

A Dark MM Charity Anthology

Volume 2

0 DEADLY NIGHT



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Please note that this anthology contains Dark MM stories. There are blurbs and trigger warnings at the beginning of each story. Please read these warnings and proceed with caution where needed. Thank you and happy reading!

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ORGANIZER'S NOTE

First, I want to say thank you to all the wonderful readers and authors who have helped my vision to become reality. I am hopeful O Deadly Night will continue to help support LGBT+ youth next year and many years after. Without you, none of this would be possible.

I created this anthology because I was seeing a lot of contemporary MM Christmas/Holiday stories, all sweet and fluffy. Don't get me wrong, I love those stories, but I noticed there weren't as many dark MM stories. I love me some dark MM and the Christmas/Holiday season, and wanted to do something to show that and give back, and here we are with Volume 2.

Both the dark MM stories and the cause we support with O Deadly Night mean a lot to me, more than I can put into words, and I am extremely grateful for all your support.

I hope you enjoy these amazing stories and I look forward to bringing you more in 2024.

Lots of love and darkness,

Faith Ryan

FOREWORD

Dearest Dark MM Fans,

Welcome to the 2nd Volume of the O' Deadly Night Anthology! You're in for a treat of deliciously dark short stories that certainly put me into the holiday spirit!

While a fluffy story can be fantastic now and again, I have always preferred the darker side of things. I find comfort in the less than happy tales and the characters most people tend to run screaming from. Writing and reading darker stories gives me a safe escape from the horrors of our reality while allowing me to work out some angst in my own brain.

The real world can be scarier than any story we write. That's why it's so important for groups like It Gets Better to exist. Now, more than ever, the LGBTQ+ community needs love and support and to know that we're not alone. Queer youth has been targeted especially hard and organizations like It Gets Better are fighting for a future where not one more young queer person is lost. By purchasing this incredible anthology you're supporting this wonderful charity and helping to save young queer lives!

Thank you!

Love,

Mozzarus Scout

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PRELUDE TO MADNESS



Alex J. Adams

When reality is an illusion.

Trapped inside your mind was the worst place to be. When you had no option but to stay there, it messed with you in the worst possible way.

Dreams, reality, and hidden desires all reared their head. It was hard to know what was real and what was pure fantasy.

That's where I found myself, inside my head. A captive, with no hope of escape, no matter how hard I tried.

But part of me wanted to stay. Stay with him. He was my one constant—the one that linked them all together, the one that called me home.

Prelude to Madness is a dark MM read with an HFN/HEA. It features drugs, overdose, captivity and dubcon.

ONE

Eric

“Wakey, wakey, rise and shine, princess. His Highness is waiting for you.” A gruff voice woke me.

How long had it been since I’d nodded off? Not long enough if my sore eyes were anything to go by. I tried to open them, blinking slowly at the stickiness gluing them together.

I had barely enough room to move in the cramped cage I’d slept in. My back and legs ached, and I longed to stretch out and release the kinks and knots that had formed in my muscles.

“Fuck off and leave me alone,” I grumbled. God, if only I were back in my bed with the soft pillows and crisp white sheets. Instead, I was locked away in this fucking cage. A cage I had no hope of escaping from.

My prison was bare, save a thin sheet and a pot to piss in, and I gagged at the nauseating stench of stale urine. I’d been here two weeks and still hadn’t got used to it.

How the fuck had I ended up here? I racked my brain, but the last thing I remembered was sipping a dry martini in a cocktail bar with a handsome young man who had promised me the best night of my life.

Dickhead here had believed him.

What?

It had been a while since I’d got laid, and a good fuck seemed a good way to spend the night. Well, an hour or two anyway.

I’d been playing the piano at the bar, a side gig to collect a few pounds towards my rent. Being a full-time composer didn’t pay the bills, but I knew nothing else. Composing music

had been my passion since I was a child. I'd spend days writing, barely eating, barely sleeping, and for what?

Not enough, that was what, but I wouldn't give it up. It was my life.

I was desperate. It was a month from Christmas, and if it hadn't been for that stupid fucking bet with my best friend, Hugo, I'd have been tucked up at home with my cat, Shadow, and a cup of warm Horlicks.

Instead, I was here. I wondered who was feeding my cat. Was anyone feeding him? A surge of panic hit me. I hoped to god Hugo was feeding him.

But what was the bet?

To get laid before Christmas. That was it. It appeared simple enough, and I'd almost won too. A measly hundred quid. It wouldn't have paid much but might have stopped my phone from being cut off, and it had been far too long since I'd felt the hard, warm body of a man next to mine.

Rick?

"Come on, princess. We have a surprise for you today." Keys jingled, and the padlock rattled as it opened.

I crawled out of the cage, stood, and straightened, every bone cracking. I rolled my shoulders, tensing, then releasing each muscle.

Fuck, that felt good.

I shuffled after my captor, shackles chafing my wrists and ankles. I struggled to keep up and almost fell in my attempt.

Jeers and shouts accompanied me from the other cages. Six more occupants, most in a worse condition than I was.

Rick?

We finally reached our destination, and he led me into a bathroom. I stopped, gazing around at the opulent gold fittings, the deep sunken bath, and a shower cubicle with

multiple shower heads. Steam rose from the bath, and the scent of roses filled the air.

It had been two weeks since my last shower, and I'd fantasised about how it would feel standing beneath blessed hot water, being able to wash away the dirt and grime ingrained into my pores.

"Strip, princess." The leather crop he carried met with my arse. Shit, that hurt.

How the fuck did he expect me to do that, still bound like a criminal? I'd been wearing these restraints since I first woke in this hell hole, and dried scabs covered my wrists and ankles.

I held my hands out to him and shook them.

He sighed and searched the huge bunch of keys. Cursing, he found the right one and opened the cuffs. They clattered to the floor.

I groaned with relief. So much better. I glanced down. Fresh sores had erupted where they'd rubbed, chafing my pale, thin skin.

I undressed slowly, elated to be out of the soiled, dirty rags I'd called clothes.

My prison officer gestured to the steaming bath. I stumbled towards it and lowered myself into the tub. Scalding water met my wounds and I hissed in pain, slowly sinking into the water up to my neck. This must be what heaven felt like.

I closed my eyes, luxuriating in the heat.

"Get a move on, princess. This isn't a fucking spa. Get washed and into these clothes. His Highness is waiting."

I sat bolt upright but lost my balance and slipped under the water. A hand gripped my hair, and pulled me up, coughing and spluttering. I gasped for air. Rose water tasted like shit!

"Jesus fucking Christ. Do I have to bathe you too?" The rough hands scouring my body felt unexpectedly good as they

purged the accumulation of filth from my skin.

Long-forgotten sensations reared inside me, and my neglected dick decided now would be a good time to wake up. Blood rushed to it, and I felt dizzy and heady with need. An involuntary moan left my lips.

“You like that, princess?” My captor asked, his breathy voice close to my ear, as he moved his hand lower and grasped my hard cock. He squeezed, his touch surprisingly light as he stroked me, while he grazed my shoulder with his teeth.

I shuddered. It had been far too long. I thrust my cock upwards into the circle of his hand. Oh, yes! Exactly like that. I did it again, so close to coming after mere seconds of this man’s touch.

Rick?

A sharp crack sounded, and the hand disappeared. Despite the heat of the water, I shivered at the loss of body contact. What the actual fuck was going on?

“I’ve told you before not to play with the prisoners,” His Highness shouted. I might have felt a little sorry for my captor, but maybe it had more to do with the fact that his hand was no longer around my still erect cock.

I longed for release but knew that wasn’t going to happen anytime soon.

“Wash him, dress him, and bring him to me.” Another sharp crack, leather on skin. Someone yelped, but I refused to look, squeezing my eyes shut. God, please don’t let me be the next target.

“Here, do it your fucking self.” A washcloth landed in the water. I washed myself quickly, ducking my head under the water again, rubbing my scalp. When I surfaced, I wasn’t surprised to see the water was now a dirty brown. All the more reason to hate baths, wallowing in your own filth, scum sitting on the surface of the water.

I climbed out. Thank god my dick had decided to behave, and after drying off with the fluffiest towel, I dressed in the clothes left for me: a pair of black, clingy shorts and nothing else.

“Really? This is what you give me?” My captor stalked towards me, slapping the leather crop into his open palm. I backed away. When would I learn to keep my mouth shut?

“Don’t push me, princess.” He shoved me through an open door into a bed chamber. His Highness and two young men lay on an enormous bed, all naked. One had his mouth wrapped around His Highness’s dick. The other kissed him passionately as His Highness fingered his hole.

What fresh hell had I stepped into?

“Play for them.”

“Sorry, what?” I turned to my captor, who pointed at a piano in the corner of the room.

“His Highness wants you to play for them.”

That had to be the weirdest request I’d ever had if I didn’t include being asked to play “Hit Me Baby One More Time” in a local BDSM club. That was a night I wouldn’t forget in a hurry.

The leather crop connected with the back of my thighs. I reeled back. Why me? Why was I in this god-forsaken place being asked to play music while three people fucked on the bed?

I did as he asked, though, and sat at the piano, flexing my stiff fingers and laying them gently on the keys.

I played one of my own compositions and closed my eyes, swaying as I drew the music from the fine instrument.

I was in another world, as often happened when I played, oblivious to the goings on around me.

I played to the sound of grunts and groans, in no doubt about what was taking place on the bed. Without faltering in my music, I sneaked a peek.

His Highness was banging one of them from behind, fisting the young man's hair. I couldn't see clearly, but his dick was huge, unnaturally proportioned. How on earth could anyone take it? He slammed into him over and over as the other man wanked himself furiously, his eyes wide and glassy, barely focused.

I was sure drugs were involved. I'd seen that look too many times not to recognise it, and not always on someone else. On the nights I'd written some of my best work, I was not just high on life but high on whatever I'd been able to get my hands on.

I was clean now, though. Or so I thought. My memory was fuzzy where that was concerned, and I didn't understand why.

Rick!

His Highness picked up the pace, and as I watched, I increased the tempo of my music, matching him stroke for stroke.

I was mesmerised by him, the taut muscles in his arse clenching with each thrust. His long blond hair was wet with sweat running in rivulets down his back. He grunted, impaling the man on his long cock. He yelled, and his movements faltered as he shot his load.

As His Highness pulled out, the young man cried out, his arse dripping with cum tinged with the telltale sign of blood. I got a closer look at the cock that had done that to him, startled at its size. I'd seen some dicks in my time, but never one that big. Not just its length but girth too.

His Highness climbed off the bed, leaving the young man writhing in agony, or was it ecstasy? Honestly? It was hard to tell.

The man crawled to the top of the bed and curled in on himself, trying to make himself as small as possible. I wasn't sure I would have done anything differently.

I continued to play, uncertain if I should stop, but the style of my music changed to a more melancholy theme, suited to the mood of the room.

His Highness stood off to the side, legs wide and his arms outstretched. My captor knelt before him, washing him down with a silken cloth, removing all evidence of his encounter.

Amazement replaced my disgust at what he'd done as once again his cock rose to attention. How the fuck? It'd take almost every man I knew a lot longer than that to recover, but here he was, his massive prick looking like it was more than ready to go again.

He glanced over at me, a wicked grin on his face. Was it my turn? Did he want to do that to me? While part of me was terrified, another part of me was intrigued. What would it feel like to have that inside of me.

"Play on," he said. "Music is the food of love, or so Mr Shakespeare said."

Not wishing to suffer his wrath, I continued and watched in awe as he took the other man, holding him upright, his front plastered to the back of his partner. The man was too high to notice anything and grinned as His Highness wrecked his hole. He lasted a little longer this time, but not by much. I'd barely got to the end of my next piece before he howled again, falling forward and slumping over the back of the young man.

Neither of them moved, both spent from their exertion.

"You, out. Now!" The lid of the piano slammed down, grazing my fingers. I sat, drawn to the still body of the young man lying on the bed, facing me. His Highness was now lounging on a sofa on the other side of the room, a lit cigar between his fingers.

The young man stared without blinking, and he wasn't breathing either. No telltale rise and fall, just an unnerving stillness.

"Let's go, princess." I followed my captor, eager to be out of the bedroom, visions of the dead man in my head. Hopefully, all he ever wanted me to do was play the piano.

Back in my cage, shackled and hungry, a feeling of nausea and dread hung over me like fog, clinging to me, suffocating me.

Rick? Are you in there?

Who the fuck was Rick, and why was I hearing this voice?

Unsure of how much time had passed, I lay down in my cage and pulled the threadbare cloth over me, trying to dispel the chill that had seeped into my bones. Sleep claimed me within minutes, my dreams disturbed by the events of the day.

I needed out, but I had to think of a way to do that without losing my life in the process.

TWO

Eric

Several days had passed since they had taken me to His Highness's bedroom. Days where I'd lain awake, thinking about what I'd seen. I wondered, not for the first time, what had happened to the young man. Was he dead?

He sure had looked that way. I suspected a drug overdose but had no way of knowing for definite. It'd been a while since I'd seen anyone so far under.

My captor had taken the other occupants of the cages one by one. Several didn't come back. Had they met the same fate. Were they too lost to the ravages of cocaine, smack, or whatever it was they ingested or injected?

On the fourth day, my captor stopped by my cage, and I was more than eager to talk to him. I did as he asked with no arguments or sass, desperate for news. He released me from the cage and walked away, beckoning me to follow him.

"Those men, the ones from before. What happened to them?"

"None of your business, princess. You do as you're told and don't ask questions. Life will be much easier for you."

Like it was easy living in a cage five feet square. I quickened my pace, staying as close to him as I could.

"I need to know."

"You need to know jack shit. You're better off *not* knowing." Once again he led me to the bathroom I'd been in before.

He removed the shackles and pointed to the shower, then twisted the dials until hot water gushed from the shower head.

"Make it quick. He won't wait long." He turned his back, and I stepped out of the small shorts I was still wearing.

I washed thoroughly, feeling almost human, but before long, the water shut off, and I was left shivering.

“Here, dry off and put these on.” A towel hit me in the chest, followed by another minute pair of shorts. I dried off quickly, conscious of my nudity. I turned my back, hiding myself from my captor.

“Nothing I’ve not seen or felt before, princess.” His voice was right by my ear, and a shudder passed through me. I stood still, silently praying he’d lay his hands on me again.

I wasn’t disappointed as his calloused hands stroked down my length, his erection hard against my arse.

“Is this what you want, darlin’?” he whispered. The coarse fabric of his jeans rubbed against my skin, lighting me up from the inside.

“Yes,” I said, breathless with desire.

“If His Highness wasn’t waiting, I’d be right up this arse of yours.” His gravelly voice made me shiver. Months of celibacy and I was panting like a dog in heat.

He slapped my bare skin and stepped away. “Chop, chop, princess. Time’s ticking.”

Dammit. I slipped on the shorts and followed him into the bedroom.

His Highness was nude again, lounging on his bed, three naked men servicing him this time. One between his legs, his head bobbing up and down, while the other two licked and kissed him as he caressed both their bodies.

I stopped in my tracks. Foursomes were no surprise, but the whole scenario made me all kinds of uncomfortable. Pills and used needles littered the dresser. Rubber tubes and burnt spoons were calling to me, the need for the high they offered shouting loudly.

“If you want to join them, I can make that happen, princess,” my captor whispered in my ear.

Did I want to? Part of me screamed yes. An inner voice yelled at me to climb onto the bed and ride that monster dick. I took an involuntary step forward, drawn to the orgy before me, but a hand on my shoulder stopped me.

“Not today. He wants you to play, and neither of us wants to upset him when he’s in this mood.”

I did as he asked, took my place at the piano, and played, spurred on by the live show in front of my eyes. I stood from the bench but kept on playing as the music reached a crescendo, getting louder and louder. It was intoxicating.

Fever burnt through me, sweat dripping from my heated skin. Arousal would come next; it always did. Music was my aphrodisiac. Music was my drug of choice.

“Here, princess. Swallow this.” I opened on instinct, my eyes closed, feeling the pill on my tongue. I swallowed it dry, struggling to get it down. I was out of practice, and all it had taken was two weeks in a cage to undo all the hard work I’d done to kick the habit.

I opened my eyes. My captor wore a smug smile on his flushed face.

How had I never noticed him before? Bleached blond, wavy hair; black eyes as dark as night, light reflecting like diamonds sparkling in the shadows. Tattoos covered almost every inch of his bare chest. I’d never been a fan, but I was willing to make an exception this time.

His eyes were wild, pupils dilated. High as a kite.

Fuck, I wanted him.

I lifted my hands from the keyboard, and the music stopped, allowing loud groans to fill the air.

I looked over at the bed. His Highness was fucking hard while his partner shouted at the top of his lungs.

“Play the fucking music,” His Highness roared. “I need it.”

I couldn't tear my eyes away from the bed until a sharp whip to my knuckles had me playing again. Bach, Beethoven, Rachmaninoff, Tchaikovsky. I played them all. The drug I'd swallowed fuelled my music. It was exhilarating, hedonistic, and I fucking loved it.

This was what I loved.

Rick, come back to me.

That voice again. I ignored it. I was never going back. This was where I belonged. In this hellhole of a prison, but right here, I could be myself. I could play, I could fuck, and I could get high. Nothing and no one to stop me.

Unsure of how long I'd played, I collapsed back to the bench, exhausted, finally resting my hands in my lap.

I looked around me. Four bodies lay on the bed, unmoving. Dead or alive, I had no way of knowing.

But where was my captor? Was I finally alone? Could I make my escape?

I was in no fit state. I was parched, disorientated, and my vision swam. An all too familiar feeling.

“Thinking of going somewhere? I'm not done with you yet.” That voice in my ear again, a voice full of promise.

“I need...” What did I need?

I needed him.

“I've got you.” Weak and unable to stand, my captor lifted me in his strong arms and carried me back to the bathroom. He placed me in the bath and removed the remainder of his clothes, revealing his limp cock hanging between his legs.

I stared as the brightly coloured tattoos swirled on his body: a snake slithered around his torso and up towards his neck. A wolf yawned, his fangs dripped with bright red blood, the droplets turning to roses on a thorny vine spreading down his thighs before meeting with a skeletal face, spiders crawling out of the empty eye sockets.

I shook my head to clear the images, but dizziness caused my head to spin.

“Don’t be sick, princess. That’s not nice.”

He lifted a glass of cool water to my lips, and I drank greedily, quenching my thirst. The relief was immediate, and I sank back into the bath, the warmth of the water helping me to drift into oblivion.

Rick? Nurse, nurse. I think he’s waking up.

The same calloused hand that had touched me before did so again, bringing me back to my senses.

He was rough this time. All gentleness had disappeared, but I didn’t care. I needed to feel him, feel this was real, not some figment of my imagination.

“Stand up and turn around.” The command in his voice was unmistakable, and I did as he asked, not faltering once. “Take off the shorts and bend over.”

I managed, balancing as I removed first one leg, then the other, then threw the sodden shorts to the side. I rested my hands on the side of the bath, offering myself to him.

“Such a good princess you are.” His rough hands massaged my cheeks, spreading them wide. “Yes, that’s what I want to see.”

He stepped up behind me, and I dropped my chin to my chest as he rubbed his blunt cock down the crack of my arse, hovering around my entrance.

“Do it.” I panted. “Just fuck me already.”

“Patience, princess. Let me at least get a bit of lube.”

“I don’t need it.” I spat on my hand and reached behind me. I couldn’t wait. This had to happen now.

“If you say so, princess.”

I screwed my eyes shut as he edged forward and entered me slowly. Fuck this for a game of soldiers. As his dick filled me completely, I pushed back.

“It’s like that, is it?” he said through gritted teeth.

“Yeah, just like that.” I had to feel it.

He set a punishing pace, and I fucking loved it. But where was the pain? Where was the sting? He wasn’t quite as big as His Highness, but I wasn’t going to complain.

Relentless. That was the only word for it. He fucked me relentlessly, his huge hands gripping my hips as he rammed into me over and over again.

A hand clutched my hair and yanked my head back, bringing me upright, changing the angle.

Sweat dripped from him, his breath hot on my neck as he fucked me.

“You like that, angel? My fucking angel.”

I fucking loved it and reached between my legs to grab my dick. I was close to coming. If only I could tell Hugo I’d won the bet. In fact, I’d won the fucking jackpot.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck.” Each word brought a fresh thrust from my captor. Harder, sharper, with purpose.

My balls tightened as I neared my orgasm. I was so fucking close now.

“Do it,” I shouted. “Fill me with your cum. Fuck me. Do it, for fuck’s sake.”

His fingers dug into my skin, but he did as I asked, harder and deeper, frenzied in his movements, slamming his hips into

me.

He howled as he came and pumped me full of his cum, and his movements slow and deliberate.

My legs buckled as my dick erupted, spurt after spurt hitting the side of the bath. I fell forward, almost hitting my head.

“I’ve got you, princess.”

“I think I prefer angel,” I whispered, all my energy gone. I was crashing hard, coming down from my drug-induced high and probably the best sex I’d ever had.

He sank into the water, taking me with him, and wrapped his arms around me. I sat on his lap, resting my head on his shoulder.

“I could sleep for a week.”

“In a week, it’ll be Christmas,” he murmured.

“That can’t be right. How long have I been here? I have to get home.”

“Where’s home, angel? You have no home. You belong here now.”

“No.” I didn’t belong here. I had a home, a cat, and a Hugo. I had something else too, something worth living for. Someone worth living for. I was sure of it.

“You belong to him now. There’s no going back, angel.”

I struggled and thrashed against him, water splashing everywhere.

“You can’t make me stay. I have to get away.” That familiar manic feeling crashed over me.

“Once you’re here, there’s no escaping, angel. About time you got that into that pretty little head of yours.”

He tightened his arms around me, halting my movements.

“I need to go home.” I sobbed. Almost three weeks of captivity and it finally hit me that he was right. I might never see my home again.

“You’re right where you need to be. Sleep now, angel. You need your rest.”

I succumbed to his words. Sleep claimed me, and once again, I remembered nothing.

I think he’s coming to. Did you see his eyes flickering? Nurse? Did you see that?

THREE

Eric

I stretched like a cat in the warm sun, relieving the fatigue from my muscles. If it weren't for the discomfort in my arse, I'd have thought I'd dreamt last night, but it had happened all right, and I felt deliciously satisfied.

Why wasn't I back in the cage, though? My last memory was of me lying in the hot water, my captor's arms around me, lulling me to sleep. How come I was here in this bed?

I glanced over to my companion, the subtle rise and fall of his chest reminding me that this was indeed real and no dream.

Why did I have the overwhelming feeling that this wasn't right, that something was a little off-kilter?

I desperately needed to pee. And take something to ease the headache from hell, no doubt from the drug he'd slipped into my mouth. I had no idea what it was, but seeing the swirling tattoos on his body, it suggested something hallucinogenic.

The craving was back, though, slowly building, making my skin itch from the inside.

"Where are you going, angel? It's still early."

Was it? I had no concept of time, having been kept in a windowless room for so long. It could have been midday for all I knew.

"I, erm, need to pee." I climbed out of bed. I was naked and self-conscious of my too-thin body. Sometimes I'd been unable to afford food. Add on another three weeks of captivity with little to eat, and I was wasting away.

The room wasn't quite as opulent as His Highness's, but a darn sight better than what I was used to, even at home.

Two doors led from the room, and I took a guess that the bathroom wasn't the one with the locks and bolts.

I walked towards the other but stopped, startled by my reflection in the full-length mirror on the wardrobe door.

I pressed my fingers to livid bruises on my hips, a stark reminder of last night's sex. The skin blanched around them.

"Hurry up and piss. I want you back here in my bed." His commanding tone brooked no argument. I rushed to the bathroom and returned to the bed in record time.

I slipped beneath the covers. What did he expect of me? At least in the cage, there was only me and no expectations.

As he ran his hands across my body, I tensed. I felt woefully inadequate today. Gone was my confidence of last night to be replaced by an anxiousness I couldn't explain. Why had he picked me? Surely, he could have chosen better-looking men. Men with more about them. Men with impressive physiques.

I had nothing to offer. I was a lowly composer with nothing going for him. A waste of time, a loser.

How many times had I heard those words, every one stinging over and over, like an angry wasp intent on causing as much harm as possible? And hurt they did, making me feel like my life and my work were worthless.

I blinked away tears. When was the last time I'd felt like this? That my life was futile, that everyone would be better off without me. I turned away from my captor. Hopefully, he hadn't seen.

"What's wrong, angel? Why the tears?" Guess I wasn't so good at hiding them after all.

I shrugged. "I don't want to talk about it."

"You feel worthless, under-appreciated, but most of all, you feel inadequate."

How did he know this?

"I know everything about you, angel. I can tell you every little thing about your life, right down to your cat and your

friend, Hugo.” He placed his hand on my hip and squeezed, catching the bruises he’d left last night. “Now, why don’t you let me help you forget, angel? I can help you remember only the good things.”

I lay on my back, looking into the black eyes that had fascinated me. Not one glint of colour, just a reflection of the darkness I felt inside me.

“Yes, I want that.”

He shifted to lie on top of me, pressing his weight into my body until I thought I would snap. He leant down and kissed me, something we’d not done before, but when he fed me a pill, I realised his reason for doing so.

“You’ll feel good soon, angel. We both will.”

He reached for the drawer in the nightstand and took out a pair of handcuffs.

My eyes widened. I was curious, never having done anything like this before. My sex life had been nothing more than vanilla. The most exciting thing, a hand job in the bathroom of a bar.

“I...I...” I stammered. “I’m not sure.”

“I’m not going to hurt you, angel,” he crooned in my ear. “You said you wanted it. I can make you forget everything.”

I closed my eyes and groaned as he ran his hands down my body, stroking every inch, the hairs on my body standing on end. His touch was electric, lighting every nerve ending until I could stand it no more.

He clicked the cuff around my wrist, and when he lifted them both and fastened the other around the headboard, I didn’t resist.

The drug took hold, and I couldn’t move if I tried, floating on a wave of euphoria, and when I opened my eyes, those

same tattoos came to life. The wolf licked his lips, then lapped at my naked skin.

That wasn't possible, but I didn't imagine the roughness of it as it grazed my body. My captor grinned as spiders skittered between us where our skin touched.

Mind fuck! That was the only way to describe it.

“You like this, angel? The way our bodies meet as one, and now we will be as one. You and me.”

He bent my legs until my knees almost touched my shoulders, exposing every part of me. I was at his mercy in every way, and I couldn't have moved away, even if I'd wanted to.

He placed his hands on my calves and pressed gently until I was folded double, allowing him to push all the way in, right to the hilt.

“So tight, just as I like it.” He leant forward and inhaled deeply, sniffing from my armpit to my neck. “Ahhh, so fucking good.”

Stretched to my limit, I abso-fucking-lutely loved it, and I steeled myself, waiting for him to move. This was going to hurt. I knew it, but he promised he could make me forget.

But as he rammed into me, over and over, never once breaking his rhythm, the pain didn't come.

“Best. Fuck. Ever.” He closed his eyes, but I needed to see him, see the look in his eyes as he fucked me.

“Open your eyes. Look at me,” I said with a confidence I barely felt.

He did as I asked and grinned at me.

“You're loving this, angel. I told you I could make you forget. You don't need Hugo or your fucking cat. You need me to fuck you into oblivion day and night.”

He was right, and as he pounded harder, a blissed-out feeling flooded my body.

“Fuck me. Take it all away. I want to feel like I did last night.”

“That I can do, angel.” His thick cock drilled into me, never slowing.

Rick, come back to me.

What the ever-loving fuck?

“Harder,” I begged. Anything to rid my head of the voice. “I need to come.”

“Not yet, angel. We’ve got all the time in the world.”

I can’t do it without you.

I squeezed my eyes shut. Get out of my fucking head!

“Here, take another.” Maybe he realised I was losing focus, but this would help. “It’ll make you feel good, angel.”

I gazed into his eyes, into the inky darkness, into his soul, and swallowed the pill.

Blackness threatened to engulf me, sucking me under into the inner sanctum of my mind. I lost all sensation of time, hearing nothing but skin on skin.

I looked around me. Faces peered from the walls, heads thrown back in silent laughter. Fingers pointed, mocking me. Images came into view and faded away to be replaced by others.

I recognised every face, for every one was me.

The earlier euphoria dwindled as I lost myself to the ravages of the drugs. I slipped into oblivion, into a place full of screams and shouts, of loud music and drum beats.

It was deafening.

I needed to get away, and I struggled against the restraints holding me in place.

“Angel, angel.” Who the fuck was angel? I was princess, or was I Eric?

Who was I? What was I doing here?

“Help me!” I screamed as my eyes flew open, staring ahead, seeing no one.

Seeing nothing but the bars of my cage.

“Princess. I don’t know what you were dreaming about, but you were making a right fucking noise.”

My captor stood next to me.

“I was with you,” I said. “In your bed.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. You’ve been here all night. After His Highness had finished, I brought you back here, and you’ve been sleeping ever since.”

There was something in his words, something I didn’t believe.

“I brought you some food. You should eat, princess.” He slid a plate of food and a bottle of water through the gap in the cage, then stepped out of reach.

I was ravenous and shovelled it into my mouth, my shackles rattling with every movement.

“Slow down, angel. You’ll choke.”

I stopped eating. He’d called me that last night. I was sure of it.

“You’re lying.” I continued to eat. Who knew when I’d next get another meal?

“Now, why would I do that? Eat your food. His Highness wants you tonight.” With that, he turned and walked to the next cage.

As he bent down, a rose peeked out from the bottom of his shirt, and I knew then I hadn't been dreaming, that last night had happened.

I slid the shackles up my arms to view the skin beneath them. Fresh marks circled my wrists, marks that only handcuffs could make.

I glanced over to my captor. He watched me with interest.

"Eat up, princess. You'll need your strength later." He walked away, whistling, and not for the first time, I wished I were home.

FOUR

Dex

“You should go home and rest, Dex. You’ve been here almost non-stop for the past three weeks.”

“How can I? What if he wakes up and I’m not here?”

My mother had wrapped her arms around me from behind, and she kissed the top of my head. I leant into her embrace. She’d been my rock these past few weeks and although she’d not always seen eye to eye with Rick, she’d accepted him, warts and all.

“It’s been three weeks now. The doctors said...”

“I don’t care what the doctors said.”

I fucking knew what the doctors said. They had no idea why he wouldn’t wake up. That it was just a matter of time. I fucking knew that, but I wasn’t giving up hope. He had to come back to me. He just had to.

He’d been out in the car on his way back from some gig a friend of his had been playing at. I was supposed to go with him, but work had called, and I’d gone in at the last minute.

If only I’d said no and gone with him. If only I’d been driving instead of him. If only I’d seen the signs. If only...if only.

But it was too fucking late now. The truth was, he was an addict, always would be, even though he’d been clean for years. The thought he’d caused the accident gnawed at me.

Work had kept me from him, leaving him alone to his own mind, and that was never a good place for him to be. The constant pressure he put on himself to do well, to be the best. I was the only one who could ground him. He’d said I was his rock. His voice of reason.

He was staying clean for me. Except he hadn’t.

The accident hadn't been his fault, thank god. Ironically, a drunk driver had jumped the lights and crashed into him, totalling the car. The driver's side had taken the brunt of it, which brought us to the here and now.

The doctors had no idea what to say. Other than scrapes and bruises and a couple of broken bones, there was no obvious cause for his coma. Three weeks on and he still hadn't woken up.

"Dex, please. Go home, even if it's only for an hour or two to freshen up."

Reluctantly, I stood, glancing once again at the face of my husband locked up in his own mind. A place he hated to be.

His eyes flickered again, a grimace crossing his face. What the hell was going on inside his head?

I sighed and took the offered handkerchief from my mum, wiping my face and nose.

"You'll call me the minute anything happens," I said.

"I will, I promise." I could tell from the look on her face she knew there'd be no change, that when I returned, he'd be in the exact same state as he was now.

I headed for the door but took one last look. Would he ever wake?

I trudged wearily down the deserted corridor. It was late, a handful of nurses on duty. From what I'd seen, only two other patients occupied rooms on this floor. A woman who had tried to take her own life, and the driver of the vehicle that had brought my husband here.

For many hours, I'd stood at his door, silently cursing the bastard for being so fucking inconsiderate. I was quietly pleased no one had come to visit, not in the three weeks he'd been here. He didn't deserve it for what he'd done. I'd heard the nurses talking to him, just random shit, but he lay there, unmoving.

His chest was bare, and I'd been tempted to view the tattoos covering his body. I'd seen a wolf and a thorny vine full of roses. A couple of the nurses had talked about a creepy skull on his thigh with spiders and a snake.

He was attractive in his own way but couldn't hold a candle to Rick, although it wasn't his looks that had drawn me. It'd been his smile, the casual way he'd played the piano, how he'd flirted with me and no one else.

That had been eight years ago, and we'd rarely been apart since then. We'd married three years later and had just celebrated our fifth anniversary. I couldn't lose him. Not now.

Over the past three weeks, I'd pleaded with him to come back to me, hoping even though he was in a coma, he'd hear me.

"Looking at him won't wake him up, you know." I turned to a nurse who had cared for them both. "Not sure he ever will."

"He ruined both lives then, didn't he?" I didn't hide the bitterness I felt towards him. He'd taken my husband from me. He didn't deserve my pity.

She rubbed my arm. "I know, Dex, but you have to have hope Rick will wake up. He has more chance than he does." She gestured to the man in the bed. "He has no one. We don't even have a name."

He could die today for all I cared. I wasn't normally so cruel, but the damage he'd caused had made me bitter. I could never, ever forgive him.

"Then he'll rot in hell, nameless. I'm sorry, but I can't feel anything but hate towards him right now."

"I understand, but at some point, you'll have to let go of your anger, else it'll fester inside you. You need to remember the good times with Rick, make sure he gets better and take care of him."

“If he ever comes out of it.” I should go before I said something I’d regret. “I need to go home. I told Mum I’d only be gone a couple of hours. I’ve wasted enough time looking at this sorry piece of shit.”

“Don’t lose yourself to grief and hate, Dex. I’ve seen it happen too many times. You’re a good man.”

She walked back to her station, and I carried on out of the hospital and back to our apartment. I let myself in and stood in the kitchen.

The moment I heard about the accident, I’d rushed out of the apartment and had hardly been back since. The place was a fucking mess, with unwashed plates and cups littering each surface. I needed to tidy up, take my mind off my comatose husband.

I took off my jacket and got to work. I refilled the dishwasher and turned it on, then cleaned and bleached every surface I could reach.

I moved to the lounge and picked up Rick’s clothes from the sofa. For some reason, he would throw his clothes there every time he came home. I lost count of the times I’d told him the sofa was not a wardrobe. He had a perfectly good closet in our bedroom.

He’d laugh and tell me he’d tidy it up tomorrow, but he rarely did. I picked up his favourite T-shirt and brought it to my nose. The faint smell of his cologne lingered, and I closed my stinging eyes, burying my face in his scent. My darling Rick.

I sank to my knees, still holding the T-shirt tightly, and sobbed. My chest ached, as did my heart. I didn’t know how I’d live without him. Hopefully, I wouldn’t have to.

“Pull yourself together. Get the place tidy for when he comes home. Positive thoughts.” I told myself.

I could almost hear Rick's voice encouraging me to get off my arse and get the place sorted. Guess I should listen to him.

Clothes bundled in my arms, I walked into our bedroom, where the bed was still unmade. Rick's clothes lay piled on a chair in the corner of the room. He really was an untidy bastard. I checked the time. Shit, I'd been away from the hospital for two hours, and I'd hardly got started.

My heart beating in my throat, I searched for my phone and finally found it on the hall table. What if Mum had called and I'd not heard it? I needn't have worried. Not one missed call, not even a text, and as much as I wanted to rush back to his side, getting the apartment straight was something I had to do.

I folded his clothes, straightening them with care and attention, then put them away in the cupboards and drawers. I'd need to educate him when he came home, make sure he kept the fucking place tidy. I stopped for a moment to catch my breath. He had to come home. I needed him.

"Jesus, Rick. I can't do this without you. You have to come home to me."

I sat on the edge of the bed and fingered the T-shirt I'd placed on my pillow. I fucking loved him more than life itself. I couldn't believe I could lose him because of someone else's fucking stupidity.

His nightstand was typical of him. Rick and his mess. He'd left everything out: glasses, watches, the bracelet I'd bought him for Christmas. Everything needed tidying.

I pulled open the drawer, but something was sticking, and I couldn't open it fully. I jiggled it until finally it came free. Wads of screwed-up paper fell to the floor. What the hell?

I was used to this. Being a composer, he'd leave reams of sheet music everywhere, but this was different. These were written words, a story.

I flicked through them and tried to put them in order, but I had no idea what went where.

The guy's name was Eric. He was a struggling composer, playing the piano in the local bars for extra cash to cover his bills. I read each page, fascinated by the story. A friend called Hugo and a sweet cat, Shadow, that he loved. Rick had always wanted one, and the more I read, the more the similarities to his earlier life struck me.

The drugs, the parties, even the night we met. Except in his story, we didn't. Strangely, this bothered me more than the drug-taking, more than the men he talked about who hit on him each night he played in the bar.

Was that how he'd seen me? Someone who preyed on him when he was most vulnerable, but I knew that wasn't right. If anything, he'd chased me, not the other way around.

I sat on the floor, Rick's work spread around me, his handwritten scrawl so familiar yet the words so not like him. I leant against the bed, exhausted. How long had it been since I'd slept? Every time I closed my eyes, all I saw was Rick's face on the day of the accident.

I was so damn tired.

I checked my phone again. Still no word from the hospital. I should go back, though, to relieve Mum. It wasn't fair for me to leave her there alone.

"Mum," I said when she answered. "I'm sorry I've been longer than I said. I'll shower and be right back."

"Take your time, Dex. There's been no change. I don't think another hour or so will make much difference."

I hated that she was right. Hated this could be the end of our marriage. I hated the doctors who were clueless. Today, I hated the world.

"Yeah, see you soon."

I rubbed my eyes and squeezed them shut, ignoring the images that assaulted my brain.

Five fucking minutes was all I wanted, just five minutes.

I woke up with a start to a dark room. What the hell time was it?

I scrambled around, feeling for my phone. Instead, my fingers touched a small wooden box wedged under the nightstand. I managed to find the light switch and turned on the lamp.

I eased it open. What was inside? If only I hadn't.

Small bags, each with a handful of pills inside, filled the box. I had no idea what they were but knew exactly why they were there.

Fucking Rick. He swore to me he was clean, but I'd had my doubts. I'd refused to see what was right in front of my eyes. Rick was using again.

Did I even know my husband anymore? Had we grown so far apart he was lost to me in more ways than one?

It was time to get him back. Time to get back to him, time to reclaim my husband.

Half an hour later, I entered the hospital, ignoring the unknown man lying in the room next to Rick. He could go fuck himself. Rick was my focus, and I'd do what I could, sit for as long as necessary until he woke up.

"Everything alright, son?" Mum asked as I took my place next to his bed. "You look different somehow."

I felt different, more positive about the outcome.

"I'm good. You go home, and thank you for staying. Rick hasn't always been the easiest man to get along with. I know he wasn't what you envisaged for me, but he's my life, my soul mate."

“He makes you happy, and that’s all that matters. I’ll come back tomorrow. See how you’re both doing.”

She kissed my cheek and left me alone with my husband and my thoughts.

I took his hand in mine, brought it to my lips, and kissed his cool fingers.

“You’d best come back to me, you asshole. Don’t you dare leave me to go through life alone. If you don’t make it, I’ll bloody drag you back here and kick your sorry arse from here to kingdom come.”

I swore his lips twitched as if he were listening and had heard every word I’d said.

He’d better be. Leaving was not an option.

FIVE

Eric

“Angel, wake up. Where did you go?”

My captor’s gravelly voice in my ear sent shivers through me, affecting parts of me I’d beg him to touch again.

I rolled over. Once again, I was in his bed. How the fuck had I got here? The last thing I recalled I was eating my meagre dinner back in my cage, but here I was, lying in comfort in a soft bed, cocooned in the warmth of his embrace.

“I was in my cage. You left me there.” I couldn’t hide the disappointment I’d felt waking there with his denial ringing in my ears.

“Couldn’t let His Highness find you here, and then there was the fit. I think maybe I gave you too much, and you passed out. I thought I’d lost you, angel.”

I remembered feeling strange, voices in my head, the walls moving. Yeah, I’d stopped taking drugs for a reason and because of someone.

“Aren’t you scared he’ll find me again?”

“He’s not around right now, so we can carry on what we started, and hopefully, this time, we’ll both get to finish. I’ve so much I want to do to you, angel.”

He nuzzled into my neck. Such an affectionate gesture, considering our actual relationship: captor and prisoner.

“I want to fuck you so bad, angel.” He stroked my arm with a featherlight touch. A shiver ran through my body. I wanted that too but refrained from telling him. I didn’t want to seem desperate, as much as I was.

He handed me a pill. “Here, take this.”

It was a small, pink, insignificant pill. I hesitated, not wanting to take it. As much as the drugs heightened the senses, they also dulled them and made me forget. Despite what I'd said yesterday, today I had to remember what was happening to me.

I was losing time, losing my memory or losing my mind.

This time, I didn't want to forget any of the time I spent with him.

"No. I don't want it."

"It'll make you feel good, angel."

I threw it to the side and turned to face him. "Not this time."

He rolled onto his back, taking me with him so I straddled his thighs. My cock nestled next to his, both of us erect.

He was bigger than me, but not by much, and I knew exactly what I wanted him to do with it.

I lifted myself and reached behind me, intent on readying myself for him.

"You don't need to do that. You can take me, angel. Spread your cheeks for me."

I did as he asked, pulling my buttocks wide and sank down, inch by inch, as he stretched me, filling me.

"Oh, yeah, angel. Just like that. I want to fuck you so hard. Fuck you until you can't walk straight."

He set a punishing pace, fucking me until my eyes rolled to the back of my head, and I saw stars. Big fucking fireworks went on in my head as he bruised my insides, catching my prostate with every thrust.

Moments later, I was on my front with no clue how I'd got there.

Despite me not taking the pill, I'd lost time again.

My legs were stretched wide to the sides, tied by my ankles to the bed. I couldn't move. My arms were out in front, handcuffed once again to the headboard.

I was blindfolded and completely on display.

Big, calloused hands ran along my thighs, then spread my arse cheeks even wider. A gob of saliva landed on my hole, and a thick thumb entered me, followed by another. I gasped at the intrusion, not used to this kind of sex.

“Look at you. So ready for me, but first, we're going to play.”

He moved away, and I heard a drawer open. I could only imagine what he was doing.

Cold lube dripped down my arse, and I jerked, the ropes cutting into my skin.

“Are you ready for this, angel?”

Was I? I didn't know what to expect but wasn't surprised when a fat dildo was inserted.

Jesus fucking Christ.

I'd never felt so violated, but I knew struggling wouldn't do any good. Despite my discomfort, my cock grew, friction building as it rubbed against the bedsheets.

“I know you're enjoying it, angel.”

I told myself I wasn't, but as he forced the dildo deeper, I couldn't stop my whimper. Stretched farther than I ever imagined possible, he continued pushing until I thought he'd split me wide.

He picked up the pace. It was painful, but I was so fucking turned on. And when he struck me with the leather crop he carried with him every day, I yelled.

“Oh, god. Fuck me harder.” Lust filled my every thought until I couldn't imagine living without this.

He thrust deeper and deeper, continuing to whip me with the crop. The pleasure, the sting, and the pain were all too much.

“Stop, please. I can’t take it anymore.”

“Yes, you can, angel. You’re such a good slut for me. A little longer.”

Tears ran from my eyes as I silently begged for him to stop, but my traitorous dick had other ideas, and I shot my load, wetting my stomach and the sheets beneath me.

“There, angel. Tell me it wasn’t good for you.” He stopped fucking me and removed the dildo, all the time caressing my back, running his hand down my spine, easing my discomfort. My arse clenched, my hole closing slowly.

“Now it’s my turn, angel, and I know you can come again for me.” He stopped stroking and guided his dick to my entrance, forcing me open again. At least this time it didn’t hurt as much. I was primed and ready.

“I...I...” Words eluded me. I wanted to tell him I didn’t want it, I’d hated every moment, but deep down, I’d revelled in the pain, enjoying every moment.

“You what, angel? You can’t lie to me. I know all your inner thoughts. You’re loving this, even though you’re unsure. Everyone’s vanilla until they’re not.”

How could he know what I was thinking? It was almost as if he was inside my head, but how? This was real. I felt and saw him. Felt him moving inside me. That couldn’t be fabricated.

I was damn sure this wasn’t a series of elaborate wet dreams.

“Stay with me, angel. Not much longer now.” I knew he was close. His voice was strained as he neared his orgasm. “Come for me again.”

“I can’t.” But as I spoke the words, I knew it to be a lie. My climax built, and as he filled me with his cum, the force of

another orgasm knocked me for six.

He pulsed inside me, pumping me full of his warm spunk. As he withdrew, I could barely breathe, waiting for the inevitable sting as his fluid dripped from me. He'd stretched me beyond anything I'd been used to.

Every part of me was sore: my arse, arms, legs. I needed a long bath to ease my muscles and joints, but I was exhausted. I could sleep forever.

“Lie there, angel. Let me take care of you.” He rubbed soothing lotion into my cheeks. He'd whipped me so hard it would have left marks.

He caressed my skin, relieving the pain. He made his way up to my shoulders, where he massaged the life back into them, after removing the cuffs. Being shackled to the bed for so long, I'd lost all sensation, my hands and fingers tingling as the blood rushed back into them.

The rhythmic movement relaxed not only my body but my mind too. I felt more at peace than I had in a long while. All traces of pain had disappeared, and I was left with a feeling of serene contentment, as if the weight of the world had been lifted.

