdest thing was that Ryan didn't even mind. Mere months ago, this feeling would've scared the crap out of him, but now, he was fine with it.

He sank his finger into Alex's pretty hole with ease, adding a second one quickly. He hadn't expected Alex to need much prep, and he'd been right. A little stretching would be enough, so he only took a minute to get him ready.

"Sit back up on my lap." He wanted to see him, look him in the eyes.

Alex scrambled up and positioned himself. Ryan grabbed that gorgeous ass with both hands and spread it wide. He couldn't wait to be inside him.

"Please, Sir," Alex whimpered, shifting his hips impatiently.

"Not Sir." Ryan wasn't even sure why it mattered, but it did. "This is not a scene. This is... Just Ryan, okay? I'm just Ryan."

Alex blinked. "Okay... Okay, Ryan."

Ryan kissed him. "Ride me, baby boy."

Alex's eyes lit up. As he lowered himself onto Ryan's cock, Ryan guided him with steady hands, Alex's tight heat enveloping him inch by agonizing inch. God, it felt like heaven and hell wrapped into one perfect package. Ryan bit back a groan, his resolve tested by the overwhelming sensations coursing through his body.

Why did everything always feel different with Alex? Why couldn't he maintain the emotional distance he'd always relied on? The intensity of their connection was undeniable, and it took all his self-control not to lose himself in the sensation.

When he was fully sheathed, he took a moment to revel. Their bodies were pressed together, Alex's smooth skin soft under Ryan's fingertips. Their eyes locked in a deep, intense gaze, and Ryan drowned in those bright blue orbs, his defenses crumbling under their weight. He'd never stood a chance, had he?

He kissed him softly. "You feel incredible. You always feel incredible. There's no one like you, baby boy. No one."

Alex shifted his hips again, wordlessly begging Ryan to move, and Ryan couldn't deny him any longer. He thrust, establishing a steady rhythm as he penetrated Alex deeper with each stroke. Their bodies moved in sync, but for the first time, their joining was more than a physical connection. It felt like their souls were connected as well, beating in unison. Jesus, he was getting sappy. Maybe the day had taken more of a toll on him than he'd realized.

"Love the way you feel inside me... You're hard as steel." Alex moaned. "You've got me so damn close."

"Me too." Ryan desperately tried to hold on a bit longer. "But I don't want this to end yet."

"Then let's make it last." Alex's eyes locked onto Ryan's once more as they slowed their pace.

Ryan leaned in and caught Alex's lips in another sensual kiss. Their tongues slid, danced, tangled, and he lost himself in the pleasure of that kiss.

"Fuck..." Ryan gasped, breaking away from the kiss long enough to catch his breath. "I need you, baby boy. Can't get enough of you."

He moved his hips languidly, sliding in and out of Alex in a slow, sensual tango rather than a fast-paced one. They kept kissing, or their mouths hovered half an inch away from each other as if they wanted to suck in each other's breaths. Ryan couldn't let go of Alex's lips, couldn't stand the thought of more space between them. They moved together as one, their bodies finding an effortless rhythm. The firelight shimmered

across their skin, highlighting every curve and line of their intertwined forms.

Ryan moaned. “You’re going to be the death of me.”

“But what a way to go,” Alex teased, his voice husky and seductive as he leaned in closer, their lips mere millimeters apart.

“Cheeky bastard.” Ryan captured Alex’s lips in another searing kiss. How could each kiss, each touch, leave him wanting more?

This encounter was a far cry from the rough, almost brutal encounters they’d shared in the past. This was something deeper, something that transcended the physical act of sex. What it all meant, Ryan couldn’t begin to unwrap. All he knew was that it mattered. Alex mattered.

Time seemed to stand still as they moved, kissed, touched, lost in a world of their own, until the pleasure that had been building and building reached a point of no return and couldn’t be denied any longer.

“Ryan...please,” Alex begged, digging his fingers into Ryan’s shoulders as if he could anchor himself to him. “I need you to...to...”

“Say it, baby boy,” Ryan ordered, his voice rough with desire. “Tell me what you need.”

“Harder,” Alex choked out, his cheeks flushed. “Please just...fuck me harder.”

The vulnerability in his plea only heightened Ryan’s arousal. He obliged and increased the force behind his thrusts, driving himself deeper into Alex’s body. Ryan groaned, his movements growing more urgent. Pleasure filled Alex’s face, his eyes glazed, and his mouth fell open as he moaned in response to Ryan’s movements. Beads of sweat dripped down Alex’s chest. Ryan couldn’t take his eyes off him.