It was bliss, and I drifted off to sleep.

When I came to next, I was clean and clothed, lying in my captor's bed. The sheets smelt fresh. How had he managed to do it without waking me?

Another conundrum I needed to solve.

I was alone and feeling well rested. It'd been a while since I'd felt this good. All my aches had gone. My backside no longer felt sore, and my arms and legs were pain-free. I felt like a new man.

As my stomach grumbled, I scooted out of bed. I was desperate for food and didn't remember the last time I'd eaten.

Dizziness washed over me, and I stumbled as my feet hit the floor.

I managed to reach the bathroom and relieved myself, viewing myself in the mirror. I looked drawn and tired, my eyes sunk into my head, like a dead man walking. How could that be?

I washed my hands, then poked and prodded my face. What in hell's name was going on? I looked worse than I ever had, even when I was pumped so full of drugs I didn't know my own name.

My body was skin and bone, hardly an ounce of fat on me. I'd not been eating much lately, but there was no way to explain my appearance. My skin was pale and paper thin. I looked ill, at death's door.

Something wasn't right.

I staggered back to bed. A tray sat on my nightstand, laden with food. I'd heard no one come in, so where had it come from? I crawled beneath the covers and dragged the tray towards me with effort.

Since I'd seen myself in the mirror, it was as if my life force was draining away, as if I were losing a battle to live I knew nothing about.

It took all my strength to eat the food in front of me. A meal I would normally have devoured took me an age to eat. I finally gave up, leaving the majority of the food untouched. I'd managed some fruit, a handful of nuts, and a slice of unbuttered toast.

A hot cup of coffee on the nightstand emitted a delicious aroma, but I had no energy to reach it.

"Here, let me help you, angel."

My captor appeared beside my bed and lifted the cup to my lips.

“Where did you come from?” I asked weakly, then took a sip, relishing the bitter brew.

“I’ve been right here with you. Every step of the way. Don’t you remember, angel?”

I remembered nothing. My memory was fading fast.

What was I doing here? How long had I been here?

“I don’t know who you are. Why am I here?” I sank back into the soft pillows and closed my eyes.

Breathing was difficult, talking even more so.

“Angel, are you ok? Come back to me. Please don’t leave me.”

What did he mean? I was going nowhere. I just needed to sleep.

A hand held mine, a thumb stroking back and forth, providing comfort.

“I’m not leaving you,” I whispered. “I’m staying right here.”

“Oh my god, Rick. You’re awake.”

Of course I was awake, and who the hell was Rick?

I slowly opened my eyes. I was no longer in the plush bedroom of my captor but in a room, stark and cold, a man I didn’t recognise sitting next to me.

I snatched my hand away. Who the hell was he, and why was he holding my hand?

So many questions and very little in the way of answers.

“Nurse, he’s awake. He’s awake,” the man shouted.

I closed my eyes and tried to go back to sleep. Hopefully, I’d wake up again back in the comfort of my captor’s room, but the incessant beeping of the machine attached to me kept me awake.

Fuck!

Was this real? Or was my captor's room real?

I was so fucking confused.

A myriad of people talking, poking, and prodding me, prevented me from going back to sleep. Small lights were shone in my eyes, and my blood pressure was taken several times. All the while, I wished I was somewhere else...with someone else.

I answered questions as much as I could. What year was it? Who was the prime minister? Did I know what had happened? All my replies were correct.

The only answer I couldn't give was the name of the man hovering in the doorway. The one with worry in his eyes, the one asking the questions.

The one proclaiming to be my husband.

SIX

Eric/Rick

“Don’t you remember me?” my husband asked, tears in his eyes.

I shook my head. I had absolutely no recollection of who he was, but I knew he believed what he said to be true.

It was several days after I’d woken up, and he was still here. He’d stopped holding my hand, but had kept his place at my bedside, rarely leaving it.

A woman who said she was his mother would occasionally visit, a pitying look on her face as she watched her son try desperately to get me to remember him.

I’d heard them whisper as I feigned sleep, talking about what they could do to help me remember. It was no use. The only men I recalled were Hugo and my captor.

I glanced over to the table by the window, feeling a connection to the sparsely decorated Christmas tree. It looked how I felt: miserable.

The machines had gone at least, as had the beeping, leaving behind an uncomfortable silence.

“Can I show you some pictures?” Dex asked.

I nodded. It couldn’t hurt. He helped me sit up and fluffed my pillows, making me more comfortable.

“This is us on our first holiday together,” He flicked to another. “And this is us getting the keys to our apartment. Took us ages to get your piano up the stairs. It reminded me of ‘Friends’.”

He swiped to another, and I looked closer.

The photo was clearly taken on our wedding day, both of us dressed in matching suits, laughing at the camera, a picture of

happiness. Confetti was in our hair, and an errant piece was on my tongue. We looked blissfully happy. Something stirred in my mind, a hidden, forgotten memory. I had a vague recollection of the day—sunshine, family, love.

I frowned and pushed the phone away. It wasn't real. It couldn't be real else I'd remember the day. Remember him.

"We've been married for five years. We met in a bar eight years ago where you were playing the piano. It was love at first sight. We're soul mates, Rick. I just wish you could remember."

"I'm sorry. It's just...this accident has taken everything from me. I only remember a man called Hugo and a cat." I couldn't tell him about my captor and what we'd done together. I might not remember him, but he said he was my husband, and I wouldn't hurt him.

"You were living your story. I read it."

"My story? What do you mean?"

"A story you were writing about a struggling composer called Eric. He had a friend called Hugo and played in bars to make more money. I think you were probably hoping to turn it into a play, although you are a composer. Quite a successful one too."

Eric. I knew that name. Wasn't that me?

"I'm Eric."

"No, you're Rick. No one has ever called you Eric." His pitying look annoyed me.

"You're wrong. I'm Eric." Nothing he could do or say could persuade me otherwise.

"I'm sorry. The doctors said not to push you, but I'm so fucking frustrated, Rick. Maybe if I showed you some more pictures, told you a little more about our life together."

“I’m tired. Maybe another time. Why don’t you go home?” Home, again a niggle in my head. In my mind, I saw an apartment, a kitchen, a bedroom, my clothes on the arm of a sofa. I was starting to remember.

“It’s Christmas Eve,” he said. “I have nowhere else to be. We’d usually go out with friends, then go back to our place. You’d play the piano, and we’d watch Midnight Mass on the TV.”

“Tomorrow we’ll have a light breakfast in bed. You’ll have Buck’s Fizz, and I’ll have...”

“Plain old orange juice.” He finished my sentence, smiling.

I remembered his smile.

“I thought I’d lost you, Rick.” He hesitantly reached for my hand and looked to me for permission.

I nodded. Yes, he could take my hand.

“You almost died. He almost killed you.”

“I was driving home and was in an accident.” I also remembered I’d had a couple of pills that night at the gig I was at. I wasn’t high, but I’d definitely been feeling the effects. The rest was kind of fuzzy, though.

“He ran into you, skipped a red light. You’re lucky you aren’t dead.”

“What happened to him? Did he...?”

“Die? No, more’s the pity. He was badly hurt and...” Dex paused. What wasn’t he wasn’t telling me?

“Tell me.”

“He’s down the hallway. Coincidence or not, he woke up just after you did. He’d been in a coma, the same as you were.”

That was fucking strange, and part of me wanted to see him. See the man who had brought my world to its knees.

“I want to see him.”

“No, it’s not a good idea, and the doctors say you have to stay in bed a little longer.”

Although I nodded, I had no intention of lying here in my bed. The moment I was alone, I’d be going down to at least take a look.

“Why don’t you go home? I’ll be fine here, and to be honest, I’m really tired and need to sleep some more. Come back tomorrow, and we’ll have a Christmas of sorts.” While I didn’t remember everything about our life together, pieces were starting to slot into place.

Slowly but surely, memories were filling the gaps, and my dreams were fading.

“I don’t want to leave you.” He squeezed my hand. “Not when you’ve just come back to me.”

“Hey, it’ll be fine. I’m not going anywhere. The doc says I’m fine. I just need a little time to regain my strength. Now go. You look tired, and I’m going to need you to help me remember and get through the next few days.”

That seemed to do the trick, and he stood, then bent down and kissed my forehead.

“I’m so glad you’re back, Rick.”

Eh, that was still not sitting right. I couldn’t forget being called Eric. Or angel.

True to my word, I did go to sleep. For a little while anyway.

“Angel? Where did you go?”

What the fuck? Why was I back here again in my captor’s bed?

“I don’t know. One minute I was here and dying. The next I was in a hospital. I don’t know what’s real and what isn’t anymore.”

“I can assure you this is real, angel. Would your dreams have this in them?”

He placed my hand on his hard cock. “I can give you this again. If you want it.”

I squeezed, and it grew beneath my touch. He was right. This couldn't be a dream. So where had I been?

“I missed you. Missed fucking you.” He pulled me towards him and gripped my arse, squashing our cocks between us, my hand still tight on his.

“Are you sure this is real?” This was the only place I'd lost time. Back in the hospital, time passed at a normal rate.

I squeezed my eyes shut and willed myself back to the hospital room. As much as I wanted to stay here with him, I had to know what was real.

“I'm still here, angel. You can't wish me away. Now, let's rest awhile. Then I know what we can do to pass some more time. I'm tired. We should sleep.”

He slept while I lay awake, trying to figure out what was going on. I was confused, my head filling with memories of Dex. That hadn't happened the last time I was here, and I started to think maybe this wasn't real after all. The question now was how did I get back.

Tiredness finally claimed me, and I sank into the arms of my captor, his breath warm on my cheek.

“Rick, come on now. It's time to wake up. We need to take your vitals.”

A nurse stood next to my bed.

“We thought we'd lost you again. It was difficult to wake you up, but here you are, good as new.” She took my blood pressure. “Everything looks fine. I'll leave you to get some rest. Dex will be back in a few hours, so you have time.”

With that, she left, but by now, I was awake and finding it difficult to go back to sleep. Maybe now was the time to see the guy who had rammed into me.

I stood on wobbly legs, dizziness almost pulling me back down. I drew in a few deep, steadying breaths and took a small step, then another and another until I was at the door.

I glanced over at the nurse's station. It was empty. Two doors led off the hallway. I had no idea which one was the right one, but there was only one way to find out.

I walked down the hallway, using the wall for support. This was harder than I thought it would be, but I'd started, so I needed to finish. A few more steps.

Unlike my room, machines beeped. He must have been in worse shape than I was. A man was lying in the bed, an oxygen mask over his face, obscuring his features. Something about his form, his build, looked familiar.

I moved a little closer, totally exhausted by now. I needed to sit down. If I could just make it to the chair at the side of his bed.

I sat with a thump and caught my breath. I needed a minute.

He looked pale, dark tattoos stark against his skin: a wolf, roses growing on a thorny vine.

What the fuck? I'd recognise those tattoos anywhere, but I had to make sure.

I stood slowly and removed the oxygen mask. There was no mistaking his face. A face I'd gazed upon for the past three weeks. His hair was different, not white like in my dream, but it was definitely him.

How the fuck could this happen?

His eyes flickered opened, focusing as they met mine.

"Angel? Is that you?" he asked

What the hell? I stumbled backwards. I reached for the chair but missed and ended up on the floor, my heart racing.

“How are you here? You were in my dream.” I whispered.

Two nurses ran in.

One of them helped me to the chair. “Rick, what are you doing out of bed? You shouldn’t be in here.”

“Who is he?” I asked her. I had to know.

“Are you hurt anywhere? Sit for a minute, and we’ll get you back to your room.” She fussed around me, checking for broken bones.

“Who. Is. He?” I asked again.

“We don’t know. I shouldn’t even tell you that.” She helped me to my feet.

“Don’t go, angel. Stay with me.”

I had to go back to my room before I did something I might regret, like crawl into his bed.

“Take me back to my room.” I couldn’t be here anymore.

“Angel,” he called out. “Stay with me.”

“Why is he calling you angel?”

I shook my head. I couldn’t tell her why. They’d have me wrapped up in a straight jacket before I could finish my story. I couldn’t believe this was happening. It had been a dream. A fucking dream!

By the time I got back to my bed, I was a bundle of nerves. My heart was pounding, and I felt sick to my stomach. The nurse tucked me back in with strict instructions not to leave again, but I had no intention of returning to that room.

Images I’d forgotten came back to haunt me. The cage, His Highness, the dying eyes of the overdosed man, and of course my captor. How could I forget him after all we’d done together, what he’d done to me? I’d like to say it was non-

consensual, but I knew deep down I'd wanted it: the sex, the drugs, the high.

The dream had been a reflection of my desires. If I stayed around him, I'd want it again, and that couldn't happen. I warred with my emotions. On one hand, the urge to go back there was overwhelming. On the other, I had a husband, a life. Putting that in jeopardy wasn't an option.

Dex returned a few hours later, but I was still on edge, unable to concentrate on anything he was telling me. He wittered on about what we'd do when we got home, amongst other things, and my irritation grew.

"Rick, are you listening to me?" He laughed. "You always do this. Your mind is always somewhere else, writing music in your mind."

"I'm sorry. Today has me all over the place. I just want to go home. Forget this ever happened and get on with our lives." I smiled at him, hoping he'd see the fake sincerity in my words.

"I want that too, Rick. I spoke to the nurses, and they said the doctor would be around later, even though it's Christmas Day. Hopefully, you can come home. They said you got out of bed today. Why did you do it, Rick?"

"I just wanted to see him, that was all. I'm over it."

Lies spewed from my mouth, but it was for the best. For both of us.

"I didn't have a chance to buy you anything, but having you home is gift enough for me."

I took his hand and kissed it. Moving on. That was the best thing to do.

Two days later, a nurse pushed me down the hallway in a wheelchair on our way home, Dex at my side. I took a fleeting look in his room as I passed, but it was empty. No sign of him around.

“What happened to him?” I asked the nurse .

“He’s gone, no longer with us.”

She changed the subject and talked to Dex about something else. Where had he gone? Did he die, or had he been released the same as I was?

I’d never know, and by the end of the week, the dreams had stopped.

My captor didn’t appear again, and I was no longer anyone’s angel.

EPILOGUE

Silas

“Any idea when he might wake up?” I asked the doctor.

Eric had been in a coma for a month now. It had been touch and go for a while, but the doctors were confident he would make it, just no clue as to when he might come around.

“It’s too soon to tell. There is brain activity, so there’s hope. I wish I could give you some idea of when.”

I nodded, I’d wait by his bedside as long as I needed to, and I knew they were doing all they could.

“Fucking hell, angel. What the fuck did you do this time?” It wasn’t the first time I’d asked him this, and I was damn sure it wouldn’t be the last.

I loved the fucking bones of this man, damaged as he was, but he was mine, and no way was I giving up on him.

I’d come home one afternoon to find him slumped over his piano, barely breathing. I don’t know if it was an accidental or deliberate overdose. He’d been so down lately it was hard to tell.

“Whatever’s going on in that beautiful mind of yours, it’s nothing we can’t deal with, angel.”

I stood, the chair scraping noisily across the floor, and walked over to the barred window.

This wasn’t any ordinary hospital. It was a secure unit, one meant to keep him safe.

I should’ve been the one to do that, but I’d failed him. Failed my angel.

It was dark outside, and my reflection stared back at me. I had dark circles beneath my eyes and a heavy scruff on my jaw. When was the last time I’d shaved?

“He loves you in his own way,” I mumbled to myself. “His love is just unconventional, not like any other. Remember that Silas.”

I rubbed my arms against the chill that had seeped into the room, over the tattoos covering them. Angel loved all my tattoos. My wolf, the roses. I’d had them all done for him.

The wolf signified the one always at the door. The roses on a thorny vine were a reminder of our love and that as hurtful as it could be sometimes, there was always beauty there.

“I do love you, Silas.” His voice was barely a whisper.

I ran to his side and clutched his thin hand in mine as I stroked his forehead with my other.

“I know you do, angel. I just needed to remind myself that you wouldn’t leave me. Not intentionally.”

I pressed the buzzer by his bed and summoned the doctors.

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to,” he croaked.

“I know, angel, but we need to do something about it. I need you with me.”

He turned away from me, refusing to meet my eyes.

“Hey, we’ll work on it together. You and me. It’s always been us, together against the shitty world.”

Tear-filled eyes found mine. “I know, Silas.”

Doctors filed into the room, and I stepped back to let them do their jobs, taking the opportunity to grab a cup of the worst vending machine coffee.

I hung around outside until they were done.

“Well?” I asked one of them as they left.

“He seems to be fine. We’ll obviously do more tests, some scans on his brain, but to all intents and purposes, aside from the fact he’s underweight, he seems fine.”

Fine. I breathed a sigh of relief. Thank fuck for that.

“When can he come home?”

“Give it a couple of days for us to do the tests, but he should be good to go then, provided everything is ok.”

I shook his hand, thanked him, and walked back into Eric’s room.

“You had me fucking scared for your life, angel. I’m nothing without you.”

“You’ve always been my everything, Silas. I’m sorry for what happened.” He looked broken, a shell of his former self.

I believed him, but something was bothering me. I’d known him long enough to know when he was hiding something.

“What’s going on? What aren’t you telling me?”

“Tomorrow, Silas. I’m tired now.” He closed his eyes. He was right. I needed to let him sleep.

This could wait. After all, how bad could it be?

A couple of days later, the doctors gave him a clean bill of health. The scans on his brain came back as normal, and he was allowed to go home. He’d seen a psychiatrist and talked to him for hours, and while he was happy the overdose had been accidental, he wanted to see him again.

Eric still needed help.

When we arrived home, he was exhausted, and I was more than ready to let him sleep and regain his strength, but as I walked out of the bedroom, he stopped me.

“Will you sit? We need to talk.”

Those dreaded words that usually signalled the end of something good. Hopefully, that wasn’t the case this time.

“Okay, we can do that.” My worry must have shown on my face, but I did as he asked and sat on the edge of the bed.

“It’s not what you think, but I need to tell you.” He looked down at his hands. “I feel like I’ve cheated on you.”

“How?” What did he mean? He’d been in a hospital bed for the past month unless it had happened before that.

“While I was in my coma, I dreamt. Dreams that make no sense to me. The first one was of you and me, except you were my captor, and I was your prisoner.”

“Is that how you see us, angel? You can leave at any time.” What the fuck was that all about?

“No, god, no.” He paused for a moment. “I enjoyed that part. It was liberating in a way, and that’s not what I’m talking about.”

He took a deep breath and told me about the other part of his dream. A dream within a dream, if you can fucking believe it.

A story of a life with another man. A husband who was so real in his head he thought it was true. Not only that, but he’d lived the life of this other man in his dream too. Felt his thoughts and his feelings. He’d fabricated a whole life for them in his head. Was that what he really wanted?

“It played out like a movie. I could see every scene in my head, both his and mine. I don’t know what was going on.”

When he came to the part about seeing me in the hospital bed, I could only think it was his subconscious reminding him who I was. Who we were, and that I was the one who mattered.

But who fucking knew what the hell was going on? The mind was a strange thing at the best of times.

I was happy he hadn’t actually cheated, that it had all happened in his head.

I climbed into bed next to him and brought him to my chest, offering him what comfort I could.

Despite his admission, I was going nowhere. It was a fucking dream brought on by an overdose and meant nothing to me.

“I’m sorry, Silas. I never meant for it to happen.”

“Nothing to apologise for, angel. I’m happy you’re here now.”

He snuggled into me, and I stroked his back.

“Now tell me about the part where we were captor and prisoner. Sounds fucking interesting to me.”

For the first couple of nights, he’d tossed and turned, often waking with a start. The dreams obviously hadn’t stopped, but I made sure to hold him close, and he’d calm before going back to sleep.

Until one night, he lay awake, and I knew he had something to say.

“What is it, angel?”

“I want you to do to me what you did in my dream.”

We’d refrained from sex since he came home. I’d been waiting for him to be ready.

“Why don’t you tell me, angel? Tell me what you want me to do.”

The more he told me, the hornier I got until my cock was so hard one touch would have me coming in seconds.

I took his hard dick in my hand and stroked him until he moaned my name.

“I want you to fuck me. I, erm, I...”

“Spit it out, angel. Let me know what you need.”

“I want you to tie me up. I know you probably don’t have any handcuffs.” He talked quickly, as if nervous to ask.

I didn’t, but we could improvise.

I grabbed a belt from my jeans and buckled him to the headboard.

My dick throbbed at the sight of him tied up and at my mercy.

“Do you want me to fuck you, angel?”

“Yes, spread me wide and fuck me like you did before.”

His words alone were a massive turn-on. This was more than we’d ever done before, our usual sex being more vanilla than spicy, but I was willing to experiment if that’s what he wanted.

I edged towards him and spread his legs wide, giving me access to his arse. It was all I wanted.

I nudged at his hole, then pushed forward. The ring of muscle gave some resistance, but I slipped in slowly until I was balls deep inside him.

“I need it hard, Silas. I won’t break.”

I didn’t need telling twice and rammed into him over and over until I couldn’t see straight.

Angel’s dick leaked, bobbing with each thrust. We were both close. I sensed it.

“I’ll not take long.”

“Me either. Go harder, though, Silas. As hard as you can.”

I fucked him with renewed passion, deeper and deeper, until I couldn’t take it anymore.

I shouted as I came, filling his arse with so much spunk it was leaking out of his hole.

“I’m coming.” His voice was strained as his dick erupted, unaided, coating his chest and stomach.

I collapsed on top of him, both of us breathless.

“Like that, angel?”

“Yes, my captor, just like that.” A sly smile crossed his face. What the fuck was he thinking?

“I think our love life is going to take a turn for the better, angel.” I bent down and kissed his lips, savouring his taste.

“I know it will. Now how long until we can both go again?”

Later that evening, we lay in bed, watching the twinkling lights on the Christmas tree, and I counted my blessings.

I didn't know how it had happened, but I had my angel back, and that was all that mattered.

“Happy Christmas, angel,” I whispered.

“Happy Christmas, Silas.”

Yes, the new year was going to be very interesting indeed.

The End

ABOUT ALEX J. ADAMS

Alex is an MM author from the NW of England. She writes dark, realistic and gritty contemporary romance, always with a HEA.

She is an avid reader and dog lover and can't wait to move somewhere warm and sunny where she can write about her perfectly imperfect men.

Finding Forever - One Chapter at a Time

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SLAYING KLAUSE



Sean Azinsalt

Two men, with an axe to grind about the past, find themselves on the brink of altering the course of the world forever. What happens when Santa is killed? Who does it unleash? Will the men find it in themselves to do what must be done? How can they save the world when they have no hope left?

Triggers- talk about past abuse, ptsd, high heat, dubcon, blood and murder.

Derek

I just want to do something that will change the course of the world. All of our other victims were meaningless in the history of humanity. They were people who preyed upon others and caused nothing but pain and misery to the human race. They deserved to die. No one missed them or cared about their absence. But we made sure that the world knew who they were – what they had done. Their lifeless bodies were found with a note and all of the information we uncovered about them so they would be known for the pieces of shit they were. My boyfriend and I were vigilantes protecting the voiceless – we were once voiceless ourselves. We knew how it felt.

Vigilantes? Superheroes?

No – they called us serial killers, and maybe we were. But we didn't see ourselves that way. We saw ourselves as the good guys who made a difference in this fucked up world. But that was about to change. Our next victim was someone who inspired hope and joy in children around the globe. But he never delivered on that promise. Children suffered and went hungry. Abuse and pain happened in record numbers to the innocent, and here was someone who had the power to change everything if he chose.

He chose alright – he decided to do nothing while people suffered. It made us sick and so angry that all we wanted to do was to make him disappear. Children would still have the mall version to sit upon the lap of a man who did nothing – just like the real version of him – who did nothing.

We had to end Santa Claus.

Andrew

“Did you clean it?” I sounded like an eighty-year-old grandma, but I couldn’t help myself. When we unwrapped the ancient weapon, it had stains on the blade that could only be rust or corroded blood. It was gross.

Derek looked completely annoyed. “We’re going to stick it in his heart. Do you really think it matters if it’s fucking been cleaned, Andrew?”

“It’s just...” I shrugged. “It’s gross. It’s the right thing to do.”

“It’s a magical object that’s older than anyone could ever know.” He grinned. “It’s self-cleaning. Ok? Does that make you feel better, my little ADHD baby?”

“You’re just being snarky because you’re nervous. You always do this.” He always turned everything into a joke. His number one goal was to keep me out of my head – where only darkness and fear lived if I was left to my own devices. Without him, I’m scared how I might have ended up. Derek grounded me.

“This could go bad quickly, babe.” He walked over and took my hand. It felt warm and comforting. I needed it more than he knew. “He’s... He may be an asshole who doesn’t give a shit about anyone else. But he’s still a magical being who could potentially slay us with a thought. There’s not a lot of information about him or his abilities in any of the compendiums we got, just... Just this, and if it doesn’t work... I guess I should...” I knew what he was about to say. He did this before every one of our kills in case it went sideways.

“If you’re about to tell me you love me because we could die, I *will* stick that blade up your ass. That’s not going to happen.”

“But it could.” His thumb made a small circle on the top of my hand.

I glanced up. “A plane could also fall from the sky on top of our house and incinerate us in engine fuel, so... Anything could happen.” I tried to make light of what we were about to face – it was the only way I could go forward. He was getting too serious, and that was my job.

“Yeah...” His grin made his green eyes twinkle. “We have made a difference, though. Haven’t we? Getting rid of all the sick bastards that hurt kids like we were hurt? We made a difference.”

“I don’t know, babe. We’ve tried.”

“At least we can say that.” He sighed, and I pulled my hand gently from his.

“We’re drenched in what we’ve done, Derek. I’m tired of seeking revenge. Aren’t you? When I close my eyes, I see their blood on my hands and underneath my feet. You promised, right? This will be the last? This will be the one that matters.”

He nodded. “And the most important. We both begged him to help us when we were too little to help ourselves. You still wake up in the middle of the night shivering and begging your stepfather to stop.” His voice held an edge of anger to it. I knew how much he hated my night terrors, but he always held me and stroked my hair as I cried in his arms. It had become a ritual that reared its head too often.

“I know. I want to make Santa pay like we made them pay.”

“I still feel the burns of that asshole’s cigarette on my skin.” He bit his bottom lip. “If I cried...”

“I know. She would just stick it in deeper.” I reached out and placed my hand on his hard chest. “We made your mother pay.”

“Just like we did your stepfather.” He grimaced. The memories of those two kills – the first we made – were supposed to free us of the pain. Instead, we mired ourselves in it deeper as we doubled down on protecting those who couldn’t themselves. We had become monsters, even if it was meant to do good.

I stepped away and walked over to the ancient book that lay on the table beside the corroded blade. “We’ve made a difference. I know we have. We’ve saved countless children over the last few years. But this... It feels so... wrong, Derek. But I also know how much I *want* to hold him accountable for doing nothing while I begged him to help me. When I discovered he was actually real... I felt a rage I had never known. I want to make him pay.”

“You know I am well aware of this since we’ve had the same conversation for months.” He laughed huskily as he walked over to me.

“It helps me to talk it out. Don’t be a dick.”

His hands found my shoulders, and he pushed his crotch against me. “I thought you liked me being a dick.”

“No.” I turned around, and his arms encircled me as he pulled me against him tightly. “I *like* your dick – very different things.”

“You *loove* my dick,” he whispered in my ear. His hot breath caused me to shudder. “You love when I spit on your hole and tease you with my head. The way you squirm...”

“It’s fucked up. I’m fucked up and always will be.”

“I’m not him.” His calm voice was so strong that it pulled me back to him and out of the memories I had never been able to forget.

“No, I know. I *want* what you do to me.” I grabbed his hair from behind and pulled him backward.

“Just as I want the... pain you cause.” His hot breath escaped in a hiss. “Fuck, baby.”

“Like I said – we are totally fucked up.” I released him and pushed him gently back. If we continued this, we wouldn’t get everything done that we needed to.

He grinned stupidly and stuck his tongue out at me. “Well, we are about to see what Santa’s insides look like, so... Yeah. We’re a little fucked up.”

“*If* it works out the way it’s supposed to. I love you, and there is no one else in the world I’d rather go down with.” I meant it. The only person who mattered anything to me was Derek. He was my entire world.

“Hey babe... If we go out – we’re taking that jolly red asshole *out* with us.” He scooted over and stood beside me as we both glanced down at the open book that had cost us something precious. Something that we could never get back from the witch who gave it to us.

I shivered as I thought about it.

“Let’s get started.” I turned the page.

Derek

“Be super fucking careful with that.” I pointed as Andrew sprayed the ancient symbol on our flue. An ancient symbol that was supposed to be a beacon Santa couldn’t ignore. It would call to him, and according to the compendium, he could not pass by on his yearly trip without coming down our chimney. It would pull him to us and into the trap painted on the floor that would bind him and keep him in place – if the witch’s book was correct... If it wasn’t – I hoped I would go first. I couldn’t bear the thought of watching Andrew die.

“I’m making sure it doesn’t drip,” Andrew snipped. “I know what I’m doing, so back off. I studied this just as much as you did, and I’m way more artistic than you.”

“You probably studied it more,” I chuckled, knowing it was true. “Yeah, I can’t even draw a straight fucking line.”

He glanced over at me and frowned. “What if this book isn’t as real as we were told. I’m starting to freak out.”

“I feel that it is real. It has a power that you can feel emanating from it. Besides, I gave the witch everything she asked for.” I stiffened as I remembered her knife peeling away my essence and slicing into me.

“A sliver of your soul.” He shuddered. He stopped painting and turned to me. “Did you feel it?”

“I knew it! I knew that it was bothering you. You could have asked earlier. You just withdrew and studied that book and looked at me with such sorrow like you were about to burst into tears.” I glanced up from the book, where I compared the symbol on the floor to make sure it was accurate.

“It should have been me. I’m much more fucked up than you. You should have let the crone rend me asunder instead of...”

“Asunder? Well, that’s a word choice. You are one of the purest people I have ever met, Andrew.” I cut him off. “I would never have let you do that. Yes – if you need to know. It hurt a fucking lot, ok?”

“And now?” His sad puppy dog eyes brought out the liar in me. He could never know the truth. I could never tell him how much I ached.

“I would never know. It hurt in the moment, but after... nothing. Does that help?” The truth was I felt like a piece of me was missing – that I was incomplete.

“I guess. It still should have been me.” He looked down at his feet and then back to me.

“I would have died to stop you, babe. This was my plan, so it had to be my soul that paid for it.”

“I don’t trust witches.” He scrunched his beautiful face into a grimace. His floppy blonde hair fell in front of his blue eyes.

“I don’t either.” I chuckled.

“Then let’s hope she didn’t fuck us over.” He was so cute when he worried.

“If she did – I doubt this rune would even bring him here, so... If it does, let’s hope the rest is correct. You’re dripping on the floor.” I pointed.

“So will Santa.” He bent down and wiped the droplet up. I liked to watch him bend over. “But just to make sure it doesn’t fuck up the trap rune. There - all cleaned up.”

“Your ass looks amazing.” I grinned as his bubble butt pressed against the fabric of his jeans. It caused my cock to throb as I stared at him. But I would wait to take him in the way he liked – hard and forceful/ I would wait until we could make love in front of Santa’s corpse just as we did all of our victims. We were fucked up and messy.

“Settle down there, cowboy. We’ll celebrate later when we’ve finished what we started.” He wiggled his ass – teasing me. “So, does it look exactly like the rune in the book?”

I walked over, stared at the drying paint, and then back at the book, which seemed to breathe in my hand. “As far as I can tell, it looks correct. You really do have an artist’s eye.”

“Ah... Your sweet talk will get you nowhere and everywhere. I’m positive it’s perfect, but I wanted you to check. I really want this to work.” His face hardened as he stood up and stared at his work that decorated the outside and inside of our fireplace. The white paint was striking against the red brick.

“Do you think he actually lands the sleigh on the roof? I mean, if he’s real, I suppose the reindeer are too.”

He shrugged as if this didn’t matter. “I didn’t think about them, to be honest.”

“I mean, if they are real, then that means they fly. More magic, I guess. Do you think they would try to check on him? Maybe they would try to get revenge or something?”

Andrew chuckled. “We have shotguns. If they break through our roof to get to him, then we have magical venison for the next year. We could make jerky.”

“You are seriously twisted, and it really turns me on.” I grabbed his hand and placed it against my hardening crotch. “I love the way your little psychotic mind works.”

He squeezed my cock hard through my pants, and I felt my knees buckle. My cock throbbed as it became as hard as steel. He grinned and bent his face towards mine. His tongue darted out, and he licked my lips. “I can’t wait to feel it inside me later tonight. Merry Christmas, baby. I fucking love you.”

“Merry Christmas,” I moaned as he stroked me roughly. “I really wish you would open your present.”

“Oh, I will. As soon as we finish with the fat man, I’ll let you finish in front of him as I take you on all fours.”

Andrew

“Why are we hiding behind the couch again?” I snorted. My heart was pounding as we waited for our plan to begin. “Are we going to jump out and yell surprise?”

“You’re nervous. So am I.” Derek rolled his eyes and pressed his knee against mine.

“That is very true, but... It doesn’t answer the question. He’s going to be trapped or...”

“He isn’t. I know.” Derek wrapped his arm around me.

“Hey! If it doesn’t work how we hope, we can still surprise him by stabbing this blade through his heart.” I held it up and stabbed the air in front of us, grinning wickedly.

“Damn... That’s dark. What do you want Santa to bring you, Andrew?” he teased. “Only his eternal soul for me to destroy with this crusty old knife.” He raised his voice’s pitch like a child. It was cute but annoying.

“I don’t sound like that. And it’s not just any knife. It’s the God Blade. When an ancient blade has a name like that, you know it’s gonna do some serious shit.”

“If the witch is right.” I sighed. “I mean, why would she just volunteer to help us like that? It’s so... weird.”

“Again, we’ve had this conversation, Derek. Besides, *she* found us.”

“I know. But... Isn’t that fucking strange? What did she say? ‘I have seen your dark hearts and can help you get your revenge.’ All it took was a small sliver of my soul, and she handed over everything we needed to kill an immortal. What does she get out of this? I mean, I saw her power. She was definitely the real deal. The hole in my soul can attest to that. So why would she do this?”

I frowned. “Does it matter? We had been talking about how he deserved it. This would be the biggest and most important thing we could ever do to save those without a voice. Not just our revenge but an act of revenge for so many countless others who cringe or grow cold when the holidays come around. The only difference is that we now know the truth.”

“That he’s real and as useless as if he were *imaginary*. I know. I felt as angry as you.”

“But we’re different, Derek. I was so scared and weak. I prayed to Jesus to help me every night. As soon as December came, I prayed to Santa. I wrote him letters. I sat on his lap at the mall – and I know that wasn’t really him – but he still let it happen. Those fake mall Santas let it happen, and I told them the truth about everything my stepfather did. No one did anything to help me. No one! For years, I suffered as he crawled into my bed and placed his hand over my mouth. No one helped me, and Santa could have! He was real, and he did nothing. I wasn’t naughty – I was so fucking nice and scared to wake up every morning because it would get dark again, and I knew he would come. Every fucking night I asked for help. Every night, my prayers went unanswered. Every Christmas, after eating a fucking turkey or ham, we would open presents, and I knew that I would pay for whatever gift was under the tree. Eventually, I stopped praying or asking for anyone to help. It made it worse for them all to go unanswered.” I felt my spine shiver as I remembered the horrors of my past.

“I know, babe. I can’t imagine what you went through. It’ll work. Maybe the witch answered your prayers all along, and she waited for the right moment to give it to us. When we were ready.” He sounded so lost. He always put on a brave face – but I knew the truth of him and how much he hurt.

“You suffered, too. Your skin shows the amount of suffering that you went through.”

He stroked my hair. He always did this when he wanted me to calm down. “But it’s over. They can’t hurt us or anyone else ever again. None of those we’ve put in the ground can ever hurt anyone again.”

“Now it’s his turn. The last one. Our last kill. I think I can let go and live a normal life like everyone else when this is over. Maybe I’ll even start to enjoy my stupid job. Who knows?” It was customer service, so that was a long shot.

“You mean you don’t want to use these on anyone else? I mean, you did use to ask Jesus for help.” He snorted.

“No. This is enough. Besides, the witch said it was a one-time use. So, even if I did – we couldn’t. I just wanna feel peaceful. Every kill we make – when I know they’re gone – I feel this wave wash over me, taking it all away for a small moment of time. I just want that feeling to stay. Besides, I am positive that Jesus is not real.”

“I don’t think I ever felt contentment until I met you. I hope that you can feel the same way after this. I know you struggle, babe. You know I know.” His voice is so calm – how he talks to me when I lose myself in the darkness.

“We can be enough. I know it can be that way, Derek. I feel it.”

A sound from above made us jump out of our skin. The tinkling sound of bells carried down through our chimney.

“Shit! I guess it fucking worked.” He removed his arm, and I felt his body tense. “Are you scared?”

“No. Not anymore. It works, or we die, possibly. But either way, I do it with you.” I reached over and kissed him gently.

He chuckled quietly. “You are *such* a psycho. I’m getting hard just thinking about it.”

We turned around and peered over the couch while we waited. The whoosh of air being forced down the chimney made us catch our breath. Then black boots hit the floor.

“What the fuck!” We heard him exclaim.
I couldn’t stop myself from grinning.

Derek

“What the fuck!” He emerged from our chimney in a way that only a mythical being could. His body materialized within the rune that called the old jolly bastard to us.

“Dude!” Andrew gasped as he stared at the large man in the dark red suit. “Santa is ripped. I thought he would be all fat and...”

“A fallacy created by your kind, I’m afraid.” He frowned. His tight white beard was slightly more than stubble, but not what I had expected. “Now, why have you called me? This rune? I haven’t seen this in many millennia. I assumed it had been lost as the olde ways had been forgotten.”

“You’d be surprised what can be bought if you’re willing to pay the price.” I shivered as I remembered what I had given up to acquire the knowledge.

“Hmm... I’m sure.” He narrowed his eyes as he studied me. “Your kind has slowly - and then quickly destroyed this realm as your knowledge advanced. Every year, I hope that my trip will have meaning and you humans will begin to understand. Every year, I watch and mourn. But there are some of you – a blessed few who still keep hope alive.” He glanced down at the rune on the floor and furrowed his eyes. He knew what it was. “I don’t think, however, that you are a part of the few. I can feel anger and greed emanate off you.”

“That’s’ the problem, isn’t it? You know nothing about us.” Andrew spat. His face twisted with an internal rage. I had seen it before when he stabbed his stepfather for all the suffering he had inflicted upon him when he was too young to protect himself – too scared to say a word.

“Don’t I?” The muscle daddy laughed heartily. His eyes darted around the room.

“You don’t seem to.” I placed my hand on Andrew’s arm. I knew where this would eventually lead, but I wanted to understand some things. How often do you get to talk to fucking Santa Claus? “If you did know, that would make you a monster.”

“By your definition, mortal – I am. Once, this realm was our home, and now we only visit when we have to. My soul is tied to this plane, even if it can no longer be our home. Some of us you turned into gods, and others were branded as monsters, but still, we persisted and did what we could. When we could.”

“Nothing is what you do! You’re supposed to take care of all the nice children, and yet you do nothing while we’re abused and tortured. You watch while children starve and die every day. One day a year, you’re supposed to make a difference, and all of our pleas and prayers go nowhere. Our letters find no heart open to receiving them.” I felt his arm tense against mine and knew he clutched the knife tightly behind his back.

“Andrew...” I whispered. “Not yet.”

“Why have you called me here and imprisoned me in this *trap*? I know what this ancient rune is that keeps me from calling upon the nexus to escape. It’s a rune my kind has used before, an olde magic, but not in all my lifetime have I seen it used by a human.”

Andrew grunted. “Answer my question? Why do you do nothing?”

“Why should I do anything? I am not your god. I am just the messenger of hope to this world. As long as I exist, I...”

“Why?” Andrew yelled. “Because your *fucking* Santa Claus!”

The man laughed and looked at Andrew sadly, but his eyes showed no compassion. “You poor fool. Do you really think I have a house filled with elves that make toys I deliver to all the good boys and girls? I don’t make a list and check it twice

as your stories tell. That is not *why* I was born. If I were all-knowing, don't you think I would at least know your name?"

"Liar! You're lying!"

I felt chills shoot up my spine. "What if he's not? What if he's telling the truth, and we've had it wrong the entire time?"

"Does it change anything?" The look he gave me told me that Andrew had made up his mind no matter what.

"It changes the reasons, doesn't it?" I countered. "If he is not what we believed, we should understand who – or what he actually is. Right?"

"Not a human, and not the mythical jolly Christmas character you created when I made my yearly pass in the skies above your realm. I am as old as creation. My kind has never been understood by humanity. Our mere presence made you see us as gods or monsters. In trying to understand us, humans created stories to satisfy their needs. I am – and I am not Saint Nicholas because that was the name they gave me. But I was never the creature they created. I am only as I was created by Chaos and Order when the first breath of life found space in this realm."

"What does that mean?" I looked at him quizzically. My mind tried to put this knowledge in a box – but the box was confusing as shit.

"Do you still have hope?" He raised his eyebrows and stared at Andrew. "I feel barely a shred of hope in this one. His life was hard and full of pain. But that was not the doing of me or any other immortal. That was because of your own kind. Humanity has often eschewed hope, kindness, and joy as you smothered yourselves in need, decadence, and greed. You have been touched by the bitterness of other's whims, boy. But I can ease your pain – if you will, but let me touch you."

Andrew tightened, and I grabbed his arm to keep him in place. There was something about this old being that was so

calm as he was on the brink of death – if he knew it, I wasn't sure. But if he knew the ruin. He must know the rest.

“So you can cure me?” Andrew's voice broke. “You can do something about all the misery felt by human children, but you have chosen to not do anything?”

“How would I know, boy? I am *not* all-knowing. I don't know the lives that are led here on this plane. But *yes* – if you want, I can take it all away.” He looked at Andrew sadly. “I am sorry that you have suffered. Many have – I know. But I do not hear your prayers. Men once called me a god, but I am not what they saw. I am only as I am. In the olde days, bad things happened when we walked among you. We withdrew so you could live.”

“I want to stop hurting. I want to forget,” Andrew's voice broke as he fought back his emotions. Maybe this day was going in a direction I hadn't seen. I had come to terms with my past, but Andrew was still mired in his, even after we murdered the one who caused his pain – he could not forget it and let go. I knew I was lucky that I had let go of mine – for the most part.

“Come to me.” Santa, or whoever this man was, gestured to him with his open palm. “Come, boy, and let me offer you what is mine to give. That which clung to the inside of the pithos as everything else escaped into your world.”

“Why me?” Andrew took a step forward, and his shoulders slumped.

“Because I see you, and I am here. Hope is sparse these days, and I, who embody and distribute it once a year into your mortal plane, can ease you for the rest of your days. There are many ways I can take away your pain. I will give you the choice. Hope is a pleasure that most men have never truly felt. I can bless you with pure, unadulterated pleasure that no mortal has felt in eons, and it will leave you whole and intact as you were meant to be.”

“I’m not worthy.” I saw his arm relax and the tension flow from his body as he dropped his head.

“All men are worthy when they are born. Hate and pain are taught lessons. Let me take the darkness from you – from both of you.” Santa was no fool. He knew he was trapped. Maybe he did want to heal Andrew, or perhaps he just wanted to be free himself from the trap we had him in. But it seemed that Andrew knew what he wanted. I couldn’t blame him. I wanted it, too. “I can’t give you what you lost to obtain your knowledge, but I can at least knit you back together. I feel the hole where part of you should be, boy.” He pointed to me. “Let me make you as whole as I can.”

“You are a monster,” Andrew whispered as he walked up to the edge of the rune.

“What?” Santa looked down at him.

“I said you’re a monster. You could do so much, but you do nothing.” Andrew pulled the old blade from behind his back. Santa’s eyes widened. “I’ll live with my pain!” he shouted, shoving the knife as hard as he could into the old man’s chest.

Santa glanced down, and his eyes glazed over with something I could only call regret. “You have no idea what you have done, fool.” He clutched at the blade protruding from his chest. He threw his head back, bellowing as his body slowly levitated into the air. “Without me, there is only despair.”

A black hole opened around the knife that stuck in Santa’s chest. It swirled counterclockwise, which made me jump back. Andrew fell to his knees beside the rune and let out a blood-curdling scream as he covered his head in pain. Dust particles sparkled in the air as they swirled towards the hole and disappeared within.

“Andrew?” I screamed as the room filled with the rushing sound of a wind I could not feel. Then it hit me – hard, and I fell to my knees, too.

Pain.

Loss.

Regret.

Fear.

Doubt.

Despair.

About everything and everyone crushed into me all at once. Overwhelming me with the darkness I felt.

My mind and heart blackened with gloom and misery as every choice and thought I ever had were laid out before me. Gone were any visions of happiness or gratitude. There was no rush of love or care – only despondency and misery flowed through me.

Hope was gone.

Santa screamed again as he twisted in the air. I looked up through the haze of my sadness to see his body slowly morphing. He had already been a big man – well above six feet tall, but what was happening was maddening and made me want to shut my eyes so I could not witness it. But I couldn't break my gaze away. His body lengthened and thinned. Muscle concaved into itself as Santa grew and shrunk at the same time. His clothes fell away as if being disintegrated before our eyes.

The blade dripped with golden droplets that blackened upon the handle of the old weapon designed for one purpose – the death of a god.

A low growl came from the deformed body as it slowly stopped twisting in the air. With the crack of bone, horns like those found on a ram grew from his head – large and curved. His fingers lengthened, and black talons slowly emerged.

What the fuck was happening? My mind was on the very verge of collapse, and Andrew had fallen over, but I could not

move. My body was frozen in fear as I watched Santa transform into something else – something monstrous.

We hadn't killed him. We had changed him into something grotesque and...

The being looked down at me with its pale grey skin and amber eyes. A demon now walked the Earth instead of the saint Andrew had just killed. A nightmare who looked at me hungrily.

“You are to be given a gift, mortals. Because of you. Hope is gone from this wretched plane, and only I remain.” His tongue stretched out of his mouth, and I couldn't understand how it could be so long. It was terrifying. It wrapped itself around Andrew's neck and licked his face. I couldn't even scream, though it longed to burst from my lungs. My mind was shutting down as I stared at this being. Ugly and beautiful at the same time. His curved horns and long tongue -his cloven feet and thin, emaciated body stood before us naked and unashamed. His long skinny cock and dark pubic hair seemed out of place on this demon who could not be a man.

“Andrew?” I whispered as I forced my hand to move towards him, but he was still so far away.

“Thousands of years have I been locked away, but the horned god of despair now walks the Earth once again.” He raised his arms and pointed at us. His tongue released Andrew, and he stepped from the rune. “I want, and you two will be the first to fill the desire of my needs. Worship your new god.”

Andrew

His tongue was dry and rough as he choked me and tasted the fear and pain that rushed through my body. I heard him sigh as if it made him... happy. I had no happiness left in me. I was barren and bereft of anything but pain. Every experience I had ever had with those who hurt me rushed back through me with a vengeance.

I gasped as I tried to find air, but his tongue only circled my throat tighter. I couldn't even glance up to really see him, but I knew he was a monster. His cloven feet and long cock dangled in front of me like a viper. What had I done? There was nothing I could take back. He had said it himself – hope was gone, and I felt it.

“Andrew?” Derek sounded so far away. I couldn't bear to look at him even if I could. I tried to inhale and found nothing in my lungs. It wouldn't be long now. At least I wouldn't have to live long.

“Thousands of years have I been locked away, but the horned god of despair now walks the Earth once again.” I gasped quickly as air rushed back into me. His tongue had loosened and released me. I saw his hooves step across the rune. “I want, and you two will be the first to fill the desire of my needs. Worship your new god.”

My head was jerked upright as his claws dug into my scalp and pulled my head up to look at him. I wanted to scream, but it stuck in my throat. How could this being exist? His body was so thin, as if he had starved for years. Ribs stuck out and made his torso angular and bereft of essence. Bones and skin were all this being was except for the thin appendage swinging between his legs.

“You will be first to drink from the fount, young one. So beautiful and full of hate. You belonged to me even before I

materialized. My servant chose well with you.” He threw his head back and cackled. I covered my ears. His face was so... confusing. Santa had been hot, but this being was just as handsome if you only stared at his face. His grey skin made him look like he had been carved from stone. “Yessss... She chose well. It has been a long time since I have been worshipped by your kind.” His hand moved down my face as his cold fingers left a trail of shivers. “You will worship, and you will know what it is to be free of all the puritanical feelings of shame that hope gave you. Your body and mind are already slipping out of the murkiness of right or wrong. All that is left is pleasure and pain. A world with no boundaries.”

“Are you the devil?” I managed to whisper even though my throat felt dry.

He hissed. “You can call me that if you wish. But no. I am not the angel cast out of your human heaven. I am the opposite of him, whom I call brother. Your kind called me Krampus, though that is not my true name. Where my brother offered hope to this plane, I offer only decadence and suffering. A never-ending orgy of gluttony, lust, and wrath – without the pain of never having your hopes and dreams fulfilled. In my world, there is no desire for something more. Only the understanding that it *is* what it *is*. A life without desire for anything more *than* desire. Can you feel it?” He breathed on me, and I felt Derek’s hand on my ankle.

The beast chuckled lowly. “I have not forgotten about you, beautiful. You who gave a part of yourself to make this blonde beauty whole again, hopefully. How do you feel now? Anger? Rage? Regret? You will be honored above all. I give you a gift, human. To be the first to truly know the truth.” His tongue snaked out, and I felt Derek slide next to me. I looked in horror as the demon pushed his tongue into his mouth.

“What are you doing? Stop it!” I managed to scream as I watched Derek struggle. A single tear fell from his eye as he

bent his head back. I watched as his throat bulged from the demon's tongue. "You're killing him!"

I felt the hand in my hair pull tighter, and I whimpered, knowing I could do nothing but watch as my lover, the only man who had ever cared for me, was murdered in front of my eyes. I had murdered many people, but I couldn't stand to watch this. But I couldn't take my eyes away. Derek deserved for me to see. He deserved for me to bear witness to his unholy death.

The demon's tongue slowly pulled out of Derek, who almost collapsed onto the floor as the long appendage pulled free with a squish that made me gag. "I am not killing him. His pain is *more* to me than his death. But he is now made whole again. He has been graced with a small piece of me. The first of many who will spread my message across this desolate plane."

"Derek?" I looked over at him, and his eyes rolled back in his head. He blinked, and his green eyes were gone. Black pupils looked over at me.

"Andrew, I... I no longer care. I feel free from all the... bullshit. It's not haunting me anymore – it's fueling me. Don't fight it, baby. Give in. You will not regret it," he said with no emotion as he stared at me with those dark eyes. "Trust me."

He walked over, and his hand slid across the small of my back.

"Maybe you should show him fledgling. Help him to see the way." The demon snorted.

"Will you join us, master?" The lust in his voice was like a gut punch to me.

"When it is time." The demon's hand caressed my jaw once again. I noticed something about him that I had not seen before. The knife – the blade I pushed into Santa's chest was gone, but a small dark bone stuck out from him in the same exact place. Was that the blade still there?

“Let me help you see.” Andrew’s hot breath filled my ear as he whispered. His hand moving down my torso before he cupped my cock in his hand. “Trust me.”

I looked at him again, and I had to stop myself from getting up and running away, even if I knew I had no strength to flee. This was not my boyfriend any longer. It may have been his body, but he had been corrupted in a way I didn’t understand. Possession maybe? Or something worse? I had to buy time to figure a way out of this if there was a way out. What could I do? I was no one.

I glanced back at Krampus and nodded. That small bone had to be what was left of the god knife. What did that even mean? I had to think and be fast about it. My time was running out.

I felt my cock harden as Derek squeezed it. Fucking traitor – betrayed by my own dick. Derek always knew how to get a rise out of me, even in the worst situations, and this was pretty fucking fucktastic.

“Lay back, and let me show you what he gave me.” Derek scooted between me and the beast and pushed me back. I fell onto the floor, and Derek lowered himself on top of me. “You’re my little whore, aren’t you? Always have been, baby.” Hu chuckled.

He pushed my T-shirt over my head and undid my trousers easily. I raised my hips up as Derek slid them down my body. My skin shivered in the cold air. When had it gotten so cold?

“Take him. Take him the way you know he likes to be used. The way he won’t admit – not even to himself.”

“Derek?” I glanced up at the beast as he grinned at me lasciviously.

“You know he’s right, baby. You know you like it rough and mean just like he used to...”

“Don’t say it!” I placed my hand over his mouth. My shame spread across my face.

“After this, you will no longer need to feel that way. After this, you will revel in whatever decadence you desire as we help spread his message worldwide. Trust me.”

“Always.” I lied as I splayed my body for him. It felt so wrong because this was not my Derek, and I knew it. But I would play along until I could make the only play I could think of, and it was a long shot at best. “I’m yours. I always have been. Where you go, I follow, Derek. Always.”

“Let me feel it.” The demon moaned as he watched. “Let me feel his pain turn to desire.”

Derek stood above me and stripped. Placing one of his feet on my face as he pulled his pants off. His toe slid into my mouth. He wiggled it, and I sucked on it, taking it between my teeth and biting it gently. He had never done this before, and it made me uneasy. But this was still him, even if he wasn’t the one driving his mind anymore. I could save him if I played along – maybe?

He threw his pants away and laughed as he stared down at me. “How do you like that? Does it make you feel used, Andrew? Does it make you want more?” He spit on me, and it trickled down my cheek.

I groaned uneasily as I tried to make it sound good –like I was enjoying the degradation. I was in danger, and I didn’t like feeling this way. I had grown into a predator – but now I felt like prey. My stomach flipped as I lay there with my lover’s toe in my mouth. Damaged and scared.

“Maybe you need something bigger? You want something bigger? I have just the thing.” He took his foot away, and he bent down over me, placing his hardening cock on my lips and scooting his body above me as he put his hands behind me like he was about to do pushups. “Open up and make me hard and wet, baby. I will use that fucking pretty mouth like I never did before.”

I opened my lips, and he lowered his cock inside my gaping mouth – filling me with his girthy cock. Derek was the biggest I ever had, and he wasn't wrong. I did like to be used by him. I had been damaged, and that damage had stayed with me my entire life. My idea of love and passion was always being the vessel for someone else to use. Making someone else happy. He knew it, but he had never made me feel bad about it. I felt like trash now.

I sucked him into me as he slowly pistoned his cock between my lips. He used my mouth for his pleasure. I moaned as I caught my breath between his thrusts and gagged as he repeatedly hit the back of my throat. He was not being gentle. He wanted to hurt me. He was getting off on it.

“That’s daddy’s good boy. Take all that dick and make it hard and wet so I can show you what it means to be truly one with me – with the new normal, Andrew. That’s right, boy. Suck me. Make your lips tighter around my... Yeah, that’s it, boy.”

I couldn't stop myself. Pleasing my lover had always been my way, and I swiped at the head of his cock with my tongue between thrusts. His groans made me feel proud, as it always did. I was sick – but it was mine. He was mine, and I would stop at nothing to get him back.

“You’re such a good little cock sucker. That’s right, boy. That feels so fucking good.”

“It doessss...” Krampus hissed. The ground shook as his hoof stomped the floor. He was an immortal with who knew what kind of strength or power inside of him. We had trapped Santa, but this being was free. How could I ever free us of him? I was no one. I was just a boy. I was just a child who...

No.

I was not a child. That was what Krampus did. My fears – my pain. He turned them into weapons.

I was a man. A man who would find a way out of this – even if I might suffer for it for the rest of my life. I had to have hope that I could... Hope was gone. But I would find a way if I could.

“Use him harder.” Krampus moaned. I felt something dry and rough lick between my legs. Krampus was licking my hole, and I had to stop from retching. I felt him slowly insert it into me. Was I too late? Was he doing to me what he did to Derek?

Derek didn't hesitate in following his master's orders. His heavy balls slammed against my chin as he pushed deeper and faster into my mouth. “Yeah, that's my little cock sucker. Take it, boy. All the way down to the base.” My nose buried itself in his pubes as he sat on top of me with his cock all the way in. He wiggled his hips, and I gagged. He didn't pull out. He left it there and laughed. “Gag on my big cock, boy. Open that throat and... God, you're so fucking sloppy. So hot and wet. Such a fucking cock slut!”

He removed his tongue and swatted my ass with it. “Yessss... His tears are like gold.” I hated myself for crying. I tried to hold it back, but the tears flooded down my cheeks. “So young and broken. So full of hate and fear. Take him. Take him now! I prepared him for you. He is wet and ready!” Krampus screamed, and I wanted to over my ears. “But he must be prepared for me. It is my seed planted in him that will turn him into one of us. The most powerful way. The most painful...”

Derek pulled his cock from my mouth – spit slid down my chin. “I have never needed you more than I do now,” he growled, slapping my face hard enough to burn. His voice was gruff and cruel – more than I had ever heard before, and we were killers. “I promise to make it hurt for you. I know you will like that.”

Derek rolled me over and pulled me up onto all fours. Krampus slowly walked around and stood in front of me. “The

horned god made you so wet.” He pressed his helmet against my hole and swiped it up and down. “I’ve never seen you wetter. Soon, you’ll understand, boy. You can be one with us and know how free it feels to let go and not care.”

“Just fuck me and get it over with, Derek. I’m tired of hearing how I’m gonna... uh!” He pressed into me and pushed himself deep into my hole. Pain ricocheted through me as my hole burned with his assault. My vision tunneled, and I fought to keep my wits about me. This wouldn’t be one of our usual fuck sessions where I felt used but safe. This was going to be something else – something darker. But I had to get through it. It was still my love – even if he was being controlled. This was not the same as in my past; I would stay in control as much as possible. I had to, or we would be lost forever. Maybe the world would be too.

“Do you feel it? The dying of hope as despair spreads through the world. When you murdered hope and let me out of my cage - without him... People are wailing and tearing their hair as they find themselves lost. It feeds me.” The beast reached down and grasped my face in his hands. “Open your mouth. He prepares you for me – then you will be mine. But first, I demand pleasure.”

Derek pulled out, and I heard him spit on his cock before shoving it back inside all the way. It burned, but I knew him. My body understood him in every way, and I opened for him. He thrust harder and harder as the sound of his hips hit my ass cheeks like gunfire. Slow and deep and then fast and furious. My body shuddered.

“Open your mouth.”

I did what I was told and fought back the tears I now refused to shed in front of this being – this monster who stood before me. I would not feed him and make him any stronger. But I was finally coming up with some kind of plan. I had to make them think they were in charge. It was the only way. But for this to work – if it would work – it had to be my way, or we

would be truly doomed. I wanted Derek back, and I would do anything to achieve that – even fuck this monster.

I opened my mouth, and his long thin cock hardened with a thought. Jesus god! If he tried to put that all the way in – I would die. It was massive. It was more of an appendage than a cock, even if it did have a human form. Like his tongue, it was something other than what it appeared.

It slid between my lips, and the beast didn't move. I sucked it slowly, afraid of what might happen. He had said that – or at least I understood that I wouldn't become like Derek until the creature fucked me. Derek was preparing me for him, and when he took his turn, I would no longer be me. I would be one with the beast. That could not happen.

“My little cock slut being spit-roasted is making me insane.” Derek plunged his cock in so hard I almost fell down. I was going to be sore as fuck.

I tried to pretend like I enjoyed the cock of Krampus. I moaned as I licked his pole. I whimpered as his cock touched the back of my throat. I groveled before him as I pleased him and seemed to be doing it well. His hisses – his feet stamping as I pleased him- told me I was on the right path. I was being the dutious servant that he wanted. I would continue this charade until I could do what I needed. I had to – if I didn't, we would be lost. I never realized before how much I loved my life. I wanted it back. I wanted the way it used to be before this happened.

Derek groaned loudly. “Dammit! You're so fucking tight, boy. This hole is begging for more cock than it ever has. You fucking love it, don't you? You like me fucking you like this? Like it's rape? You like being used as you were always meant to be. You're just a hole built for someone's pleasure. Fuck...”

“Enough! It is time,” Krampus hissed. “Once my seed goes into you, young one – you will only know pleasure and care for nothing more. A hole he called you. A hole you will be.

And with every man who uses you, they will become one of us. Spreading the message and causing the world to fall.” He slid his long cock from my mouth. And I whimpered as Derek slammed hard into me once more.

“I don’t want to stop.” Derek rotated his hips with one more slow thrust. “He feels so good, horned one. So fucking wet and tight.” He withdrew himself slowly and slapped my ass so hard I winced. But I would not give in to their desire to see me broken. I could take it long enough to try my plan. If it failed – it would no longer matter. I would be just like Derek had become. I would be lost and a servant to the horned god – AKA the beast – AKA the monster – Krampus. I would just be a hole.

“Prepare yourself mortal. No man in eons has had such exquisite pleasure and pain from one of my kind. When we withdrew from this world – I was hidden away – trapped by the living embodiment of hope himself. I became weak and old. But soon, I will return to my glory, and we will watch this world burn with you by my side. You can cry if you want. I hope you do. But embrace the darkness and let my seed take away all your pain.” He let go of my face and walked around behind me. Derek stepped aside as if he no longer cared. The look on his face was cold and indifferent – as if I were just a hole to him and nothing more. Not the man he loved and took care of when I was at my lowest. Not the man he raised up and taught how to stand up for himself. I mean, sure, we were murderers to those who deserved it. But I knew now that I would be forever tainted by what I did here tonight. The death of Santa, of hope itself, would linger. What happened now would rip my soul to pieces when I thought of it – as if I could ever forget it. But I had to persevere. I liked this world, even if I did hate parts of it. I wanted it back. I wanted Derek back. I wanted to feel hope once again.

“Wait! Oh, horned, horny one.” I flipped over and moved to a sitting position. “Not from behind. Not for someone of your power and magnitude. If I am to serve you – let me look at

your face as you take me and make me one with you.” I stared at him and batted my long eyelashes as flirtatiously as possible.

He smiled, and I had to stop myself from screaming as his tongue snaked out of his mouth and licked me. “I taste your fear, and it’s delicious. Yes. I will watch your face as I slowly impale you upon me. Watch your eyes roll back in your head when I spurt my seed into you, and then watch as you forever change and become a part of us.”

I laid back and stared at his long cock. It had to be a foot long, and now it was no longer as thin as it once was. He was getting stronger and filling out as he sucked in the hopelessness that now permeated the world. I could no longer see his ribs protruding through his skin. If I lay back and let him take me – could I then do what I had to try to accomplish? It was the only Hail Mary play I had left!

I slowly stood and bowed my head. “No great one. Let me humble myself before you. Why should you do the work when I am here to serve you and only you. I am just a hole for you and Derek. Let me serve. Sit, and I will impale *myself* upon your *greatness*.” I gestured to the chair and thought it was large enough to hold him and me as I sunk down upon him and caressed his skin. He needed to believe it.

“Yes. Then, while he rides you, he can blow me,” Derek growled again, even more gutturally than before. “Let me use him too, master. Let me watch as he suffers under your magnificence.”

“I don’t think I...” Pivot. I needed to make sure Derek couldn’t see what I was doing since he drank the Kool-Aid – or his spit... Whatever. I couldn’t let him stop me. “If you would lay down, master, I could also let Derek use my mouth.” This seemed to be an even better plan. He would already be down, and my hands could easily reach. “Every hole filled with the power you possess as it possesses me. I could think of no better way to die.”

“To be reborn,” Derek smirked.

“Yesssss... Your holes are ours, boy.” The beast lay down on the ground and waved his cock like a schoolboy at me. “Sit and feel what no other being in the world can give. Sit and be reborn.”

I walked over to him and faked the best grin that I could. “I’ve never fucked a god before.” I stepped over his body, and his hands reached up and felt up my legs to my thighs.

“You aren’t honest with yourself. You’ve been hard the entire time, boy. You may be scared, and you should be, but you want this more than you’ve wanted anything in your entire life before. To give yourself over to a life of complete subservience. It makes you throb. Your manhood leaks with the want you feel. Place yourself above me, and let me give you what you crave even if you pretend you don’t.”

He wasn’t wrong. I *was* a damaged human like every other human being walking the planet. My damage was mine, and right now, it was betraying me. My cock ached in a way I hadn’t ever felt before. It was him – I knew and the power he possessed. Lust emanated from him – if he was in his full power, I am sure he would be much more beautiful and harder to deny. But I wanted Derek back – and I would fuck this Krampus asshole to do it.

I moved beside him, and he held his cock in his taloned hand. I placed my hole against him. After Derek fucked me, I knew I could do this. I was slick with him, and I would manage the pain as long as I could before I played the last play I had. I felt his stiff cock brush against my hole, and I slowly pushed myself down. It burned more than I thought as it stretched me. He wasn’t as thick as Derek, but I knew this was just the beginning of who he would become. Who knew how his cock would grow as I inserted it inside me. From here, I couldn’t get close enough – I would have to take more of him inside myself, and I had to do it quickly before he turned me into a sex zombie. I did *not* want to be a sex zombie.

“Yesss... Take me inside you, boy. Let me defile you with my cock. I grow and become more powerful as you give yourself to me.” I knew he wasn’t lying. I felt it.

“My turn.” Derek stepped forward and placed his feet on either side of his beastly master. He held his cock in his hand and pulled me by the back of the head towards him. This I could do. This I could enjoy. This was my Derek, and to save him, I could fuck this monster. What bothered me was that a small part of me wanted to succumb to this evil creature. Part of me wanted to end the pain I always felt. I took Derek in my mouth and slid further down Krampus’ cock. I had to have half of him inside me now. But there was still another good 6 inches to go. Fuck... He was going to destroy me.

I was close, but not close enough.

“I haven’t felt a hole so wet and hot in eons, boy. Your ass was built for this. You were made for this.” The beast moaned, and it reverberated through me. It made me weak in the knees, and I let myself slide another couple of inches down his now thicker cock. I felt it growing inside me like a snake. “Ride me and let my seed free you forever.”

I regret that I did. He sank deeper into me with every rise of my hips and every bend of my knees. My mouth was filled with my Derek, and I focused on his cock, but the power that emanated from Krampus filled me with a desire I had never felt before. It began to overpower my senses, and I wanted to take all of him deep inside me. To feel so full with him that I would burst. But Derek and his hand on the back of my head – intertwined in my blonde hair – kept me focused.

I slid further down. It was almost in my grasp. Derek was in the way, and I hadn’t foreseen that. I pushed my head against his cock and slid all the way down his length, pushing him back just a little with my head as I held myself there, choking on him.

Then, my world was truly shifted. Krampus thrust upwards and sent more of himself into me. His lust took control, and even though I was on top, he was now in control, and I moaned around Derek's cock as he thrust hard inside me.

It had to happen now.

I let my hands slide up Krampus' torso – past his patch of dark pubic hair and over his now rippling abs until I felt the nub of what might be a bone. It was over if I was wrong, but if I was right, this could all change in a second. Or not. I honestly had no fucking idea. But I had...

No. I had no hope.

I had plans. I always had plans.

The beast was having his way with me, and I was bucking wildly on top of him, barely able to keep Derek's cock in my mouth as my body shuddered with every thrust. My hand touched the bony appendage, and I brushed against it with my fingers to see what kind of hold I could grab onto.

“God, boy, take it all the way in,” Derek pushed himself harder against me again, and I felt my fingers pull back as the bone went out of my reach. I needed to really be able to grab it. I hoped I was right, and this was what I needed it to be. The remains of the god knife. If I could just regain some control.

I reached up and grabbed Derek's balls, and pulled backward. He took a step in the right direction as he groaned. I reached back down and quickly released Derek from my mouth as I glanced down. It was right there, and I...

My fingers found it! I screamed as I pulled with all my might. Krampus' hands reached up as he noticed what was happening and pushed. I held on, and Krampus helped me with the force I needed. With the sound of flesh ripping, the knife appeared in my hand as I pulled it from his skin. Black blood dripped from the blade and cascaded from the hole that now appeared in the beast's chest.

“You... What did you do? How?” He sounded so pathetic as I pulled up with all my might and slid off the dying beast’s cock – at least, I hoped he was dying.

“What’s happening?” Derek ran his hand through his dark hair, and I glanced up. Green eyes. Derek was back. “I... What happened?”

Krampus screamed as I stood above him, holding the dripping knife. His body twisted upon the ground, and the gash in his chest opened wider as it began to swirl clockwise. Dots of light flew from his tear, and I stepped back – grabbing Derek’s hand and pulling him with me as we watched the creature’s body rise into the air and hover there as his musculature shrunk. He became the thin creature he first appeared as. His power was fading.

I was right.

I had hope. Every fiber in my body buzzed with the feeling that had been bereft, and I absorbed every electric particle I could.

“What happened?” Derek muttered as he stared at the ghastly creature squirming before us in the air.

“I’ll tell you later. Just watch because I have no idea what’s about to happen.” I stepped back as Krampus screamed with the pain of his dissipating. But in his place, another being began to form from his flesh. His brother. Hope would walk the planet again.

We stared at him as he slowly began becoming flesh. Trust me. He was a naked, hot, hairy daddy, and I was staring. My cock throbbed as he became who he was. His tight beard and hairy chest – his thick cock and twinkling eyes. Yep! I had a hard-on for Santa and had never been happier to see someone in my life. The feeling was jubilant, and I felt myself rise on my heels with glee.

He flexed his torso as he lowered to the ground naked as the day a baby was born. It was a very nice visual. I noticed Derek

checking him out, too. He reached out his hand.

“I think I will take that now.” His low voice commanded, and I handed it to him.

“I had no idea... I... I am so sorry.”

“I think you deserve a gift, don't you?” He winked at me. My cock throbbed. I knew exactly what I wanted.

Derek

“Why would you still do this for us?” Andrew looked down at the ground. I knew he blamed himself for what just happened. Honestly, I wasn’t even sure what had happened. The last thing I remembered was that monster’s tongue forcing itself down my throat. I’m not sure I wanted to know when I looked at Andrew’s naked body.

“You did do the right thing, boy. In the end, at least.” Santa reached down and adjusted his girthy cock. “I know you had to suffer when my brother arrived. It took someone brave and strong to defeat him.”

“I... I killed you. I’m... so... sorry,” Andrew stammered and burst into tears. I was at a loss as to what to do. I reached over and pulled him close to me and held him in my arms as he let it out.

“Yes. You did, and I honestly didn’t see it coming, boy. But I believed you suffered enough for your stupidity.” Santa stepped towards us and held out his hand. The knife had disappeared, and I don’t know how. I fucking hated magic.

“Please?” I looked at Santa and then back to Andrew, still sniffing in my arms. “Please help him. That’s all I care about.”

“You carry a piece of my brother inside you. He filled the hole in your soul with a tiny sliver of himself. You brought him here, so you were honored. This boy was made to serve. I can heal you and remove what he put inside you. I can make you whole again.”

“You’ll help him, too?” I tried to sound strong – but in the presence of this dom, daddy Claus, I admit I was a little weak in the knees. I may have been a top myself, but... When in the North Pole... I was willing to sit in Santa’s lap.

“Of course. I can take away the pain of your past from both of you, but the taint from my brother... He was in both of you in different ways. To take away his stink, I’m afraid you have a choice.” Santa grinned, and my stomach flipped.

“What choice?” Andrew slowly pushed himself out of my arms and turned to the naked Santa. “Please? I... I want it to all go away. But I don’t ever want to remember what happened here tonight. Please?”

“It was one of your best moments, I’m sure. You sent a very powerful and cruel being back to his immortal prison, and that took an act of courage I can only imagine. Do you want to truly forget the best of you?”

Andrew nodded. “Yes, sir. I do. If I remember what happened here tonight... I don’t see how anything else matters. I want to forget all of it.”

“That means you will forget me too, which is probably for the best. I will do it, but it will come with a cost. Everything does.”

“What? What more could I give.” Andrew choked back a sob, and it broke me.

“We’ll give whatever we have to. I don’t care about anything else but giving Andrew what he wants. I just want us to be happy together,” I said firmly. “I just want him to be happy.”

“I can do that and remove all the memories from tonight if that’s what you wish. Now for the choice. For you, brave boy, I am afraid your only option is to give yourself over to me. But it must be willingly. Unlike my dark brother, I need you to tell me *this* is what you want.” Santa’s cock jerked as he looked down at it. “He was inside you – I can feel his presence, even if he is trapped once again. To remove the stain – I must replace it.”

“You have to fuck me?” Andrew’s eyes widened in surprise. “I’m a little sore after...”

“I know. Not for long, boy. You will be healed and soothed by me.” Santa held out his hand. “I’m afraid the same goes for you. To take away the piece of himself attached to your soul will also require me to...” Santa raised his eyebrows lasciviously. “It’s olde magic.”

“Santa? I never knew you were a dirty old man.” I chuckled. “I willingly give myself to you.”

“I do, too. I mean, how many people can say they’ve fucked Santa?”

“Few of your kind. But those few lived blessed lives. Join them now. Come.” Santa spread out his arms, and Andrew and I looked at each other. We both had a twinkle in our eyes.

“I mean... Sexy Santa is hot, and we’re doing it together.” Andrew smirked.

“We’re doing it for us.” I took his hand in mine, and we walked over and knelt before Santa.

He put his large hands on the back of our heads and pulled us towards him. His large meaty cock stood at attention, and Andrew and I moved our heads to either side and slid our mouths down its length.

“That’s nice boys. Real nice.” Santa groaned as his fingers dug into my scalp gently.

We licked and kissed over his head. His musk tasted sweet, like a candy cane. Our tongues brushed against each other, and we locked our eyes together as we savored this giant Santa cock.

“I got the balls. You can have the shaft for now.” I giggled, unable to help myself. Just being in Santa’s presence was intoxicating and made me feel lighter than I could ever remember.

Andrew took Saint Nicholas’ shaft in his hand and gulped it down. He always did like sucking dick, but he was relishing in this. Maybe he felt like I did – lighter and happier than before.

His slurps were like music to my ears, and I reached down and grabbed Santa's heavy balls. I licked the delicate skin before taking one of his heavy nuts into my mouth and sucking on it. I wasn't sure if Santa's groans were from what I was doing or Andrew gorging himself on his dick – maybe a combination of both as we pleased this muscular daddy from another world.

The smell of him was manly yet delicate. I inhaled deeply from his groin, popped his other large nut into my mouth, and slurped on them, using my tongue in a wild dance of arousal. My cock was fucking throbbing. I reached down and started slowly stroking myself.

After a few minutes of pleasuring Santa's balls, I joined Andrew on the shaft. He pulled off Santa's cock, and I slowly swallowed his length all the way to his white pubes. I buried my nose in them and sniffed slowly. It was a mouthful, and I could taste his precum as it drizzled from his cock. I slowly pulled off, and Andrew took his turn swallowing Santa's pole.

We repeated this over and over. Balls – cock – balls – cock until Santa chuckled mirthily. "It's time. How do you feel?"

"I feel... so much better. Lighter and... I don't feel burdened. I remember everything, but it's in the past, and I... It's like I have let go." Andrew grinned. "Did you already... poof the past away from us?" It feels like it."

"Yes. The pain of the past is but a memory. You know it happened, but it has no power over you anymore. Now, to finish what we started. We must obliterate any remaining influence of my brother inside you." He looked at us happily. I mean, we just slurped the shit out of his massive Santa cock. It was a shame that we were going to forget this. This was something I wanted to remember.

"How should we..."

"You need to fuck both of us, right?" I asked.

"Yes. I will only come once, boys. So, I will need to breed both of you quickly. It would be best if you stack yourselves.

Also, I think I will really like that. If things had been different – this could have been an orgy for us all to look back on fondly, like in the olden days when we walked among you. But this is for the best.” He stroked both of our cheeks. “Who wants this first?” He held his thick cock in his hand. Precum dribbled from it, and Andrew reached out, took it on his finger, and popped it into his mouth.

“I guess you’re first. You’re also the smallest, so maybe it’s best you get on top of him.” Santa chuckled, and it sounded like music.

“Wait. I want to see this. Please?” Andrew begged. “I want to touch you while you...”

“I do, too.” I nodded.

“Boys... ok.” His eyes twinkled. “Get on the floor.”

Andrew fell backward and pulled his ankles behind his ears. I laughed as I lay down beside him and did the same. “You are such a Santa slut.”

“Looks like you are too.” He grinned as he looked at me with my legs in the air.

Santa spit on his cock and took a finger, and rubbed it against our holes at the same time. I felt wet, like I had just been lubed. He removed his finger, and I reached down and felt my hole. I was slick. I inserted a finger quickly, and it went easily inside.

“Magic.” Santa laughed as he pressed his thick cock against Andrew’s hole. “Ready?”

“Yes,” Andrew answered lustfully. His eyes were dick-glazed over.

Santa pressed himself into Andrew and slowly slid his thick cock all the way in. Andrew moaned and grabbed my hand as Santa slowly rocked his hips and filled my lover with his immortal dick. The way Andrew sounded, it must have been pretty fucking spectacular. Santa pumped into him and grunted

with every thrust. “Boy, you are magic yourself. This is so tight, and... You’re beautiful.”

Andrew reached up and let his hands explore Santa’s furry chest. His head lolled from side to side as he stared at the daddy as he gave himself over to the pleasure he felt. His eyes rolled back in his head. “You’re so fucking big! It... It fills so good, Santa. Give it to me. Harder.”

Santa obliged and fucked the holy yuletide hell out of my boyfriend as I watched with a smile. I mean, it was Santa – come on.

Santa slowly pulled out of Andrew, who whimpered at his withdrawal. “It’s your boyfriend’s turn now.” He winked at me.

I pulled my legs back and stuck my ass in the air while waiting for him to enter. Santa threw my legs over his shoulder and pressed forward, staring me in the face as he pressed his large helmet against my incredibly tight hole. I hadn’t been fucked in years. Andrew was a strict bottom, so it had been a while since I had a dick in my ass.

“You are very fucking tight.” Santa huffed as he pushed himself inside me. There was no pain, just a slight burn as he stretched my hole with his thickness. It felt so good, and I threw my head back against the floor and writhed underneath him.

“Fuck! That’s so... God, you feel so fucking good inside me.” I moaned, and my breath came out in small gasps.

“Do you remember how my brother defiled you?” His breath wafted across me and made me woozy.

“It was his tongue. He stuck it down into his throat. I almost puked,” Andrew answered quietly. “Now, who’s dickmatized, Derek? You seem to really like it.” He giggled. He sounded so pure and light like he had no cares in the world.

“I do. Fuck me, Santa daddy. Fuck me and make me feel good. Help me to feel good.” I begged.

Santa bent his face to mine as his cock slowly impaled me on its length. My hole stretched slowly around his girth, and I tried to breathe. Before I understood what was happening, Santa’s lips were on mine, and his tongue slipped past my lips. I reached up, grabbed his face in my hand, and opened my mouth, letting his tongue slide against mine.

That taste again of something sweet. Gingerbread and candy canes. Peanut butter cookies and fudge. Santa was a very *sweet* man. I mean, he had to be to save us after we killed him. I guess it was in his jolly nature.

I sucked on his tongue as he twirled it around my mouth and moaned into him with every thrust of his hips pummeling against my ass. He drew his head back and smiled at me.

“I have a lot to do tonight. I’ve been delayed by two very handsome men. Your ass is like a vice, boy. I want to come in you so badly. Are you ready? We will have to be fast so I get enough of my essence in each of you.” He ordered, and Andrew got on all fours beside us. Santa pulled himself back and slid his cock out of me. “Get on top of him, so I have easy access.”

I got up and lay on Andrew’s back, keeping my weight off him so he didn’t collapse. Santa pressed his cock into Andrew’s ass again and thrust hard inside.

“Ready?” He huffed as he grabbed Andrew’s hips and moaned loudly. Andrew’s moan told me that he felt Santa’s come gush inside.

Before I could even glance, Santa pressed inside me and kept gushing. I felt it burst into me as he pressed his cock in and held it there. It tickled inside me.

“Derek? I feel it.” Andrew laughed. “I feel it taking it all away.”

I threw my head back and laughed, too. “Me too. It’s fast acting come. You do good work, dom, daddy Santa.”

“I like that.” Santa pulled out of me and stood. I crawled off Andrew, and we both stood and stared at the gorgeous man who had given us his magical gift.

“Maybe I will let you remember this. But do not try to stab me again, ok?” He smiled and placed his finger against his nose, and with a poof – he was gone.

Hope.

Love.

Light.

I remembered what had happened to me when I was young and how I struggled. I remembered the things that Andrew and I had done. But they didn’t feel like a burden. They felt like something I survived. The burden was gone. The place where my soul had been torn was...

A soft, bright light blinded my vision for just a second, and I shook my head. Andrew giggled and wiped at his eyes.

“I... Did we just fuck Santa Claus?” Andrew looked so confused and shook his head.

“I think we did. How the hell did that happen?” I shook my head in disbelief.

“I... I remember him coming down the chimney. What were we doing?”

“I think... Huh? I don’t remember. I am hungry as shit, though. Maybe we were going to eat?” I shrugged happily. “It’s weird that I... I mean, it was Santa, right?”

“It *is* Christmas Eve. It totally was Santa Claus. Wanna go see what’s in the fridge? Maybe we could make pancakes. I really want something sweet.”

“I love you.”

“I love you too.”

We lived happily ever after and never had a nightmare again.

The End

ABOUT SEAN AZINSALT AKA SHANE K MORTON

Shane lives in Studio City with his husband and their fur babies, Bette Davis and Dick Grayson. His novels include The Trouble With Off-Campus Housing, Private Waterloos, The Year of the Cock, Fault Lines, Drag Queen Detective Series, Bluegrass Boys Series, and The Point Pleasant Holiday Series. His Dark Romance books, written under Sean Azinsalt, include: It's in My Blood, Bound, and Dark Eros. When not writing, Shane can usually be found at a film festival or performing cabaret in a dark dive bar.

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SANTA'S WORKSHOP



Bey Deckard

When two young men are abducted from different towns, imprisoned and forced to suffer the unimaginable at the hands of a madman in a Santa suit, they discover solace in each other's embrace. But can they find the strength to escape their nightmarish incarceration before it's too late?

CWs: Amputation/mutilation, rape (non-detailed)

Ryan groaned softly and covered his eyes as the sunlight turned the back of his lids a bright orange-red. *Nope . . . need more sleep.* He grimaced and turned over, reaching blindly for the duvet, but discovered he was fully clothed on top of his bedding. He must have gone to bed drunk. It would explain the dull headache and why he hadn't shut the blinds.

Ugh, why do I do this to myself? He sighed. *I'm such an idiot.* Then he frowned. *Wait a sec . . .* It was one thing not remembering going to bed, but he had *no* memory of having drinks with anyone. The last thing he remembered was stopping for gas. He opened his eyes and sat up, his heart racing.

“What the *fuck?*” His mouth was so dry it came out as a hoarse whisper. He glanced around and snatched his glasses from the metal shelf above the bed, putting them on as he cast about in a wild panic.

The light wasn't from the sun shining through his window—it was coming from a naked lightbulb hanging on the ceiling. He was in a windowless cell. One wall was just metal bars; the other three were pitted concrete. Ryan's lungs constricted as terror set in, his breath raspy and quick as he stared into the bright blue eyes of the young man sitting on a cot across from him.

“Where am I? What the heck is going on?”

“I wish I could tell you.” The stranger had messy dark-blond hair framing his face, the blunt edges of it ending at his sharp jawline. He sat hugging his knees, his back against the naked concrete wall.

Ryan began desperately gasping for breath and lurched to his feet as if standing could help him suck in more oxygen. Dizzy, he stumbled and dropped to his knees, barely feeling

the pain as he hit the floor, and let out a strangled cry as he fell forward onto his hands, his vision growing dark.

“Hey . . . hey, hey, hey.” The stranger appeared in his tunnel vision, his eyes wide with worry. “Look at me. Okay? Now, look at my finger.” He held a finger up in front of Ryan’s face. “Concentrate on it. Focus on it. You got it? Yeah?”

Wheezing loudly, Ryan wrenched off his fogged-up glasses and forced himself to train his swimming vision on the finger before him. He nodded.

“Okay, good. Now, focus on my face again. You can do this. You *got* this. Just focus on my face.”

Ryan stared at his cellmate’s freckled face, the finger growing blurry as his focus shifted. His breathing was already starting to slow.

“All right, now do it again. Focus on my finger, then focus on my face. Five seconds at a time. Just breathe.”

After shifting his focus a few more times, Ryan was no longer panting and gasping and struggling for air. Finally, he gave a shuddering sigh and sat back on his heels, using both hands to wipe the tears off his cheeks.

“Thanks.” Ryan put his glasses back on, the lenses now smudged with his fingerprints.

“Don’t mention it. It’s a good trick to remember for panic attacks. Shifting focus like that stimulates the vagus nerve. Snaps you out of it pretty quick.” The stranger smiled, deep dimples appearing in both cheeks. He came out of his crouch and stood, holding out his hand. “Here.”

Still shaky and faint, Ryan accepted the help and got to his feet. He then sat on the edge of the cot he’d woken up in. He stared at the floor between his bare feet. *Where the hell are my socks?*

“Hey.”

Ryan looked up and saw that his cellmate was offering him a glass of water. He took it gratefully and drank the whole thing in a few swallows.

“Thanks. Again,” he said, handing the glass back.

“Don’t mention it. I’m Zim, by the way.”

“Zim? Like the cartoon alien?”

Zim laughed. “Well, it’s actually Lester Zimmerman—I was named after my grandfather—but no one calls me Lester. Not even my folks.”

“Ah. Okay. I’m Ryan.”

“Nice to meet you. Well . . . as much as anything can be ‘nice’ in this situation.” Zim walked to the little sink in the corner to put the glass away, then took to his own cot.

“You don’t know where we are?”

Zim shook his head. “What’s the last thing you remember?”

“I was on my way to visit friends in Ottawa and stopped at the big service station in Casselman. I *think* I went in to use the john, but it’s fuzzy.”

“Shit.” A wrinkle appeared between Zim’s dark-blond brows.

“What?”

“The last thing I remember is going out for my morning run.”

That explained Zim’s running shorts and sleeveless shirt. “In Casselman?”

“No. That’s the thing. I live in Markham.”

Ryan stared at him. “That’s like . . . a four-hour drive from Casselman.”

“I think more like five, depending on how you go.”

Heart pounding again, Ryan gasped a few breaths and looked down, focusing on his feet again as he digested this information. “Do you think we’re even still in Ontario?”

“I *thought* I was, but if you were taken from that far away . . . Shit, we could be anywhere.”

“Oh god.” Ryan rubbed his palms against his thighs, trying to ground himself. “And you’ve been here *how* long?”

“It’s hard to say. There’s no daylight. But if I go by meals and sleep . . . five days.” Zim shrugged.

“Oh god.” Ryan’s panic had a grip on him again. “Oh god, what the fuck is *happening*?”

“I have no idea.”

“Do you know who’s responsible?” Ryan’s voice had an edge of hysteria that caused it to hit a high note that, under normal circumstances, would have embarrassed him. However, there was nothing normal about what was happening to him.

“That,” Zim replied grimly, “I can tell you. And it’s so fucked up, you’re going to tell me I’m bullshitting, but it’s Santa Claus.”

Ryan could only stare for a few seconds, wondering if Zim had gone a little funny in the head from his ordeal. “Santa Claus?”

“I mean, not like, *actual* Santa Claus. He’s some sicko who calls himself Mr. Kringle.” Zim’s jaw visibly clenched as he stared through Ryan for a moment, obviously remembering something. “He’s terrifying.”

Frowning, Ryan looked towards the bars, the room beyond shrouded in darkness. *Mr. Kringle? Santa Claus? What the fuck?*

“I woke up just like you did. No idea where I was or how I got here. Then, this huge guy in a Santa suit comes up to the

cage and just *stares* at me. Wait ‘til you see his eyes.” Zim’s nostrils flared as he sat back, his face pale as he shook his head slowly. “He’s, like, *intense*. I almost pissed myself.”

Ryan swallowed, staring at his cellmate. Zim wasn’t a small guy. He was taller than he was, definitely over six feet, and in good shape. If *he* was scared . . . Ryan took a shuddering breath.

“And . . . I don’t even know how to explain it to you. But there are these *elves*. And somewhere out there—” Zim gestured to the darkened room beyond “—there’s his workshop. And he’s making toys. For Christmas.”

“Uh. What? *Toys*?” Christmas was months away.

“I don’t even know, dude. I just . . . I get two meals a day, and it’s going to sound crazy to say this, but the food is *amazing*. And then, at around the same time every night, I suddenly go to sleep.”

“Suddenly?” Ryan blankly stared at him, half believing he was dreaming.

Zim nodded. “One minute, I’m just sitting here or trying to find something to pick the lock or whatever, then suddenly it’s the next morning. Poof.”

“Huh.”

“I think it’s either gas or, I don’t know . . . blow darts or something, but it’s like I stop existing for a bunch of hours. I don’t even dream.” Zim suddenly chuckled, but it was without humour. “And then this.” He pulled back his hair to show Ryan the clean white bandage on the side of his head. “I woke up like this yesterday morning.”

“What happened?”

“I’ve got no ear. It’s fucking *gone*.”

“*What*?” Ryan’s heart thumped hard for a few beats, making him dizzy, and his throat was once again thick with fear.

Zim shrugged again, then crossed his arms, leaning back on the concrete wall. “Dunno how I’m ever going to wear sunglasses again.”

A single, crazed laugh burst out of Ryan, and Zim grinned wide.

“How are you so *calm* about this?” Ryan asked, his voice going shrill again.

“I have a theory.” Zim tapped the bandage and pressed his lips together, lifting his brows. “I’m totally numb. No pain at all. I think there’s something in the food. Maybe there’s some drug? And maybe for anxiety too. I mean, I *know* I should be *way* more freaked out than I am. But it’s all kind of . . . distant, you know?”

“Jesus.” Ryan took off his glasses, pinching the bridge of his nose as he panted through clenched teeth, grappling to control his terror. Tears brimmed his eyes, and soon he was gulping for breath as the direness of his situation sank in.

“Hey.”

The thin mattress dipped as Zim sat down next to him to place a comforting hand between his shoulder blades.

“Hey, we’ll figure it out, okay? Now there’s two of us, and that’s a hell of a lot better than just one. We’ll put our heads together and break out of this shithole. Right?” Zim rubbed his back.

“Right,” Ryan replied, nodding as he tried to slow his breathing. “Okay.”

“Oh. Hey, there’s supper.” Zim squeezed his shoulder. “Eating will make you feel better.”

“Supper?” Ryan looked up, confused.

“Yeah, you slept all day. It’s evening.”

“Oh.” Then Ryan heard a shuffling, rasping sound approaching from beyond the bars. He stared wide-eyed at the

figure that emerged from the gloom. *This must be one of the “elves” Zim was talking about.*

At first, Ryan thought it was a little person carrying the tray, but as they approached, Ryan pressed the back of his hand against his mouth in horror. The elf’s arms were of average adult proportions—it was the bandaged stumps they hobbled on that made for their short stature.

“Oh my god.”