“Jesus, baby boy...” Ryan forced the words out between ragged breaths, his world narrowing to the exquisite pleasure coursing through him.

He'd always come before Alex, one of the privileges of being a Dom. But this time, he didn't want to. He wanted to see Alex fall apart on his cock, wanted to witness up close and personal the ecstasy he could bring him.

He released his grip on Alex's waist and snaked one hand between their bodies, grasping Alex's hard cock and stroking him firmly. Alex gasped, a shudder rippling through him. Ryan pumped Alex's cock, rock hard in his hand, adding a little screw motion at the end that he always loved himself.

Alex threw his head back, his eyes closed, as he surrendered to the pleasure, fucking himself on Ryan's cock. He was so beautiful, so stunning. Ryan couldn't look away.

"I can't..." Alex moaned, low and sexy. "If you keep that up, I can't..."

"It's okay, baby boy. Let me see you come."

That was all the permission Alex needed. With a guttural grunt, he came, spurting his load over Ryan's hand. Ryan held himself back, even though he was seconds away from coming, his balls so full and tight they hurt. Only when Alex had come down from his high and opened his eyes again did Ryan let go.

He thrust upward into him, then again.

"Alex...shit!" The words were torn from him as the dam inside him broke. A tidal wave of pleasure surged through his veins, drowning his senses. With a cry that seemed to echo through every fiber of his being, Ryan let himself be swept away.

Wiped, he held on to Alex as he tumbled sideways onto the couch, then stretched out. He slipped out of him, and somehow, that severed connection hurt.

"Come here." Ryan shifted to wrap his arms around Alex and pull him close. Their bodies, still trembling, molded together like pieces of a puzzle, fitting perfectly into the spaces each had carved out for the other. Alex's head rested against Ryan's chest as they both struggled to catch their breaths. Slowly, Ryan's heart rate came down, and he could properly breathe again.

They lay on the couch, their bodies pressed together. The room was filled with the scent of their lovemaking, a heady mixture. Ryan traced lazy circles on Alex's shoulder, the rise and fall of Alex's chest against his own a comforting rhythm that soothed his racing pulse. Sweat slicked their skin, glistening in the flickering firelight, and for a moment, it felt like the world outside had ceased to exist.

"My perfect baby boy," Ryan murmured, the uncharacteristic tenderness in his voice surprising even him. "You're...you're really something else."

How could he process the tornado of emotions inside him? He wouldn't know where to start. He'd never felt like this, felt so much. Everything about Alex drew him in like a moth to a flame. He wasn't one for sentimentality, but something about this moment, about Alex, had gotten under his skin.

"Damn right I am." Alex's laughter was breathless and musical, full of joy. "And don't you forget it."

"Trust me, baby boy. There ain't a chance in hell of that happening." Ryan cupped Alex's face, forcing him to meet his gaze. The intensity of their connection burned between them, palpable and electric. "You've got me wrapped around your finger, whether you know it or not."

As they lost themselves in the moment, it became increasingly difficult for Ryan to deny the truth—that their relationship was so much more than casual sex. Nothing about their connection was casual, and it had long stopped being about sex as well. He didn't want to get too caught up in feelings he couldn't fully understand yet, and he was nowhere near ready to put a label on it, but he couldn't deny that whatever it was had the power to change him.

To change them both.

It terrified him.

Something had changed. Alex wasn't sure if it was because he'd told Ryan he loved him or what, but Ryan was different with him. Softer. Gentler. More...loving.

He didn't want to give himself false hope, but it was hard not to dream of what could be when Ryan was this sweet. What they had shared on that couch hadn't been sex. That had been lovemaking.

And when they'd gone upstairs, Ryan hadn't hesitated to take Alex with him into his bedroom. They'd fallen asleep with their arms wrapped around each other, and how could Alex not harbor hope after that? It was like Ryan had turned into a different man, one Alex had only seen glimpses of. And every night since, now a whole week, Ryan had insisted Alex stay with him for the nights.

They'd shared Ryan's bed and made love every single time. No scenes, no quick and dirty encounters or fast fucks, but slow, sensual lovemaking. Okay, so they'd still done it in public twice, where others could've walked in—and once, they had—but still. Something fundamentally had changed, had shifted.

But would it last? That was the first thing on Alex's mind as he woke up that morning as the little spoon to Ryan, who had not only his arm wrapped around Alex but a leg slung across his as well. Almost as if he'd feared Alex would walk off in the middle of the night. Not a chance. Waking up next to

Ryan was... Alex wasn't sure how to describe the feeling. Did magical sound too cheesy?