“Yeah. Like I said. Hard to put into words.” Zim got up and walked to the bars, peering out at the elf that wheezed and gurgled as they carried the laden tray toward them. The elf wore a fuzzy red-and-green outfit covered in dark, crusted stains and a floppy green hat with a broken candy cane attached to it. Bloodshot eyes stared at him from above a white cloth mask painted with a lurid cartoon smile, and the bottom edge of the mask was mottled with pale brown stains. Ryan watched in sickened fascination as a long string of pinkish drool dripped from the mask to the tray, sliming one of the metal cloches covering the plates.

“Thank you,” Zim said when the elf had finished their laborious journey and deposited the tray at the narrow opening beneath the bars. The elf then turned away and began shuffling back to wherever they had come from, a ratty, bloodied bandage trailing from one of their stumps.

“I’m going to be sick.” Ryan watched the elf disappear into the gloom.

“I think they’re prisoners too,” Zim said, sliding the tray under the bars. He took one of the paper napkins and quickly cleaned the drool away before holding a dish out to Ryan.

“I can’t eat.” He swallowed, nausea making saliva pool in his mouth.

“You really should try.” Zim grabbed his own covered plate and sat on his bed. He lifted the cloche and smiled, breathing in deeply as he picked up his fork. “Mmm. Seriously, you

should eat something. You'll be less, uh . . . well, I guess it's not *hangry*, is it? Scangry? Hangrified?"

Ryan watched in a daze as Zim tucked into his food, making little happy sounds as he chewed. Despite Ryan's queasiness, his stomach growled audibly. When was the last time he had eaten? He could have been unconscious for a long time. Ryan stood and took the other serving from the tray, then perched on the edge of his cot.

"Plus," Zim said once he'd swallowed his mouthful, "if I'm right about anti-anxiety meds in the food, you'll feel better in no time. You'll see."

Ryan clenched his teeth, flaring his nostrils as he noticed a streak of pink drool Zim had missed, then lifted the cloche. Beneath it was a beautifully plated serving of ravioli, a small, crisp green salad, and a few slices of fresh baguette. *Huh.*

It smelled delicious, and Ryan's stomach grumbled again in agreement. *Okay. I can do this.*

Zim hadn't exaggerated. The food *was* amazing.

"So, we don't get stale bread and water," Ryan said, dipping his bread into the roasted red pepper and tomato sauce. "That's . . . weird, right?"

"Yeah. Oh, and we only get two meals: breakfast and supper. I don't get it, but I'm not complaining. The portions are great." Zim grinned. "Though I hope he didn't cook my ear into this."

Ryan's appetite vanished at Zim's words—he set his plate aside.

"Hey. I'm *kidding*. I don't think there's an ear in this." Zim pushed the raviolis around on his plate. "At least, I *hope* not." He shrugged and took another mouthful.

Ryan watched him eat in silence for a few moments, and then he asked, "And the elves? Do they ever say anything?"

“No. And I seriously don’t want to know why or what’s going on beneath their masks. That one just now, the one in the green hat, is the worst out of the two. At least the one in the red hat is wearing a full bag over its head. It doesn’t drool like the other one.”

“Oh god.” Ryan felt nauseous. “I have to get out of here.”

“No kidding,” Zim replied and licked the sauce off his fork. “But how?”

“There’s got to be a way.” Ryan got up and walked to the bars to tug on them, but they didn’t so much as wiggle.

“The only thing I’ve been able to think of is if I could find two skinny pieces of metal. I could jimmy the lock. I’m sure of it.”

“You’ve picked locks before?”

“How hard could it be?”



Ryan spent a little while looking around for anything Zim could use to pick the lock but gave up in frustration when his search yielded nothing. Then, he had the uncomfortable realization that he had to go to the bathroom. Thankfully, Zim turned around and put his fingers in his ears, singing “Pumped Up Kicks” loud enough that he drowned out the sound of Ryan on the toilet. Red-faced, Ryan apologized afterwards, glad that Zim was so understanding.

“Listen, if I have a choice between taking a shit in private or having someone to talk to, I’ll take someone to talk to every time. Don’t worry about it,” Zim said, smiling.

“Thanks.” Ryan quickly ate the rest of his cold ravioli because his appetite had returned, then took his plate and

covered it, placing it back on the tray. “So . . . now what?”

“Now we lie here and wait to zonk out.” Zim was lying on his back, his hands clasped beneath his head, staring at the pitted grey ceiling.

Ryan lay down on his own cot, lacing his fingers over his chest. He was a little drowsy and attributed it to having filled his belly, but then frowned when a familiar fuzzy warmth started in his chest, growing slowly as his thoughts began to drift.

“Hey, you’re right,” he said. “The food’s drugged.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah, I know this feeling. I’m thinking it’s Ativan. No . . . actually, Xanax. If it’s working this fast, I’d bet on Xanax. It works faster on me than Ativan.” He looked over at Zim who had turned on his side to face him.

“I take it you’ve got some experience with anxiety?” his cellmate asked with a small grin.

Ryan chuckled and nodded. “How could you tell?”

Zim laughed softly.

“I don’t know if I like this more than being flat-out terrified.” Ryan furrowed his brow.

Mouth quirked to one side, Zim jerked his shoulder up in a little shrug. “Me neither. But if the alternative is starving . . .”

“Yeah.” Ryan sighed and turned his gaze back to the ceiling. “So. When do you think I’m going to meet Santa Claus?”

“You can call me Mr. Kringle,” said a deep voice behind Ryan.

Startled, Ryan sat up so fast he hit his head on the little metal shelf above his bed, turning around as he rubbed his scalp.

Standing at the bars was a massive man wearing a ratty dark-red Santa costume that hung open in front, displaying a thickly muscled chest covered in arcane symbols. His skin had an unhealthy grey tinge to it and it glistened wetly in the wan light. Ryan met his eyes but had to look away immediately—the intensity of the man’s glare felt almost physical in its assault.

“You can’t keep us here,” Ryan choked out, staring hard at the tattoos on Kringle’s chest. “Someone is looking for me right now. They’re going to find me. My father’s a *cop*,” he lied. “He knows how to trace—”

“No.”

Ryan glanced up and met the man’s fierce pale gaze again for a split second before looking away. Though he was nauseous with terror, he balled his fists and stood.

“They will find us and—”

“No!”

The shout caused Ryan to step back in fright. He stumbled back onto the cot, landing with a teeth-jarring thump on the hard mattress pad.

“I am making toys for the children.” Kringle spoke in a quiet measured tone, his voice as pleasant as someone narrating a fairy tale, which somehow made him even more terrifying, and his words were clipped and precise. “Christmas will be here soon, and the children will need their toys.” He smiled, taking his Santa hat off, and clutched it in front of him with hands the size of catchers’ mitts. Kringle was bald and Ryan realized his skin was wet because of sweat—he watched beads of it roll down the man’s scalp to his cheeks where it darkened his ratty smoke-grey beard. Kringle then scared him again, throwing back his head to yell, “Ho! Ho! Ho!”

As if in answer, someone in the distance screamed and Ryan whimpered, his bladder failing him as the man at the bars let

out another nightmarish parody of Jolly Ol' Saint Nick's signature laugh.

Tears in his eyes, Ryan watched the man retreat into the darkness beyond. His breath hiccupped as he wrapped his arms around himself and rocked on his narrow cot, absolutely terrified out of his mind.

"Boy, that's disturbing," Zim said matter-of-factly. He was pale but seemed composed, Then he looked down at himself, his lips pulled back from his teeth in a bizarre grin "Huh. Looks like I *did* piss myself this time." He gave a shallow laugh and glanced up at Ryan. "You?"

"Yeah, me too," Ryan whispered, his voice trembling

"Scary fucker, right?"

Ryan didn't even have a chance to nod. He faintly registered falling back against the wall and hitting his head, but then he was gone.



Weeks passed, and nothing mattered anymore. Ryan had woken up a few days earlier from the strange, sudden coma-like sleep to find that, like Zim's ear, something had been taken from him. He chewed his food carefully to avoid the gaps where his canines used to be.

"What do you want to do today?" asked his cellmate. "Twenty questions?"

Ryan shrugged listlessly. He was numb, but whether it was from the sustained terror of their existence or the drugs or both, he didn't know. It was exhausting.

"We could . . . uh, play tic tac toe." Zim's plastic fork scraped his plate as he swirled the last bite of his blueberry

pancake in the slurry of maple syrup and fresh whipped cream.

Sighing, Ryan met Zim's gaze. "I think I just want to sleep."

"Dude. Come on. You're giving up . . ."

"So?"

"I could ask Smiley again if they could bring us some books or something. I'm sure I could convince them to sneak something in for us," Zim replied. "I just have to get through to them." They'd nicknamed the two elves that served their meals every day Smiley and Boo because of the masks they wore. Smiley seemed the more approachable of the two, but only because they could see that the elf was just as scared as they were. Boo's face was covered completely in a dirty white hood with only tiny holes to see out of.

"What's the point?"

"What's the point?" Zim repeated, exaggerating Ryan's grumpy tone. "The point is, we can't give up. Someone's gotta be looking for us. Someone's got to have seen *something*."

Ryan knew Zim was only putting on a brave front for his benefit. Hope was just a mirage at this point, *but* . . . he might as well play along to make Zim happy. He sighed.

"Yeah, you're right. Okay, sure. Let's play twenty questions."

As Ryan prepared to start guessing, he took off his glasses to clean them on the hem of the new T-shirt he'd been given. Finding himself in new clothes that second day had been a whole new sort of terror. Ryan felt sick to his stomach even thinking about it. Losing teeth was somehow easier to digest than the fact that someone had *touched* him in his sleep and cleaned him *everywhere*. He felt violated and gross.

"Dammit," he swore as the plastic on his glasses cracked. He'd taken to chewing the ends of the arms, a disgusting habit, but one that soothed him when his fear was at its worst . . . which was usually around midday. That's when they could

hear their captor grunting rhythmically somewhere nearby as someone screamed and sobbed, the sound of flesh on flesh echoing in the dark, punctuated by Kringle's chilling Santa laugh. Ryan closed his eyes. It was best not to think about it.

"What happened?" Zim asked, sounding concerned.

Ryan looked up. "Oh. Broke my glasses." He pulled the shattered plastic off the wire arm and showed Zim.

"Oh my *god*."

The smile that broke out on Zim's freckled face surprised Ryan. His cellmate looked like a kid on Christmas—*no, don't think that*. He shuddered and met Zim's gaze again. "What is it?"

"Give 'em here."

Confused, Ryan handed over his glasses and watched in dismay as Zim forced the other plastic earpiece to bend one way and the other until it too lost its plastic sheath. Then, with a grin, he snapped the arm off.

"What the hell, dude. I need those to see." Then Ryan realized what he was looking at: two long, skinny pieces of metal . . . perfect to pick a lock with.



"Do you want me to try?" Ryan whispered impatiently as Zim tinkered with the lock.

"Hang on. I think I've almost got it." Zim had been at it for a long time with little headway. Not only had he never picked a lock before, but he was working blind because the lock was on the other side of the bars. "Aaaallmost."

"You've said that like fifty times now."

“*Fuck.*” Zim stopped to pick up the broken piece of Ryan’s glasses he’d just dropped. Again.

“Listen. Maybe we should wait until tomorrow.” Ryan was getting nervous. They’d just eaten supper and he had no idea how long it would be until they were forced to fall asleep.

“I’m not spending another fucking second in this place if I don’t have to. And if we get out, we’ll escape the gas. He can’t put us to sleep then.” Zim was still convinced it was gas that was piped into their cell. Ryan was certain it was drugs in their evening meals.

“We can wait until tomorrow . . . in the afternoon. You know . . . when he’s usually distracted. With someone.” Ryan was sure that those sounds would haunt him for the rest of his life.

Zim turned and glared at him. “You’re distracting *me.*”

“I’m just saying that if it’s *not* gas and it’s a sedative in the food, even if we make it out of *this* room, we might not have time to get all the way out. Who knows how big this place is?” Ryan started pacing the cell, clutching his biceps. “And then what? That psycho finds us like, passed out on the stairs or something? What do you think he’ll do to us then?” Ryan heard a piece of his glasses fall to the floor again, and he groaned. “Will you be more caref—” He turned and froze in place. Outside their cell stood Kringle. His coat was unbuttoned as usual, but today he was naked from the waist down. His cock hung heavy and soft between his legs like a giant white slug.

“Oh *fuck,*” Zim rasped. “Sir . . . You see . . . Uh, we were . . . I was just . . . Please, don’t—”

Ryan threw his arms around Zim as his cellmate stammered, yanking him back from the bars. They clutched at each other, staring at the man in the Santa suit in terror as they waited for the worst.

Kringle just gave them an ugly smile and placed a clear plastic mask over his mouth and nose, his nightmarish eyes boring into them.

As everything went black, Ryan realized Zim's gas theory had been right after all.



Ryan buried his face in his pillow, not ready to face another day at the mercy of Kringle, or Satan Claus, as he thought of him. Then he heard something that made his stomach knot. He sat up. Zim was crying—Zim *never* cried.

The events of the previous night came back in a rush.

“Oh god.” Ryan almost tripped over himself in his haste to cross the cell. Zim lay huddled on his cot in the fetal position, facing away. “Are you okay? What happened?”

Zim let out a weak little sob, his breath hitching, and he whispered something indistinct.

Alarmed, Ryan touched his arm. “What did he do to you? Did . . . did he, uh . . . *hurt* you?” He couldn't get the image of Kringle's nudity out of his brain. *Had he . . .?* He felt nauseous just thinking about it.

Turning his head to Ryan, Zim stared up at him with red-rimmed eyes. He then slid his arms out from under the blanket, and for a moment, Ryan didn't understand what he was looking at—Zim's arms ended at the wrist where they were swaddled in clean white bandages.

“He took my hands.” Zim's voice was hoarse and lifeless.

“Oh god.” Ryan stared, his mouth dry.

“He took my fucking hands.” Zim turned away again, tucking his arms against his chest as he continued to cry softly.

Ryan stayed on his knees next to Zim's bed, numbly watching his friend weep over the loss of his hands, cold tears rolling down his own cheeks. Then he turned to the bars, his heart pounding. *What was that?* Was there someone standing there just beyond the reach of the light? He thought he could hear breathing. A moment later, subtle movements in the shadows confirmed his suspicions that they were being watched. But was it an elf, or was it Kringle? If it was the latter . . . the bastard was probably jerking off as he watched them suffer.

Ryan got up and sat on the end of Zim's bed, using his body to block the view of their watcher, and started rubbing Zim's back just as Zim had done for Ryan that first day.

"Shh. It'll be all right," he murmured, knowing full well that it wasn't, but what else was he supposed to say? He kept rubbing and whispering any comforting words that came to mind and was contemplating starting to hum something like his mum used to when Zim shifted closer to the wall. When Zim looked back at him over his shoulder, his eyes pleading, Ryan realized that he had moved, not to get away from him, but to make room for him on the bed.

Why not? Ryan stretched out behind Zim and put an arm around his waist, resting his forehead against his back as he hugged him gently.

He'd never spooned with a guy before, but what did it matter? Zim needed him.

After a while, Zim's tears tapered off, and when the silence dragged on, Ryan assumed he had cried himself to sleep. Then Zim cleared his throat.

"Uh. Ryan?" Zim's voice was hoarse, but he sounded a bit better, mood-wise.

"Yeah?"

"Can you do something for me?"

Ryan quickly sat up. “Of course. Anything.”

Zim turned around and Ryan helped him up, careful not to bump his injuries. Even though he was probably numb from the painkillers they were fed, Ryan didn’t want to hurt him by accident.

To his surprise, Zim’s pale cheeks reddened to match the tip of his nose and his tear-swollen eyes. He looked away. “I, um . . .”

“What is it?”

Zim sighed. “I need to take a leak.”

“Oh?” Ryan stared at him for a beat before it dawned on him what he was asking for. “*Oh.*”

Zim met his eye and gave him a sheepish grin. “Yeah, I don’t need you to, like, aim for me or anything. I can sit. But if you could help me with my pants and uh, dab, afterwards, that would be mucho appreciated.”

“Dab?”

Red-faced, Zim gave Ryan a weak shrug. “Yeah, with some toilet paper. I really hate having any, you know, drips . . .” He chewed on the side of his lip. “But if that’s too much of an ask, I totally get it.”

“No!” Ryan surprised himself by how loudly he’d said it and winced, laughing softly before he shook his head. “No. No, that’s fine.” He smiled. “I’m not squicked out by stuff like that. I have a baby brother. I changed his diaper and wiped his ass all the—” He stopped, and he and Zim stared at each other awkwardly. “Oh.”

“Oh god. I didn’t think of *that.*” Zim looked like he was going to start crying again.

“It’s fine. It’ll *be* fine. I’ll take care of you. Don’t think anything about it.”

Sniffing, Zim swiped at his eyes with a bandaged wrist-end and nodded. “Well, I don’t need to do *that* yet. Just number one.”

“All right.”

Ryan did his best to be as detached and professional as he could as he undid Zim’s pants and slid down his boxers, looking away as he did so, and then turned his back to give Zim privacy. Afterwards, he folded up a piece of toilet paper and “dabbed” Zim before helping him back into his pants.

“That wasn’t so bad, right?” Zim’s forehead wrinkled up. It looked like he was trying hard not to look embarrassed.

“Piece o’ cake.” Ryan smiled.

A scraping, gurgling sound heralded the arrival of their breakfast, and they both turned to the front of their cell as Smiley hobbled towards them with a tray.

“Oh yeah, and of course I’ll help you eat too,” Ryan said.

“Yeah, but only if you wash your hands first,” Zim replied with a smirk, his good humour returning.

“Oh. Right.” Ryan went to the sink to wash up while Zim went to meet Smiley at the bars.

“Oh, fuck *off*.”

Ryan turned at the exclamation and found Zim standing there covering his face, his shoulders shaking.

“What is it?”

“Take a look.” Zim let out a high peal of laughter. It sounded a little unhinged and for good reason. On the tray Smiley had left, between the domed plates, was a sealed deck of playing cards.

After weeks of having nothing to do, they’d finally been given something to occupy their time with.

“What a fucking *asshole*.” Uncovering his face, Zim stared down at his residual limbs, laughing helplessly, tears in his eyes. “How’m I supposed to hold cards? With my toes? What a dick. What a fucking dick.”

Ryan could do nothing but watch as his cellmate laughed until he broke down and sobbed.



“Are you . . . uh, Thanos?” Ryan asked. He played with the dissolving stitches on his abdomen. Most of them had come out, but there were two left that were just annoying. It was still a mystery what was taken out of him, but whatever it was mustn’t have been important because he felt just fine.

“*What?* No.”

“Okay, I give up.”

“I’m Marlon Brando in *Apocalypse Now*.”

Ryan shrugged, staring at the ceiling. “Never seen it.”

“Oh *man*. I can’t *believe* you’ve never seen it.” Zim laughed. “It’s a classic. You’ve *got* to see it.”

“Right.” Ryan sighed, turning to Zim who lay on his cot across the cell. “Maybe we can ask Smiley or Boo if we could please have a TV and the Netflix password.”

“You’re in a mood.” Zim sat up, tilting his head at Ryan. A smile dimpled his cheeks. “Hey, what do you think Kringle’s Netflix password would be?”

“I don’t know. I don’t care.”

“Probably something to allay his neighbours’ suspicions. Like . . . ‘totally not a serial killer’, all one word with the N and the S and the K capitalized.”

Ryan snorted. “Did you really just use ‘allay suspicions?’

Zim’s grin widened. “Hey, I like my true crime shows.”

Shaking his head, Ryan sat up, deciding to humour Zim. “Okay. But *usually* you need a number in a password too.”

“Right. Six, six, six?”

“No . . . Come *on*, it’s *obvious* what he would use,” Ryan replied.

“Oh yeah?”

“Twenty-five.”

Zim looked confused for a few seconds, then he laughed. “*Right*. Christmas.”

Ryan chuckled. Zim had a knack for drawing him out of his melancholy, but it was getting harder the longer it got. They were losing track of days, neither sure how long it had been since they had been taken. And they continued to lose pieces of themselves. Zim’s other ear had gone the way of the first, he’d lost a couple molars, and then a large square of skin from the back of his calf had gone missing.

As for Ryan, he was now missing the middle toe on each foot, the pinky on his left hand, and whatever it was that had been taken from his abdomen. He frowned and touched his incision again, distractedly tugging on one of the stitches.

“You know what? Maybe he took a rib. Did you count?”

“Huh?” Ryan looked up, prodding at his side. Zim had previously suggested a kidney. “Oh. How many am I supposed to have?”

“How do you *not* know this?”

“Because not everyone is studying to be a doctor, you dork.”

Zim barked out a laugh. “Okay *fine*. You have twenty-four. Twelve on each side. Well, except if you have a genetic anomaly.”

Ryan slowly counted his ribs and found he did indeed come up short on one side. “What the hell? Why would he take a rib?”

“Why would he take my ears?” Zim shrugged. “The guy’s a psycho.”

“Hm.” Ryan sobered. They were disappearing piece by piece. *How long before there’s nothing left? How long can this go on?*

As if he could sense Ryan’s descent back into melancholy, Zim piped up again.

“Supposedly, there was this guy who removed his lower ribs so that he could deepthroat his own dick.”

“What?” Ryan glanced up.

“Yeah, he could already suck it, but he wanted to make it easier. Auto-fellatio. Swallowed his own cum and everything.”

Laughing, Ryan shook his head. “That sounds made up.”

“Swear to god.” Zim solemnly pressed his mostly healed arm to his heart. If Kringle had amputated Zim’s hands himself, he had done it with skill. The skin was smooth, and the seams of the covering flaps were straight and flat. Once he was fully healed, Zim probably wouldn’t have much in the way of scars.

“Actually, speaking of dick . . . Could I get an assist, please? I have to piss.” Zim lifted his brows hopefully as he smiled.

“Sure.” Walking still felt sort of funny with the missing toes—Ryan had to step carefully as he met Zim at the back of the cell. He quickly undid his cellmate’s pants, as he had done dozens of times now, and turned away to give him privacy as he used the toilet. Then, when Zim stood, Ryan folded a square of toilet paper and reached out to gingerly lift Zim’s dick with his forefinger and thumb to clean him off. He noticed that Zim’s shaft felt a little different than usual . . .

stiffer. Without thinking, he squeezed it. Zim let out a gasp, his dick immediately getting harder in Ryan's grasp.

Ryan dropped Zim's semi-erect cock like it was a hot coal and stumbled backwards a step. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I don't know why I did that. Brain fart. I was distracted," he stammered. "I didn't mean to . . . I'm sorry. I'm not gay."

Cheeks bright pink, Zim stared at him, slightly hunched over with his pants still around his knees and forearms crossed over his dick, hiding it. "Uh. It's okay." He grimaced, blowing out a breath. "I'm not gay either. But . . ." He cleared his throat. "But, I'm bi."

Ryan blinked at Zim. "Oh."

"I mean. Not that that really matters. It was just a reaction. I guess mentioning the blowjob earlier kinda started it." He held up his blunted forearms. "It's not like I've been able to jerk off, you know? I'm a little pent up."

"Ah. Yeah." Ryan swallowed, his eyes dropping to Zim's erection. He cleared his throat. "It's just a natural reaction."

"Yeah."

"Uh. Do you want me to do your pants up?"

Zim laughed, still red-faced, and nodded vigorously. "Yeah, let's tuck that away, eh?"

Ryan averted his gaze as he slid Zim's boxers back up, pulling the waistband out far enough to scoop up his stiff dick and trap it under the dark-grey cotton. But when he went to zip up Zim's pants, he couldn't avoid touching the hard bulge. Buttoning him up as fast as he could, he gave his cellmate a tight smile and turned to go back to his cot, surreptitiously adjusting his own hardening dick in the process. *What the hell?*

"Well, that wasn't awkward at all," Zim said with a chuckle.

"It's fine," Ryan replied. "I'm sorry."

“No, I’m sorry.”



The rest of the day was spent in almost complete silence. What little conversation they *did* have was strained and overly polite. When supper came, Ryan and Zim ate together, Ryan cutting Zim’s food and feeding him every second bite, all the while feeling weird and nervous. Ryan knew it wouldn’t be long before Zim had to go to the bathroom again, but he couldn’t tell if it was dread or excitement he was feeling at having to touch him again. Maybe both.

“You all right?” Zim picked up his glass of sparkling water with the insides of his wrists and carefully brought it to his lips.

“Yeah, I’m fine.” Ryan gave him a weak smile. Zim’s cloth-covered dick had been so hot and hard against his knuckles. He winced, shifting in place. *Don’t think about it.*

“Do you want to talk about earlier?” Setting down his glass, Zim chewed on the corner of his bottom lip.

Ryan quickly shook his head. Then he shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“Listen, when I said I was bi, I didn’t mean, like, I was into you like that. Or anything.”

“No, I got that.” Ryan fiddled with his fork, staring down at the swirls of balsamic glaze in his plate. “Totally. But . . . what if . . .”

“What *if* . . .?”

Ryan looked up at Zim. He was staring at him wide-eyed, waiting for him to finish. Ryan felt his face redden and shrugged again.

“What if . . .” There was a weird tightness in his chest that made it hard to force the words out. When they finally did, his voice sounded strangled. “If, like, I was to help you out.”

“Help me out?”

“With . . . things.”

“Are you offering to jerk me off?” Zim asked, his voice high-pitched with disbelief.

Nodding was the only response Ryan was capable of. *What am I doing?* All he knew was that he couldn’t stop thinking about Zim’s dick and how hard his own was right then.

“*Hell* yeah.” Zim grinned. “How can I refuse? When? Right now?”

Ryan nodded again quickly and Zim popped excitedly to his feet. He accepted Zim’s help getting to his own, grasping him around the forearm, then followed Zim to his cot.

“How do you want to do this?” Zim asked eagerly. “Sitting? Lying down?”

“Uh. I don’t . . . I don’t know.” Ryan scratched the back of his neck, not able to meet Zim’s gaze. “What do you like?”

“Let’s lie down with you behind me.”

“Okay.”

Heart pounding and mouth dry, he waited until Zim was lying on his side on the thin mattress and then joined him, spooning him like he had the day Zim had lost his hands. Suddenly unsure of himself, he stayed motionless for a long time, just trying not to let his anxiety take hold.

“You don’t have to,” Zim said quietly into the silence.

“No. I want to. I just—” Ryan took a deep breath and forced himself to put his hand on Zim’s hip “—needed a sec.”

“Take your time.” It was obvious Zim was trying to rein back his excitement, which made Ryan feel bad for making

him wait. He clenched his jaw as he moved his hand over and hastily undid Zim's button and zipper. Then, eyes closed, he slid his hand down the front of Zim's boxers, grabbing his dick with more confidence than he actually felt.

Zim exhaled hard. "Oh fuck."

Ryan frowned, leaning his forehead between Zim's shoulder blades as he started to stroke him slowly from balls to crown, using the same method he'd always used on himself. "This okay?"

"Oh yeah," Zim replied. He moaned softly. "Maybe a little faster."

"All right." Feeling more certain of himself now that it was actually happening, Ryan quickly worked Zim's boxers down to free his dick from the constricting material. Then he took Zim back in hand, jerking him more swiftly as his own boner throbbed against the front of his boxers. He moved his hips to get a little friction against the damp material, but then Zim surprised him by sliding his ass back against him.

"*Oh.*" Ryan huffed out a harsh breath, stroking Zim as he thrust his pelvis to grind into him, all timidity gone now.

"That feels so good," Zim said in a hoarse whisper, then he moaned again. "I'm going to cum."

Whimpering through clenched teeth, Ryan rutted against Zim, wishing there wasn't a barrier of cloth between them, then he gasped as Zim let out a ragged cry, his hot cum slicking Ryan's quickly moving hand. He pressed his face hard against Zim's back, muffling his full-throated yell as his own cum burst out of him in a thick, pulsing flood that coated the front of his boxers and left him shaking and gasping for breath.

"*Fuuuuck.*" Zim laughed. "Oh god."

A tremor went through Ryan, and he chuckled. He was lightheaded but in the best of ways. He smiled, but then froze

when he heard the little *tick* that heralded the nightly sleeping gas. Ryan was out cold before he could gather another thought.



Ryan opened eyes. He was in his own cot. Lifting his head, he saw that Zim was still asleep across the room. Morning brain fog after the drugged sleep always made the previous evening feel a little unreal, so it took him a few minutes to grasp what had happened between him and his cellmate. Then he had a few seconds of blinding, gut-churning panic when he realized that Kringle might have punished them for what they had done—he had taken Zim’s hands for trying to pick the lock . . . could he have . . .? *No no no.*

Hands shaking, Ryan slowly reached for his crotch and then heaved a deep sigh of relief to find himself still intact. And, on further inspection, he saw that he’d been bathed again, which was a good thing, considering the state he’d been in when he’d fallen asleep.

“Hey.”

He glanced over at Zim who was sitting in bed, rubbing his eyes with the ends of his wrists. Ryan shifted up so he was facing him. “Hey.”

“So, did Kringle cut your cock off too?”

Ryan gaped at Zim, his pulse doubling. “Wha . . . *Shit.* He . . . *oh god.* You’re—”

“—only joking.” Zim gave him a wide grin, his blue eyes narrowed in mischief.

“You *asshole.*” Ryan shook his head. “I can’t believe you would *joke* about that.”

“Well, you know what they say: if you can’t laugh . . . uh . . . something something about crying.” Zim yawned loudly. “I saw you checking your dick. Honestly, it hadn’t even occurred to me.” He laughed. “Hooray for not being eunuchs, eh?”

“Yeah.” Ryan glanced down at his feet, suddenly awkward.

“So?” Zim asked.

Lifting his eyes, Ryan hunched his shoulders. “What?”

“Have any regrets?”

“About what we did?” Ryan quirked his mouth to the side, then slowly shook his head. It was the truth.

“Good.” Zim smiled. “Come here.”

“Why?”

“Since that psycho fucker doesn’t seem to mind us having a little fun, I figured we should take advantage of that and do it again. Often.”

Ryan gave Zim a shy smile. “Uh.” His cheeks were warm. “Yeah. Okay.”



This time they took a different approach, with the two of them lying facing each other, but in opposite directions. While Ryan used his hands to stroke Zim’s dick, Zim used his mouth on Ryan’s and it was *incredible*.

Zim’s hot, wet mouth and slippery lips soon had him gasping and trying to remember that he was supposed to be jacking Zim off at the same time. He kept pausing because Zim would tease him with a rough-tongued swipe to the underside of his cockhead, causing him to moan and shiver,

pulling him inexorably closer to orgasm. Then Zim would stop and thrust his hips, coaxing Ryan to keep his hand moving.

“Sorry,” Ryan said, his voice rough. He closed his eyes, soon distracted again by Zim’s skillful treatment of his dick, but this time Zim didn’t stop. He brought Ryan quickly to the edge and kept working his cock as Ryan twitched and moaned through the first pulse of climax, the realization that Zim was eagerly swallowing his load adding such a searing edge of intensity to his orgasm that he couldn’t hold back the cries that bounced off the bare walls of their cell.

He lay there panting and giddy once Zim had released him, one last throb of pleasure causing his body to twitch as he tried to catch his breath.

“Sounds like you enjoyed that,” Zim said, resting on his elbow with a crooked smirk.

Ryan laughed and sat up, pushing Zim onto his back on the cot. He grabbed Zim’s dick two-handed and started stroking him swiftly. When Zim arched his back off the mattress with a low moan, Ryan made a decision—he bent over and took Zim into his mouth as he jerked him off. It was only fair.

Zim inhaled sharply when Ryan’s mouth closed over his cockhead and he grasped the sides of Ryan’s head with the ends of his wrists, thrusting his hips in time with Ryan’s movements.

In what felt like only a few seconds, Zim whimpered and made a harsh sound in the back of his throat, flooding Ryan’s mouth with cum. Startled, Ryan nearly choked, but then forced himself to swallow quickly before the next spurt hit the roof of his mouth—it tasted weird, but if Zim could swallow his jizz without complaint, he could repay the favour.

“Okay! Okay . . . *whoa* boy. *Stop.*” With a strangled curse, Zim pushed Ryan’s head away, then lay there chuckling.

“Sorry. Did I do something wrong?” Feel self-conscious, Ryan wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. His throat

burned a little.

“No. Just *sensitive*.” Zim pressed down gently on his cock and winced. “*Oof*. You surprised me. I wasn’t expecting you to go to town on me like that.”

“It was okay?”

“It was top notch.”

Ryan smiled and blushed. After a few awkward seconds, he coughed into his fist and furrowed his brow. “Um. Zim?”

“Yeah?”

Face warm, Ryan pressed his lips together hard for a moment. “I think I might be bi too.”

“No shit.” Zim grinned wide. “What gave you that idea?”

Ryan frowned, not sure he appreciated Zim’s teasing tone, but then Zim held out an arm, beckoning him.

“C’mere.”

He hesitated, but only long enough to tell himself he was being silly for being uncomfortable, considering everything that had already happened. Then he stretched out, lying stiffly with his head on Zim’s chest at first, but when Zim hugged him close, Ryan sighed and put his arm around him, relaxing into his embrace.

“This is nice,” Zim said softly.

“Yeah.”

They lay there in silence, Ryan listening to the sound of Zim’s strong heartbeat. He felt a little like crying, but it wasn’t from fear or sadness for once. He closed his eyes, breathing in Zim’s scent.

“You know what?” Zim’s voice sounded a bit strange, like he too was on the verge of tears.

“What?”

“I think we just found something good to hold onto in the midst of this fucking nightmare.” He squeezed Ryan gently against his side. “And maybe even more incentive to get out of here, you know?”

Ryan could only nod because he could barely breathe around the brick-sized lump in his throat.



Their hunger for each other’s touch became an obsession. They spent their days only half-dressed, learning all sorts of ways to pleasure each other. Meals were quickly eaten, simply fuel for their bodies as they coaxed each other to orgasm until they were empty and exhausted. Most nights, they fell asleep on their own, well before the gas was piped into their cell. Ryan knew they were channelling all the fear they felt into something that was manic and desperate, but it was all that they had.

At the beginning they had wondered why Kringle was allowing them to indulge themselves, but they soon realized he was enjoying the show. Sometimes they could hear him masturbating in the darkness beyond their prison, breathing heavily as he watched the two of them grapple on the flimsy mattresses, the sweat on their bodies glistening in the cold light of the naked bulb. Most of the time Ryan was too distracted to hear Kringle let out his boar-like ejaculatory grunts, but when he did, he felt sick and violated. Unclean. Only Zim’s warm embrace could bring him back to himself.

But there were upsides to entertaining their loathsome captor. For one, the pilfering of their body parts had stopped. First days, and now weeks had gone by without them waking up to missing pieces. Also, the harrowing sounds of Kringle defiling the flesh of their fellow prisoners had stopped. Gone

were the screams of those suffering through unspeakable acts forced upon them by the madman's horrifying desires. They'd bought a little peace for everyone—even Smiley and Boo seemed more relaxed.



Ryan panted, his breath hissing past the flesh he held in his teeth as Zim groaned, jerking his hips back into Ryan.

“Oh fuck,” Zim whispered.

Chuckling, Ryan released Zim only to bite him in another spot along his shoulder. Zim's shaft swelled in his hand in response, so he stroked him faster. The moan that burst out of Zim made Ryan's dick throb so he closed his eyes, concentrating. He was only a few thrusts away from climax with his dick trapped tight between Zim's oiled thighs, but he wanted to wait for Zim. It felt *so* good when they came together, though all the orgasms Zim had given him were the best he'd ever had, not just the ones they shared.

“I'm so close.” Zim's voice was raw as he trembled against Ryan. “I'm . . . oh fuck . . . I'm going to cum. Oh *funuuck* . . .”

Ryan whimpered as he felt Zim's cock twitch, then he gasped, the first pulse of orgasm taking him by surprise. Slowing his thrusts as he coated the inside of Zim's thighs with cum, he loosened his grip on Zim's spurting cock, his slippery hand moving easily over his shaft and cockhead, the two of them moaning in unison as they emptied themselves for the third time that day.

Afterwards, they lay there breathing quietly, still entwined, hearts syncing as the sweat cooled their bodies.

“I didn't hear him,” Ryan said with his lips against the red bite marks he'd left on Zim's skin.

“Shh.”

“Maybe he was just being extra quiet.”

“Ryan, stop it. Just . . . shut up and enjoy the moment. Please?”

Ryan pressed his lips together, eyes closed. Maybe Kringle was watching them right now . . . standing in the shadows.

“*Stop* it,” Zim said a little louder. “I can *feel* you thinking about him. He doesn’t deserve so much real estate in your head.”

Sighing, Ryan shook his head. He pulled Zim back hard against him in a tight hug.

“I’m sorry.”

Zim let out a huff of breath, not quite a laugh, then retreated from Ryan, rolling onto his back in the narrow space between Ryan and the wall, and lay there with his knees up and cum-slick thighs parted. He held his arm out and waited for Ryan to settle against his chest before shifting to hold him gently.

Ryan bit his lip as he watched the cum slide gradually down Zim’s thigh towards his groin. Zim really wasn’t into penetration, so intercrural sex was the closest thing they did, and he was more than happy with that. There was something so satisfying about ejaculating on Zim bare skin. . . it made him feel weirdly possessive.

“My sheets are, toast.” Zim said with a chuckle. “Like, totally *saturated* with jizz.”

“Yeah. I guess that means you’re sleeping over at my place tonight.” Ryan smiled. They made a mess of one set of sheets every day, using it as an excuse for both of them to share a cot that night. Though at this point, did they really need an excuse? They hadn’t really spoken out loud about their feelings, but it was clear that the bond between them was deepening.

“Your bed’s more comfortable anyway,” Zim said, his shrug rocking Ryan’s head.

Ryan snorted. “Whatever.” Despite sharing a bed every evening, they would wake up in the morning on their own cots with the sheets, their clothes, and their bodies freshly cleaned. The last was still disturbing . . . but, at least they were no longer waking up with fresh incisions. Ryan frowned, disturbed by how much he was normalizing what was happening to them. He couldn’t even remember how long it had been since he and Zim had even talked about escaping. *This is not good.*

A soft shuffling sound made him crane his neck to look through the bars. Right then, Zim’s stomach gurgled, a Pavlovian response to the sound of their evening meal approaching. Today it was Boo lugging the heavy tray, and they seemed to be struggling more than usual. The reason became apparent as they came closer—there was a bottle of red wine on its side between the covered plates.

Ryan sat up and pulled on his pants, meeting Boo at the front of the cell.

“What’s the special occasion?” he asked, gesturing to the wine.

Boo just stared up at him, two tiny glimmers visible through the ragged holes in the hood the only indication the elf had eyes at all. Zim was convinced Boo was deaf—they never responded to questions in any way. At least Smiley had shrugged once when he’d asked if there was any cilantro in the curried lamb.

“Thank you,” Ryan said, bending over to slide the tray under the bars. “Much appreciated.”

“Ooh. What’s this?” Zim scooped up the wine and inspected the label. “Oh wow. This is *not* a ten-dollar bottle of wine.”

“No?”

“I mean, it’s not like a pricey Châteauneuf-du-Pape or anything, but this isn’t swill.” Zim cracked open the bottle and slowly inhaled. “Oh, this is gonna be goood.” He waggled his eyebrows. “Fancy a drink?”

Nodding, Ryan laughed. He picked up the plastic wine glasses from the tray and held them out. “Please and thank you.”



Ryan hadn’t had a drink in weeks, or maybe months, and because of that, the wine hit him pretty hard. He’d always been a cheerful drunk in the past, never prone to anger or melancholy like some of his friends, and that’s how it was at first with Zim. They had ended up laughing themselves silly over something—he couldn’t even remember what it was—and then Zim had surprised him with a cheek kiss that flirted precariously close to the corner of his mouth, thrilling him with goosebumps and a whole swarm of butterflies in his stomach.

Ryan thought it was funny that he was now fully inured to having a penis in his mouth, but the thought of *kissing* a guy made him feel like he was a starry-eyed teen. It was ridiculous.

But then he had to take a piss, and suddenly the warm golden glow of alcohol and near-sightedness that had shielded him from reality evaporated as the pitted concrete blocks came back into focus.

He stood there staring at the wall of his cell, unsteady on his feet and in his mind as he pissed loudly into the toilet bowl.

Why are we acting like this was such a treat?

Zim and he were trapped in a cage with no hope of escape, held there by a madman in a Santa suit who got his jollies

from lopping off bits of them when he wasn't mutilating his "elves" or doing god knows what to those poor people in the other cells. There was *nothing* to celebrate. What the fuck were they doing?

Ryan staggered back to Zim but stopped when he heard a rustle outside the cell. He made a face, a sour taste in his mouth as he approached the bars.

"Where you goin'?" asked Zim, his words a little slurred.

"He's out there. Watching us. Expecting us to *thank* him." Ryan gripped the bars, pushing his face between them, staring at the vague shapes in the dark, looking for movement. "Aren't you, you sadistic *fuck*. Hoping to get us drunk so we put on another show for you, eh? You like watching us? Well, watch *this*." He held up both middle fingers. "You make me sick. You're pathetic, that's what you are."

"What are you *doing*?" Zim whispered urgently as he gripped Ryan's shoulder, trying to pull him away from the bars.

"I'm showing this psycho fucker I'm not afraid of him. I'm done being his private porn show." Ryan wrenched his shoulder out of Zim's grasp, nearly falling over in the process. "You hear that? I'm *done*," he shouted.

"Come on. Let's go sit down, buddy. I think you need some water."

Ryan found Zim's cajoling tone condescending. "I'm *not* just going sit here anymore. I won't. *I won't*." He turned back to the dark room beyond the cell, his eyes zeroing in on the big blurry shape in the corner. Ryan laughed. "I'm going to be *so* happy to see them haul your psychotic ass to jail. Because they will. *Ohhh* they will. You perverted, limp dick, bedwetting, *dog fucker*."

"Uhhhh . . . Ryan, why are you taunting the bad man?" Zim laughed nervously. "Taunting the bad man is never a good idea."

“I’m not afraid of him anymore. I’m not.” Ryan rested his forehead on one of the cold metal crossbars so that he’d stop drunkenly weaving back and forth, and glared out at the shadows. “You know what I’d like? I’d like to watch you get your nasty cock cut off. That’s what I’d like to see. With a . . . with a *rusty saw*. I would *laugh*.”

“I’m pretty sure you’d pass out if you saw a man getting his dick cut off. You don’t exactly have nerves of steel.” Zim took Ryan gently by the hand. “Come on. Let’s get you to bed.”

“No! I want him to know that he’s a piece of shit and that I’m not afraid of him.”

“I think you’ve said plenty.” Zim tugged Ryan, and Ryan relented, letting go of the bar. “Let’s go to bed.”

“I’m not tired.”

However, whether or not he was tired was a moot point—they didn’t even make it halfway across the room before the gas knocked them out.



Ryan woke to darkness the next morning. He sat up, feeling groggier and more uncomfortable than he had in weeks, and looked around. There wasn’t even a glimmer of light.

What the . . .?

Then he realized something felt weird about his eyes. He touched his face, his heart skipping a beat as his stomach clenched. There was something on his face. *Oh no*. He traced the edge of the bandage. No, *two* bandages. They covered his eyes. Why were they covering his eyes?

Gasping for breath, Ryan started peeling away the medical tape with numb fingers. *No no no no*. The bandage over his

left eye lifted easily away, and he let it drop. He couldn't see. His eye wouldn't open. With a trembling hand, he slowly touched his eyelid, then yanked his hand away, his pulse racing. He quickly tore away the bandage on his right eye and found it was the same as the left. *No. This isn't real. This isn't happening.*

"Ryan?" Zim sounded alarmed. Ryan could hear him approach and stop with a gasp. "Jesus fucking christ."

Ryan turned towards the sounds. "Zim?" *Please please please let this be a nightmare. Please let me wake up.* "Zim?"

"Yeah, I'm here." Zim sank down and wrapped his arms around him. "I'm here."

"Did he scoop my eyes out?" Ryan asked in a small voice. He was shaking so hard it was difficult to breathe. "Zim? Are my eyes gone?"

"That's . . . that's what it looks like." Zim's voice was thick with emotion as he hugged Ryan tighter.

Ryan clenched his teeth, his head swimming for a moment, and then leaned forward and vomited on the floor.



"Do you want to eat something?"

Numbly, Ryan shook his head, burying his face against Zim's shoulder. They were lying on Zim's cot, facing each other, with Ryan in Zim's arms.

"You should probably eat something. For nothing else, you'll probably need the drugs in the food. You're going to be in a world of hurt soon . . ."

"Later," Ryan whispered. It still didn't feel real. He'd struggled his whole life being very near-sighted. He'd often

called himself blind as a bat. Now he was blind as a . . . mole? Or, like one of those creepy deep-sea fish? Earlier, Zim had calmly explained that he'd been given a double enucleation where only the eyeball was removed, leaving the eyelid and tear glands intact, which is why he was still able to cry. Ryan had put the bandages back over his eyes with Zim's guidance so that he didn't wind up with a nasty infection, but now the gauze was uncomfortably wet from his tears. Ryan sniffled and Zim held him tighter.

Zim sighed. "*Why* did you have to goad him like that?"

Frowning, Ryan pulled away from Zim. "Are you *serious*?"

"What?"

"Are you seriously blaming me for what he did to me?"

"I just mean . . . things were going—"

"I swear to god, I am going to hit you if you say things were going *well*. They weren't going well. It was only a matter of time before he got bored of us and went back to . . . this."

"I wasn't going to say *well*. I was going to say *better*."

Ryan punched Zim in the shoulder.

"Hey, ow."

"Things weren't *better*. They were just less horrific. There's a difference."

Zim sighed. "Yeah, I know." He moved one of his arms up and rested his wrist against the back of Ryan's head. "I just wish you hadn't said anything. I just *hate* what he did to you. Your poor eyes."

"Your poor hands."

"Yeah. I would totally be running my fingers through your hair right now if I could." Zim mussed his hair gently.

At Zim's softly spoken words and touch, the skin prickled down the back of Ryan's neck and along his ribcage, giving

him shivers. “You would?”

“Yeah.”

“To make me feel better?” Ryan whispered.

“Mmhm.” Zim stroked his hair some more. “Is this making you feel better?”

Ryan nodded.

“I . . . um.” Zim was silent for a few seconds.

Ryan wished he could see his expression. “What is it?”

“There’s something I want to do, something I’ve been wanting to do for a while now, but I didn’t know if you’d like it.” Zim’s voice was low and intimate, his face closer to Ryan’s now. It sent another frisson down Ryan’s sides.

“Oh?” Ryan could barely breathe. He hoped Zim was talking about kissing him.

“And I don’t know if it’ll make *you* feel better, but I know it’ll make *me* feel better.”

“Okay?” Licking his lips, Ryan swallowed, moving his head forward a touch. “You can do it . . . if you want.”

“You sure?”

Ryan started to nod, then gasped as Zim’s lips touched his. It was like there suddenly wasn’t enough room for his lungs and his heart inside his chest. He clutched at Zim’s back and shivered as he kissed Zim back, whimpering when Zim coaxed his mouth open. Ryan timidly touched Zim’s tongue with his and Zim responded with enthusiasm, kissing him with such abandon that Ryan soon had to break away just to catch his breath.

“Was that okay?” Zim sounded just as breathless as he was.

“Yeah.” Ryan smiled. “I think I really like you, Lester Zimmerman.”

Zim laughed. “You can’t see it, but I’m making a face right now.” He quickly kissed Ryan again. “Hey. You never told me your last name.”

“It’s Reid.”

“Ryan Reid? You sound like one of those Marvel characters you love so much.”

Ryan chuckled, then sobered, not wanting to think about anything having to do with home. “Can you kiss me again?”

Zim’s lips touched his but only briefly. “I can. But you have to promise me that you’ll eat something.”

Ryan nodded. “I promise. Now kiss me like you mean it.”

Zim laughed.



The afternoon was spent learning to get around without crashing into things. To get from one cot to the other was about six paces. From the front of the cell to the back was nine. The toilet and sink were off to the left at the back. Ryan did the circuit a few times, gaining more confidence as he learned to rely on Zim’s eyes. It was both frightening and tiring being in the dark all the time—it was unrelenting and the bandages didn’t help with the suffocating feeling. He was itching to rip them off so that he could see. It didn’t make sense, but it was like his body believed that they were the reason he couldn’t see.

“Okay, and now step twice to the left,” Zim called out. “Okay good. Now it’s about two paces to the toilet.”

“Thanks.” Ryan stepped forward carefully. He reached out and down, finding the porcelain rim, then turned around and sat. Standing to pee was no longer an option. When he was

done, and his hands were washed, Zim guided him back to the cot. He was nearly there when he heard a scream. He froze in place, his heart crashing against his ribcage.

A second scream was cut short before Kringle let loose with a beastly “Ho! Ho! Ho!” After a few seconds of silence, a rhythmic slapping noise began, and Ryan staggered, reaching blindly for Zim as a man started sobbing in the distance, pleading for it to stop.

“Fucking hell,” Zim said, hugging Ryan to his chest as Ryan stuck his fingers in his ears, praying for it to be over soon. It took a long time before the noises died down.



Ryan used the bars to guide himself toward the sound of an elf approaching with their supper. It was definitely Smiley. Boo’s breathing didn’t sound so . . . wet. Without his sight, sounds were becoming more layered and complex. Where before he had only heard shuffling and gurgling, now he could clearly hear a soft whimper with every step.

“Which is it? Smiley?” Ryan asked.

“Yeah. You can tell that?”

Nodding, Ryan leaned over, feeling around on the cold concrete for the tray the elf had deposited. “Thank you,” he said when he’d found it. He stood carefully with it in both hands.

“Do you want something?” Zim asked.

It took a second for Ryan to realize he wasn’t talking to him. “What’s going on?”

“It’s . . . staring at you.”

“She.” The barely audible sounds of pain he’d heard as the elf walked had had a distinctly feminine timbre to them. “You’re a woman, right?”

“She’s nodding,” Zim said.

Ryan set the tray down on the floor and felt his way back to the bars. “What is it?” he asked softly.

Smiley’s breath gurgled in her throat.

“She’s touching her eye. Maybe she’s saying something about your eyes.” Zim’s voice got louder as he approached. “Yeah, she’s nodding again.”

“What about my eyes?” Ryan asked her.

“Uh. She’s just standing there . . . Oh, never mind,” Zim said. “She’s leaving. I wonder what that was about. Maybe she felt bad for you?”

Ryan frowned, pondering what had just happened. The seed of an idea was planted.



A few days later, Ryan was able to move around the cell with ease, so when he heard Smiley approach, he met her quickly at the bars as she set down the tray. He grabbed the elf’s hand, and she let out a surprised cry, trying to pull away.

“Please,” Ryan said, locking the fingers of the other hand around her wrist so she couldn’t get away. “Wait. Just wait, okay? I don’t want to hurt you. I’ll let you go, but first I just want to talk. Please?”

The woman relented and stopped trying to get loose, but Ryan held onto her just in case.

“She’s just standing there,” Zim said, coming to crouch next to Ryan.

“I want to believe that you’re a good person, and that you feel bad for what’s happening to me and my friend.” Ryan stopped and waited, but Zim stayed silent. “The other day, when you came to give us supper, you wanted to say that felt bad about my eyes, right?”

A few seconds passed. “She nodded a little bit.”

Ryan breathed out slowly. “You’ve obviously been through so much I can’t even imagine, but you still care about what’s happening to us, don’t you?”

Another pause. “She nodded again.”

Hope began to take root. “Will you help us escape?” The woman jerked back, but he held fast to her hand.

“Oh, she definitely doesn’t want to do that. She’s shaking her head like crazy.”

“Is it that you don’t *want* to or that you feel like you *can’t*?” Ryan asked.

“I think we’re going to have to stick to yes or no questions. She’s just standing there. Oh . . . she’s crying now.” Zim’s voice went soft with compassion. “You think you *can’t* help us, right?” Zim paused. “She’s nodding.”

“Is he holding someone close to you prisoner?” Ryan asked, guessing. “Is that why you can’t help?”

“Oh shit, she’s nodding.” Zim sighed audibly. “I’m so sorry.”

“Is it . . . a friend?”

“No,” Zim said.

“A boyfriend? Husband?”

“No and no.”

“A daughter . . . a son?”

“No and . . . oh, it looks like that’s a definite yes. She’s really crying now.”

Ryan nodded. “Yeah, I can hear her.” He squeezed the woman’s hand as she gurgled and sobbed. “I’m so sorry.” She squeezed his hand back after a moment, and he felt guilty for what he was about to say, but there was no other recourse. She was their best bet. “My mom is probably going crazy, worrying where I am,” he whispered. “She’s probably crying herself to sleep every night, wondering what happened to her son.”

This only made the woman cry harder, and Ryan felt his own tears trickle out from beneath his empty eyelids. He felt like such a dick for putting her through this.

“I love my mother so much. I want to see her again. I *have* to go home to her. And Zim wants to go home to his mom too. But we can’t do it alone. We need help.”

The woman’s hand trembled in his and she let out a low moan.

“She’s shaking her head.”

“If you help us, we will come right back and bring the police. Everyone will be rescued. Your son will be okay and you’ll be okay. And that bastard Kringle will get what he deserves.”

As she squeezed his hand again, Ryan could actually feel that she was shaking her head, the way her arm jiggled in his grip, so he continued without waiting for Zim. “I know it’s a huge thing to ask. But,” Ryan said softly, clutching her hand gently now in both hands, “I think you want to do this. I think you want to help us. I think you know it’s right.” Then, with a silent prayer, he released her.

“She’s standing there, staring at you,” Zim murmured.

Please please please. “Will you help us?”

He waited in silence and darkness for her reply.

“She’s walking away. *Damn.*” Zim’s disappointment cut through Ryan as he sat down with a thump, a sick feeling in

the pit of his stomach. “Hey, it was worth a try.”

“I guess.”

That evening they ate in silence. Defeat hung heavy in the air like a cold fog.



Breakfast was served by Boo the next morning and Ryan wondered if Kringle had witnessed the exchange with Smiley. Maybe he had doomed the poor woman.

However, later that day Ryan heard something that gave him hope.

“What is it?” Zim asked drowsily.

“Smiley’s coming,” Ryan replied. *No one* visited them in the middle of the day. And the fact that it was the woman . . . He sat up with a smile and met her at the bars, but jerked back in surprise as she snatched his hand.

“What are— *Oh.*” Ryan closed his fist around the cold metal thing she’d placed on his palm. “Oh thank you. Thank you,” he whispered, but she had already retreated with quick shuffling steps, moaning softly as she went. “We’ll come back for you. I *promise,*” he called out softly.

“Holy shit, did she just . . . is that what I *think* it is?” Zim asked, standing at his shoulder.

Nodding, Ryan turned and opened his hand, showing Zim the key.

“Holy shit,” Zim repeated in a hush. “Holy fucking shit. Let’s get out of here.”

“Not yet,” Ryan said. “We have to wait until we *know* Kringle is distracted.”

“Shit. Good idea.”



They didn't have long to wait. A man started gibbering somewhere nearby, his sobs pathetic as Kringle laughed. Then the man let out a scream, followed by a second, this one even more shrill. Then the grunting began.

“Okay let's go.” Jaw set, Ryan tried to ignore the sounds as he fumbled with the lock.

“What if this is a trick?” Zim asked in a hoarse whisper.

“No. I don't think she'd do that to us.”

“Why not?”

The key finally turned with a sharp click and the door squeaked open with an easy push. The man in the other room started begging again, his voice high and desperate. “Because, I have a feeling that that's her son.”

Zim didn't reply. He didn't have to. His silence spoke for itself.



With Ryan's hand on his shoulder, Zim led them through a series of corridors, the cries of the man growing fainter as they walked.

“It looks like . . . the basement to a hospital or something,” Zim whispered. “The walls are all concrete but there are doors with numbers on them. And there are signs pointing to exists and shit like that.” They walked for a few minutes longer, then

Zim stopped. “You’ll have to open the door for me. It’s here.” With his wrists, he led Ryan’s hand to the door handle.

Ryan pulled open the door, holding it open for Zim, then put his hand back on Zim’s shoulder. They passed through three more doors the same way, and then Zim stopped in his tracks with a guttural sound of disgust.

“What? What is it?” It took a second for the smell of decay to reach his nostrils. He choked and pinched his nose with his palm over his mouth.

“Oh god,” Zim said, his voice muffled, obviously covering his own mouth and nose.

“What is it?” Ryan repeated, his pulse skyrocketing. The smell was so bad it made his eyes water.

“It’s . . . I can’t even . . . There are bones. And parts. And Jesus Christ what is *that*?”

“Words, Zim. Tell me. What’s going on?”

“It’s . . . it’s his workshop. And his . . . toys. If you can call them that. Boo and Smiley . . . They’re sewing—” Zim suddenly made a retching sound and jerked away from Ryan’s hand.

The sound of him vomiting made Ryan queasy. He swallowed hard, feeling around for Zim’s back. After a second, his hand met Zim’s shoulder again as Zim straightened.

“Sorry. It’s . . . Just be glad you can’t see any of this. Oh, their faces. Ryan . . . their *faces*.” Zim’s voice cracked. “And there are animal parts and people parts and everything is rotting and everything is sewn together. Fucking hell, I think those are my fucking hands.”

Something brushed Ryan’s bare foot and he jumped back, startled. “What was that?”

“There are rats. Everywhere. Oh *fuck*.” Zim was audibly sick again.

Trying not to breathe too deeply, Ryan shook Zim’s arm. “Come on. We have to get out of here.”

“I . . . don’t know which way to—” Zim suddenly pulled Ryan to the right. “*Thank you*.”

“What happened?”

“The elves pointed. It’s this way. Everything is going to be okay.”



It felt like an eternity before they found the stairs that would take them up three flights to the ground floor. From what Zim was describing, they were in an old abandoned psychiatric hospital. But where?

“Okay I think I found the way out,” Zim said, hurrying them along an echoing corridor. The tiles under Ryan’s feet were silty with dust, and the air smelled dank, and the farther they went, the colder it got.

Finally, Zim led them down three steps and stopped. “This is it.”

With Zim’s guidance, Ryan got the door open and gasped when the cold air hit his face. “Oh god.” He quickly slammed the door shut.

“Shit,” Zim cursed. “It’s gotta be minus twenty out there.”

The two of them were barefoot and were dressed in T-shirts and pants. They would get hypothermia before they got very far.

Zim had Ryan sit in the hallway while he searched nearby rooms. When he came back, he dumped something in Ryan’s

lap.

Ryan made a face at the musty smell and sneezed when dust tickled his nose. “What is it?”

“Sheets and curtains. Anything I could tear down or pull out.”

“Oh! Fantastic.”

“Yeah, I figure we can rip some of this stuff up and tie it around our feet like shoes. And then we can wrap ourselves with the rest.”

“Good idea.”

“Yeah, I don’t want to escape just to freeze to death.”

Ryan laughed, then got to work tearing up the sheets so they could make foot coverings.



About twenty minutes later, they were trudging along the side of a small tree-lined road. According to Zim, they were still in Ontario, given the signs, but it wasn’t clear exactly *where* they were—Zim didn’t recognize anything. Even worse was that not a single car had passed by yet and the two of them were starting to get really cold despite being bundled up in the musty sheets. Ryan cupped his hands over his face, blowing into them to warm his nose, then reached out for Zim’s shoulder again before he strayed blindly into the road.

“There’s got to be *something* nearby. A town. A . . . gas station. Anything,” Ryan said, his teeth chattering. The wrappings on his feet were already soaked through, and his toes were completely numb.

“I don’t see any more signs except for two highways I’ve never heard of,” Zim grumbled. The cold had definitely put a

damper on their escape. “The one-fifteen and the seven.”

“You’ve never taken the seven before?” It ran through bigger towns like Kitchener, Peterborough, and Markham. “Hey, wait, I thought you said you lived in Markham.”

“I do.” Zim stayed quiet for a beat. “But, I don’t drive.”

“Ah. You know how to, though, right?”

“I never needed to,” Zim replied, sounding defensive.

“Ahh such a city boy.”

“And you’re such a hick.” Zim laughed. “Though . . . you don’t actually *sound* like a hick.”

“Oh *thanks*.” If Ryan still had eyes, he would have rolled them. Then he heard something and turned his head to hear better. “Car’s coming!”

“Oh yeah, I see lights coming this way. Thank fuck.”

“Wave them down!”

Chuckling, Zim said, “What did you think I was going to do, stick my thumb out?” He pulled away from Ryan and Ryan could hear him shuffling around on the asphalt as the car drove towards them.

Please. Please stop. Ryan waved his arms too.

“Oh, thank christ. It’s a cop,” Zim said excitedly as the approaching car slowed. “Wait . . . not a real cop. Looks like a rent-a-cop.”

“Who cares? We *made* it, Zim. We’re safe.” Ryan put his hand out, searching for Zim and grabbed a handful of cold musty sheet when he found him. The car crunched to a stop in front of them, and one of the doors opened.

“Sir, you *have* to help us.” Zim took a step towards the car, dragging Ryan with him. “Please. We need help.”

“Now, what on earth are you two doin’ out here?” said a deep, friendly voice from inside the car. “It’s freezing. Come

on, now. Get in, get in. Let's get you warmed up."

Zim helped Ryan climb into the back of the SUV, the two of them sighing in relief as the heat inside the vehicle immediately started thawing them out.

"*Lordy*, you two would'a caught your death o' cold out there tonight. Goin' to minus thirty with the windchill," the man said.

"Now *he* sounds like a hick," Zim whispered.

Ignoring Zim, Ryan spoke up. "Can you please take us to the cops. A psychotic madman kidnapped us and kept us locked in a cage for *months*."

"Yeah, we totally need the cops."

"Don't you worry about anything, now," the man replied. "Everything's goin' to be a-okay."

"Thank you." Ryan and Zim replied in unison, and Ryan reached over to take Zim's smooth wrist-end in hand. The SUV started moving again, and though Ryan expected him to pull a U-turn he didn't. *Huh*.

After a few minutes, the man started speaking, but Ryan realized immediately he wasn't talking to them.

"Yeah, it's Lloyd. Uh-huh. Yeah." The SUV sped along the highway. "Tell Mr. Kringle I found them. Yeah."

Ryan's heart dropped into his stomach, and it felt like all his blood was draining out of him, leaving him a cold, hollow husk. "No," he whispered.

"What the *fuck*," Zim said hoarsely.

"I'm bringing them back now. Yeah. Of course! You too." Lloyd ended his call and then raised his voice. "Now, you boys sit tight and don't make a fuss. It'll be easier this way."

Faint with panic, Ryan tried to open the door but realized the handle was disabled. Then he thrust his hands in front of him, checking for a barrier that separated the cab like in a police

car. Finding none, he quickly undid his seatbelt, took a deep breath, and lunged forward, looping his arm around the man's neck.

Immediately the SUV swerved, but Ryan hung on, even as his shoulder hit the frame of the car painfully.

“Holy shit,” Zim exclaimed. “Holy *shit*. You got him, you got him.”

The car swerved again as Lloyd tried to dislodge Ryan one-handed, but Ryan tightened his grip, clenching his jaw as he braced a knee against the driver's seat and pulled back with all his strength. There was a small *pop* and Lloyd suddenly stopped fighting, letting out a gurgling moan as he went still in Ryan's arms. The SUV slowed then came to an abrupt stop as they bumped up against something.

“Uh. We hit a tree,” Zim explained.

Panting, Ryan sat back in his seat, the adrenaline in his veins making him shaky. He waited until he caught his breath, then slowly reached for the man in the driver's seat. He touched Lloyd's neck.

“Is he dead?”

After finding no pulse after a few seconds, Ryan nodded.

“Holy shit.” Zim let out a crazed-sounding laugh. “Oh my god. That was fucking *insane*.”

“Can you give me a ha—” Ryan stopped and cleared his throat. “Can you help me? We need to get his phone.”

“It's on the dash.”

“Okay, lemme . . . here . . .” With Zim's help, Ryan crawled over the console and got into the passenger's seat, and, after putting the car into park, he reached over and killed the engine. He then felt along dash until he found Lloyd's phone. Taking it out of its holder, he turned it around in his hands, running his fingers over it. “Is it an iPhone? Android?”

“Definitely iPhone. You can use Siri to call nine-one-one.”

Ryan opened his mouth to do just that . . . and paused. “No. Hang on. Not yet.” He reached across the dead man’s chest and fumbled for the door handle. Once he’d unlatched the door, he braced himself and shoved the body out of the car with his feet.

“What are you *doing*?” Zim asked from the back seat.

“We can’t just sit here and wait for someone to come rescue us. Kringle’s obviously got other people looking for us. I want to put some distance between us and them before we call anyone. I figure if we get to the main highway, it’ll be safer.”

“Right. Uh. That’s a good idea, but . . . how are we going to *do* that? I can’t drive. And even if I could, it’s not like I can hold the steering wheel, you know?”

Ryan tugged on the driver’s door, slamming it shut. “I know.” He put on his seat belt. “I’m going to drive.”

“*What?*” Zim noisily climbed over the console to join Ryan in the front. “How?”

Taking a deep breath, Ryan turned to Zim. “It’s muscle memory. I can do this. You just have to be my eyes. We’ll take it really slow.” He reached across Zim and grabbed the seatbelt, strapping him in.

Zim gave a nervous laugh. “You’re not serious.”

“I’m dead serious.” Ryan knew he sounded more confident than he felt, but there was no way he was going to let the two of them fall back into Kringle’s clutches. And they had to save the elves and the other prisoners. He’d promised.

Settling back in his seat, he keyed the engine. Then, out of habit, he reached for the rear-view mirror to adjust it and then stopped with a wry smile. “Okay. Do I back up straight?”

Zim was silent for a few seconds. “Pretty much. If you back up straight, you’ll get back onto the road. You’ll be on an

angle, but then you can straighten out.”

“Gotcha.” Ryan put the SUV in reverse, said a little silent prayer, and inched the car back until he felt the blacktop under his wheels. Letting out a sigh of relief as he threw the vehicle into drive, he turned to Zim with a smile. “See? I got his.”

“I am in fucking *awe*, babe,” Zim said, a smile in his voice.

“Did you just call me ‘babe?’” Ryan asked, wrinkling up his forehead.

“Yeah. Is that bad?”

“No.” Ryan grinned. “Not at all.” They were going to have to figure out the logistics of this burgeoning relationship—like distance, coming out to his parents and friends and all that—but for now it was enough that they were free, alive, and together. Everything else would fall into place later.

“Oh my *god*.”

Startled, Ryan turned to Zim again. “What? What’s wrong?”

“Do you know what tomorrow is?” Zim let out what could only be called a giggle. “It’s fucking *Christmas*.”

“Wow. Really?”

“Yeah. I’m looking at the guy’s phone. December twenty-fucking-fourth. No *wonder* we escaped. It’s a goddamn Christmas miracle, is what it is.”

Ryan gasped as Zim’s lips suddenly touched his, and he smiled, returning the brief kiss. “Hey, it’s going to be a ‘goddamn’ miracle if I don’t kill us getting us to the highway.” He smiled and reached out for Zim’s face, cradling his cheek fondly for a second before clutching the wheel again. “All right. Let’s do this.”

The End

ABOUT BEY DECKARD

Bey lives in Montréal, Canada where he spends most of his time writing, doing graphic work, painting portraits, speaking French, cooking tasty vegetarian eats, or watching more movies than is good for him. If you're the curious type, www.beydeckard.com is where you'll find art and free stories by Bey as well as information on his published works.

<https://beydeckard.com>

<https://linktr.ee/beydeckard>

www.facebook.com/groups/deckardsdiablerie/

<https://www.instagram.com/beydeckard/>

ALL I CLAIM



Abrianna Denaë

Hollis Maddigan is a freelance hacker for the Amato Organization. When he begins getting anonymous Christmas gifts in the days leading up to the holidays, their Second in Command is the first person he turns to.

Tennant Mason is the Amatos' greatest weapon; he's both feared and respected in the criminal underworld. When the obsessive part of his personality latches on to the one person he shouldn't want, he ignores all the social normalities he's worked hard to imitate, and sets about giving Hollis a Christmas he'll never forget.

When Hollis and Tennant come face to face for the first time, neither can deny the pull to one another. Hollis knows it's a bad idea. He's been hurt too many times to trust again, and Tennant's antisocial personality disorder doesn't make him a warm and fuzzy partner. But the closer they get, the more they let their walls down, and for the first time, they find someone who understands them—dead bodies as gifts and all.

All I Claim is a dark MM mafia short story set in the All's Fair series. It is a prequel story to book two, All I Fear, but can be read before or after that book. This story ends in an HFN

Trigger Warnings

Kidnapping

Torture

Light blood and knife play

Breath play

TENNANT

Now

The cold wakes me. My eyes open slowly, and it takes far too long for my brain to come online.

I've been drugged.

It's not the first time, and it won't be the last. How... irritating. Being drugged isn't my idea of a good time.

I try to get free of my restraints, but the metal chains clink together with every movement. At least my captors aren't stupid and went with chains instead of rope to make it harder for me to escape. Not that it matters. I don't plan on staying in this small, cold as hell room for long. It might take longer to get out, but chains are only *harder* to escape from, not impossible.

Through the pain in my head, I try to remember where I'd been and what I'd been doing. The last thing I recall is sitting in Cristian's office at the main house...then nothing.

The more I try to figure out the missing pieces, the more my head pounds.

If that motherfucker drugged me, I'm going to be pissed.

It's happened before. After I got out of the hospital, part of my training involved Cristian testing my reactions to certain things, mainly torture. It's how he turned me into his deadliest weapon.

So while I can't say I'm *pleased* to find myself chained in a small room after being drugged, it's not too big of a deal.

With a sigh, I settle in to wait for the games to begin.



The sound of a door opening has me opening my eyes, ready to get this over with. “Took you long enough,” I complain, though I honestly have no idea how long it’s been. Not as long as usual, I’m guessing, but then, variation makes it interesting.

I haven’t even tried to figure out what kind of fuckery is planned for this little session. At this point, I’m immune to all forms of torture, but since Cristian’s traitorous bastard came along and all his sins were revealed, Cris has learned some new tricks. It should be interesting.

Except when I lock eyes on my captor, everything inside me goes cold because this person is definitely *not* Cristian...

TENNANT

Then

Snap.

The person tied to the chair screams loud enough to drown out the music playing overhead. I poke my fingers hard into the spot I just snapped like a glow stick, and it elicits such a wonderful shriek from my test subject that I do it again.

“Interesting,” I muse aloud, “but not exactly what I was going for. Let’s try again, shall we?”

“No,” the woman begs. “Please, no...I– I’ll give you anything you want, just please...”

I smile and stare into her dark eyes. “Who said I wanted anything from you?”

I can practically taste her fear at the thought that I’m just a random psychopath who is torturing her for no reason at all. Of course there’s a reason. I may not be able to deny the psychopath part, but I don’t torture people for fun.

I do it because it’s my job —and maybe a little because humans are fascinating creatures.

My watch beeps, and I give my guest a smile. “Saved by the bell. I have better things to do, so I’ll leave you for now.”

“N...no. Please y– you can’t...”

“Goodbye, Jade. Try to stay alive while I’m gone.”

I grit my teeth as she begs with every step I take. Stupid woman. If she wasn’t so useful, I would cut her tongue out, but Cristian’s orders were clear. Most of the time I actually do follow his commands. So for now, her body parts stay attached.

“Leave her where she is,” I tell the guards outside my torture chamber.

They nod, and I continue on through the warehouse and out the front doors. My driver waits patiently where I left him hours ago.

I slip into the car without a word, and we're off to the main house. Pulling my phone out, I disregard all the pointless notifications. Why everyone under me seems to need something when I'm occupied remains a mystery. They get along just fine any other time. Dumbasses. I should use them in my next experiments.

I open the encrypted messaging app I use to contact Hollis. There's nothing new from him, of course. He's not one to send anything along he wasn't specifically hired to. Mild annoyance flashes through me at the lack of any task to send his way.

Maybe... No, Cristian would kill me if I paid Hollis's fee for information we could get on our own. But, not only would it be so much faster, it would mean he had to talk to me.

Manipulative? Yes.

Ask me if I care. Of all the people I'm surrounded by on a daily basis, Hollis Maddigan is by far the most interesting. So if I occasionally drop something into his lap just to see how quickly I can get under his skin...well, nobody needs to know.

Tennant: I have a job for you

It only takes him seconds to reply.

Hol: I'm busy

Tennant: You know I'll pay well

Hol: I don't need your money

Tennant: What do you need then, Hol? Say the word and it's yours

Hol: Go away

Tennant: I'll drop the specs in your inbox at 9am tomorrow.

Hol: I hate you

Tennant: Thank you

He doesn't respond, but I knew he wouldn't. I'm aware he could very well refuse the work, but him entertaining the conversation is as good as him saying yes. There have been plenty of times in the past where he'd sent a generic unavailable message if he really can't or doesn't want to do the job.

The fact that he still responds to me, even after all this time, and how much he says he *doesn't* like me, is telling.



Walking into the main house, I grimace at the music playing overhead. Whenever Roman is in charge of the music, my ears begin to bleed. If the boy is trying to kill us with his horrible music taste, I hate to say it's working.

When I get to Cristian's office, I give it a courtesy knock because it's the "rule." When I open the door, it's to Cristian sitting behind his desk, head thrown back and one hand out of sight while the other grips the edge of the desk.

I snort. "You know," I drawl as I close the door and stroll over to one of the chairs across from the desk, "the two of you have a bedroom."

"And you were raised with manners," Cristian growls, looking at me with black eyes filled with fire.

I shrug and keep my eyes trained on his as he moves back and helps Carter to his feet when they're presentable. "At least lock the door. What if it was your son?" I ask with a smirk.

"*He* actually knows better," Cristian shoots back. Carter places his hand on Cristian's shoulder, and I try not to sneer at it.

Every instinct says to protect Cristian, and letting Carter anywhere near him goes against everything I was trained to become. It doesn't matter that it's been almost a year now, or that they'll be married in just a few short weeks—the day after Christmas because Cristian is a twisted, yet romantic fucker.

Learning that Carter was not only the bastard son of our closest rival, but a plant sent by his psychotic brother was a bitter betrayal...one that almost cost him *and* Roman their lives.

That Cristian could forgive and still love the man shows that he is the better of the two of us.

I may have accepted Cristian's choice of partner, but it doesn't mean I wouldn't happily strap Carter to a chair in my torture chamber and have some fun with him if given the chance.

Ah well; maybe my new toy will prove to be interesting when I go back to her.

“Is there a reason you're here?” Cristian asks.

Carter stands slightly behind him in the perfect bodyguard stance even though he's no longer on the payroll as one.

“Yes, actually. I haven't been able to extract any information, but—”

“Tell me you didn't,” Cristian says, and if I didn't know better, I'd say he was begging. “Please leave that man alone.”

I smirk. “Now where's the fun in that? Besides, he'll do it faster than our people will.”

Cristian shakes his head. “The payment is coming from your own account this time.”

“Fine.”

He studies me for a moment, then says, “What's your fascination with him?”

Honestly? I have no idea. There's just been something about Hollis that gets under my skin, that has from the beginning. The fact that he doesn't put up with any of my shit, yet still entertains me whenever I contact him? Color me intrigued. But...it's more than that.

We might not have met in person or even had a proper conversation, but he's caught my interest. I'm sure I'll get bored soon enough; it's already been two years. The obsession will go away eventually. It always does.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" It's easy to keep the smile on my face, as seeing Cristian's frustration at my responses is always fun. After all these years, he still hasn't learned. If he wants to pretend I'm normal sometimes and ask dumb questions, who am I to pass up a good time?

"Let me know what happens. And try not to make too big of a mess."

"I'm offended."

"You don't know how to be," he snaps back. "Get out."

Laughing, I stand and button my suit jacket. "I'll lock the door on my way out."

"I'm going to kill you."

"I'd like to see you try, Cris. I really would."

When I leave the office, I make sure to twist the lock and shut the door firmly behind me. The music is still blasting overhead. I consider shooting one of the speakers set into the ceiling, but then Cristian really *will* try to murder me.

Striding into the living room, I find Roman and Leandro sitting on the floor next to the coffee table, and it seems Roman has once again convinced Leandro to paint his nails for him.

The two of them bonded over their shared trauma — well, more like Roman took one look at Leandro in that cell Julian

De Luca had had him in and decided he was keeping him. It's not that dissimilar from my relationship with Cristian. Different circumstances, maybe, but he'd basically decided I was 'his' from day one, and here we are thirty-odd years later.

"You might be down a finger," I say as I enter the room, "but I know you can function perfectly without it."

"It always looks better when someone does it for me," Roman replies.

"I could do yours next, if you want?" Leandro says without looking up.

"I could poison your food," I answer.

"Too bad you don't cook." He looks up and smiles, and it'd be chilling if I were anyone else.

What *does* scare me is the way he can wipe all expression from his face and become nothing but a blank slate. That kind of natural talent needs to be honed and carefully fine-tuned so no one realizes Leandro is anything but the average fifteen-year-old. The last thing I want is for him to end up where I was at that age, no matter how...noble the actions that led me there were.

"Can we put on some real music?" I ask as I sit.

"This is real music," Roman says.

"This is trash."

Both teens snort. "Trash, really?" Roman looks over at me with mirth in his green eyes. "That's the best you can do?"

"If you insist on making the entire household listen to your atrocious music, it should at least be something interesting."

"You don't even like music!" Roman protests.

I can't argue with that. All of it is useless noise to me, but the...trash Roman listens to is the worst of it.

“There, done.” Leandro screws the lid onto the bottle of polish and sets it on the table.

“Thank you.” Roman examines his nails and turns to me. “What do you think?”

I look at the deep red color and nod. “Very fitting.”

“I thought so. Might make it my signature color. I should see if Dad has anyone I could have fun with, do a comparison.”

“You want to compare human blood to your fingernail color.” It’s not a question, but the same tone I use when “questioning” someone.

“Yep!” He smiles.

If I didn’t know any better, I’d question the kid’s sanity. But considering the things that bring *me* pleasure, who am I to judge? He is Cristian’s son, after all...odd comes with the territory.

HOLLIS

Then

At least he pays well. Tennant Mason bulldozing his way into my life and wreaking havoc on my perfectly planned work schedule should be normal after two years of the man doing it, but that doesn't mean I will stop bitching about it.

He thinks he can just demand my time and attention and I'll jump to do his bidding... The sad thing is, that's correct. The past year I've done less random jobs in between my regular clients because I haven't had to. Tennant and the Amatos give me plenty of work, and at this rate I'd never have to take another job if I didn't want to.

Tennant might aggravate the ever loving shit out of *me*, but he's my bank account's best friend.

The job isn't hard. I have the information he requested within a few hours, but of course, I have to show off and end up digging deeper. Jade Colins has been a *naughty* girl.

Shaking my head as I put everything into a folder and send it to Tennant, I wonder how anyone thinks they can get one over on the Amatos. From what I've seen in the two years I've been working with them, they *always* find out, and the consequences are *never* worth it. Some people are just a special kind of stupid, I guess.

Minutes after I send the file over, a message in the encrypted app I created just to talk to Tennant pops up.

Tennant: Thank you. This is very... thorough

Hollis: Did you expect anything less?

Tennant: Of course not. There's a reason I always come back for more of you

Rolling my eyes, I close the messages and get back to work, unwilling to play his game.



The sound of a buzzer pulls me back to the real world, though it takes my brain far longer than it should have to register that the sound is actually the doorbell. With a frown, I pull up the camera outside the front door and watch as a delivery driver drops a box on the stoop, then heads back to his truck.

Dread begins to pool in my stomach, and when I push back from my desk, I almost convince myself not to go see what the package is. I haven't ordered anything in days, and the only two people who have my address wouldn't send me anything without telling me; both of them know enough about my trauma to not do that.

The compulsion to know for sure is what makes me get out of my chair and head to the front door. *Curiosity killed the cat, Hollis*. Telling my brain to shove its self-preservation up its ass, I open the door and pick up the box. I curse, as it feels like my bones froze in the few seconds it took to grab the package.

Bringing the ominous package back to my desk, I look for any identifying markers, but the only thing on the box is the shipping label with my name and address, the sender some company I never heard of before.

Grabbing the knife I keep to the right of my keyboard, I slice through the tape, toss the packing paper onto the floor, and pull out... a thermos. But it's not just any thermos. It's almost identical to the one I saw while I was out shopping the other day. I hadn't bought it because I neither needed a new one, nor was I going to pay what they were asking.

Though this one isn't quite the same despite being the same color. It's bigger than the one in the store, and it appears to

have been ordered especially for me if the decals of computers and keyboards are any indication.

While some of my anxiety is easing knowing it's not from *him*, I seem to have picked up a *new* stalker, one who likes to send random gifts. And isn't that worrying?

Setting the thermos down, I search the box for a note but find none. Flipping the flap of the box back over, I look at the shipping label again, getting the company name, then sit down at my computer to do some research.

When in doubt, hack something.

TENNANT

Then

“How long are you going to leave her to suffer?” Cristian asks as we watch the video feed of Jade hanging from chains attached to the ceiling. One side is lower than the other, so she can stand on one leg and potentially take some weight off her shoulders; unfortunately for her, it’s the leg I broke. She has to be in excruciating pain. Too bad there’s no sound on these video feeds.

“Until I get bored, since we have all the information we need from Hollis, and then some.” I keep my gaze on the screen. “And you questioned my decision to hire him.”

“Smug isn’t a good look on you, Ten.”

“*Everything* is a good look on me.”

I can feel the disdain rolling off Cristian, but I ignore him. My current plaything is pretty pathetic, just hanging in her chains, trying to keep her weight off her leg, though I can see the strain in her body as she does so.

“Finish it, Tennant. I rather not drag this out unnecessarily.”

“Yes, Boss.”

If I’m being honest, I’ve been bored with her since I first had her in front of me. She’s not very entertaining. Leaving Cristian in the security room, I head over to the torture chamber, the guards stationed outside the door giving me a nod and opening the door.

As soon as I step into the room, the incessant beeping noise that was coming from the speakers stops, and Jade raises her head.

I’m sure it’s a relief to have the noise stop. For all that Carter is a traitorous bastard, he still has good ideas that have come in handy time and time again — like driving a person to

the brink using sound. Of course, when the tables were turned on *him* last year, I'm sure it wasn't such a good thing in his mind. Nonetheless, I shamelessly hoard torture techniques no matter where or who they come from.

"P- please..." Jade says in a broken voice. "I... I don't know what you want."

"Are you sure?" I ask as I step around her. "You're absolutely *positive* you don't know why you're here?"

She looks up at me with red-rimmed eyes and her face shiny with tears, and oh, the way my blood sings at the image she makes.

"I- I, who are you? Why are you doing this?"

Placing a hand on my chest, I grin at her. "Did I forget to introduce myself? How very rude of me. My name is Tennant Mason." She sucks in a breath at that, and my smile widens. "And you're here because you're a lying, traitorous bitch."

The innocent act fades away, and Jade smiles. "I'm doing what's right, protecting my Family. Surely you understand that?"

"I understand you thought you could use your looks to get inside and get information. Unfortunately for you, no one was buying what you're selling."

She sneers. "The Amatos can't handle both Families, not when a bunch of cocksuckers are at the helm."

I step closer to her. "Ah, but that's where you're wrong, Jade. Because we not only can, but are. You and your traitorous boytoy must have missed the fact where Carter brought his father to heel."

"Both the bastard and his spineless father are unworthy of leading."

"Oh, to be so delusional." Reaching out, I trace her neck with my fingers, wondering how it'll feel to squeeze the life

out of her.

“If you kill me, you’ll never find out who else wants to take you down.”

“You sure are full of yourself, aren’t you?” I lean closer and whisper in her ear, “Good thing Albert already talked.”

She sucks in a breath. “You’re lying.”

“Am I?” I pull away and reach into my pocket for my phone, pulling up the photos for her to see.

The choked, distressed sound she makes is beautiful. I’d thought about dragging her lover slash partner in crime in here so she could watch as I dismembered him, but in the end, I’d changed my mind. It’s much better this way, letting her know that it doesn’t matter if she talks or not because we already know everything.

“You shouldn’t play games you can’t win, Jade,” I tell her softly. “Failure is such a bitter thing to swallow.”

“Fuck you!” She spits, some of it landing on my still held out phone. “You think you won? There’s more of us where we came from. Georgio may have handed his balls over, and many of his followers have done the same, but not all of us are spineless.”

Wiping my phone screen off on my suit, I slip it back into my pocket. “Don’t worry about your friends. I have people rounding them up right now. Would you like to see proof?”

Her bravado flees at my news. “H– how?”

I give her my most charming smile. “Because we’re better than you. Simple as that.”

Walking over to where the crank is for the hook she’s attached to, I turn it on, watching as she slowly rises up until both her feet are barely touching the ground.

When she’s in position, I grab one of the smaller crowbars and walk over to her. She thrashes in her chains, but really, all

that does is make it more fun when I smash the end of the crowbar into her ribs. Her scream is beautiful, her face twisting in pain as she cries.

Without hesitation, I slam the crowbar into her already broken leg, enjoying the sound she makes and the distinct *crack* of bone as I further shatter them.

“I’m kind of disappointed that I didn’t break the skin when I initially snapped your leg.” I tell her, making sure to put the right amount of sympathy into my tone.

“Fucking psycho!” she cries as I bring the crowbar back.

I grin. “Why, thanks for the compliment.” With that, I smash the crowbar into her ribs again.

Her scream cuts off as a cough escapes her throat. I hum and move close to her, pressing against her torso and listening closely as she cries out then tries to suck in a ragged breath.

“I think I punctured something with that last hit,” I muse.

Jade gets brave and tries to kick me, but I step back and swing the crowbar again, hearing the snap of bone on what was her good leg.

Taking another step back, I study her as she hangs. Both of her legs are swelling, and I’m pleased with how black and blue the already broken one is. The one I just broke looks okay for now, except the knee is obviously out of place and swelling nicely.

Her breathing is ragged. Some part of her ribs definitely punctured a lung; no matter, it’s not like she’ll live long anyway.

Flipping the crowbar over in my hand, I get a good grip, take a step to the side, and swing it forward, aiming directly for her throat. The end sinks into her skin, and she makes a choking noise as I pull it out, ripping her throat open.

I watch impassively as she dies, and when the life finally leaves her eyes, I walk out of the torture chamber with sharp, sure steps.

TENNANT

Now

“What the hell is this?”

Hollis smiles as he walks into the room. “I think this is what they call a kidnapping, no?”

I wiggle in my chains but they, of course, don’t budge. “What the fuck is going on here?”

He tilts his head as he looks at me. “I mean, I thought it was pretty obvious, but if you need me to spell it out for you...”

“Release me,” I order, voice dangerously low.

“No.” He walks closer and raises a hand, tracing my face with the tips of his fingers. It’s only because it’s *him* that I don’t bite them off. “I don’t think I will. You’re mine now. I can do whatever I want with you.”

My heart speeds up, and my blood heats with anticipation because sitting in front of him like this, at his mercy? It makes me want things I shouldn’t.

There’s another layer to prove how fucked-up I am because I shouldn’t *want* the person who kidnapped me. Yet as he stands in front of me, confident yet unarrogant in a way few people are, I can’t help but want to undress him and take him apart piece by fucking piece.

HOLLIS

Then

There's another package on my stoop. It wasn't there when I left a few hours ago, and I didn't get any notification like I should have from the security system, which is...concerning. Stopping just at the bottom of the steps leading up to my apartment, I pull my phone out and dial the only number I know by heart.

“Do you know what time it is in Russia?” H asks.

“You're not in Russia.”

“Maybe not, but my current job is and I need to be on my game. I've only been in bed for...an hour and a half, great! Thanks so much, D.”

I laugh at his tone and ignore the fact that, even though he picked out my current name, he still uses my old handle. “I need you to log into my security and tell me who's been by within the last three hours.”

There's a pregnant pause before he asks, “Another gift, huh?”

“Yep.”

“Give me a moment.” I wait as the sound of H getting out of bed and settling in at his desk travels down the line. The familiar clacking of keys soothes some of my nerves, though I can't help but survey the vicinity.

There is absolutely no way anyone should have been able to get past my security, not when it's something H and I built from the ground up—especially since we added some new tricks we've been working on when the first package was delivered three days ago.

“Interesting.” H says after a few minutes.

“What's interesting?”

“Well someone definitely broke into your system. They didn’t manage to cover their tracks completely, but the framework is there. I keep running into dead ends, but give me a few hours and I could map out the exact steps they took to gain access. I’m rather impressed, and if your safety wasn’t on the line, I’d say track them down and train them.”

“You mean they’re in the city?”

“Oh, absolutely. They were able to mask their IP and I can’t get a location, but they’re not *that* good. Like I said, they didn’t cover their tracks completely.”

“So, all this, I’m assuming, is a long-winded way to say the cameras didn’t catch whoever left the package.”

I can practically hear H’s wince. “Correct. Sorry, D.”

Sighing, I look at the innocent-looking box sitting on the top step. “It’s okay. Stay on the line with me, though? Just so I’m not alone when I die.”

“I hate when you say shit like that,” he grumbles.

“It’s the truth, H,” I say in a low voice as I climb up the steps and pick up the box, holding the phone between my shoulder and ear as I unlock the front door.

He’s quiet as I enter the apartment, and I know he’s angsty over what I just said. As much as H tries to fit into the dark world we find ourselves in, he also has a soft heart...and with what he knows about my past, he doesn’t appreciate my morbid humor.

“It was a long time ago,” I remind him gently. “Over nine years now. And,” I put a bit of cheer in my voice, “without that, we wouldn’t have met in person.”

H sighs, but I ignore him. “Okay, I’m going to open the box of doom.”

“Stop being dramatic.”

“It’s like you don’t know me,” I tease. Putting the phone on speaker, I set it on the desk next to the box and carefully cut into the tape with my knife. “Well, we don’t have to worry about tracking down a non-existent company this time around.”

“Why’s that? You know where it’s from?”

“Nope.” I answer, setting the knife aside. “It was apparently hand-delivered. as there’s no label.”

“That’s... worrisome.”

“Ya think? Okay, moment of truth.”

“Please don’t die. I don’t want to be stuck with V alone for the rest of my life.”

“Now who’s being dramatic?”

“Shut up and open the box. You’re making me anxious.”

Taking a deep breath, I open the flaps of the box and remove the packing paper.

I stand there, staring into the box, and H gets impatient. “Are you dead?” he asks.

Laughing, I reach into the box. “No, but I don’t know if I’m going to be or not.”

“That’s not funny, D.”

“Neither is sending me a fucking knife, H!”

“Are you serious?”

“Yep.” Picking up the phone, I put my new “gift” on the desk, open the camera app, and take a few pictures before sending them to H.

“Well, shit,” H says.

“Pretty much.”

“Is it good quality?”

Setting the phone back down, I pick up the knife and remove it from the sheath. “I think so. Not that I know anything about knives, but it’s better than the one you got me when I moved out.”

“Interesting,” H says. “I can tell you now it’s not me. I haven’t even started my Christmas shopping yet.”

“And it’s not V.”

H laughs. “No, they’re the last person that would send a weapon. And *he* wouldn’t send you anything that could potentially harm him.”