He would cherish every second because nothing was guaranteed with Ryan. This change, whatever had caused it, wasn't permanent. For all Alex knew, Ryan would revert to his old "fuck 'em and leave 'em" style and that tender side would disappear again, never to come back.

"Morning," Ryan rumbled behind him, and Alex couldn't have prevented himself from smiling, even if he'd wanted to.

"Morning."

"Turn around, baby boy. Let me see those pretty baby blues of yours."

Alex did, and Ryan kissed him thoroughly, morning breath be damned. He rubbed himself against Ryan unashamedly, loving the friction of their morning woods against each other. "Want me to take care of that for you?" he asked.

"If you want to."

If you want to? What on God's green earth was happening? Where had Ryan's confident, bossy Dom side gone? As much as Alex loved the new dynamic between them, he missed Ryan bossing him around. He needed both, or was he asking too much? That softer side of Ryan was amazing, and Alex reveled in the tenderness it brought, but that didn't mean it was all he needed and craved. He was still a fuck toy, and he needed Ryan to treat him as one.

"Make me."

The words were out of his mouth before he could rethink them, but when Ryan's eyes darkened, Alex realized they'd been perfect. Ryan wrapped his hand around Alex's throat. "Suck my dick, baby boy."

Fuck, yes. "Make me."

The fire flashing in Ryan's eyes made his heart skip a beat. Things were about to get intense.

Ryan reached for Alex's left wrist, but he rolled away, quick enough to evade him but not so fast Ryan wouldn't stand

a chance.

“You little...”

Ryan grabbed him, pinning Alex down with his body, but Alex wasn't done playing yet. He shoved Ryan off him and crawled toward the edge of the bed. A rough hand around his ankle yanked him back. With a growl, Ryan dove on top of Alex and wrapped his arm around Alex's head, squeezing him into a tight headlock. Alex could barely keep a grin off his face.

Ryan brought his mouth close to Alex's ear. “I've changed my mind. I don't want your mouth on my cock. Spread your legs for me.”

A thrill ran down Alex's spine. “No.”

Ryan put his knee between Alex's thighs. “Spread. Your. Legs.”

“Make me.”

The sound Ryan made was more animal than human, and he was anything but gentle and tender when he forced Alex's legs apart. Oh, Alex could've fought back, could've prevented it. After all, Ryan had never bested him on the mat. But why would he when this was so much more fun?

With one arm still around Alex's throat, Ryan positioned himself, his hard cock pressing against Alex. Two seconds pause, enough for Alex to safeword—hell, no—and then Ryan drilled into him. They'd had sex the evening before, so he was still somewhat stretched and slick, but fuck, it still burned. Ryan didn't stop, didn't give Alex a second to catch his breath. No, he went full into beast mode, slamming into his ass until Alex saw stars.

His ears buzzed, his heartbeat pumped through his veins, and everything else faded. The pressure on his throat was enough to make him gasp for breath, but Ryan didn't let up, didn't relax. He kept pounding him, letting loose on Alex's ass with slaps that echoed like gunshots through the room.

“You like this, you little slut, don't you?” Ryan grunted. “Admit it. You need a big cock in your ass. You want me to

take you like this.”

He did. He so did. And if he'd had the oxygen, he might've admitted it, but all he could do was hang on for the wildest ride of his life. And fuck, he was so turned on, his cock hard as iron. Every time Ryan rammed into him, it caused friction between Alex's cock and the sheets, enough to bring him close to the edge in no time.

His vision went black at the edges as his balls pulled up violently. He gasped, tensed, and lost the battle. He couldn't even cry out as he came, too spent, too tired, too breathless.

Ryan's whole body shook as he, too, came, depositing his morning load inside Alex. His arm relaxed, and Alex drew in raspy breaths, his eyes closed and his body slack. Ryan withdrew—fuck, Alex always hated that part—and rolled off him. For one second, Alex felt abandoned, as if Ryan had discarded him like the man had done so many times before.

But Ryan pulled him into his arms again, and they cuddled. Tears formed in Alex's eyes, though why, he didn't know. He didn't let Ryan see them, content to bury his face against Ryan's chest, his head safely on his shoulder.

It took a long time before either of them spoke, and Alex was grateful for the silence. He needed some time to recover from that experience.

“That was...intense,” Ryan finally said. “You okay, baby boy?”

“Yeah. More than okay.”

Ryan gently pushed Alex's head back and forced him to meet his eyes. “We never talked about doing dub con play.”

“You gave me plenty of opportunity to safeword.”

“Would you have? I need to know I can trust you to respect your boundaries, especially when we try new stuff.”

“I swear. I'll never let you push me past what I want.”

“Talk to me about that scene Mark wanted to do with you. The sharing scene. Were you truly okay with that?”

Alex hesitated. “He asked me. I consented.”

Ryan cupped his cheek. “I know, but that’s not what I asked.”

“I’m...” Alex sighed. “I wasn’t okay with it. Not with him. Not the way he’d set it up.”

“Why?”

“Because it wasn’t you. It wasn’t the sharing part. I’m a slut. You know that. The idea of being used by multiple guys is a huge turn-on for me...but I need you to be in charge. I need to do that with you as my Dom because you’ll keep me safe. You know my limits. You can read me like no one else. And...I trust you.” Warmth filled him as the truth hit him all over again. “I love you.”

“Oh, baby boy...” Ryan pressed his forehead against Alex’s. “It humbles me how you say that so easily and freely.”

“I mean it.”

“I know you do, and that’s what makes it so special.” He leaned back and met Alex’s eyes. “But why didn’t you safeword with Mark?”

“I don’t know. I keep trying to convince myself I would have if you hadn’t barged in and stopped everything, but the truth is that I’m not sure. Master Mark is... He’s a good Dom, and he wasn’t doing anything I didn’t want. He went over my limits with me, and I had agreed to sharing.”

“Help me understand what happened, then, because when I saw you with him, I knew something was wrong. I picked up on your signals.”

“You did. All I can say is I needed Mark to be my Dom... since you wouldn’t do it. I didn’t want to ask Lowell, since we work together, or Jesse because we live in his house. I wanted you, but you wouldn’t do it.”

Ryan frowned. “But we work together as well. Why was that not an argument with me?”

“It should’ve been, but the heart wants what it wants. It’s always been you, Ryan. From day one. No one pushed my

buttons like you did. No one made me as angry...or made me feel as much, period. I wanted you, and then I started to like you, but you were determined to keep things casual between us. What choice did I have? I wanted to be trained as a sub, and Master Mark was my only option. So when he proposed that scene, I didn't want to say no. I wanted to be a good sub, and I had told him that was my thing..."

"I failed you."

Alex widened his eyes. "No, you didn't."

"Yes, baby boy, I did. I played with you, pushing buttons I damn well knew I had no right to push."

"That's what Wander called you out on."

"He did, and while I realized he was right, I didn't grasp the big picture yet. I should never have used you the way I did, and I'm sorry."

Was the world coming to an end? In the last week, Ryan had done all these things Alex had never seen or heard from him. He'd been gentle and kind, tenderhearted and almost romantic, and now he was apologizing? "*Who are you?*"

Ryan winced. "I'm not even gonna pretend I don't understand that remark. The fact that you're asking me that after I apologize, well, that speaks volumes." He sighed. "Honestly, baby boy, I have no clue how you can love me after what I did to you."

Alex sat up straight. "Hold on. Don't take this too far."

Ryan pushed himself up as well. "What do you mean?"

"I'll accept your apologies for playing my Dom when you had no intention of being what and who I needed. That's fair. But don't act like everything we shared was against my will. I'm a slut, Ryan. I like sex. I like to be used. I love it when you slam me against the wall and fuck me. Or when you fuck me in public. Or what we just did. That's not something to apologize for."

"No?"

"No."

Ryan threw up his hands. “I don’t know how to do this. I feel like... You told me you loved me, which made me realize how little I have given you. I want to be a better man, one who is worthy and deserving of your love, but I don’t know how.”

Was he trying to break Alex’s heart? Because that was exactly what he was doing. Not the bad heartbreak, the kind that would leave marks, but the good kind, where he was confirmed that this was a man worth loving. “Ry, you don’t need to do anything to be worthy or deserving of my love. I already love you, remember?”

Ryan swallowed. “You called me Ry.”

“Yeah. Is that okay?”

“No one’s ever called me that.”

“I’ll be the first then. And the only one.”

“I’d like that...” Ryan took a deep breath. “So are you saying I don’t need to change?”

Alex hesitated. How did he word this right? “No, but...I want you to change in ways that will make you happier. Not me. I love you the way you are. But I think that some of what you went through, like what happened with Quinton, impacts you to this day and robs you of some of the happiness you could experience, and I don’t want that for you.”