I sigh. “Yeah. V also said he seems content where he’s at for the moment. Which is good. The last thing I need right now is to worry about him being on the move. But this means I really *did* pick up a stalker.”

“Seems to be the case, brother.”

“Lovely. Okay, well, I’m not dead, and I seem to have a new weapon in case anyone *wants* me dead, so I’ll let you go back to bed.”

“Not funny, D. *So* not funny. I can call Henry if you want? He’s currently twiddling his thumbs and pretending to be a productive member of society, so I’m sure he’d appreciate the outing. Maybe we can catch whoever it is in the act. It can be my Christmas present to you.”

“No, that’s okay. Don’t go pulling favors with assassins for me.”

“Let me know if you change your mind. I’ll call you later to make sure you’re still alive.”

“You do that.”

H hangs up and I sit in my chair, staring at the knife as if it’ll give me all the answers I need.

What the fuck is going on?

TENNANT

Then

For someone who went through so much trouble to not be found, Hollis doesn't have the best situational awareness. Sure, he'd looked around when he found my last gift yesterday, but he hadn't noticed that the car parked directly across the street from his apartment didn't belong.

It works in my favor, of course, but it's also the reason I gave him a knife — even if I'm slightly concerned that he's more likely to hurt himself with it rather than whoever tries to attack him. Knowing he has a weapon eases some of the need burning inside me, as I'm certain Cristian wouldn't allow me to kidnap Hollis.

"Boss is going to kill you," Joel says as he steps up beside me.

"What he doesn't know won't hurt him, and you didn't have to come."

He chuckles. "Right. It's *your* order that says everyone at the top isn't allowed to go anywhere without guards. Which, sorry to say, sir, includes you. Be lucky you only have one guard as opposed to two, or like Roman, three."

"You don't have to throw my words in my face, Joel," I reply mildly. "Not unless you want to have some fun later?"

He snorts but doesn't respond, mainly because he knows I won't follow through on my threat. Sadly, he's the only one in our current ranks who can guard me. Anyone else would get under my skin too quickly, and I'm not "supposed" to kill our men. Or *they* would get irritated with me because not everyone can handle my...quirks.

Sadly, he's also right. I don't need to get chewed out for not following my own order; nor do I need Roman and Leandro, and even Cristian, breaking the rules simply because I did.

After Roman was kidnapped and Carter stupidly turned himself over to his brother last year, Cristian's protectiveness went into overdrive. Not only his, but mine too.

Carter might be on my shit list, but I'm not going to leave him hanging. Even though I don't understand it, I recognize how attached Cristian and Roman are to him. When it comes to Roman's safety, well...one day I'll probably die protecting him. I just have that feeling.

All this, of course, means Joel gets a front row seat to me watching Hollis. Cristian would most likely call it stalking, but his opinion doesn't matter.

The barista running the coffee truck calls Hollis's name, and he goes to pick up his order. As I watch him walk back to his table where he's been, of course, doing something on a laptop, I notice I'm *not* the only one watching him.

The older man, who takes a seat across from Hollis mere seconds after Hollis settles himself again, has been keeping an eye on my hacker the entire time he's been here.

Joel groans but I ignore him, focusing intently on the tableau playing out.

Hollis leans back in his chair, getting as far away as he can without actually leaving.

The guy says something that makes Hollis frown, and I have to hold myself back from going over there and getting rid of the asshole. When Hollis begins shaking his head, I take a step forward, but Joel puts a hand on my arm to stop me from moving.

When the guy doesn't take a hint and tries to *reach* for Hollis, I reach for my gun. Hollis, doesn't put up with the asshole's shit but instead pulls his hand off the table, shuts his computer and reaches for his bag.

It appears the asshole is still talking, even as Hollis stands with his things. Mr. Can't Take A Fucking Hint stands too and

once again reaches for Hollis, taking a step toward him. Without preamble, Hollis tosses his drink at the dickhead and walks away.

Everyone in the vicinity stares as the guy starts yelling, and when he turns around to yell at the people now talking and laughing at him, Joel pulls out his phone and takes several pictures of his face.

“Send them to Leandro as well,” I tell him as my phone vibrates in my pocket, with what I’m assuming are the photos.

“Already done, sir.”

Discovering that Leandro not only has antisocial personality traits but a knack for hacking as well has made it so much easier to execute my current plan.

And as I watch the asshole stalk off in the opposite direction of Hollis as he leaves the park, I know what my *next* gift is going to be.

HOLLIS

Then

Definitely a stalker. The photos of the body that landed in my inbox this morning should be disturbing, but all I can think is: *thank God they didn't leave it at my front door.*

But seriously, why would anyone want to follow me at all, let alone *kill* for me? I'm not that interesting. Well, *Hollis* isn't interesting. Who I was before... He has some stories to tell, not that I ever plan on sharing those. It's bad enough H knows what happened.

But, never mind that. Since I *am* being stalked, I'll have to look into whether there were nearby cameras at the park. The dead body is basically a shining beacon into who my stalker is, but it would be remiss if I didn't do my due diligence to make sure.

I decide this 'gift' isn't one H needs to know about. It'll only give him heart palpitations, and he'll send one of his pet assassins to come play babysitter and executioner for sure.

And if I'm right about my stalker, well...having someone take him out would get real messy real fast.

The first thing on the to-do list is to try to trace the sender. Ignoring the pictures of the mutilated body pieces all wrapped up in shiny red bows—not very creative wrapping, but points for trying—I come up against my first dead end.

Like they did when they hacked into my security system, they hid and rerouted their IP address, making it harder, but not impossible for me to follow. Because, while whoever this is is good, I'm better.



“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.” I mutter aloud. *I fucking knew it.*

I couldn’t trace the hacker’s exact location. They’re a crafty bastard, but their grasp of sending someone on a wild goose chase is shaky at best. They were able to get away with it when they broke into my security system, but they fucked up by sending those pictures directly to my inbox. I had more to work with because of that, and so even though it took—a glance at the clock confirms it—five fucking hours, I know more or less where they sent the email from. While the location isn’t exact, it’s enough that my assumption about who is sending me thermoses, knives, and *fucking pictures of dead bodies*, as Christmas gifts is confirmed.

The question is what to *do* about the problem. I know what I *want*...but I don’t know if I can have it. I’ve spent so long trying to avoid personal relationships outside of the two people I call family because they don’t ask questions. We all have questionable pasts—you don’t get into this business by being fucking normal—which means we know how to avoid butting into personal history.

But other friends, and more importantly, *relationships*? Those require a certain level of trust and opening up, and I’m not so sure I can do that. Not if it means breaking myself open and remembering how *they* desperately tried to cut out pieces of me.

But... I look at the pictures on my screen again. If anyone has the potential to understand, it’d be *him*. After all, he’s made it no secret in the two years we’ve known each other what type of person he is. Then there’s that sealed folder I uncovered but didn’t read from some psychiatric hospital. If that doesn’t scream ‘*secrets you don’t want anyone to know*,’ I don’t know what does.

No one’s ever killed for me before. And isn’t that fucked-up, that the deciding factor is a dead body?

Though, I never claimed to be normal.

How to go about this is the question. Because if Tennant thinks he's in charge of this little game, well, it'll be fun putting him in his place...

TENNANT

Now

“This isn’t a fucking game...” I warn him.

Hollis grins. “Isn’t it? I mean, it’s not a dead body wrapped in pretty, shiny wrapping paper, but that’s more your speed than mine. No, I realized, after seriously considering changing my name for the *second* time, that if you want to play, we can play. On *my* terms.”

He walks toward me with all the confidence of a man who does this every day, and fuck does it make my cock hard.

“And what terms are those, Hol?”

The slap is loud in the small room. My cock aches in time with the stinging in my cheek.

“Don’t call me that, first of all.”

I smirk. “I think you like it.”

“I think you’re an annoying stalker.”

I shrug as much as my chains would allow and adopt my well-practiced conversational tone. “How else was I going to get your attention? You can’t tell me you didn’t like the gifts.”

“Oh, no, I did. Very much. In fact”—he pulls his suit jacket to the side to show me the knife strapped to him—“I think I’ll use one of them right now.”

With that, he pulls the knife from its sheath and holds it between us. “I think I’ll enjoy using this on you,” he muses before slicing my pants open, steel blade barely missing nicking my hard cock. “You’re so fucking dirty, Tennant,” he whispers, tracing fingers up the underside of my dick.

“Are you going to cut me, Hol?” I ask in a careful voice. “Do you want to see my blood stain that pretty little blade of yours?”

He traces the flat of the knife over the inside of my thigh, and my breath catches in my throat. Hollis watches with heat-filled dark eyes as he gently scratches my skin with the knife.

This is *not* how I imagined he'd use it, but I can't say I want him to stop. I'm not Cristian; being cut to pieces doesn't get me off... but for Hollis, I would do anything he wanted. That's a novel concept because this whole thing started because *I* wanted *him*.

But as he kneels between my spread legs and looks up at me with equal parts desire and fear, something shifts, and I know I'll give him anything and everything he wants.

"What would you do if I did?" he asks as he once again traces my dick with the blade.

"Keep you forever."

"Oh? That wasn't in your plan already, when you were stalking me?"

"It's not stalking if you like it, Hol." I hiss as the knife cuts the underside of my dick.

Hollis leans down and licks up my cock. When he pulls away he says, "How many times do I have to tell you not to call me that?"

"As many times as you want. Doesn't mean I'm going to stop."

I groan when he cuts me again, this time on my thigh. Once more, he dips his head and soothes the sting with his tongue.

"Have you ever tasted your own blood?"

I can't help the smile that crosses my lips. "Can't say that's my kink."

"You sure about that?" he asks as he cuts me again, and deeper this time, before he dips his head and runs his tongue along the cut.

I can't deny the way my breath catches when he stands and leans over me. As he leans down, I can smell the blood on his lips, and when he kisses me, I taste it.

My dick aches, and I want nothing more than to throw this man to the ground and fuck him senseless.

Hollis shoves his tongue into my mouth, sharing the taste of my blood with me. He dominates the kiss, not letting me take any control, but instead of chafing, it makes me want him more.

"I want to fuck you," he says after pulling away. "Do you want that? Want me to make you come?" He kneels between my legs again, keeping his eyes on me even as he brings his mouth to my aching cock. "Or are you too manly for that? Does the idea of being fucked open on my dick scare you?"

I groan as he sucks the head of my cock into his mouth. He teases me with his lips and tongue, getting me wet and sloppy but not taking me deep into his mouth. Every time I try to shift in my chains, he pulls off, stopping until I'm still again.

"I'm going to release you," he tells me, standing up. "And I'm going to fuck you. If you try anything, I *will* kill you."

"Don't threaten me with a good time, Hol." The sting from his slap is worth seeing the fire in those dark brown eyes.

I don't waste any time. As soon as the chains loosen, I extract myself from them, grab Hollis, and shove him against the wall. He fights me—of course he does—but even though he's the one with the weapon, he's untrained.

It's not a hardship to disarm him. Even as he tries to get away, I grab his wrists, pull his arms above his head, and hold him against the wall.

When I kiss him, it's harsh, and my teeth bite into his lips and tongue, spilling *his* blood this time.

Hollis moans and shifts his hips, his hard cock brushing against mine.

“Still want to fuck me, Hol?” I ask, using my free hand to grab his hair and shove his head to the side, exposing his neck to me.

“Yesss.” He hisses as I dip my head and bite at his flesh.

“You sure about that?” I bite the side of his neck, sinking deep into his skin until I taste blood.

Hollis squirms, trying to get away, only this time it’s... different. There’s an urgency and desperation to his movements.

Carefully, I pull away, keeping his wrists against the wall but otherwise not touching him.

“No,” he says. “You... I’ll let you do everything and anything you want to me, Ten. But not *that*.”

I study his reactions for a long moment, taking in his elevated breathing and the way he strains against me, though he doesn’t make another actual attempt to get away.

“Okay, Hol.” Moving back in, I kiss him again, sharing the taste of blood and promise that I won’t hurt him beyond his means. “You can fuck me all you want. But...” I trail my lips back down to his neck. “I still own you.”

When I bite him this time, his body arches away from the wall and for a moment, I wonder if he’s come.

Using my grip on his wrists, I pull him from the wall and shove him to the ground, following after him. The knife I took off him comes in handy as I cut his clothes away.

“Unfair,” he says as he looks up at me with eyes almost as dark as Cristian’s. “Can’t use my gift against me.”

“I believe I just did.”

Gripping his exposed cock, I stroke him, noting that even when he was worried I’d take something he didn’t want to give, he’s stayed hard this entire time. The *trust* this man is putting in me makes me breathless.

“Lube,” he gasps out as I spread pre-cum along his shaft, “is in my pocket.”

I don't stop what I'm doing until he's a shaking mess and his cock throbs in my hand. Only then do I release him and fish around for the small bottle, flicking the cap and unending it over his dick.

Hollis gasps and moans as I spread the lube over him, far more than necessary, but well...I've never done this before. I don't plan on fucking myself open with my fingers, because the thought of Hollis doing that with his cock is much more appealing.

“Tennant...”

“Hush. Leave your arms above your head,” I order, maneuvering myself so I'm positioned right over his dick.

There's no hesitation as I bring the tip to my hole and press down. The sting reminds me I'm alive, and the flash of pain as I take him in makes my blood sing in my veins.

Hollis gasps, and I groan as I sink all the way onto his cock. The pleasure of it is overridden by the burning pain of being stretched like this, but that only makes my cock throb.

Leaning over him, I enjoy the stretch of his cock opening me up, the change of angle making me moan as I once again take his wrists in my hand. Hollis's swollen lips part, and I can't help but dip my head and kiss him again.

Despite touching him in every place I can reach, I can't help but want more. Sweeping my tongue into his mouth, I claim him, fucking his mouth as I start fucking myself on his cock—slowly at first, then faster and harder until I have to pull my mouth from his to breathe.

Hollis thrusts his hips up, fucking into me, and it's *almost* perfect. Sitting up again and hissing as the angle changes once more and my body lights up in pleasure, I use my free hand to grip Hollis's hair, tilting his head back.

The bite marks I gave him look perfect against his pale skin. The one where I broke the skin isn't bleeding now, and I release his hair to pick at it to get the blood flowing again, listening to his hiss, but more importantly, feeling the throb of his cock in my ass. He *likes* it, the pain, even the taste of blood as I shove my finger in his mouth and he closes his eyes as he *sucks*.

"I thought we were playing this game on *your* terms?"

Hollis thrusts his hips again and I meet him stroke for stroke, enjoying the pleasure that comes with not quite being slick enough, but at this point far more stretched out so it doesn't burn so much.

"Who said it's still not my terms?" he asks. "You're on *my* cock. It's *my* blood on your lips."

Taking a chance, I slide my hand over and close my fingers around his delicate throat. He gasps but doesn't try to escape. Instead, he fucks me harder, and as I cut off his air, he looks up at me with such adoration I almost pull away. I haven't done anything to earn this man's trust, yet here he is, giving it to me anyway.

The power this man has over me. *No one*, not even Cristian, has trusted me so effortlessly and without limits, yet here Hollis is, giving me the ultimate control over his life. And for that, I'd do *anything* for him.

"Do it," he whispers when I allow him breath. "Take it all. Everything, Ten."

Without further thought, I cut off his air and ride him until tears stream down his face and my orgasm is *right there*.

Hollis's eyes close, and as I ease off the pressure on his throat, he comes inside me. The feeling of his cum painting my insides sets off my own orgasm, my body shaking. I have to let go of his wrists and place both hands on either side of his head to hold myself up.

Hollis doesn't open his eyes, but his lips tip up in a smile as he whispers in a raw, rough voice, "Merry Christmas, Tennant."

HOLLIS

Hours after Tennant fucked the life out of me, we're in my bed. My memories of how we went from the quick and dirty fucking in the kidnapping room I put together to my apartment are hazy.

"How'd you do it?" he asks as I lay on top of him.

I bury my smile into his neck. "I had some help."

He sighs. "Cristian."

I nod. "Yep. I got in contact with him after your last 'gift,' explained what I wanted, and he helped make it happen."

"That's the last time I drink anything he pours."

Laughing, I lean up on my elbows and watch his face. "He just wanted to help. Wasn't very impressed when I said you were stalking me."

"Watching, not stalking. There's a difference."

I roll my eyes and continue. "He also asked if I was sure because there wasn't an out if I went down this path...well, unless I want to die, that is."

"You don't seem too concerned about dying."

I shrug. *Been there, done that. Dying doesn't scare me. Never has.* "You held my wrists, you...have to know," I say in a low voice.

Tennant doesn't respond, but he does reach out and gently take my arm in his hand, fingers tracing over scars I can't pretend don't exist.

"It's not my business unless you want it to be, Hol."

This man. I don't understand how someone like him can be so incredibly sweet, but that's part of his appeal. Tennant is everything he's claimed to be, and more. And I want it all.

"So you kidnapped me, fucked me, and now what?"

“Now,” sliding up his body, I kiss him. “Now you’re mine. My Christmas gift to myself if you will.”

He smiles. “Good, because I’ve claimed you, Hollis, and now I’m not letting you go.”

“Well we only have tonight. Apparently there’s a Christmas dinner tomorrow that can’t be missed, and then the wedding.”

Tennant sighs again. “At least they’re not getting married *on* Christmas.”

“I don’t know, sounds romantic,” I tease.

I find myself on my back in an instant and let out a breathless laugh.

“Absolutely not,” Tennant says in a hard tone.

I smile and reach for him, amazed that he allows me such liberties, that I *want* to touch and be touched. Only Tennant can do this to me—make me feel safe and cared for after fucking me to near unconsciousness.

“No,” I reply. “I agree. Marriage is for other people, not me. But you, Tennant, are definitely for me. Cristian didn’t have to warn me about you. I was already gone for you. Have been for a long time. Maybe that makes me stupid, because you’re *you*, but...” I trail off and shrug. There aren’t words to describe how I feel, so I don’t bother trying.

He threads his hands through my hair and kisses me. “I understand. So long as we’re on the same page.”

“About marriage? Absolutely.”

“You know,” he says in a light, *highly* suspicious tone. “You’re going to need a suit. Two actually. Cristian doesn’t stand on ceremony when it comes to family dinners, but Christmas is the exception. Especially since we didn’t get to have our usual dinner last year because the truth about Carter’s identity came out before brunch was even finished.”

“Why would I... *Shit.*”

Tennant smirks. “There’s *definitely* no going back after you meet the family, Hol.”

HOLLIS

I'd seen satellite and Google images of the Amato family home, but in person is a different thing. Just outside the city, the house is grand, made of brick with tons of windows. Standing in front of it scares the life out of me.

I want nothing more than to get back into the car and drive far, far away, except Tennant's bodyguard drove onto the property, pulled up near the wide steps, and let us out before getting back in the car and driving off to the detached garage.

The fact that *Tennant* has a bodyguard is slightly amusing, until he tells me he'll be putting his men through their paces to find the best fit for me.

“Uh, why?”

He stares at me as he leads me up the steps. “Because you're mine now, and with that comes all the dangers and enemies associated with this life. I cannot protect you from it, Hol. I would if I could, but neither of us is naïve. Being with me, becoming so embroiled into the Family, means our enemies will become yours.”

I take a shaky breath. *Can I do this? Really do this?* I left one monster behind only to throw myself at a different one. Only Tennant's icy blue eyes promise nothing but protection from everything that could ever hurt me. And what's *that* except a deciding factor? The knowledge that Tennant may be just fucked-up enough, strong enough, and best equipped to deal with every piece of baggage I come with? Even if I can't bring myself to tell him what a bad idea I am?

You have to tell him. I shove the thought—which annoyingly sounds like H—to the back of my mind. There's so much we need to do and discuss, but as Tennant leads me across the threshold of the Amato home, none of it matters. He looks at me with something impossible to name, but I know I want to

hold onto it for as long as possible. There will be time to reveal all our secrets later.

As soon as we cross the threshold, music erupts in my ears, and Tennant grimaces. “Damn teenager.”

I look at him, confused, then up to the ceiling as he explains.

“There are speakers embedded into the ceiling of the entire house, except for Cristian’s office. Anyone keyed into the system can choose the room or rooms they want to connect to. Roman has decided it’s his mission to drive us all crazy with his shit music taste, which I’m honestly surprised Carter’s letting him get away with. The man loves his Christmas music. I’m not sure which is worse.” The disdain in Tennant’s voice is amusing.

“I wouldn’t call Sam Smith shit music, but if you say so.”

Tennant takes my hand, and I try to ignore the way my heart skips a beat. He leads me into the living room, which is decked to the nines in Christmas decorations. There’s a large tree over by the window, a few presents still tucked underneath. Garland and lights hang off the mantel, along with stockings with everyone’s initials. It’s a magazine cover worthy room. Even the four people—*Tennant’s family*—who are sitting and waiting for us are...perfect, if you ignore the aura of danger that surrounds them.

The two adults stand and make their way over. I’ve met them both before, of course; they helped me with the whole kidnapping thing. But that doesn’t make it any easier as Cristian Amato, one of the most powerful and *dangerous* people on this side of the country, reaches out for my hand.

His black eyes hold a wealth of secrets, and it’d be so easy to get lost in the vastness of them. “Good to see you again, Hollis.”

“You too.” I try to smile and make it look natural.

He steps back and his fiancé, Carter, takes his place. He's as light as Cristian is dark, blue eyes sparkling and smile bright, but the deep scar running across his cheek negates his pretty boy looks and tells you there's more to him. His hand in mine is firm, and though he doesn't say a word outside of "hello," I understand fully that he is more than *just* the future mafia spouse, but a formidable opponent in his own right.

More terrifying than the heads of the Family, though, are the teenagers. Roman Amato is up first. He's...not at all what I expected.

Dressed in a skirt suit, and standing no more than five-foot-four, if that, he grins at me, all boyish charm with striking dark green eyes and dark hair. His hand is small in mine, fingernails painted a deep red, and I can feel the strength and callouses from wielding a gun and knife. He looks like any other kid his age, younger even, than sixteen, but I know better. Roman is the Amato heir, and as he greets me so formally, with the air of someone far older, I can see that in him.

"Glad to finally meet you, Hollis."

"You too."

Roman steps aside, and I steel my nerves as Leandro De Luca—now Leandro Mason—stops his chair in front of me. He doesn't reach for my hand, and I try not to let my worry over that show. Instead, he studies me with blue eyes the same shade as Carter's—giving away the fact that they're related—and it's a long moment of anticipation before he speaks. "There's no reason to be scared, Hollis. You can't be a worse parent than Ten."

Tennant drops my hand and steps forward. "You little shit."

Roman, Carter, and Cristian laugh.

I suck in a breath and try to hide the fact that this kid just rendered me speechless with a damn *joke*. But... it's more than that, isn't it?

These people, they're Tennant's family. And on paper, Tennant is Leandro's father. I did the paperwork myself for the adoption.

Being here, with him, is so much bigger than him and me.

"It's a legitimate question!" Leandro wheels backward, out of Tennant's reach.

"I'm going to legitimately drop you out a window," Tennant tells him before turning to Roman. "Both of you."

"What did I do?" Roman asks, innocence written all over his face, but even *I* know better than to believe that.

"Neither of you are funny. Try not to scare Hollis off before dinner, please."

"Considering he's here, I'd say it's too late," Roman replies.

I smile, because he's not wrong.

"Enough." Cristian doesn't raise his voice, but that single word stops everyone in their tracks anyway, giving away his position in the Family and the respect that comes with it. "Let's head into the dining room, shall we?"

Carter takes Cristian's arm, and they lead the way with Roman a step behind them. Tennant holds out his arm for me, and almost as if in a dream, I see my entire future spread out in front of us as I thread mine through his.

He leads me through the house, which is just as beautifully decorated as the living room, and into the dining room.

Cristian pulls out Carter's chair before taking his own seat at the head of the table. Tennant walks me around the dark wood table that's laden down with red and gold place settings and pulls out a chair for me, directly across from Roman. Tennant takes his place next to me—to Cristian's left, and Leandro settles himself on my other side.

As we all settle in, the music changes to Christmas music, and I don't know if that's better or worse than Roman's

musical tastes.

Staff come in, set food down in front of us, and fill our wine glasses—even the teenagers’—and though it looks amazing, I don’t think I can eat a single bite.

“Don’t worry. We’re not this formal all the time,” Roman assures me.

“No,” Cristian agrees. “Just for special occasions. Christmas never used to be one of them. It was Roman and I for a long time, and Tennant. But when Carter came into our lives, well, it’s always been his favorite season, and he’s helped us discover the magic in it.”

Carter smiles at Cristian and reaches for his hand. “I was happy to show you the errors of your ways, hun.”

I never thought I’d see a mafia Boss roll his eyes, but there it is. It loosens up some of the tension, seeing the two of them act so much like a “regular” couple in love—even after everything they went through *last* Christmas.

When I reach for Tennant’s hand, I glance at him and meet his eyes. My breath catches as we stare at one another.

There’s so much we have to discuss. So many things have to happen if we’re going to make us work. My past isn’t pretty, and I already know Tennant’s isn’t either. But we have all the time in the world now. Maybe we were always going to end up here after two years of flirting and a handful of Christmas gifts, one of those being a dead body.

As the people around us dig into their food, and conversation starts up, I keep my gaze trained on the one man I shouldn’t want. Despite the obstacles between us I know, without a shadow of a doubt, that kidnapping him was the best decision I ever made.

ABOUT ABRIANNA DENAE

Abrianna Denae is a queer author from Northern California. An English major, they have always had a passion for writing.

Deciding to sit down and write one of the many stories that had plagued their mind for years was the easy part—finding the time to do it was a different story.

A lover of books that make the reader feel something, Abrianna tries to incorporate as much of their real-world views and feelings into their stories as they can.

Author links:

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STRONGER TOGETHER



Elouise R East

When life brings him to his knees, all he needs is Ward.

Jacob is down on his luck, and he doesn't know what to do next. When he steps out of his comfort zone and approaches a guy for a night of debauchery, he gets more than he bargained for.

A hell of a lot more.

Who is this guy, and why does Jacob not want to let him go?

An MM dark romance with a down on his luck guy who finds his HEA in an unexpected partner.

Author note: This story contains stalking, torture and murder.

Jacob

Jacob Trenton stared at his boss with an open mouth. “What?” he finally managed.

“You’re fired, Jacob. I know you’ve been stealing the stock. I took a chance on you because you appeared to need the helping hand, but you’ve repaid me by stealing from me. If you had come to me for help, I would’ve helped. But instead, you stole from me. That doesn’t give you a second chance.”

“But—”

Mr Roberts slashed his hand through the air. “No, Jacob. No excuses. If you leave without causing any problems, I won’t press charges. I know you’re down on your luck, but I won’t abide stealing. Especially during Christmas time.”

Jacob’s shoulders lowered, and he nodded. “Yes, sir. Thank you.”

“Grab your belongings—and only your belongings—and leave.”

With a heavy heart, Jacob left the supermarket. What was he going to do now? This was the third job in six months where he’d been fired for something he hadn’t done—because no way would he steal from anyone. Yes, he was having trouble keeping a job, but he wasn’t a thief.

He trudged up the snowy steps to the front door of his current home—well, Ari’s home. He had a lot to thank his friend for, not least of which was the spare room of his house after Jacob got evicted from his apartment for something he hadn’t done. No amount of pleading for his landlord to reconsider helped his cause, and Jacob had moved into Ari’s guest room that same day.

Maybe he was just gullible and others were using him as a scapegoat? It was the only thing he could think of, but he

hated confrontation, even if it would get his name cleared.

“Ari, are you home?” Jacob threw his keys on the hallway table.

“In the office!”

Jacob slumped onto the office’s sofa and put his head in his hands.

“What’s up?” Ari’s chair squeaked.

“I need to find a new job.” Jacob peeked through his fingers.

Ari raised his eyebrows. “And why do you need a new job?”

“I got fired.”

“Again?” At Jacob’s nod, Ari asked, “What for?”

“Stealing stock.”

Ari gaped. “You stole stock?” Jacob lowered his hands and glared across the room. Ari snorted. “Okay, stupid question. You’re either finding shitty jobs, J, or you’re becoming the fall guy for a lot of people.”

“I had that exact thought. I don’t know why it keeps happening.”

“Have you considered arguing your point?”

The thought sent shivers through Jacob’s body, almost as much as the cold had done when he walked home. “I can’t. It’s bad enough when someone asks me where something is in the shop. And that’s not even someone being mean to me.”

Ari sighed. “We’ll have to start looking for something for you.”

“I’ll find something to pay the rent, Ari, I promise.”

“I’m not bothered about the rent, J. I’m bothered about you being taken for a ride.” He shook his head. “Let’s forget about the crappy events for now. I’m heading out for a drink tonight. You’re coming with me.”

Jacob held up his hands, palms forward. “Nope, not happening.”

“It’s not up for debate, J. I’m paying. You need to get laid and chill the fuck out for a night. We can start looking for another job on Monday.”

“I’m not really in the mood—”

“What part of ‘it’s not up for debate’ didn’t you understand?”

Jacob exhaled. “Fine. I’m not hooking up, though.”

“Yes, you are.”

“With the mood I’m in, everyone will stay clear.”

Ari chuckled. “Not when I dress you like a prize cow.”

Jacob snorted. “I’m not sure I like that metaphor.”

“It’s perfect. Go soak in the bath for a bit. I’ll have your outfit ready for when you emerge.”

Ari’s and Jacob’s definitions of outfit differed about as much as a millionaire saying his two-hundred-foot yacht was a little boat. The painted-on black jeans, tight red shirt with too many undone buttons and a pair of black trainers were not Jacob’s usual attire. He was more of a fan of joggers and a T-shirt. But Ari wouldn’t listen, so Jacob dressed in his “prize cow” outfit and followed Ari into the club he’d chosen.

With music battering at his eardrums, he winced with every step towards the bar. He locked gazes with several men as they weaved through the crowds, but none seemed interested, as Jacob had predicted. There were times he was sure he had “shy introvert” tattooed on his forehead. Either that or there was something weird about his appearance—the outfit notwithstanding.

Ari leaned over the counter, shouting to the bartender, who nodded in response, and then Ari smiled at Jacob. His mouth moved, but Jacob couldn’t hear a thing. He waved his hand

towards his ear and shook his head. Ari rolled his eyes and transferred his gaze to their surroundings. Jacob followed suit, trying not to meet anyone's gaze, but he found one man staring at him from the other end of the bar. The pulsing lights flashed across the man's face, throwing it into shadow and then a variety of colours, but somehow, Jacob could tell he was staring at *him*. He swallowed down the lump that had developed but couldn't seem to tear his gaze away. Jacob was frozen to the spot, not wanting to move in case the guy turned away.

“Go get him, J.”

Ari's voice pierced the bubble he'd found himself in, but apart from the staring man's gaze flicking to Jacob's right and back again, the guy didn't stop staring. Jacob's stomach swirled, and he bit his lip. Should he try? It wouldn't hurt to speak to the guy. If he got bad vibes, he could pretend he had an emergency and find Ari again.

“I don't know if I can, Ari.” His hands found his ice-cold glass, the sudden chill doing nothing to stop them from trembling at the thought of approaching a stranger in a club. A tall, muscular, handsome stranger, but a stranger still.

“You can. Deep breath and walk over there. The worst he can say is no, but from what I can see, he's interested.”

Jacob inhaled and slowly exhaled. “Okay.” At least that's what he tried to say. Keeping hold of his drink so he had something to fiddle with while he tried to navigate this bad idea, he pushed through the masses until he reached the end of the bar. The moment he emerged by the man's side, their gazes locked again. As if the man had never lost sight of him.

“Hi.” Jacob swallowed and couldn't think of another thing to say.

The guy was a work of art. Angular jaw, defined cheekbones, short dark hair and possibly stubble unless the

light played tricks on him. He worked his jaw repeatedly, giving the impression of chewing on something.

The man held out his hand. “Ward.”

Jacob wiped his hand on his jeans and clasped the man’s hand, the warmth immediately seeping into him. “Jacob.”

With the dimness of the club, Jacob couldn’t see the colour of Ward’s eyes, but they were dark. And piercing. His gaze sank right down into Jacob, and for a long moment, they stayed that way, joined by their hands and gazes only, but it was...everything. Then Jacob lowered his eyes.

Ward’s mouth kicked up at the side, which Jacob saw from the corner of his eye, and it was that which had him pulling his hand away and staring at the counter.

“This isn’t a place for you, Jacob. You deserve something better than a loud, dirty club.”

Ward’s deep tone had Jacob’s eyes closing and his heart fluttering. He imagined that voice whispering into his ear as they lay in bed, and his breath stuttered.

“Can I take you home, Jacob?”

Jacob nodded, despite the warnings blaring in his head. He didn’t know the guy. He couldn’t just walk out of the club with a stranger. Could he? He needed to let Ari know, at least.

“I need to—”

“Text him,” Ward finished for him.

There was something about the way Ward told him what to do that set fire to Jacob’s blood. He pulled his phone free, and Ward removed the drink from his hand. Opening the message thread with Ari, he sent a brief message, even when he wanted to ask for advice.

JACOB: I’m leaving with someone. His name is Ward. We’re going to...

He glanced at Ward when he couldn't finish the message, and Ward took the phone from his hands, still chewing, and input the address. Then Jacob sent it. The moment he slipped the phone back into his pocket, Ward took his hand and pulled him through the crowds to the exit. The cold winter air filled his lungs, and Jacob shivered—Ari had told him a coat would ruin his outfit. Asshole that he was.

Warmth quickly surrounded him when Ward draped his coat around Jacob's shoulders, along with his arm. Jacob smiled into the collar, lowering his gaze, as the scent of mint invaded his nostrils.

“Are you okay with walking? It's not far.”

“That's fine.” Jacob thought he might be willing to walk anywhere with him, even if it was thirty miles. Uphill. And over hot coals. Why was he so taken with this guy? A slight tendril of doubt filtered through his haze, but as soon as he felt it, it disappeared again when Ward pressed his lips to Jacob's temple.

They wandered from the mostly derelict part of town to one with small, well-kept gardens and fences, though they were mostly covered with snow. Ward opened the little brown picket-fence-style gate and gestured for Jacob to go first up the path. Jacob climbed the three wooden steps to the porch—big enough for a single rocking chair—and waited for Ward to join him.

“You'll have to excuse me for a moment. I need to fix the lock and handle. The key gets stuck every time, and it takes a bit of jiggling.” While Ward had been talking, he'd been inserting and rattling the key until the lock finally clicked. “Ah, there we go.” He waved his hand towards the open door. “After you.”

Jacob entered the dim hallway, studying the floor to ensure he didn't trip over anything. The front door closed, shutting

them into a house Jacob didn't know, with a stranger he also didn't know. What was he doing?

“I—”

Warm hands cupped his jaw and thumbs brushed over his cheeks, soothing him in ways he didn't realise he needed.

“I won't hurt you.”

The minty words blew over his lips, and he licked them even as his eyes closed in invitation. The gentle brush against his mouth had his breath stuttering from his lungs. Every thought flew from his mind except that he wanted Ward. Needed him. His fingers reached for anything he could grasp hold of and wrapped around fabric. He tightened his hold as Ward's mouth brushed against his again, firmer this time, but still as brief. Jacob's hand released the fabric and slid upwards over hidden muscles and warmth until he gripped Ward's shoulder. When Ward repeated the brush of their lips, Jacob tightened his hold and kept him from retreating. As if a burglar had been given free access to a home full of enough items to send him into retirement, Ward fused their mouths, and Jacob's mind went offline.

He could only feel.

Feel the slide of their tongues together while they explored their mouths.

Feel the glide of Ward's hand as he threaded his fingers into Jacob's hair.

Feel the warmth of Ward's body when he pulled Jacob into him with an arm around his back.

Jacob whimpered when Ward's hand left his head, but he moaned when it joined his other hand and grasped Jacob's ass, grinding their groins together. Ward lifted Jacob clear off the floor, and Jacob wrapped his legs around his waist and his arms around his neck, neither breaking the soul-destroying kiss. Ward feasted on Jacob's mouth as he carried him through

the house. Only when Ward laid him down did Jacob open his heavy eyelids to see the star-lit sky above him. He gasped and pulled away, staring through the glass ceiling at the bright sparkles of the night as Ward kissed and nipped at his neck.

“You’re mine, Jacob. All mine.”

Ward whispered the words—no, the *promise* against his collarbone, and as the buttons of his shirt came undone, Jacob understood his life was about to change. With every kiss on his exposed skin, Ward whispered the word, “Mine,” and Jacob smiled, ecstatic to finally be the sole recipient of someone else’s focus.

Ward

Ward finally had Jacob's body beneath his, and his skin was as smooth as Ward had expected. He hadn't planned on approaching Jacob that night, but the other man had taken things into his own hands. Something that had surprised Ward when not much could. Jacob had flailed a little once they were behind closed doors, but distraction was the best thing for whirling brains—or so he'd been told by many people who were supposed to know such things.

The conservatory was cool despite usually being heated, but the view was enough to further help distract Jacob from his thoughts. All the while, Ward kept undressing and kissing him. When he reached Jacob's jeans, he unfastened them with the ease of experience and pulled them and his shoes off, leaving Jacob in briefs and his open shirt.

Ward knew what he liked in a man, and Jacob was the epitome of it. Slender but tall. Not too muscular but toned. And an expression that made Ward want to give Jacob everything he could. Which wasn't much.

Goosebumps rose across Jacob's skin, and Ward dragged his shirt over his head and took off his trousers. He lowered himself over Jacob, bracing himself on his hands as he slowly brought them skin to skin. There was a slight chill to Jacob's body from the winter air as he pressed down, pushing him into the sofa cushions at his back.

"Are you okay?" he asked, not needing the answer but knowing he needed to ask, anyway.

Jacob nodded, licking his lips as a flush darkened his cheeks. "Do you have..." He cleared his throat and licked his lips again—a sign of embarrassment. "A condom?" he said in a rush.

Ward raised his eyebrow and smiled. “I do. And lube.” He reached for both on the small table beside the sofa and held them up. “Are these okay?”

Jacob nodded quickly. “Thanks. I...”

Ward brushed a thumb across Jacob’s cheek. “It’s fine. Never be afraid to tell me what you need or want, Jacob. No matter what it is, I’ll get it for you.”

Jacob bit his lip, and Ward pulled it free, rubbing his thumb over it. He lowered his head, taking Jacob’s mouth again, needing to show Jacob exactly how perfect Ward was for him. He only had this one chance to tie them together because if Jacob left there unsatisfied or unhappy, Ward would lose him.

And that couldn’t happen.

He’d worked too hard to get Jacob to the position they were in then, even if it had happened earlier than he’d expected. He was adaptable as well as impulsive. Jacob was his, and there was no way he was messing this up.

He kept Jacob’s mouth busy while his hands went to work on freeing his lover from his underwear. He didn’t want to move them, which might give Jacob the chance to second-guess things, so he slid his knife from where he’d hidden it and sliced up the sides of the briefs without Jacob even realising he’d done it.

With Jacob’s cock, balls and ass free for Ward’s use, he stroked Jacob’s shaft, using the precome as lube for now. Jacob’s mouth fell open, and he panted, eyes tightly shut. Ward studied his face, memorising the micro expressions he’d never seen before. Nothing escaped his notice, but he’d never seen Jacob in this position before, either. Which was a good thing because if he had, that person might have met with a happy accident.

Ward nipped at Jacob’s jaw as his free hand massaged Jacob’s pucker. He hadn’t opened the lube yet, so he wouldn’t penetrate him, but he could loosen him a little before pushing

deeper. The noises Jacob made were better than Ward had imagined. He'd seen enough porn to know what to expect, but he hadn't believed anyone could make similar noises when they weren't being paid to do so. Jacob proved him wrong. Ward wanted to cause as many of those sounds to emerge from Jacob as he could manage. It was as addictive as his chewing gum habit.

"Please," Jacob murmured, his hands fisting the cushions as he lifted his legs, giving Ward more room to work.

Ward kept stroking but removed a hand to tear open the lube packet with his teeth. He one-handedly squeezed the gel into his hand and smeared it on his fingers, making sure to slick Jacob's cock a little, too. As he went to work stretching Jacob's hole, he studied the man beneath him. Every hitch of breath, every tensing of a muscle, every squirm and wriggle was catalogued and locked away for another time.

"Please, Ward!" Jacob's voice caught as his breathing stuttered when Ward slipped four fingers inside his channel. "Oh, god! Please!"

Ward removed both hands and slid the condom down his shaft, slicking it with the lube leftover on his hands, and he held the head to Jacob's entrance. He pushed forward, sinking into him in one long, continual thrust until his balls met Jacob's ass. Gripping Jacob's hips, Ward breathed through the need to ram into him over and over, chasing his own release. That wasn't what someone would usually do, and he needed to think about his partner, especially if he wanted Jacob to stay around. Not that he would let Jacob go anywhere after what was happening between them. As he'd told Jacob earlier, he was his. From then onwards, Jacob belonged to Ward.

"Move! Please, move!" Jacob begged, his eyes tearing as the need became too much for his body to handle. Ward could see that in how his body tensed, how he couldn't keep still.

He braced himself on his forearms, sliding his arms beneath Jacob's back and bringing them face-to-face. Without saying a word, he began to move, staring into Jacob's eyes and watching every nuance of his responses. Jacob's arms slid around Ward's back, his nails digging into his skin, and Ward found a new addiction—feeling those nails. With every thrust, Jacob got louder and held tighter. With every withdrawal, Jacob whined and whimpered. Ward vowed to give that to the man every day from that moment.

Jacob's body tensed further, and his legs wrapped around Ward's hips. Ward upped the pace, still staring at him, and Jacob closed his eyes, bit his lip and groaned. His channel clenched around Ward's cock, and he kept thrusting until his climax flowed over him, not once taking his eyes from Jacob. His heart pounded as he came down from the high, and he stared at Jacob's closed eyes and relaxed features.

As his dick softened, Ward held onto the condom and pulled free as Jacob's eyelids fluttered open. Ward smiled, knowing Jacob needed the reassurance that this wasn't a hookup and nothing more. If Ward had his way—and he would—they would see and be with each other every day.

“Are you okay?” Ward asked, still covering Jacob's body to ensure he didn't get cold.

Jacob smiled and bit his lip, his eyelids shielding his gaze from Ward. “I am.”

Ward manoeuvred them so he cradled Jacob against him, his front to Jacob's back, allowing Jacob to still view the stars through the roof of the conservatory. He covered them with the blanket from the back of the sofa.

“Thank you, Ward. This was...”

Ward tightened his arms, holding Jacob closer and giving him the reassurance he needed. “It was perfect,” Ward finished. “And there's plenty more. We're not finished. You're mine, remember?”

Jacob sighed and wriggled. “Yours,” he mumbled and then sighed. Within seconds, Jacob fell asleep, and Ward held him like he was supposed to, underneath those stars in a house that wasn’t his, remembering one of the things he’d done to bring Jacob to where he was.



Ward stepped across the hallway, wearing Jacob’s hoodie with the hood up over his head. He couldn’t do much about his height, but he’d studied Jacob enough to walk like him. He made himself look shady, looking left and right as if he was nervous while he broke into the apartment across from Jacob’s.

The woman was in the shower—his timing was precise, as always. He moved across the space, moving several things out of place to fuck with her mind, and then stepped into the bedroom. Listening for when the shower stopped, he moved across to the chest of drawers. He opened each one, ruffling the contents and leaving them slightly ajar. Then he pulled the cover back from the bed, exposing the sheet. Removing a jar from his pocket, he opened it and flicked it onto the sheet. The white fluid splattered across it, and he replaced the cover over the top, leaving it slightly unkempt.

The shower stopped and the curtain pulled across the metal rail. He retraced his steps, moving a few more things as he went. He slammed the door as he exited, waiting for a second, for the woman to shout, “Who’s there?” before he returned to Jacob’s apartment.

It wasn’t the first time he’d been in the woman’s apartment. It wasn’t even the second time. He’d been gently terrorising her for weeks, making it look like it was Jacob’s doing. He pulled out his phone and checked the camera and microphone

he'd fixed near her front door, where he could see her entire open-plan apartment. She stood with a towel wrapped around her, staring around the space with a frown. Moving over to the coffee pot, she nudged it back into its original position, the same with the vase on the dining table.

He saw her visibly shiver and retreat to her bedroom. If she was true to form, she wouldn't come out again. Instead, she would get ready for bed and read before she slept, but he waited for the inevitable. The scream, when it came, was high pitched and long, and she ran out of her bedroom, naked, wiping a hand over her side, the other holding her phone.

Satisfied he'd done what he could that night, he removed Jacob's hoodie, replacing it in the drawer he'd found it in and let himself out of the apartment through the guest bedroom window and down the side of the building.

A week later, he stood outside the window of the building manager's office, listening to him telling Jacob he wasn't welcome in the apartment anymore.

"I don't know why she won't press charges against you because you're a sick fuck, but for some reason, she won't. But I'm not taking the chance that you'll continue to terrorise the people who live here. I want you gone. Immediately."

"I don't know what you're talking about, Mr Evans," Jacob replied. "I haven't done anything."

"Don't lie to me, Mr Trenton. I have evidence that proves you were in her apartment, moving her stuff and," the man paused, "getting off over her stuff. You're sick. And now you're someone else's problem."

"But—"

"I don't want to hear another word. I want you out. Today. Now. Get your things and go."

The door closed, and Ward slipped around the front of the building, leaning against the corner for several hours before a

car pulled up and Jacob's friend helped him load boxes into it.

"Thank you, Ari. I appreciate this. I have no idea what's going on."

"It's fine. You'll get on your feet again."

Ward watched until they finished and drove away. The next part of Ward's plan would start soon.