Ryan bowed his head. “I can’t believe that even now, you think of me before yourself. How can you say that and then believe I deserve you? I’m a selfish bastard.”

Alex took his hand. “Yeah, but apparently, I like selfish bastards.”

“Jesus, baby boy, you’re killing me.” Ryan laced their fingers together. “Now, don’t get your hopes up, okay, because I don’t want to disappoint you. But I want to try to be...better. Happier.”

“Be yourself, Ryan. I don’t expect you to become Mr. Sunshine. All I want is for you to be happy.”

“I am. Happier than I ever thought possible. And that’s all you, baby boy. You make me happy.”

What more did Alex need than that? “You make me happy too, Ry.”

Ryan had never been so confused in his life. Ever since that day they'd faced Jeffries, he'd been out of sorts. He'd asked himself things he never had before, had doubted himself in areas he'd always been confident in, and he'd questioned his feelings in ways he never had. How could he be a grown-ass man and not know how and what he felt?

Because he didn't. One second, he was convinced he was in love with Alex because, seriously, how could he not be? His baby boy was perfect in every way, the sunshine that had brought light into the darkness of Ryan's existence.

But then the doubt crept in. Was he even capable of love after Quinton? Hell, had he ever loved Quinton to begin with? If he had, why had he been content to keep him a secret? Wasn't that proof he was the selfish bastard his inner demons accused him of being?

But if he had loved Quinton, that meant he was capable of love again. That he could love Alex. But did he?

Jesus, he was driving himself crazy, his thoughts going in circles, always returning to the same point. Was he a man capable of love? Or had something inside him gotten damaged, making him incapable of fully and wholly loving another person? He couldn't figure it out.

"What's wrong with you?" Wander asked him after a meeting. "Did you even hear a word I said?"

Luckily, Ryan had always been able to process information, even when half his brain was distracted by

something else. “Yeah, you told us your brother Roman had some personal issues and might be moving in with us for a while.”

“Okay, so at least you heard that. That still doesn’t explain why you’re acting weird.”

Ryan sighed. “How am I weird?”

“You haven’t been yourself, yeah? You’re off, acting different. Don’t tell me I’m imagining things.”

“No, you’re not. I’m...dealing with some stuff.”

Wander quirked an eyebrow. “Anything I can help with?”

“Not unless you can tell me how to know if you’re in love with someone.”

Wander blinked. “Okay, then. Let me switch gears here. How did I know I loved Burke?” He scratched his beard. “Like you, I’m not a soft man, Ryan. I’ve never been. So when I found myself experiencing feelings I’d never had before, this soft tenderness, this deep need to take care of Burke, I knew something was different.”

Softness and tenderness. That rang true. “I don’t even know if I’m capable of love.”

“Why wouldn’t you be?”

“I had a boyfriend. Back when I was a detective. I arrested this mobster, and his brother wanted revenge. When he couldn’t get to me, he went after Quinton and killed him. That’s when I quit the force and became a PI.”

“I know,” Wander said calmly. “You didn’t think I’d hire you without running a background check, yeah?”

“You never mentioned it.”

Wander shrugged. “Figured it was none of my business if you didn’t want to talk about it. But what does this have to do with whether you’re capable of love or not?”

“I hid him.” Ryan winced. “No one knew about Quinton other than my mom and sister. I never told my coworkers. Cops, you know? Not exactly known for being gay-friendly.

But when Quinton died, I found out they'd known all along and had never said anything. I'd kept him my dirty secret for no reason at all."

Wander put a hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry you felt you had to make that decision. It's not an easy call, and I can understand your fears. But again, what does this have to do with love?"

"How can I claim I loved Quinton when I hid him from the world? When I forced him to be my dirty secret...only to have him killed because of me."

Wander took his hand off Ryan's shoulder and held it up. "Hold on. Back up there. It's not your fault Quinton got killed."

"They wanted revenge on me, and he paid the price."

"Ryan, how many times has this happened? How many times have you heard of mobsters or bad guys taking revenge against the family of a cop?"

Ryan frowned. "It's rare. Why?"

"It's extremely rare. So why would you blame yourself? You had no way of knowing this could happen. It wasn't even a calculated risk."

"But... But he died because of me."

"No, Ryan. Quinton died because of the actions of a madman, of an evil person. Not because of you."

"Even so, if I had truly loved him, wouldn't I have been honest about him? Love is not forcing someone to stay in the closet."

"It's not that black and white, Ryan. Did you grieve him when he died?"

Ryan swallowed, his throat tight. "I wanted to die with him. I didn't think I'd ever smile again."

"That's love. If you hadn't loved him, you wouldn't have felt that way. You wouldn't have experienced all this guilt, and you wouldn't have felt devastated."

Huh. Ryan had never looked at it like that, but what Wander had said made sense. And Ryan had loved the time he'd spent with Quinton. He'd been different from Alex, far more introverted, though he'd been a total brat as a sub. He'd been sweet outside of that, caring. He'd wanted nothing more than to take care of Ryan. They'd been good together, and Ryan had been debating asking Quinton to marry him—knowing he'd have to come out for that.

“I did love him,” he said hoarsely. “Part of me died with him.”

Wander squeezed his shoulder. “I can't even imagine.”

“But does that mean I'm still capable of love? Can I trust it after what happened?”

“I wish I could promise you that nothing will ever happen to Alex, but I can't. Life is uncertain and tragedies happen. But tell me. If you knew then what you know now, would you have made the same choice? Would you have chosen Quinton again?”

Ryan didn't even need to think about it. “Yeah, only this time, I wouldn't have hidden him. I would've shown the whole world how proud I was to have him by my side.”

“Then there's your answer, yeah? Love is always worth the risk, even if you know it'll only be temporary. Loving Alex is worth it, Ryan. I'm telling you. If Burke died tomorrow, God forbid, I'd be grateful for every day I got to spend with my amazing man...and I'd choose him all over again if I could.”

“Thank you.” Ryan frowned. “Wait. I never told you it was Alex.”

Wander snorted. “You think I'm fucking blind? Of course you're in love with him.”

“How the fuck would you know when I can't even figure it out myself?”

“I knew when you safeworded his scene with Mark. You were jealous, and I have never seen you jealous. Ever. You cared for that boy, and that's only grown deeper. You love him.”

“He told me he’s in love with me. It made me feel so small.”

“Yeah, love can do that. It’s humbling and baffling at the same time to see ourselves through the eyes of someone who loves us.”

No kidding. “I don’t know if I’m good enough for him. I’m so much older, and on top of that, I’m a grumpy, selfish asshole.”

Wander grinned. “Pretty sure he’s well aware of both and loves you anyway. Take it for the miracle it is, my friend. And you’d better tell him before he changes his mind.”

He wasn’t wrong. “I need to put a ring on him. Claim him.”

“Holy shit, you really go from zero to a hundred.” He slapped Ryan on the back. “Good luck with that, and let me know when the wedding is...”

With a last hearty squeeze of Ryan’s shoulder, Wander walked off.

Right. Maybe Wander had a point, and Ryan should take this one step at a time. Surely, the first step would be to tell Alex how he felt, that he’d finally seen the light. Wander had told everyone to head to the gym to spar, so at least Ryan knew where to find him. But was it okay to walk in there and announce it? Or did he have to make some kind of grand gesture? In that case, he was shit out of luck. It had taken him long enough to figure this out. He couldn’t afford to spend another week trying to come up with something spectacular. The truth would have to do.

He set off, and when he’d reached the end of the hallway, he broke out in a run. It was as if his feet couldn’t go fast enough, and he was out of breath when he stumbled into the gym. Everyone else but Wander was working out, and Alex was in the corner, punishing a boxing bag with rapid-fire punches, all hitting their aim. Fuck, he was so sexy in a tight-fitting tank top and those shorts that showed off that round ass.

Ryan walked over, and when Alex spotted him, he stopped. “Hey, what’s up?”

“I wanted to... I needed to...” Fuck, how did he say this? Where did he begin?

“Are you okay, Ry?” Alex frowned. “You’re sweating. Is something wrong?”

“No, everything is fine. More than fine.”

“Then what is it? You’re starting to scare me.”

“I’m in love with you.” There, he’d said it. And now that those words were out, the rest followed like a waterfall. “I love you, baby boy. I’m sorry I needed some time to work that out, but I was afraid. After Quinton, I was so scared of loving again, of hurting again, or worse, of hurting you. Rationally, I know what happened to Quinton wasn’t my fault. It wasn’t. But emotionally, it’s still hard to let go of my guilt and feeling responsible. And the thought of something happening to you... Jesus, it terrifies me. I can’t stand the thought of anything happening to you. Because I love you, my sunshine. I love you so goddamn much.”