Coming back to the present, he realised several hours had passed while he'd been lost in thought. When Ward's arm had gone to sleep, Jacob stirred. His head burrowed against Ward's biceps, and he tensed when reality intruded. At least that's what Ward assumed had happened for Jacob to become a block of ice. Ward nuzzled against Jacob's temple, humming gently, something he'd read that helped soothe wounded animals, crying babies and skittish men.

"I'm sorry for falling asleep." Jacob's voice was hoarse.

"Don't be. I'm glad you got some rest. Are you hungry?"

Jacob's stomach answered, growling loud enough to make Ward believe he'd not eaten for a while.

"Come with me, and I'll make breakfast," Ward said, sliding out from behind Jacob and pulling the man upright. The blanket fell off, leaving them both naked, and Jacob closed his eyes, his cheeks darkening to a rosy pink. Ward grabbed his own briefs and helped Jacob into them, expecting him to ask why he wasn't wearing his own, and when he didn't, Ward pulled a T-shirt over his head, too. Sliding on his trousers commando, he slipped his hand around Jacob's and tugged him towards the kitchen.

“Any allergies I need to know about?” Ward knew he didn’t have any, but he had to keep up appearances.

“No, none.”

He led Jacob to a barstool at the breakfast bar and began making scrambled eggs on toast. He poured a glass of apple juice and set it in front of Jacob.

“Thanks. So, what do you do, Ward?” Jacob asked, looking around at the decorations.

Ward raised an eyebrow and turned back to the eggs. “I’m a mechanic.”

“Cars? Motorcycles?”

“Trains.”

“Huh.” Ward glanced over his shoulder, and Jacob frowned. “That’s one of those jobs that I never knew existed but obviously *must* exist because trains need fixing just like any other vehicle. Is mechanic your job title or is it more like an engineer?”

“Mechanic is fine. Some people use engineer, but as far as I’m concerned, they’re the same thing, one just has a fancier title.”

Jacob laughed. “Do you enjoy it?”

“It pays the bills.” What little he had.

He switched off the cooker and served the eggs and toast, sitting close enough to Jacob that their legs were touching. Jacob smiled at him and dug into the food, moaning with each bite.

“What do you do?” he asked Jacob, despite already knowing the answer.

Jacob fidgeted on the stool, pushing his leftover eggs around his plate. “I’m between jobs at the moment.” He sighed and put down his fork. “I lost my job yesterday for something I didn’t do. Which I know sounds like a cop-out and what loads

of others would say. But I truly didn't do it. I don't do well with confrontation, though, so I just left. I didn't fight my corner or anything." Jacob's hands waved around as he spoke. "I need to find another job, though, because I need to pay my rent. I know Ari doesn't mind if I don't pay, but he already gave me his spare room when I got evicted. I don't want to push things too far and lose him as a friend. I would've moved in with my ex, but he cheated on me and I ended things with him. I wasn't able to get anywhere else to live because I didn't have any money behind me, so I ended up with Ari." He took a big inhale and let it go. "Holy crap! Sorry. I didn't mean to word vomit like that. I'm obviously harbouring some ill feelings towards life at the moment."

Ward slid his arm around Jacob's shoulder. "Life brought us together. Don't forget that." He leaned closer, staring into Jacob's eyes. "You're mine, remember? Nothing will touch you ever again."

Jacob gaped and ducked his head, but Ward pressed his finger beneath his chin, bringing his gaze up again. As much as he enjoyed the submissiveness, he needed to reassure him. "Thank you," Jacob whispered, eyes wide. "Are you my Christmas present?"

"Nothing will touch you ever again," Ward repeated, meaning it. And it was the truth. Because now Jacob was with him, Ward didn't need to do anything to bring Jacob closer into his orbit.

Jacob

Everything that had happened the previous night and, so far, that morning had been amazing. Jacob didn't feel the need to run away like he usually did when he found himself still at his hookup's place when he'd meant to leave before he'd fallen asleep. There was something about Ward. Something wild. Something free. And Jacob wished he could be the same.

And as for the promises Ward made, they sent warmth through Jacob, though he knew it was only to make him feel okay about the situation. He didn't mean it.

"Thank you for breakfast. I should get home." Jacob reluctantly put his finished glass on the counter and wiped his hands. "Thank you for..." His cheeks heated, and he closed his eyes, biting his lip. Ward's hand cupped his cheek, startling Jacob's eyes open, and his thumb pulled Jacob's lip from between his teeth.

"You need to stop biting this," Ward murmured, eyes on Jacob's lips. "It's a giveaway that you're uncomfortable. People will exploit that."

And didn't that prove the point about Jacob being the fall guy? Jacob sighed. "I know. I try."

"I'm happy to help you remember."

Jacob chuckled at Ward's words, swiping his tongue across his lips, only to catch the tip of Ward's thumb. He locked gazes with him, and Jacob fell into his dark eyes. With the light of the kitchen, he could see they were darker than he'd even imagined the previous night. A bottomless journey right into his soul. It should've scared Jacob, but it didn't. Ward wouldn't hurt him.

"I should go."

"I'll take you home."

They put the plates in the sink and wandered back to the conservatory, collecting their clothes. Jacob tucked his thumbs into the waistband of Ward's briefs to remove them, but Ward's hands covered his. He stared into those eyes.

"Leave them on." Ward pulled Jacob's hands free.

Jacob swallowed hard, his cock already interested in another round, even though his ass ached. He broke away from Ward's gaze and pulled on his remaining clothes. When he picked up his briefs, he raised his eyebrows when they almost fell apart. He glanced at Ward, who raised his eyebrows at him and then glanced at the briefs again, shaking his head. They must've been lower quality than usual to split at the seams like that. He frowned, studying the almost straight lines from bottom to top. How did that—?

"Are you ready?" Ward asked, standing by the door.

Jacob shook his head and scrunched up the briefs in his hand. "Yes." And no. He wasn't sure he wanted to leave.

Ward opened the conservatory door, letting them into the back garden. "I park back here."

Jacob bit his lip and then freed it when Ward stared at him. "Can you even get a car back here?"

"No."

"Then how—?"

He shut up when he saw the motorcycle. The sleek black machine was a beauty. Jacob didn't know much about cars or motorcycles, but he knew what he liked the look of, and this was it. He'd never ridden on one before, as much as he'd wanted to. Trying not to show how excited he was, he glanced down at his clothes.

"I don't think I'm dressed well enough."

"Here." Ward held out a leather jacket, and Jacob slid it on. It was far too big for him, but he could scent the mint from

whatever Ward wore. He inhaled into the collar and smiled. When he opened his eyes, he caught Ward throwing a piece of gum into his mouth.

“Ah, that’s where the mint comes from,” he said. Ward blinked at him and then held out the packet. Jacob grinned and took one. “Thanks.”

“Climb on and slide your arms around my waist,” Ward said after starting the engine.

Jacob did so, and Ward reached back and grabbed his hips, pulling him even closer. With his cock nestled against Ward’s lower back, Jacob tightened his hold around Ward’s waist, and then they rode off. Slowly at first, they worked their way through the snowy streets, and Jacob closed his eyes and let the wind against his face blow away any reservations about his life. Yes, he was in a tough place, but he could climb out of it again. As he had done before. He was strong enough for that. And he had Ward to thank for these thoughts. The previous evening had been wonderful and had made Jacob feel like he was a person. One day, he could fight his own corner. Maybe. The only time he had was when he found his ex and his lover in their bed.



Jacob frowned down at his phone. Why did Harry need him home right away? It was the middle of the day. He made his excuses to his boss and left work, driving as fast as he could without speeding until he parked outside their apartment building. He locked the car and raced into the building, tapping his foot as he waited for the lift. If he’d thought he could manage it, he would’ve run the ten flights of stairs.

When he finally inserted the lock in the door, his heart was in his throat. What the hell was wrong? Was Harry ill? The

thought had him jogging through the apartment to the bedroom door because that's where he could hear groans coming from. He must be ill.

Jacob flung the door open, taking several steps into the room before stopping. Some guy was balls deep inside Harry with the latter on all fours on their bed, groaning and moaning with his eyes closed. The guy smirked at Jacob but didn't stop. He slapped Harry's ass, and Harry pushed back, moaning some more.

The guy said something, but Jacob could only stare at Harry, whose eyes suddenly opened.

"Shit! Jacob..." Harry's eyelids fluttered as the guy continued to fuck him. "Fuck, stop." Harry tried to pull away, but the guy was having none of it, and Harry caved, collapsing to the bed as the guy reamed him.

Jacob turned and walked away. When he returned later that night, Harry tried to explain, but Jacob, for the first time ever, put his foot down.

"There's no excuse for that, Harry. If you wanted out of the relationship, you should've just told me. Not sent me a message so I could walk in on it. We're done."



Jacob frowned, even now trying to figure out who the guy was, though his face was blurred by emotion. He brushed the thoughts away just as Ward spoke.

"Hold on," he warned and sped up.

Jacob grinned even as he closed his eyes. Why he had faith that Ward wouldn't hurt him—in more ways than one—was beyond him, but he did. Everything felt...right with him. Something Jacob hadn't felt with anyone else before. He

brushed aside those thoughts, not wanting to be reminded of his failures.

When they pulled up at Ari's house, exhilaration filled him. He climbed off, removed his helmet, and gave Ward a huge smile.

"Thank you. That was amazing. I thought I'd be worried about sliding around in the snow, but it was so smooth."

"You're welcome. Will you call me?"

Jacob's eyes widened. He'd never been asked that before. It had always been that they would call him. He wasn't sure what to do with the role reversal.

"Um... Yes. Yes, I will," he said, confidence filling his voice. He *wanted* to see Ward again. He pulled his phone free and handed it over. "Put your number in."

Ward's long fingers tapped at the screen, then he handed it back. "I'll let you decide if you want to message me your number."

There was no expression on Ward's face, but Jacob understood the undercurrent. He tapped a button on his phone screen and a monotone noise sounded. Ward raised his eyebrows, a move Jacob was already attributing to amusement.

Jacob shrugged and smiled. "I don't want you to think I'm not interested."

Ward reached up to Jacob's nape and pulled him close. "I'd be disappointed if you weren't interested because I'm all in, Jacob. You're mine, remember?"

A flutter went through his body, and Jacob exhaled the word, "Yours."

Ward's lips touched his, and Jacob fell into another mind-blowing kiss. When they parted, Jacob's head spun, but Ward kept hold of him until he found his balance. He grabbed the

edges of the leather coat to remove it, but Ward stayed his hands.

“Keep it. It’ll give you an excuse to call me.”

Jacob bit his lip to contain his smile, but Ward fixated on his mouth, and he let go, rolling his lips inwards.

“I will take these, though.” Ward pulled Jacob’s ripped briefs from the pocket and stuffed them in the pocket of his trousers.

“You don’t want—” He stopped when Ward stared at him. Focusing on the ground by his feet, he cleared his throat. “Okay. I’ll call you. To give you your jacket back.”

“Make it soon, Jacob. I’d hate to chase you. I’d prefer to spend the time celebrating Christmas with you.”

Jacob stared into Ward’s eyes, heat blooming through him. “I will.”

Ward dropped another kiss on his lips and roared down the street. Jacob watched him go, holding onto the jacket as if it would disappear with him. After Ward turned a corner, Jacob entered Ari’s house.

“Look at you, you dirty stop-out. The walk of shame indeed.”

Jacob closed his eyes after sinking into the sofa where Ari sat and rested his head back.

“That good, huh?”

“Amazing.”

“Nice jacket.”

Jacob smiled and stuck his nose against the collar, inhaling the minty scent. “It is, isn’t it?”

“You’re sex-drunk. Go get some sleep.”

“I slept very well, thank you.”

“I can imagine. Are you going to see him again?”

Something in Ari’s voice made Jacob glance at his friend. “Yes. Why?”

Ari shook his head. “Just be careful, okay? Don’t fall as fast this time. It never works out well.”

Jacob frowned at the ceiling. Ari was right, but Jacob was worried it was already too late. One night with Ward had him wanting more. Wanting everything. Everything Ward’s actions and words promised. He couldn’t help himself.

The following two weeks were examples of exactly what Ari had warned him. Jacob had called Ward that same day asking when they could see each other again, and Ward had spent the evening reassuring him that seeing each other that night was not too soon. From that moment, they’d spent every day together. Ward even helped him to look for a job—to no avail, which was unsurprising as it was Christmas.

Unfortunately, Jacob had fallen hard and fast for Ward, despite his friend’s warnings. Ari and Ward didn’t get along, although both were friendly enough when they were together, which wasn’t often. Jacob spent time alone with Ari and time alone with Ward, for the most part, rarely crossing the two.

It was during one of these alone times with Ari that he finally told Jacob his fears.

“It’s too much, J! You’ve barely been apart. You need time alone to get your head on straight. Without him hovering over you like a lost puppy.”

Jacob glared at Ari. “He’s nothing like a lost puppy. Stop exaggerating.”

“How much time have you spent apart these past two weeks?” Ari stood, hands on hips, face dark.

“Does it matter if it makes us happy?”

“That’s what I mean! Us. Us, us, us. That’s all I hear anymore. What about you, J? You as a singular? Where has that man gone?”

Jacob pointed at himself. “I’m still here!”

Ari shook his head. “No, you’re not. You’re J and Ward. J doesn’t seem to exist alone anymore.”

“Bullshit!”

Ari’s eyes widened. “And that’s the other thing.” He waved his hand towards Jacob. “What happened to not liking confrontation?”

Jacob opened his mouth to argue but realised he couldn’t. Before Ward, he would’ve never considered arguing with Ari.

“Look, I’m not saying don’t be with him. I’m just saying to slow things down. You’ve gone into this by jumping out of the plane without a parachute. I support everything you do, J. I just need you to make sure this really is what you want, and you’re not just being swept along by a Ward-shaped wave.”

Jacob couldn’t help himself. He chuckled. “First a plane analogy and then an ocean one. Haven’t you heard about not mixing them?”

Ari huffed a laugh and settled onto the sofa. “I support you, J. I truly do. I just don’t want you hurt.”

“I know.” Jacob sat beside him. “I understand where you’re coming from. But I’m happy, Ari.”

“I know you are. But I want you happy for the right reasons. Not because you’re being manipulated.”

Jacob shook his head. “He wouldn’t.”

“Then where has this confidence come from?” Ari held up his hand, stalling Jacob’s words. “I’m not saying it’s not a good thing. It is. But…” He sighed. “Just be careful, okay?”

Jacob rested his head on Ari’s shoulder. “I will.”

And he would. Ari had given him some food for thought, and he intended to follow those thoughts wherever they went. He didn't believe Ward would do anything to hurt him. If anything, Ward would protect him from those who *would* try. But he needed to be sure. Now doubts had been voiced, Jacob could see cracks in their perfect relationship. Like why wasn't Ward at work during the week, and why hadn't it occurred to Jacob before now?

Was Ari right? Was he going into this too fast? He didn't know. What he did know was that he couldn't imagine not seeing Ward every day. The idea of it weighed heavily on his chest. But they needed to talk.

Now.

"I have to go," Jacob said, standing and heading for the door.

Ari sighed again. "Okay. Call me if you need me."

He glanced back at his friend, seeing the worried expression on his face. "I'm going to talk to him, Ari. Some of what you've said is right. I'm not giving him up, but I'll explain your concerns. I'll talk to him."

"Will I see you tomorrow? You know, Christmas Day with my family?"

"Can I let you know?"

Ari sighed. "Sure."

Half an hour later, he stood in front of Ward, hands on hips. "Why haven't you been working?"

Ward

Ward blinked at him, his jaw halting its usual chewing regime. The little spitfire had more fire in him than either of them had realised, and Ward brought it out in him as much as he could. He needed Jacob to gain the confidence he would need to become part of Ward's world. But occasionally, even Ward was surprised by Jacob's backbone.

“When you called to ask if we could meet again that night, I called into work. I told them I was taking two weeks off. I have to go back the day after tomorrow.”

Jacob slipped onto the sofa beside him. “Why didn't you tell me?”

He couldn't say it didn't matter because that wasn't what someone else might say. “It slipped my mind because we were enjoying ourselves. I planned to tell you tonight.”

Jacob smiled and ducked his head, his teeth scraping across his bottom lip but not biting it. He was learning. “We have been, haven't we?”

Ward slipped his arm around Jacob's shoulders, but he resisted his pull. His newfound confidence might just be the death of Ward. Fucking sexy as hell.

“I think we're spending too much time together?”

Jacob hadn't meant that to sound like a question, Ward knew that, but he took it as one, anyway. “We're spending as much time together as we want to. That's what people do in new relationships, isn't it?” He didn't care what other people did in their relationships, but he knew Jacob did. At least for now. When he'd been with Ward for long enough, no one else's opinions would matter but their own.

“I suppose.” He sighed. “I don't want to mess this up, Ward. I know I can be needy, and I don't want you to think you have

to stop doing other things because I want to spend time with you.”

“You know that’s not true. I don’t want to do anything but be with you.” It was true. Jacob filled his waking and sleeping hours, whether or not he was beside him.

Jacob blew out a breath. “I think this neediness stems back from my family’s deaths. At least that’s what the counsellor told me when I was younger.”

It had been at one of those counselling sessions that Ward had first found Jacob, and he knew what that fucker had told Jacob. If he hadn’t already dealt with the man, he would’ve needed to do so.



Ward entered the house in the middle of the night, not being as quiet as he could on purpose. He wanted someone to investigate so he could get the night rolling. He filled a glass with water and drank, slamming the glass on the counter when he was done. Roaming the downstairs, he found a couple of things he knew Dr Coulson would be unhappy about losing.

“Whoever you are, I’ve called the police. You better leave before they get here.” Dr Coulson descended the stairs, cricket bat in hand. When he met Ward’s gaze, his shoulders lowered. “Ward. What are you doing here? You know I don’t see patients at my home.” He rested the bat against the walls, something he would regret, and came into the living room.

Ward picked up the glass trophy Dr Coulson had won the previous year for his work with trauma patients. He threw it in the air, spinning it, before catching it again.

“Be careful with that.”

Ward stared at him, threw it in the air again and purposefully didn't catch it. It shattered on the wooden floor, sending shards across the space and over Dr Coulson's feet.

"Ward!" He sighed, regaining his control. "Let's sit and talk. That's obviously what you're here for."

"No, thanks, doc. I'm here for something else."

He grabbed the doctor by the throat, cutting off all sounds, and slammed him down onto the sofa. Slipping his free hand into his pocket, he pulled out the metal stake used in camping. Without waiting, he stabbed it into Dr Coulson's hand, going straight through to the wooden arm of the sofa and pinning him to it. He cut off the scream by tightening his hold on his throat. He reached for another stake, this time aiming for his thigh, though not in a place that would make him bleed out too quickly.

By the time he had used his final stake, there was no need to hold Dr Coulson's throat. He'd passed out, but at least he wouldn't be able to move when he regained consciousness. Ward settled onto the coffee table, watching and waiting.

Dr Coulson's eyelids fluttered, and Ward leaned forward.

"Argh!" he screamed behind the gag Ward had given him.

"Glad to see you're back with me, Dr Coulson. I decided you needed a lesson in what trauma was. You're giving all this advice out, but you're not making anyone feel better. You told Jacob it was his fault his parents had died. Who does that? Certainly not someone who was trying to help him. You need to understand what trauma is so you can treat it better." Ward paused. "Or I might just slit your throat for what you've made Jacob believe."

Dr Coulson shook his head, eyes wide. Ward pretended to consider his options, but Dr Coulson knew who he was. He'd even written psychopath in his notes, and Ward was going to show him exactly what he was made of.

He left the man staked to the sofa and entered the kitchen, taking his time to find the best knife for the job before he returned to the coffee table. Spinning the knife in place, he said, "I think you're better off out of this world. I can't take the chance you'll upset any other people."

Dr Coulson's eyes filled with tears, and Ward grabbed his hair, pulling his head back. The slice across Dr Coulson's throat was slow, Ward dragging it out because the guy needed to suffer for what he'd told so many other children and adults alike. He watched the life drain out of the doctor before pulling his dressing gown aside and carving the initials JT into his skin.



“You were bound to feel adrift, Jacob. You’d just lost your family.”

Jacob finally let him pull him into his arms and snuggled against Ward’s chest. “If I hadn’t missed the train, they wouldn’t have been in the car at all.”

Ward tightened his hold on Jacob and his need to revive the man and kill him all over again. “It wasn’t your fault.” Jacob’s shitty counsellor had not been careful with his words at their sessions and regularly insinuated that Jacob shouldn’t have missed the train. It seemed Jacob had taken those words to heart.

“Wasn’t it?”

“Not even a little. It was the drunk driver’s fault.”

Jacob froze, and Ward waited for the inevitable question he’d purposefully set himself up for. “How did you know what happened?”

Good boy. “I’m sorry.” He wasn’t. “I researched your family when you told me what happened. I didn’t want you to have to tell me and dredge up awful memories.” He left out the fact that this research had been done eight years ago.

Jacob stayed frozen for a long moment and then he climbed into Ward’s lap and wrapped himself around him, resting his face in Ward’s neck. Ward had never understood what people felt at times, but he understood he wanted Jacob in his life. He could see them working and living together in perfect harmony. He would have to explain his personality at some point, but it wasn’t needed yet. Soon, but not yet.

“Thank you,” Jacob whispered against his skin. “I want to tell you.”

Ward could already hear the repressed emotions in Jacob’s voice, and if he could take that away from him, he would, but he wasn’t able to. One day, though, Ward would explain what he’d done for him. Fully. With no secrets withheld.

“I’d been visiting my grandmother as I did every summer. I took the train there, stayed for two weeks and took the train home again. I’d done it for years. This day, I was running behind schedule. I got to the station as the train pulled away from the platform. There wasn’t another train for four hours, so I called my parents and asked them if they would pick me up from the station because it would be too late for the buses. They weren’t happy about it but agreed. They had to get Elise out of bed.” Jacob sniffed and cleared his throat, and when he spoke again, his voice was hoarse. “She was only thirteen years old. And I was pissed at them for not being there when I got off the train because I was tired and wanted to get to bed. They didn’t answer when I called, and I was worried, but I got a taxi home instead. I saw the police at my house when we pulled up.”

“Life never turns out the way we want it to. My family sent me away when I was fourteen. When I wouldn’t fit into their idea of a perfect child. I’m better off without them. And

although you would've done great with them in your life, you're still here, Jacob. You're living, and I'm sure they'd be glad of that."

Wise words that he'd overheard counsellors say to patients over the years. Ward could fake the empathy and emotions needed, but he rarely felt anything. He needed hard facts to make decisions. Something he had done when he'd first seen Jacob. Research and hard truths before he'd found the person who could be his.

Jacob lifted his head, his gaze spearing into Ward's. "I'm sorry they sent you away."

"It was the best thing for me. For them." Maybe it was time to bring Jacob into his world. He cupped Jacob's face. "You're everything I ever wanted as a partner, Jacob. The moment I saw you, I knew. I could see the banked fire waiting to be freed." Jacob's eyes widened. "You may not believe it, but I saw it." Ward would know in the next few seconds if he'd made a mistake. "I saw it eight years ago."

Jacob studied him, confusion clouding his eyes, lines deepening on his face as he frowned. "What do you mean eight years ago?"

Ward slid his hand to Jacob's nape, holding him steady as he broke the news. "I first saw you in Dr Coulson's office. Eight years ago."

Jacob shook his head, trying to lean back, but Ward wouldn't let him. "I don't understand."



In the bright lighting of the waiting room, Ward's eyes were fixed on a man sitting across the room. He wore a red hoodie and blue jeans. His arms were crossed tightly over his chest,

and his gaze was on the floor. Glaring at the floor would be a better description. Ward wondered what the floor had done to deserve such anger. He didn't flinch whenever a name was shouted or when someone sat next to him or when a buzzer sounded. He just sat there, as if frozen in time, and Ward wanted to know why.

“Jacob, please come through.”

The guy didn't look up, but he grabbed his bag, slung it over his shoulder and marched towards the counsellor's office. As he drew nearer, Ward could see his face was a map of pain and anger. Although Ward didn't understand the emotions, he had taught himself what they were, how he could identify them and how he could show them in himself, even if he didn't feel them.

It was the anger that drew Ward. He wanted to set it free. To allow the fire that was building to scourge the earth. From that moment, he ensured he was there every time Jacob was. Watching. Learning. Helping to make him become everything he could be.



Ward explained his version of events.

Jacob tried to move off his lap, but Ward held tightly, even as Jacob squirmed. “Let me go.”

“Where did that anger go, Jacob? Every time I saw you after that, it had banked a little more until there was nothing left and you were little of what you once had been. I vowed then that I would help you regain that fire.”

“What do you mean? We've just met. How could you help?” Jacob wriggled, and Ward flipped them so Jacob was beneath him on the sofa. He held his wrists even as Jacob fought him. “Let me go!”

Ward laid on top of him. “Stop,” he commanded, and Jacob obeyed instinctively. “I’ve been helping you ever since. You needed to find that anger, Jacob. To remember what it was like to feel your stomach burning and roiling with heat that has nothing to do with sex.”

“I don’t understand!”

“You needed to learn how to be strong. How to climb out of the holes you were thrown into. How to survive. And you did.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Jacob’s eyes spit fire at him, and Ward nodded.

“That. Feel that? That fire? That’s what you need. Being evicted from your apartment, losing your jobs, your boyfriend cheating on you, no bank willing to loan you money to get a new place. It all built strength. And fire.”

Jacob froze, staring up at him, though his chest heaved with his breaths. “What?” he whispered.

“I couldn’t do it too often because you needed time to recuperate after each downfall. But each time, you rose stronger and with more fire feeding you.”

Jacob went slack, but Ward didn’t release him. “You did this to me?” he murmured.

“I did.”

“How could you do this?” Tears filled his eyes.

“Let me ask you something, Jacob. Do you feel any closer to being the twenty-three-year-old man who had just lost his family?”

Jacob shoved against him. “Why would I want to be back there?” he shouted.

“Because that was who you truly are inside, Jacob. That is who you were meant to be. And those counsellors and so-called friends of yours back then did nothing to help you. They

told you to shove it down, pretend it wasn't happening. I know, Jacob. I know how that feels, and it's not fair. You need to be free to be who you truly are, not a shell of your former self."

Jacob stopped fighting, closing his eyes against the tears escaping, and Ward waited. Was Jacob strong enough now to choose for himself? Would he choose Ward, or would he choose to leave him? Whatever route he chose, Ward would never leave. He knew how to get inside someone's head, and even if Jacob didn't want to see him any longer, Ward would still work to make Jacob as strong as he could be to survive the world. But if he chose Ward, he could open an entirely new world to him.

"I wanted revenge," Jacob whispered. "With one breath, everyone kept saying it wasn't my fault, that it was the drunk driver's fault, and then with the next, they whispered that I should've been more independent. Not so reliant on my parents. That revenge turned inside because they were telling the truth. It was my fault."

Ward let go of Jacob's wrists and cupped his face, bringing their gazes together. "No, it wasn't. You were right to want revenge."

"The counsellor died, though. Before I could find him."

"He paid for what he did."

Jacob studied him with a frown, and then his eyebrows rose. "You?" Ward didn't reply, just stared at him with a steady gaze. More tears filled his eyes. "You did that? For me?"

Ward brushed his thumb against Jacob's cheek, the only acquiescence he would give.

Jacob's chin trembled, and he swallowed hard. "Thank you."

Ward brushed away his tears. "What else do you want to know?"

“I should be more upset by what you’ve told me, but I’m not. Why aren’t I?” Jacob trembled beneath him.

“Because you see what I saw back then. You see what happened to you, and you’re realising I’m right. You lost yourself. Now’s the time to find yourself again.”

Ward let go of Jacob and sat up, giving Jacob room to run if he wanted to. It had to be Jacob’s choice now. Ward had done everything he could. The rest was up to Jacob. And if that meant Jacob would turn Ward in to the police for what he’d done, then so be it. But if Jacob was as strong as Ward believed him to be, they would be spending their first Christmas together.

Jacob

Jacob should be more scared than he was. He should be horrified by what Ward had told him—or implied, at least. But he couldn't help but feel like Ward could see him more clearly than anyone else ever had.

He pushed upright, tucking himself into the corner of the sofa while staring at Ward. Head spinning, he closed his eyes and just breathed for a few minutes. Ward hadn't moved when he opened his eyes again. Still holding himself rigid. Still staring at Jacob. And something about it made Jacob laugh. He put his hand over his mouth, trying to stifle the uncontrollable giggles, but he couldn't. Burying his head in his drawn-up knees, he let his laughter free, tears rolling down his face.

He had no idea how long he laughed for, but his ribs were aching by the time he could take a full, deep breath. Lifting his head, he exhaled.

“Sorry. No idea where that came from.”

“It's a release, I'm told. Helps you to get out all the uncertainty so you can clear your head and think again.”

Jacob tilted his head. “How do you know that?”

“I've studied people and their reactions to things. It was necessary for me to be able to blend in.”

“Why necessary?”

Ward blinked at him. Jacob had seen him do the same thing several times when they were together. What was that reaction about?

“I don't feel emotions the same way someone else does. I had to study people, so I knew how I was supposed to react in certain situations.”

Jacob recoiled. “You’re faking it? This?” He waved his hand between them. His stomach churned. Was he just an experiment to Ward?

“No. I’m not faking it as such. There is something about you that calls to me. My reactions to you are real, though I may not show them as much as other people would. I see things in black and white. There are no grey areas for me. It’s difficult to explain.”

Jacob was beginning to see where Ward was going with this explanation. Certain jigsaw pieces clicked in his head. “You’re a psychopath.”

Ward stared at him and nodded. “I’m classified as a borderline, antisocial psychopath. I lack the emotional breadth of others. I’m impulsive, enjoy taking risks, intense at times —”

“How many people have told you this? You’re saying it like you’re reading a diagnostics sheet,” Jacob interrupted.

“Every doctor and counsellor I ever saw. I’ve not seen anyone for years now, though.” Ward blinked at him again. “Does my diagnosis scare you?”

Jacob shook his head slowly. “It should, but it doesn’t. I’ve always been interested in psychology. I watch—”

“True crime shows so you can learn,” Ward finished for him.

Jacob gaped. “How did you know?”

“You’ve been in my life longer than I’ve been in yours.”

Jacob rested his cheek on his knees and stared at Ward. So much information had been thrown at him in such a short time. But nowhere in all that information was the push to leave Ward behind. To run and never see him again. In fact, the idea of it made Jacob’s chest tighten.

“You need to think about what we’ve discussed and decide what you want to do. I can take you home.”

“No!” Jacob took a breath before climbing into Ward’s lap and cupping his face. “No,” he whispered. “I should go. I should think. But I don’t want to. I want to feel. I want to listen to my heart instead of my head.”

“And what is your heart telling you?”

“That I’m doing the right thing. That you’re worthy of my time. That you deserve my...love.”

“I don’t know what that is, but I know what it looks like.” Ward slid his hands behind Jacob. “I can show you.”

Jacob shook his head. “You don’t need to do anything different. I was already falling before we had this conversation.”

“You don’t know everything yet.”

Jacob swallowed. “There’s more?” Ward nodded. “Tell me everything.” He didn’t move from his position, though he braced for learning something he couldn’t cope with.

“I’m not just a mechanic. I also do freelance work. I’m a professional stalker and burglar.”

Jacob covered his cheeks with his hands, his two little fingers meeting over his mouth as he considered Ward’s words. “What does that entail, exactly?”

“I’m hired to scare people.”

Jacob leaned back. “Why would you do that?”

“They deserve it. They’re not nice people, Jacob. I choose my targets wisely.”

“I thought you said you were hired to do this?”

Ward nodded. “I am, but I research the person they’re asking me to stalk before I accept the job. If the information I find is bad, then I’ll accept the job. If they’re good people, I

won't. I know right from wrong, even if I don't truly understand it."

Jacob exhaled. "But what does that do? Stalking them, I mean. What's the purpose?"

"To scare them. I've taken on jobs for politicians who have used their power to hurt people, for a gang leader who sold drugs to teenagers and for a husband who had killed his wife, though no one could prove it."

"How did you know that he'd done it, then?"

"We had a little discussion."

"Do you hurt them?"

Ward raised his eyebrow. "Sometimes."

"Do you kill them?"

"Sometimes."

"You did for me." Ward stared at him but said nothing. "What about the burglary? What do you do that for?"

"Again, to scare people mostly. Occasionally, I make it look like they've been burgled to flush them from their home. Some people don't like staying in a place they know someone else has been in uninvited."

"And it's always bad people?"

Ward nodded. "Always."

"So you have a conscience?"

Ward shook his head. "Not really. I know right from wrong, as I said earlier. That's my blueprint if you like. I use that knowledge to determine whether someone is good or bad. It doesn't make any difference to me who I do it to, but I don't want to end up in jail."

Jacob sighed. "My brain is officially full and about to explode."

“Let me take you home.”

“Why are you trying to get rid of me?” Jacob chuckled.

Ward stared at him. “I’m not, but I know this is not something everyone can stomach. I would understand if you didn’t want anything to do with me.”

Jacob slid his arms around Ward’s neck. “I see you as a modern-day hero.” Ward blinked at him, and Jacob finally figured out what it meant. “You do have tells. You would be good at poker, but I’m learning there are some things you can’t hide.”

“Only with you.”

“What do you mean?” Jacob cocked his head.

“You’re the only one I let see the things I can usually hide. I’ve learnt to hide every body language and facial expression, but with you... I want you to see who I am. To accept me for who and what I am.”

Jacob licked his lips. “You stare and blink when you’re shocked.”

Ward didn’t say anything for a moment, and then he nodded. “I do.”

“Do you realise you’re doing it?”

“Yes. I have certain tells that I want you to know, to help you understand me.”

“So, it’s a conscious decision.”

Ward nodded again. “It is mostly, although I’m finding I don’t need to do it as consciously as I did it before.”

Jacob smiled. “You’re trusting me.”

Ward shook his head, and Jacob’s stomach dropped. “I always trusted you, even when we hadn’t met.”

Jacob smiled and tucked his head into Ward’s neck. He should be more worried about this. What the hell was Ari

going to say about it all? Then he realised he could never tell Ari about this. Never. This would be on his shoulders. Could he live with the secrecy?

“Would you like to help me?” Ward said.

Jacob clocked Ward’s chin as he snapped his head up. “Help you?” He rubbed Ward’s chin.

“Yes, help me with what I do. Not the actual doing part, but the research. You like to learn about true crime. Why not see it from the source?”

Jacob’s mind whirled. Could he be part of something illegal like that? It was a different kettle of fish from knowing about it to taking part in it. If someone found them, they’d both be in trouble with the police. But he wanted to know everything.

“Can you show me before I answer that?”

“Sure.” Ward stood, gripping Jacob’s thighs to keep hold of him.

Jacob loved it when he did this to him. Ward seemed to... Well, before, Jacob would’ve said Ward seemed to enjoy it, but with the new information, enjoy was probably the wrong word. Why wasn’t he freaking out about this news?

Ward drove him to another place. What looked like an abandoned house in the middle of several more derelict places. The area gave Jacob the shivers, but he pushed it down.

They went into a bedroom that didn’t have much furniture other than a bed, a bedside table and a bookcase. Ward stopped before the bookcase on the far wall. Pulling on the side of it, Ward moved it without a grunt, and that was when Jacob saw it swing open to show another room inside.

The room was small, though big enough to fit a desk and chair, a whiteboard and several computers and printers. Jacob walked across to the whiteboard.

“John Winters,” he read. “Age forty-nine. Wife, Angelica, and two daughters, Rose and Lily. Lawyer for Dayton Rimes.” He glanced at Ward. “I recognise the name Dayton.”

Ward stepped beside him. “Dayton is a drug dealer, but the police can’t find anything to pin on him because his lawyer is too good.”

“You’re going after the lawyer instead of Dayton?”

Ward nodded. “Dayton won’t fall for it as easily as John will. John has his family to think of.”

“You don’t hurt them, do you?”

“I don’t. I don’t even break in when they’re home. I only ever focus on the person responsible, not the people who surround them. Unless they’re involved, too. But the wife and kids are not involved with John’s kickbacks from Dayton.”

“How do you know all this?”

“I’m good with computers.”

Jacob stared around him, acknowledging those words, and then focused on the whiteboard again. “So, where are you with it?”

Ward settled at the computer and brought up some details, explaining each potential plan and its contingencies. The amount of information Ward had on the guy was incredible, and how he worked to ensure that only the one person involved would be caught in Ward’s trap was impressive.

“Who hires you for this type of thing?” Jacob asked suddenly.

“It varies. Sometimes, it’s the police, off the record, of course. Occasionally, a lawyer. I once had a woman hire me to scare her husband because he was an asshole to her and their kids. I’ve had all types of people.”

“How do they find you?”

“Word of mouth. If someone is desperate enough, they’ll find the information.”

Jacob stepped back and leaned against the wall, taking in everything Ward had shown and told him. No matter what Ward said, he was a hero. He saved people because of what he did, although he wouldn’t feel the emotions relating to that feat. Jacob could feel it for him. Pride rose up, and he knew his answer.

“Yes.”

Ward blinked at him. “Yes?”

“I want to help you. Yes.”

Ward smiled at him, and though Jacob knew it was for his benefit, he appreciated the gesture even more. Ward pressed him against the wall of the secret office, caging him in with his arms.

“Are you sure?”

“Positive. One question though.” Ward nodded. “Why isn’t this at your other place?”

Ward raised his eyebrows. “That’s not my house.”

Jacob gaped at him. “What?”

“The owners are on holiday for another week. I wanted you to have somewhere nice to go while you got to know me.”

Jacob huffed a laugh and stepped closer to him. “I don’t need nice. I need you.”

Ward lowered his head, fusing their mouths, and Jacob climbed him like a tree, allowing his lover to carry him into the bedroom and ravish him throughout the night and into Christmas Day.

6

Ward

Two years later

Ward rattled the handle on the back door and then stepped to the window beside it, jiggling it to see if it would open. “I don’t know if blue would be better. Isn’t blue supposed to be a calming colour?”

“You don’t need calming, sweetheart. You’re calm enough for the both of us,” Jacob said into his ear. “In fact, if I didn’t check you were breathing regularly, I would be concerned you were no longer with me.”

Ward’s mouth twitched, even though Jacob couldn’t see him. He found himself making more facial expressions as the days passed because every one lit up his husband’s face. He went back to the door and pulled out his lockpick. It was a custom-made design which looked like a regular key, but when he inserted it into the lock, the outside retreated, leaving the lockpick device in the keyhole. It wasn’t as simple as that, but Jacob had a good head for design, they’d found. He was responsible for most of their new toys.

The lock clicked, and he entered the house, not trying to be quiet.

“I’m calling the police!” a woman shouted, her voice shaking, and Ward paused.

“We have a problem,” Ward said. “Elaine’s home.”

“Fuck! I thought she was out of the country?” Rapid tapping sounded over the earpiece.

“Supposed to be. Must’ve got back earlier than planned.”

Jacob sighed. “Are you going to continue or come back?”

Ward considered the options. That night was the best night to make a show of Kurt, though it would’ve been easier

without his girlfriend as a witness. Not impossible, just easier. But maybe he could show her exactly what type of man Kurt was. It might make her choose more wisely in the future.

“Continue.”

“Okay.”

No hesitation on his husband’s part. The first time Jacob had joined him on his freelance job, he’d been shaky and quiet. The second time—when Ward had killed the woman—he’d been sick, but he had never turned his back on Ward for it. He’d understood that the woman had been physically and sexually abusing the kids in her care, and he’d been happy to see her demise—it had been just a little too close for comfort. Now though, he never hesitated.

“Why not green, though? Isn’t green calming?” Jacob returned to the earlier conversation about the colour of their bathroom.

“I supposed it depends what shade.”

Ward continued through the kitchen, tapping the baseball bat he held against every piece of furniture he passed.

“Maybe we should choose red to celebrate our Christmas beginnings,” Jacob said. “It’s been almost two years since we got together.”

“For you, maybe. For me, it’s ten years.”

“Fuck. I still feel sorry for not being ready for you sooner. You spent all that time alone.”

“You know that doesn’t bother me.”

Jacob sighed over the earpiece, and Ward knew it didn’t matter what he said. Jacob would get over it, eventually.

“The police are on their way! You better scram!” Elaine shouted from the top of the stairs.

“Is Kurt even there? If he is, he’s even more of a shit for making his girlfriend do all the talking.”

“He’ll be here. More than likely, he’s letting her do the heavy lifting while he hides his stuff. Maybe even himself.”

Ward moved into the living room, staring at the array of decorations filling the space, including an enormous Christmas tree, decorated within an inch of its life. He purposefully caught the vase on the end table and let it crash to the floor.

“I mean it!” Elaine cried, though her voice betrayed her confidence.

“It would go better for you, Elaine, if you get Kurt to come downstairs in your place.” Ward waited, just out of sight. He had no way of knowing if she had a gun or not, and the last time he got shot, Jacob went ballistic at him.

“Kurt’s not here!”

“Yes, he is, Elaine. Things will go much smoother if you send him down.”

“Fuck you!” a male voice said. “I ain’t coming down there until you show yourself.”

The sound of a gun cocking made Ward sigh. “I promise not to get shot,” he told Jacob.

“You better not.”

Ward lifted the bat so Kurt would see it, and sure enough, the gun fired, missing the bat completely. “If I have to come up there to fetch you, Kurt, I won’t be a happy man.”

“Fuck off. No way am I coming down there.”

“Do you really want me to explain to Elaine exactly what you’ve been up to?” Silence. “Because it’s no bother to me at all. We can start right at the beginning, when you were Tobias’s bitch and following orders like a little lap dog. Or we could start in the middle when you slit Tobias’s throat to take over his reign. Or maybe when you kidnapped that fourteen-year-old girl and handed her over to Green. You know Green, don’t you, Elaine? Kurt’s best friend.”

“Shut the fuck up, man.”

Ward tutted. “Not the way to talk to the person who has your life in his hands.”

“There’s no way you can get to me before I shoot you—argh!”

The thump, thump, thump of someone falling down the stairs had Ward chuckling to Jacob. “Looks like someone took a tumble.” He raised his voice again. “Thank you, Elaine.”

Ward headed for the stairs, mindful that Kurt could still have his gun, though it was unlikely. He found him groaning on the floor, legs spread like he was ready to be reamed. Grabbing his arm, Ward dragged him across the floor, not being at all careful to keep him from hitting his head on anything.

“Fuck!”

Ward dropped his arm and stepped over him. “Either you get yourself onto this table, or you won’t like how I do it.”

“Fuck you,” Kurt spat.

Ward pointed the gun he’d picked up and put a bullet in each forearm. Kurt screamed and tried to get away, but Ward stepped onto the bullet wounds, holding him in place. “Shall we try that again? Yourself or me?”

Kurt glared at him, breathing heavily through his nose, but he nodded. Ward removed his feet and stepped back, watching in case Kurt did something unpredictable. But he wouldn’t. He was far too predictable a man to have a unique thought in his head. Their research had shown that.

“Elaine?” Ward said, keeping his eye on every move Kurt made to manoeuvre himself onto the table.

“Um, yeah?”

“Have you called the police? Be honest now.”

“No-no. We didn’t. Kurt didn’t want them involved.”

“Good. Please keep it that way. You seem like a nice person, Elaine. You really don’t want to join forces with a guy like Kurt. You could do so much better.”

“I think you’re right.”

“I want you to do something for me now,” he said when Kurt was laying on his back on the table. “I want you to get yourself ready to leave. Get anything you want to take with you, then come down to the front door. No harm will come to you if you don’t harm me.”

“O-okay.”

Footsteps sounded overhead and a door slammed closed.

“What the fuck do you want, man?”

Perspiration beaded on Kurt’s forehead. Ward walked to the side, flicking the switch on for an item that would come in handy soon.

“I’ve been asked to get revenge for that fourteen-year-old, Kurt. She turned up dead. Did you know that?” Ward chuckled though he felt no amusement. Neither he nor Jacob did when they’d found out everything that had happened. “Of course you did. You helped Green dispose of the body.” He picked up a star decoration from the sideboard and pressed the tip into the wound he’d made earlier, eliciting a scream from the man. “Tut, tut, tut. Far too much noise.”

Ward pulled a small delicate bauble from his pocket and put it against Kurt’s mouth. “You need to keep this in your mouth gently or it just might break and send shards down your throat.” He gripped Kurt’s jaw, pressing between the bones to make him open and then slipped it inside. “Tight hold now.” He patted his cheek.

Kurt glared at him. A door opened and footsteps sounded.

“Jacob, I’ll be sending Elaine out in a moment.”

“Okay. I’ll be waiting.”

Although Jacob didn't always take part in the stalking and burglary aspects of their work, he helped with everything else. When there were victims, he helped rescue them. When there were accomplices, he ensured they didn't escape.

"I-I'm here," Elaine said.

Ward grabbed a knife from the kitchen counter, splayed Kurt's hand and staked him to the table. The muffled scream wasn't as loud as before, which was the point of the bauble. The choking afterwards was the other point. It would take Kurt a minute or two to stop the sphere from blocking his airways.

Ward headed to the front door, stopping a few feet away. "Thank you, Elaine. I promise he will get what he deserves."

"Did he—"

She was asking if he had taken part with the girl, but she didn't really want the truth. "No, he didn't. He's just the supplier." A blatant lie that will save her conscience a little.

She nodded. "Thank you."

"My colleague is outside and will see you get to where you need to be without problems."

Elaine glanced towards the dining room, but she wouldn't be able to see anything. Then she exited the house and closed the door.

"Elaine is outside."

"Copy that."

Ward returned to Kurt, who was curled on his side, trying to remove the knife with his free hand, but the wound was obviously paining him, making him have less strength. He didn't wait. He slammed Kurt back by the throat, smashing his head against the table.

"I'm not finished with you."