The entire gym had grown silent. The others had stopped their workouts and were now watching them. Ryan didn’t care. If they could watch him and Alex having sex, they could certainly witness him declaring his love. He wasn’t ever going to make Alex a secret, someone or something to hide and be ashamed of.

“You love me?” Alex whispered. “Are you sure?”

“Oh, baby boy, how could I not love you? You’re perfect.”

Alex tore off his boxing gloves, then jumped straight into Ryan’s arms, sending both of them tumbling onto the mat. Ryan held on to him, then rolled on top of Alex and kissed him under a chorus of cheers and whoops. Ryan didn’t stop kissing Alex until he was out of breath.

“I love you,” he said again. Now he knew why Alex had kept saying it in the beginning. It was too big to hold inside.

“I love you too, Ry. Sir.”

“Can I be both? I want to be your Ry and your Dom.”

“I want to be your baby boy and your sub. I want to be your everything.”

“You already are.” Sappy as it was, nothing had ever felt so true.

Alex smiled. “This cheesy side of you, that’s not gonna stay, right? ‘Cause it’s freaking me out a little.”

Ryan kissed him again. “Yeah, I don’t think so. I’ll be back to my old grumpy self in no time.”

“That’s okay. I love your old grumpy self.”

EPILOGUE

Love was strange, wasn't it?

Saying those three words aloud had changed everything between them, and a month later, Alex still couldn't believe it. Ryan had lost that super sappy, touchy-feeling mood...but Alex was okay with that. It hadn't been Ryan anyway. He liked him grumpy and sarcastic.

But that soft and tender side still came out way more often, and they made sweet love as often as they did intense scenes. They could switch from plain vanilla to kinky in no time, and even more fascinating was that they could read other's moods and intentions. Alex knew when Ryan needed to blow off some steam on Alex and always happily volunteered. But Ryan also knew when Alex was needy, and he never failed to provide Alex with what he craved.

Love. That was what it looked like between them.

They were working on a different job together, shadowing a man whose wife suspected him of being involved in a Ponzi scheme. Not exactly glamorous, but Alex didn't mind.

Marilyn and Sam had asked them to stop by, and when they had, they'd expressed their gratitude all over again and gifted Ryan and Alex a painting of Sam's Promise that now hung on the wall of Ryan's office. Their office. Somehow, Alex had become Ryan's right-hand man, and no one questioned it, including Wander. How had Alex gotten this lucky?

“I want to ask you something,” Ryan said that morning after they’d woken up and exchanged mutually satisfying blow jobs.

“What’s on your mind?”

“I think we need to talk about your limits again now that we’re together.”

Ah, yes. Alex had waited for Ryan to bring that up. Ryan hadn’t shared him since they’d been officially together, and while Alex hadn’t missed it, he wasn’t sure if he would miss it in the future. But how would Ryan feel about it? “I’m assuming you mean monogamy.”

“Yeah. Would you be okay with consensual nonmonogamy? On your end, that is. For you. I have no desire to use anyone else. You’re all I need. In fact, you have been for a long time.”

Hadn’t Caleb, Jonah, and David mentioned during the sub hangout that Ryan hadn’t touched them in weeks? “I know.”

“You do?”

Alex smiled at him. “We subs talk to each other, you know.”

“Right. Well, then you’re aware I mean it when I say you’re enough for me. But I don’t think I’m enough for you.”

Alex hesitated. The way Ryan phrased it made it sound far harsher. “That’s not how I—”

“You’re a slut, baby boy.” Ryan took his hand and pressed a kiss on it. “You love to be used. And I know it’s a fantasy of yours to be whored out by your Dom.”

Even now, even after all that time, Alex’s cheeks grew hot. “I’m…”

“It’s okay, baby boy. This is what you crave. There’s no shame in that.”

Alex looked away. “I don’t want it if you don’t. If you’re not okay with it, I mean.”

Ryan cupped his chin and forced his head up. “I *am* okay with it. I’m very okay with it. The idea of deciding who gets to use you is a huge turn-on for me.”

“Yeah?”

“But we have to have rules.”

“Like what?”

“I’m in charge. That’s nonnegotiable.”

“I want that anyway. You’re my Dom.”

Ryan nodded. “Okay, then we’re on the same page. I decide when, who, and what. And I always, always have the right to safeword out...and so do you.” His face grew serious. “Alex, you have to swear to me that you will do that if you need to. I won’t engage in this if I can’t trust you to respect your limits.”

“I swear, Ry. I’ll never make that mistake again.”

“Good. Then we’re on.” A sly, sexy grin spread across his face. “I’m going to throw an orgy with you as the centerpiece. Have everyone who wants to use you...but I’ll be the last one, and I’ll be the one who takes you home. I’ll watch my slut go crazy pleasuring all those men...but your heart belongs to me.”

“Always.” Alex’s voice was hoarse. “I’ll always be yours.”

“Damn straight.” Ryan’s grin widened. “Roman arrived today, did you know?”

“Wander’s brother?”

“Yeah. I heard he’s a little down, so I’m sure he could use a pick-me-up.”

Alex swallowed. “What did you have in mind?”

“I have it on good authority that the man has a massive dick, so I’m thinking I’m gonna send him my little horny slut as a welcoming present and then watch as he fucks you into the mattress. What do you think?”

Alex's whole face was on fire. "Whatever you want, Sir. I'm your slut to whore out."

"Oh yes, you are." Ryan kissed him hard. "I love you, baby boy."

"I love you too."



Thank you for reading No Rules. There's more to come in the No Regrets series. [No Secrets](#) is all about Wander's brother, Roman, and how his world is upended when he meets Caleb... It's now available for [preorder](#)!

Interested in that orgy Ryan promised Alex? [Click here to grab the No Rules bonus story](#), where Ryan makes good on sharing his eager slut, Alex.

SIGNED PAPERBACKS AND SWAG

Did you know I have a web store where you can order signed paperbacks of all my books, as well as swag? Head on over to my [web shop](#) and check it out!

BOOKS BY NORA PHOENIX

Forestville Silver Foxes

A brand-new contemporary MM romance series set in the small town of Forestville, Washington, featuring characters in their late forties. These silver foxes think they missed their chance at happiness...until they meet the love of their life, right there in Forestville. A feel good small-town romance series!

- [Renovating the Model](#)
- [Awakening the Sheriff](#)
- [Healing the Twin](#)

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](#)
- [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, mpreg, 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](#)
- [Dragon's Magic](#)
- [Dragon's Stand](#)
- [Dragon's Surprise](#)

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](#)
- [Perfect Daddy at Fifty-One](#) (novella)

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)
- No Rules (grumpy/sunshine, D/s play, service kink)
- No Secrets

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 stand-alones.

- 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](#)

Don't miss out on the extras in the box sets of the Irresistible Omegas. The [first box set](#) contains books 1-3, the [second box set](#) includes books 4-6, and the [third box set](#) includes books 7-10. All box sets have bonus scenes you don't want to miss.

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)
- [The Little CEO](#) (a daddy kink short with age play)

Ballsy Boys Series: *Cowritten with K.M. Neuhold*

Sexy porn stars looking for real love! Expect plenty of steam, but all the feels as well. They can be read as stand-alones, but are more fun when read in order.

- [Ballsy](#) (free prequel)
- [Rebel](#)
- [Tank](#)
- [Heart](#)
- [Campy](#)
- [Pixie](#)

Or grab the [Ballsy Boys Box Set](#), which contains all books and an exclusive, never before published bonus novella.

Kinky Boys Series: *Cowritten with K.M. Neuhold*

More sexy porn stars! This is a spin off series from the Ballsy Boys, set in Las Vegas...and with some kink!

- Daddy.
- Ziggy.

AUDIO BOOKS BY NORA PHOENIX

Most of my books are now out on audio, available through Amazon/Audible and iTunes.

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- [No Filter](#)
- [No Limits](#)
- [No Fear](#)
- [No Shame](#)
- [No Angel](#)
- [No Shame Series: the complete series](#) (all five books with bonus materials)

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Or grab the [box set](#), containing all three books plus bonus materials.

Stand Alones

- [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.

Ballsy Boys Series: *Cowritten with K.M. Neuhold*

Sexy porn stars looking for real love! Expect plenty of steam, but all the feels as well. They can be read as stand-alones, but are more fun when read in order. The Kinky Boys is a spin off set in Las Vegas. Narrated by Kenneth Obi.

- Rebel
- Tank
- Heart
- Campy
- Pixie

Kinky Boys Series: *Cowritten with K.M. Neuhold*

- Daddy
- Ziggy

CONNECT WITH NORA

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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 gives you updates, exclusive content, and all the inside news on what I'm working on. Sign up here: <http://www.noraphoenix.com/newsletter/>

You can also stalk me on Twitter: <https://twitter.com/NoraPhoenixMM>

On Instagram:

<https://www.instagram.com/nora.phoenix/>

On Bookbub:

<https://www.bookbub.com/profile/nora-phoenix>