He grabbed another knife and strode back to him, stabbing through his free hand and staking him again. It brought back

memories of what he'd done to Dr Coulson. He needed to keep Kurt's feet from moving before he used what he wanted. Reaching up, he yanked the Christmas lights from around the ceiling. He looped them around Kurt's ankles and then around the legs of the table, splaying him. Once he was secure, Ward stared down at him.

"This will be fun."

He grabbed the iron from where he'd left it to warm and held it above Kurt's groin. He paused, his learnt conscience poking at him, but the voice in his ear settled him.

"He deserves it, Ward. Don't hold back on my account."

Jacob always knew what to say, even when Ward couldn't explain his thoughts or actions. Without waiting another second, he rested the iron on Kurt's groin. He had wanted a quicker reaction but there was no way he was touching the man's disgusting cock. No matter how much he wanted him in pain. The heat would still get to him, as his mumbled screams were advertising. Steam rose from the iron, and Kurt writhed, undoubtedly making it worse.

Withdrawing the iron for a moment, he allowed Kurt some respite and checked his work. The black scorch marks on Kurt's trousers were testament to what damage could be done, and Ward nodded. A little longer and it would be through the fabric completely. Ward replaced the iron on his groin, this time putting it completely between his legs, where his balls were, and pressed. Hard. Then, to make matters even better, he depressed the steam button.

Gargled screams rose from Kurt's throat, the bauble having done its job of reducing his airway.

"I never thought I'd enjoy this, but somehow..."

The voice didn't come through the earpiece, and Ward glanced up, not having heard Jacob enter the house.

"You've learnt well," Ward said.

“I have a master teaching me.” Jacob smiled at him and transferred his gaze to Kurt. “He deserves every bit of this and more.”

Keeping the iron where it was—it was probably melted into the skin by now—he waved towards Kurt. “Have at it. Might as well practise while you can.”

Jacob pulled a knife from his pocket and tapped it on his chin. “Hmm. What to do. What to do,” he muttered absently before hitting Kurt in the jaw.

The crunch of the bauble shattering made even Ward wince, but the screams and gargles from Kurt were music to his ears. Swallowing shards of glass could not be pleasant.

“Now I can practise.”

Ward watched as Jacob took the knife to Kurt’s skin, and something akin to pride flowed through him. He truly had learnt well. They were the same, though forged through different experiences. He couldn’t wait to have Jacob completely by his side, night and day.

What they could accomplish together would be epic.

ABOUT ELOUISE R EAST

Elouise R East writes all things taboo. Her characters, however flawed and kinky, come to life on the page, unfolding in front of her, and she has very little input into how they want to be shown. Just like real life, the lives of her characters change with every choice, every interaction and every conversation. And she wouldn't have it any other way.

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AVE FUCKING MARIA



MJ Green

Christmas in Melbourne meant hot sunny days and time spent with family, watching as the next generation of Tomasis got excited about what Santa might bring. But for Albie and his fiancé Gio, there was no better Christmas gift than the combining of their favourite activities—music and murder.

Their grapevines need fertilising after all.

Content Warnings

Violence, Torture, Mutilation

Also includes references to off page sexual assault by the bad guy.

ONE

Albie cursed as the strings on his violin gave into the stress caused by hours of continued playing, each one snapping in turn as though carrying out a carefully co-ordinated protest. He didn't need to practice the piece. Albie could happily play it without the sheet music on the stand in front of him regardless of whether he performed it for his family, their church congregation, or the Lord Mayor of Melbourne. It was a beautiful piece of music that he and Gio had performed together countless times since they were sixteen—Albie's violin paired with Gio's voice. Every time they played it, the song came to life in a slightly new way...infused with the emotion that filled their soul right then.

Whenever Albie needed a distraction, a break from the stresses of living a double life, he always reached for his violin. Fingering the strings and lost himself in the familiar chords until the world slipped away and nothing existed but the music and Gio.

And he'd played for a solid two hours tonight—fingers red and raw along with the broken strings—as he waited for Gio to return with a long-standing debtor whose credit at their tables had finally run out.

He'd just finished removing the broken strings from his violin when a loud racket erupted outside the room. Angry curses that tumbled from Gio's lips were punctuated by the thud of a body being shoved roughly into the wall and the pitiful begging of a man who'd realised his fate too late. Albie dropped the strings onto the desk and carefully rubbed the neck of his violin, checking for damage before laying it on the desk. Restringing could wait until after Albie had created music of a different kind.

The door of their basement refuge swung open, and a body was sent sprawling through it ahead of Gio. Albie sat back and watched his fiancé stride through the door with a wickedly

dangerous grin on his face. A grin that always preceded a night of murder and fucking. Two damn good combinations in Albie's books...and depending on how much of a fight this bastard put up, they might not even make it to their bedroom before the fucking portion of the night started.

Gio's sharp gaze snagged on the unstrung violin, and he raised a questioning eyebrow. "I thought you'd replaced the strings not that long ago?"

Albie shrugged and fingered the pile of broken strings; he had no intention of letting them go to waste. "Two hours of waiting, amore mio... I had to do something with my hands." He held up his left hand for his fiancé to see, fingers imprinted with the chords he'd played over and over.

Gio chuckled softly and shook his head. "Ave Maria?"

"Is there anything else I'd play when stressed?" He said with a smile.

Every musician had their favourite piece of music...the one they always turned to when everything around them might be going wrong. Familiar and comforting like a soft blanket or the roar of a fire on a cold winter's day. Music that Albie had been turning to more and more in the last few weeks as their unknown enemy continued to strike at them.

"But now that our guest is here"—gesturing at the man picking himself off the floor—"I have something else with which to relieve my stress."

"What the fuck?" the man spluttered, face ruddy and eyes burning with a fearful anger despite his attempts to appear intimidating. "You can't just kidnap people! Not that your bully boy did a good job of it... I be the cops are already aware of my abduction...hell, I bet it was caught on every camera within the casino along with those monitoring the city's traffic. Pretty stupid aren't ya, despite how well you've cleaned up," the man spat in Gio's direction, but Albie's fiancé didn't react to the insult flung at him—they'd had far worse

thrown at them in the past. “Do you even realise who the fuck I am?”

Albie ignored the man’s ranting for the moment, though his accusation that Gio had ‘cleaned up’ rankled and spoke of the man’s failure to recognise who they were. For Gio to clean up as the man suggested, his fiancé would need to be wearing a tux...and they were far too expensive, precious to sully with anyone’s blood.

“What’ve got on him? Knowing Benito, he’d have kept a dossier on him that’s far thicker than the debts he incurred.” Debts were the common reason for people to wind up in their basement... being undercover cops was another, as were those who tried to take advantage of their staff at the casino, many of whom were family members or thought of as such.

Gio grinned and tossed a USB drive onto the desk. “Benito says everything you need is on there.”

Albie picked up the drive and plugged it into his laptop. His fingers played with the broken strings while they waited for the laptop to boot up and for the information Benito sent him to become accessible. Wondered too how they could be used to fill the room with music once more. It wouldn’t produce the perfect blend of harmony and melody that his violin and Gio’s voice could, but that wasn’t the kind of music Albie wanted to create. In the past he’d wrapped the broken strings around fingers and toes... bound wrists together and watched hands change colour... pulled on them tight until blood seeped around their edges... threaded them through a needle before sewing a guest’s mouth shut—he didn’t do that one too often, preferring to hear his guests scream. But ultimately what he decided to do, depended on the contents of the USB drive Benito provided. The punishment should always fit the crime and if that involved a bit of torture first...Albie grinned, then he was all for it.

A tap of a key and all the information Benito had gathered on the man was displayed on the screen.

“Gareth Matherson... forty-three years old... married... three kids... and the newly appointed CEO of the Matherson Group.”

Gareth snorted, hands brushing over clothes as his gaze flicked nervously between Albie and Gio. “Not exactly secret information... anyone with a keyboard can find that out.”

Albie arched an eyebrow and stared hard at the man. “You obviously aren’t so well acquainted with a keyboard, then... seeing as that you don’t realise who we are”—gesturing at himself and Gio.

He’d known who the man was the moment Gio had shoved him into the room, Gareth’s father had been a patron of the arts here in Melbourne...not to mention the deals that had been done between the Matherson Group and the Tomasi Corporation in recent years. Deals that he and Gio were in charge of negotiating on top of their duties at the university... however, he guessed Gareth had failed to pay any attention to that fact when neither he nor Gio carried the titles of CEO or COO as their fathers did.

“But you’re right, that information is rather...basic. Thankfully, Benito has included more than that in his report.” Albie tapped the keys again and brought up the next page of the report...the one that detailed all the debts that Gareth Matherson had incurred. “Let’s see... in the last month you’ve accrued a hundred thousand in debt at the tables...and with thirty percent interest that the house charges, that has quickly grown in size despite your pitiful attempts to pay it off.” He lifted his head and sneered at Gareth, the man’s demeanour not yet crumbling which suited Albie fine. Better to punish those whose arrogance remained right up until their bladders voided in fear...right when it was too late to act contrite. “And of course, that’s on top of the million that you’ve already accrued... giving you a rough balance owed to *us* of... one point eight million dollars.”

“I owe that to the casino.”

“No, Gareth... you owe that to us... Casinos don't lend those kinds of sums, not here in Australia. It's illegal, didn't you know.”

“Right, right... because why else would they offer it as a service?”

Albie shook his head and wondered how this man had ended up in charge of a commercial group whose assets included three different financial lending institutions. It also didn't bode well for the others who sat on the board of the Matherson Group—Albie wondered if it was better to relieve them of the burden and suggest to his father that the Tomasi Corporation buy them out. There'd be favourable terms for purchase in a few days too that it'd make worth their while...because who else would want to buy a commercial organisation once it's tarred with the financial failures of its CEO.

“Because to lend money, you must be a registered financial institution and there are limits on the interest that can be levied on such loans. I'd have thought for a CEO like yourself, you'd've been reluctant to sign a loan contract that charged thirty percent per month, not per year... but then again, maybe you're as competent at your job as you are at playing at the tables. And by that I mean not at all.”

Gareth flinched at Albie's remarks, delivered calmly and yet the scathing bite behind them wasn't hard to miss. “It's not like I can't pay it off—”

“If that was the case,” Albie interrupted. “You'd have done so already... and from what I've heard through the grapevine... the Matherson Group isn't as financially stable as it once was... an incredible achievement I must admit when you've only been in the charge for the last three months.”

“All commercial organisations of our size suffer a financial wobble when the leadership changes.” Gareth scoffed.

“A wobble? Not sure that a thirty percent dip in profits and a fifty percent devaluation of asset holdings could be described

as a...*wobble*.”

Albie smirked when Gareth pressed his lips together thinly while his eyes widened in surprise. Fear too. That information wasn't publicly known yet, their quarterly results not due to be released for another month, but if there was something that Albie needed to know his men had ways of getting it for him. And when it came to Benito's sources... Gareth Matherson wasn't the only one from Matherson Group board of directors accruing large debts at the casino.

“What do you want then?” Gareth snapped. “I can give you property...companies... in exchange for wiping my debt.”

He wasn't surprised by the offer and yet the debts Gareth Matherson had accrued weren't the only reason why his file had been handed over to Albie and Gio. The swapping of financial assets in exchange for clearing debts could easily have been handled by Benito and his team. In fact, they had on multiple occasions and Albie was aware of another whose debts would soon be leveraged against their business in order for the Tomasi Corporation to acquire it for a new venture that his cousin Everett and Gio's brother Ryland were in the process of starting up.

“If only it were your inability to gamble that had brought you to our attention.” Albie drummed his fingers on the table and smiled at Gareth, lips pressed thin as they stretched upward and his eyes narrowing. “No... to wind up here”—waving his hand at the room—“you need to have done something far worse than getting into debt with the casino.”

TWO

Gio brushed the band of the engagement ring he wore with his thumb and grinned at his fiancé. Gareth Matherson still appeared to have no idea who he and Albie were...neither their standing in Melbourne's social pages, the city's business world, nor the rumours that swirled around them—rumours that weren't all wrong. He didn't know whether to be offended by the man's ignorance or to be pleased by it. Those who understood caved too fast...resigned themselves to their fate and were frankly not much fun.

Sure, many of them still begged for their lives, bartered with the lives of others in order to walk away alive, and offered them riches that he and Albie had little need for. But beyond their pitifulness they didn't resist their fate. They didn't arrogantly believe that their name or standing in the community would be enough to save them. And lately those who'd been killed in this basement before being buried beneath their vines had left them unsatisfied. There was no point in torturing someone...making their death as painful as possible if they failed to scream.

He couldn't wait to see what pain Albie unleashed on this arrogantly ignorant CEO.

Leaning against the door with his arms folded over his chest, he stared at Gareth Matherson, almost daring him to try and make a break for the door. There'd be no escaping from this room now that he'd been brought here. Yet it was always amusing to watch the emotions flicker across their guests' faces as they sized him and Albie up and tried to determine whether they could take them in a fight. Even more fun to actually demonstrate why escape was no longer possible. He and Albie might not look like fighters or like men who'd willingly get their hands dirty at the expense of their clothes, but being performers was gruelling work. Their schedules demanded they keep fit and their positions in the Tomasi

Famiglia also required them to be competent in several forms of combat.

Disappointingly, Gareth Matherson wasn't a fighter. Not physically at least.

"The cops will come looking for me," Gareth snarled, hands clenched at his sides while his face slowly turned a dark shade of red. "They will find me. I'm important...and you are nothing more than Her Majesty's next guests."

Albie arched an eyebrow and sighed, his fingers tapping on the desk next to the pile of broken violin strings. "The cops aren't looking for you... they don't even know that you're missing. Won't for another"—making a performance of checking his watch—"eighteen hours. If you're lucky."

Gareth's face grew redder, lips pressed together tight and the retorts he wanted to throw back at Albie kept restrained behind them.

Gio watched as Albie's fingers stilled, the smile on his face growing deliciously darker while Gio's cock grew harder. His breath hitched when Albie placed his hands on the desk, palm down, before pushing himself upright and then leant over it. He'd fucked Albie over that desk many times in the past often while their latest guest lay in a puddle of blood on the floor. And tonight would play out in much the same way.

"But you can forget being found, Mr. Matherson because by the time I'm done with you...there'll be nothing left *to* find."

Gareth shook his head, anger blazed from his eyes. "You aren't above the law," he spat. "And what? You're going to go to all this effort of killing me for a few measly debts... that doesn't make sense. Dead men can't pay their bills."

"You're right. I'm not going to all this effort because of debt. And you're wrong about dead men because I can easily recoup those losses even after you take your last breath."

"If this isn't about debt, then why the fuck am I here?"

Albie straightened up and began to count the man's transgressions off on his fingers. "Theft. Rape via drink spiking. Rape via coercion. Rape via blackmail. Attempting to defraud."

"You can't prove any of that," Gareth snorted, a smug smile sliding into place that more than confirmed the information Benito had gathered.

"You're about to learn that your money can't save you." Albie moved to stand in front of the desk, crossing his legs and gripping its edge with his fingers as he leaned on it. "Your instances of stealing casino chips was caught on camera as was your attempt to cash them in... your raping of our employees and other customers of the casino is also well documented."

"Right... because if that was the case, you'd have turned all the evidence over to the police, and seeing that you haven't—"

"We'd rather handle things in-house," Gio snapped, pushing off the door. He strode toward Gareth, hands flexing at his sides only too eager to collide with the man's face. The thefts Gio had been aware of when he'd collected Gareth from the cells beneath the casino, but the other incidents... he'd not known anything about them but that did explain the utter contempt Benito had for Gareth instead of pity.

Stopping beside Gareth, Gio glanced at Albie and waited for his fiancé's orders. Dealing with men like this... entitled men who believed that everyone else was not only beneath them but existed for their entertainment was one of Gio's favourite activities. If he'd stopped at the thefts, his death would still have been a certainty however it would've been quick and relatively painless. Relative that was to the punishment...the torture he'd be forced to endure before finally being allowed to die.

"String him up. Hands and feet both restrained. Then remove his clothes," Albie told him, anger rippling beneath the

surface of his words.

Grinning, Gio grabbed a hold of Gareth and dragged him across the floor to the back wall. He slapped the cuffs hanging from it to Gareth's wrists before yanking on the chain that pulled them taut above his head. Kneeling down carefully, he fastened cuffs to Gareth's legs.

"What the fuck? The cops will fucking get you for this."

"The cops will have to find you first," Gio sneered while stepping back closer to Albie. He reached behind him and grabbed the knife that Albie had placed on the desk for him. Flicking it open, he tapped the blade against the palm of his hand and walked back to Gareth. He snickered as the man's gaze flickered to the blade, fear rippling over the man's body as he fought against the restraints holding him in place.

"You're crazy... this is fucked up... real psycho shit..."

"And?" Gio shrugged and tapped the knife on Gareth's chest. "Like you're really one to make accusations like that."

He made quick work of Gareth's clothes, cutting away the expensive fabric until it lay in useless strips on the floor at the man's feet. Dragged the sharp tip of the knife down Gareth's chest, laughing when it dug deeper into his skin as Gareth jerked, desperate to get away from him. It would be so easy to slice into the man's skin, to watch the rivulets of blood slide over his paling flesh...to listen to the screams that came with each cut. Not that it would kill him. Not straight away. But despite the urge, Gio drew back from Gareth and waited for Albie to share the vision he had for the man's death.

"How are you wanting to do this, amore mio?" Gio asked with a breathless sigh as Albie's arms slid around his waist and rested his head on Gio's shoulder.

"The punishment should fit the crime... aesthetically at least."

Gio groaned at his fiancé's words. The last time they went down the aesthetic route, they'd strung one of Albie's high school bullies to the gates of his family estate with fishing wire... reminiscent of the time the bastard had destroyed one of Albie's violins and had hung it from the school roof. Considering Gareth's crimes, Gio could only imagine the plans Albie had instore for him.

Albie pressed a kiss to his cheek before stepping away from him. "I need you to drag my desk... or even grab a table from somewhere and set it up close to Gareth. Then grab my laptop and one of the smaller flat screens from upstairs."

"Do I want to know what you're planning to do?"

"Not yet... but you're going to love it."

THREE

Albie watched as Gio disappeared out the door of the basement and head up into the main house before returning his attention to Gareth Matherson. Jamming his hands into the pockets of his pants, Albie rocked on his feet and pressed his lips into a thin smile. Gareth's earlier cocky arrogance had diminished somewhat now that he'd been chained to the wall and stripped of his clothes. Vitriolic words still tumbled from the man's mouth along with those that promised Albie great riches if he released Gareth. Albie arched an eyebrow and shook his head while rejecting ever offer Gareth made. He and Gio didn't need the money being offered, not when their combined wealth—legally and illegally generated—far outstripped Gareth's.

Money wasn't the reason Gareth Matherson found himself invited to their playground of debauchery several weeks before Christmas. Punishing the bastard for his inability to service his debts could've been a job easily left for Everett and Ryland to deal with. Hell, they could've dealt with Gareth for the transgressions that had earned him the invite too... but it had been a while since he and Gio had gotten a chance to spill blood in a satisfying way.

Music... while their passion, it was also a demanding profession that sucked up their free time. Not that they had much down time between the classes they taught, their individual practices and those with ensembles, and the work they were expected to undertake for the Tomasi Corporation along with the family's illegal enterprises. Hours of work that left him and Gio little time for the simple pleasures in life... like killing people in slow, torturous ways.

And sometimes music gave Albie the inspiration needed for those deaths.

Grinning, Albie turned away from Gareth and strode back across the floor to his desk. He picked up the broken strings

and let them slide through his fingers, his mind already working on the problem of how to use them. *The punishment should fit the crime...* that's what he'd told Gio, and the lust soaked groan that had slipped from his fiancé's lips had Albie not wanting to disappoint Gio.

Gareth's crimes were sexual in nature and his punishment should reflect that aesthetic...in a twisted, macabre way.

Snatching the strings off the desk, Albie clutched them tight in his fist as an idea formed, one that worked well with the items he'd asked Gio to fetch. He rounded the desk and rummaged through the top drawer for the large-eye needles that he'd used before with his strings. Excitement tugged at the corners of his lips as Albie found them. Closing the drawer with his hip, Albie then sat on top of the desk, legs swinging as he hummed the chords of Ave Maria while threading two of the needles. Gareth's panicked begging...his angry ranting became twisted with terror and confusion as Albie made a show of it—he was a performer after all.

“You've decided then?” Gio asked, walking back into the room with one of the smaller flat screen TVs they still had in their house and placing it against the wall.

“Yes... I have.” Albie smiled at his fiancé. “But don't worry...I have no intention of getting started until you return,” he said, tilting his head to accept a quick kiss before Gio disappeared out the door again.

And waiting for Gio to return was excruciating. Now that he had a plan, Albie wanted to start threading the needles through Gareth's skin. He wanted to hear the terror in the CEO's voice... the pained cries that would be torn from his throat... But his desire to experience it all with Gio present won out. There was nothing better than torturing a man until he begged for death while seeing how much it turned Gio on. Would turn Albie on too.

“I thought this table would be big enough to set the TV up on,” Gio said, entering the room carrying the small side table that sat next to the couch in the conservatory. “And it was easier to carry.” Gio placed the table in front of Gareth about half a metre back before working quickly to set up the TV and laptop despite not knowing what exactly Albie had planned.

“Do you want anything specific on?” Gio asked as he shoved the last cable into the TV and then stepped back.

“I do... but not yet.”

No. He definitely didn't want to give away too much of his plan. Didn't want to elicit the desired reactions from Gareth until Albie was ready for it to happen.

“Music then?”

Albie tapped a finger against his lips and hummed. “A musical accompaniment might be nice while I work. Are you offering to serenade me, amore mio?”

Gio chuckled softly. “I've learned my lesson over the years, that when you're in this mood...singing is near impossible. However, I do have an arrangement that I'm working on currently...” Gio's voice fading off as he tapped on the keys of the laptop and accessed the cloud server where they kept the music they were working on.

“Which arrangement is that?” He furrowed his brows and tried to think of the piece of music Gio had been working on recently. Albie couldn't think of anything.

“For our performance of Ave Maria at Christmas Mass... I know it's a little late to be thinking of changing it up, but I seriously want to do something different with it this year.” Gio pressed play on the recording. “I wanted to incorporate a few other Christmas Hymns into it... switch up the tempo...and while keeping Ave Maria as the dominant piece.”

Albie nodded and picked up one of the threaded needles. It wasn't the first time they'd multitasked like this. Their two

worlds colliding as a melody of their own creation harmonised with the screams of those who they intended to kill.

As the sound of a piano being played filled the air, Albie closed his eyes and swayed in time with the familiar beats. He could easily envisage Gio sitting at the piano, forehead creased in concentration while the music sheets on the stand in front of him were covered in notations. Different melodies spliced together until they harmonised with each other until it was hard to hear when one song ended and the other began. He winced too when a transition wasn't as smooth as it could be...the chords struck not quite the right ones. Yet he could see what his fiancé was trying to achieve...and Albie looked forward to transcribing the music for the violin—if Gio hadn't already done it.

Opening his eyes, Albie stared at Gareth and grinned at the utter disbelief displayed on the man's face. He gripped the needle between his fingers tighter and stalked toward Gareth watching with delight as the man's disbelief turned into one of confused terror. Albie only grinned wider at the sight of the man's fear, relishing it in the same way he would one of the fine wines produced by the grapes in the vineyard surrounding them.

“What the fuck do you think you're going to do with that?” Gareth's voice pitched higher with every word uttered. “Because you aren't coming anywhere near me with it.”

“What? Afraid of a little needle?”

“There is nothing little about that,” Gareth hissed, the restraints holding him in place rattling as he tried to yank himself free of them.

Albie shrugged and flicked his gaze across the line of Gareth's hips, calculating the distance required for the string to reach and the density of the flesh that covered them. There'd be no point anchoring the first stitch in skin that would only tear before the real fun could begin.

He pressed the tip of the needle to Gareth's flesh, one or two centimetres from where his hip bone jutted out. Albie needed the strings to become taut in a devastating way... for Gareth that was. And the beauty of this plan was that there was nothing Gareth could do to stop the string from doing its job... well, there was, but Albie had a solution for that too.

“Don't. Touch. Me.” Gareth snarled.

“Like you really have any say in this matter,” Albie sneered, pinching the spot he'd chosen between his forefinger and thumb. He pushed the needle through the skin and looped it back until it formed the prettiest of knots while Gareth gave a high-pitched scream...because yes, he'd lied—the needle wasn't small at all.

Standing back to admire his handiwork, Albie hummed along with the melody playing before recognising it as the first few chords of O' Come All Ye Faithful which then tripped into those of Silent Night before leading into Ave Maria. Gareth's cries, the pained sobs that spilled from the arrogant man's lips added a layer of harmony that surprisingly worked well with the melody Gio had created.

“You should really be quiet,” Albie snapped, though silence wasn't at all what he wanted. “You've been granted a rare insight into how Gio and I create our music... a chance to hear it all before it is polished for commercial release. There are people who'd willingly die for this experience...” Albie chuckled at the irony of the statement as Gareth would do exactly that...die.

Gareth's eyes widened and his body jerked against the restraints when Albie grabbed a hold of his flaccid cock. Tightening his grip, Albie lifted Gareth's cock up and stretched it out. He licked his lips and smirked, relishing the terrified cries being ripped from Gareth's throat as Albie alternated between slipping the needle through the flesh and looping it around Gareth's cock. Noticing the string was

getting shorter, Albie stretched the foreskin and slipped the needle through it before tying it off with another pretty knot.

Albie strode back to the desk where the second threaded needle lay and exchanged it for the needle in his hand.

“Do you need me to rethread it?” Gio asked, gesturing at the remaining strings and the now empty needle.

Glancing over his shoulder at Gareth, Albie narrowed his eyes. He'd only planned to use two strings, wrapping them around the bastard's cock so that when... fuck, he couldn't wait until they reached that part of the festivities. The second string he'd planned to wrap around Gareth's balls while stitching his scrotum to his cock. Albie wasn't sure how to incorporate the third and fourth string into his plans. Maybe he could use them to connect Gareth's genitals to his inner thighs... adding more tension when the time come to set the next part of his plan in motion.

He turned back to Gio and grinned. “Why not? I'm not sure if I'll use them... but I guess the more stitches I add to his body...”

FOUR

Fuck... Albie was in one of *those* moods... one that lead to beautifully macabre masterpieces which always topped the last one his fiancé created. The violin wasn't the only instrument his fiancé was skilled with, never failing to draw the most delicious sounds from those hapless victims who wound up in their basement—whether it was here at the vineyard or in the city if time wasn't in their favour.

And time hadn't been in their favour recently.

Hours of practice, teaching, and keeping one step ahead of their still unknown enemy meant there'd been little time for this. Easier and more efficient to pass the bastards over to his brother Ryland or their cousin Everett to deal with. It wasn't that they hadn't dished out any punishments to those who sought to cross them... but there was a big difference between shooting a man point blank and taking their time to savour it. Nothing sweeter than listening to the music change as men went from begging for their lives...to begging for their deaths.

Gio thought Albie had out done himself a few years back when they'd been given free rein to seek revenge on those who'd bullied Albie throughout high school. He knew it sounded hard to believe that Albie has been bullied considering who their family was and the rumours of their mafia connection well-spread amongst the social elite of Melbourne. But many of their schoolmates never bought into those rumours, unable to reconcile them with the classical loving and very not in the closet Albie Tomasi. If they'd been able to deal with them at the time, maybe the bullying would've stopped after the first few bloodied...well, it wouldn't have been only their noses broken. However, their father's had forbidden them to do anything while they'd still been at school...and once that restriction had been removed, they'd not hesitated to hunt them down. And one former bully had kicked off their trend for making punishments...the

revenge they sought being aesthetically inspired by the victim's crime.

That bully had soon found himself strung up on the gates of his family's estate... death coming slowly through starvation, predation by the local wildlife, and gravity forcing the fishing line binding him to the wrought iron into his body. Better still, no one had reported him missing, and it wasn't until his parents returned that he was discovered. Although too late to save him. Not that there was much left to save once the opening of the gates had torn him in two while still alive... barely.

But the ingenious plan that Albie had concocted for Gareth might just top it which considering Gio's understanding of the plan was based on inference alone, it was a bold claim.

Picking up one of the remaining broken strings, Gio slid his fingers along its length and grinned. This morning he'd listened to Albie play his violin, drawing music from his instrument with every slide of his bow and the press of his fingers on the strings...these very strings. And now his fiancé was using them to elicit a different kind of music, and while the tone of this new instrument was a little...too high pitched, the cracks that appeared in its melody had their appeal. By the time Albie was finished, Gareth's discordant sound would harmonise with the music Gio had arranged... but it was a pity he couldn't record the sound and lay it over top of the music for playback later. He'd need to remember the register that Gareth begged in... that he screamed and hoped that he could somehow replicate it later. The challenge would come in ensuring the strange harmonising dissonance couldn't be identified as the death throes of a tortured man.

Gio always appreciated a challenge.

He quickly threaded the needle and lay it on the desk for Albie.



“What do you need me to do now?”

Gio thrummed his fingers on the desk and watched his fiancé stride back across the basement toward him. The last of the broken violin strings had been sewn into Gareth’s body and going by the amount of blood staining the needle, some threads had been pushed deep beneath the man’s skin before being connected to parts of him that were far more...fragile. He almost pitied the man... sympathised with Gareth for the pain that he was currently in and what was yet to be inflicted on him.

Almost... because while Gio could easily imagine what the effect was going to be, it wasn’t his balls and cock bound in rigid violin strings.

And besides, he looked forward to the hearing the man’s cries... those that went beyond the blubbering, terrified, and begging whimpers that were already filling the room.

Albie chuckled. “I know what I want to ask...to suggest... however, I can’t imagine that you’ll want to miss any of it.”

“No... God, no. I want to watch every last excruciating bit of it.” Grabbing a hold of Albie, Gio pulled him in close and trailed kisses up his fiancé’s neck. “Should we make a bet or two on the proceedings?”

“A bet?” Albie arched an eyebrow before shaking his head. “Depends on what kind of bet... and do you even know what the end result will be?”

Gio smirked at Albie and whispered, “It doesn’t take much to work it out... so, should we bet on whether he passes out first or whether he’ll fucking come while his dick is being turned into a bloody mess?”

FIVE

Despite being reluctant to stop kissing his fiancé, Albie managed to pull himself away from Gio in order to finish dealing with their guest. He smirked at the terrified expression Gareth now wore, no longer looking like the consummate CEO while his arrogance had fallen away when Albie threaded the last of his broken violin strings through the man's scrotum.

And fuck, he'd screamed so beautifully then, that Albie might've pushed the needle through the sensitive flesh in order to drag the sound out for longer. But it wouldn't be the last screams ripped from Gareth's throat along with the expected—and highly anticipated—begging for it all to stop. Desperate cries that wouldn't garner an ounce of sympathy from Albie or Gio.

“You know what we should've done?” Gio said from behind him. “We should've gotten Georgio to set up cameras to record it all. I'd imagine the performance Gareth is about to put on for us would fetch a good price in the darkest corners of the web.”

Albie glanced over his shoulder at Gio before shrugging them. “Next time... maybe.”

Gio snorted. “Next time it won't be Gareth.”

“True... true,” he replied, nodding his head slowly. “Although next time we engage a performer for this act, we'll have worked out the kinks and leaving only the beauty the performance deserves... and besides, there are others on our shit list who'd be worth far more.”

Running his gaze over Gareth, Albie checked to make sure all his stiches were still holding. The last thing they needed was for one to tear out Gareth's flesh before they'd even reached the fun part of the proceedings. Satisfied everything was alright, Albie shifted his attention to the computer and TV set up behind him. Albie's fingers hovered over the keys while

he listened as the last notes of Gio's musical arrangement played through the speakers. Ave Maria was a song that meant more to them than the Christmas concerts and the Midnight Masses where they routinely performed it. The song could also be heard echoing within these very walls during moments like this. A strange collision of the two vastly different worlds Gio and Albie lived in... their life spent in the spotlight as darlings of the classical music world, and the one spent in the dark shadows where blood routinely stained their hands.

As the song reached its end, he closed the music player and opened a browser window via the VPN programme Fiero had specifically created to protect the online interests of the Tomasi Famiglia. A necessity these days as more and more of their business was conducted through digital means, but today it wasn't for business purposes that Albie required it. He quickly checked the coded message Georgio had sent before loading up the recommended porn site. Queuing up several of the videos that Georgio had already bookmarked on the site, Albie then pressed play.

"I wasn't sure, Gareth, if you had a preference for blondes, brunettes, or redheads," Albie said as the room began to echo with the sounds of sex. The moans, groans, and the slapping of flesh that might've been arousing to him if there'd been more than one cock involved and no vaginas. "Or if the bustiness of a woman mattered to you—obviously, I'm not a connoisseur of such things, nor is Gio—so, I've made sure that there is varied selection of women for you to watch." He stepped back from the TV to stand next to Gio. "If it's not... getting you hard... then do let me know, and I'll find something else because the performance won't work otherwise."

"No...no...no..." Gareth cried, panic and terror clawing at his voice as he glanced between his cock and the video being played through the TV. "This is... inhumane... breaking some kind of laws..."

Albie chuckled. “Of course, it’s breaking laws. Murder usually does... well, unless the State of Victoria has decided that murder is no longer a crime...which would mean I could stop burying bodies in the vineyard.”

“What? I drink that wine... oh God... it was my favourite ___”

“Well, then you’ll get to fertilise those very vines, won’t you?”

“What?”

God, did the man not know any other word, or did he honestly believe that he was walking out of this room somewhat alive and with a mutilated cock? Albie rolled his eyes and wished Gareth would get with the programme already... the screaming part of it that was which usually came right before the dying part. He really wanted to get to the Gareth dying part of proceedings... sooner rather than later, he and Gio needed to get up early in order to make it to Mass tomorrow.

And missing Mass was out of the question considering their positions within the family.



Albie strode into the church via the side entrance where the pastoral offices were, his violin case gripped tight in his hand and Gio close on his heels with their sheets of music. Their early arrival wouldn’t go unnoticed by the crowds already lining up to enter the church for the morning’s service, fans, and eager reporters desperate for a sighting of them. But it didn’t matter how long they waited, unless they were regular members of the congregation or belonged to the Tomasi family, none of them were getting inside.

He'd often wondered why the church still insisted on his and Gio's continued performances at important Masses like this one despite their growing fame beyond the city's boundaries—and wider still—for their musical abilities. Family money might go some way to grease the palms of the church elders and appease their concerns regarding the imposition of the crowds outside. Not that Albie believed his father or even Gio's would go to such lengths either. Their public profiles might serve as decent smoke screen for his and Gio's less than legal activities, but it could also prove to be a hindrance. Harder to slip into the shadows when your faces were splashed across billboards with every concert or show you performed... every move you made scrutinised and just by the police.

And so far they'd been lucky.

Yet regardless of why the church persisted with having them perform, this morning Albie would've preferred to remain at their vineyard hideaway. Would've preferred to watch Gareth's slow demise happen in person rather than needing to spectate it via video feed on the largest screen they could get away with—which wasn't very large at all. Though it wouldn't have mattered, if Gareth had succumbed to the torture Albie had devised for him... terror dampening the expected arousal. It was either that or they'd gotten the man's taste in porn so damn wrong... and performance anxiety shouldn't have been an issue. It was well documented that Gareth enjoyed sexual exhibitionism with many of his victims being drugged and raped in front of others.

But it was that need to watch Gareth which had seen them arrive at church earlier than usual to set up everything he and Gio needed. Usually, their set up requirements were nil. A soundcheck to ensure that the quality of the sound being piped out to the large screens set up outside the church for their fans was up to the expected standard, and nothing more. Rarely did they require the church to pull the music stands out of storage to sit their sheet music on... what was the point when they'd been playing the same set of hymns for the past twenty

years...or thereabouts. Today, however, the music for their performance had changed, providing them with a valid excuse to request the music stands to be dragged out. Heavy wooden ones that would easily disguise the tablets which would enable them to continue observing Gareth.

Albie would be pissed though, if all the fun he'd planned happened while they were both stuck in church. He'd happily share his complaints with God too, though maybe not in a loud, vocal manner. Screaming, "the fucking died while we were in church," in the middle of a performance wouldn't go down well. Not when several high-ranked members of the various law enforcement agencies were in the audience... though it might elicit a few appreciative giggles from the younger members of the Tomasi family present...

Not his or Gio's fathers, though, who'd be left trying to divert the law enforcement personnel's attention elsewhere instead of their arresting Gio and Albie. Neither of them had set foot in a jail cell, not even for traffic offences like their cousin Everett and Gio's brother Ryland were prone to doing in their late teens. He was almost certain that pair had seen it as a game. A riskier version of Bingo where instead of numbers, all the squares on the card were police stations in Melbourne. But he and Gio would rather their bloody form of entertainment didn't involve the police... well, that is unless the police were active, yet unwilling participants in it.

SIX

Gio could sense Albie's frustration. See it too, hidden behind the professional smile that was practically laminated onto his fiancé's face. No one else could see it... their years of being on stage had quickly taught them how to be the consummate performers and leave all personal issues off to the side in the wings of whichever theatre they'd be walking out onto.

Well...that's how it was supposed to be.

Today, their two worlds were clashing together in an unfamiliar way. A tablet lay on Albie's music stand, next to the music score that Gio had arranged over the past two weeks just for this morning's performance. Albie's gaze shifted minutely between the two, his eyebrow shifting with frustration when Gareth's predicament remained unchanged. Gio, unfortunately didn't have the same excuse to stand there and stare at the screen or the music... but that didn't mean he didn't have an excuse at all, Gio just had to be cleverer about it, subtle.

And frankly, he could understand Albie's frustration. Felt it keenly himself. But while Albie wanted to see the broken violin strings dig through Gareth's flesh like he'd imagined they would, Gio wanted to *hear* him. He wanted to hear Gareth's cries, the terrified sobs ripped from his throat as his cock...the part of his anatomy that the CEO regarded as important to his whole identity as a man, became a mangled mess. He wanted to hear those cries fade as Gareth's blood seeped from his body and puddled on the floor at his feet... the horrified noise, strangled by lust as Gareth's arousal from what he was watching overruled his mind and sent him spiralling into the beautiful mutilating splendour of him coming.

Although... Gio would rather the man sobbed in their basement and not get too bloody aroused before they returned.

And if the porn being played through the computer wasn't going to give the desired results... there were always other methods of ensuring the man's cock got hard.

First though... they needed to get through this performance.



As the last notes of *Ave Maria* reverberated through the air, Gio glanced across at Albie and grinned at his fiancé. Two steps was all that separated them... two steps was all that stopped Gio from sweeping Albie into his arms and kissing him hard... Well, not so much the distance between them, as it had never stopped him from doing so during other performances, but the awareness of the fact they were inside a church. It might've been their church; one their family donated enough money to that the bishops who over saw its congregation would turn a blind eye to anything the family did in and out of its walls. However, it'd be foolish to think that the bishops would willingly choose to ignore an act of intimacy that went against their covenants... A heated glance filled with promises for later was all they could share right now.

Taking their leave, he and Able disappeared out a side door and headed back to the office where Albie had left his violin case. It was only once the door had been closed, that Gio felt it was safe to speak.

“If we disappeared now back to the vineyard... how much trouble do you think we'd get into with our papas?”

Albie snorted and carefully laid his violin back in its case. “Honestly? I think the papas will be a more than a little pissed if we skip out on the rest of the service, but then, if they knew what was waiting for us back at the vineyard...” He shrugged his shoulders and let his words drift off.

It would be the first time they'd chosen not to slip into one of the pews after a performance at Mass and listened to the priest's sermons before accepting communion. Although with each passing year, it had been harder to listen to the words of those who continued to preach the wickedness of their lifestyle. Except it wasn't a lifestyle. It was just who they were. And Gio wouldn't change a damn thing about it.

"True... I guess." Gio sighed and rubbed at his jaw. "Does that mean we shouldn't slip out a side door and return to our guest?"

Gio watched as Albie shut the violin case with a gentle click before brushing his hands lovingly over it. There was no mistress in their relationship...not even another mister, but their music definitely came close to being one. It had slipped into their hearts, their souls from a young age and had never left... had only grown stronger with the passing years as their own love for each other strengthened into an unbreakable bond that nothing could destroy. He hated to think of a future when one of them might no longer exist in this world, leaving the other with a heartbreak so deep not even their music could mend them. A sentiment they both shared after watching their papas mourn the loss of their mamas. Except while their sorrow had pulled their papas back from their duties to the family, they'd still had each other to lean onto...to love. He and Albie had no one else to lean on or to seek comfort from.

And if they had to think of death, then Gio would rather they both went out together. Wrapped in each other's embrace while music tumbled from their lips until there was no more air in their lungs to give it voice...no more beats in their chest to keep it in time.

He shook those morbid thoughts from his head. Their enemies, unknown as they were, hadn't managed to kill them yet and Gio didn't tempt fate by imagining what their perfect death might be.

Albie pursed his lips and glanced at the video of their basement streaming through the tablet. “We’re heading home. I don’t want this thing with Gareth to drag out for too much longer... or he’s going to be too damned exhausted to provide the performance I want to witness.”

Gio nodded while pulling his out his phone and firing off a message to Ryland, informing him that neither he nor Albie would be present at post-Mass family gathering. It wouldn’t stop them from getting into trouble with their fathers, but at least the reprimand they received later wouldn’t be on the same level as if they hadn’t put in their apologies.

SEVEN

The drive back from Melbourne to their vineyard dragged, and that was despite Gio's heavy foot on the accelerator while still trying to avoid gaining the attention of the cops. Being pulled over, making their apologies before accepting the ticket and the demerit points dished out wouldn't be the end of the cops' interest in them. Albie could almost guarantee that the moment Gio's name popped up alongside the license plate number, the local police would get themselves into position to follow them the rest of the way back to the vineyard. Wasn't like they hadn't done it before... they weren't particularly stealthy at it either. But last time the police had attempted to follow them, they'd bypassed the vineyard altogether and took the bastards on a roundabout trip all the way back into Melbourne. It had cost Albie the chance to finish off the bastard who'd been in the basement at the vineyard himself and instead one of his St Kilda cousins—purely because they were closer—had to do the job.

That wasn't going to happen this time.

Not if Albie could help it.

Albie winced as Gio's phone rang and Ryland's name flashed on the screen. He'd hoped they'd have reached the vineyard before Gio's brother rang, reducing the chance of their being ordered to return to Melbourne. But he couldn't ignore the call either.

Leaning forward, he tapped the accept call button on the phone, Ryland's voice echoing loud through the car before Albie even had a chance to say "Hi".

"I take it your disappearance before the end of Mass has something to do with a certain missing prominent Victorian CEO."

Gio chuckled. "Fratello... you know I'm not going to confirm or deny that."

“Good thing then, I was asking our cugino, and not you, fratello.”

“My answer is the same, cugino,” Albie answered, smiling at the thought of the petulant, frustrated expression Ryland was no doubt now wearing, and one that was more than likely mirrored Everett’s face. Just like him and Gio, Everett and Ryland were very rarely seen apart, and yet, Albie knew unlike them, the pair weren’t ever going to be more than best friends who were occasional bed fellows.

“So... if I mentioned it to Capo, would he be able to confirm or deny it?”

Albie narrowed his eyes at the phone, wishing that he hadn’t accepted the call as voice only. His cousin was playing a dangerous game, and one that Ryland must know that he’d quickly lose. “The answer would be no... and you’d be well advised to not mention this to them at all.”

He didn’t believe his father, the Tomasi Capofamiglia or even Gio’s father, the family’s Consigliere, would have any issues with what they were doing. The pair rarely interceded in their business dealings unless they were asked for their opinions or to lend the weight of their positions in order to solve matters quickly. However, right now, Albie wasn’t in the mood to explain why they’d abducted Gareth Matherson and were currently torturing the bastard before killing him. And if they were going to object to anything, it would be the torture aspect of it...their papas preferring that they didn’t toy with their victims before killing them. But where was the fun in that?

“I have to offer up some kind of excuse... one that’s actually fucking believable AND justifiable. While ‘heading back to the vineyard for a fuckfest’ is believable and everyone will be grateful that all the rooms in the main house will be safe to enter... well, somewhat safe. The papas aren’t going to view it as a valid reason for the family heirs to not be here.”

“Do not use the Gareth’s disappearance as an excuse for us not being there,” he growled. “Or I’ll inform them that first of the cops you killed weren’t buried in the safety of the vineyard but were dropped in the Yarra.”

Thankfully the police hadn’t connected the death of those cops to anyone, least of all to members of the Tomasi family—although they’d fucking love it if they could.

“Oooh that’s a fucking cruel threat, cugino.”

“Well, as your Capo Bastone...I’d be rather remiss in my duties to the family if I didn’t inform the papas of your... indiscretions.”

“Fine, fine... I’ll tell them that Gio plans to impregnate you with the next family heirs, and you’ll re-emerge once it’s done.”

Albie groaned and shook his head, a wry smile toying with his lips. “That isn’t—”

“But at least no one will argue with it,” Ryland cackled, ending the call before Albie could reply.

“He’s not wrong...and if news of Gareth’s disappearance has already started to make the rounds, then the papas aren’t going to assume that we’ve NOT had something to do with it.” Gio said, placing a hand on Albie’s thigh, fingers brushing against his half-hard cock. “And besides... I think we’d make beautiful babies together.” He turned to Albie and threw him a salacious grin that only hardened Albie’s cock further.

Fuck... how long until they reached the vineyard? Or was it worth risking an indecency charge by getting Gio to pullover so they could fuck now?



Basement or bedroom? Not that they needed a bedroom to fuck, especially when it meant climbing up two flights of stairs. There wasn't a surface in this house, flat or otherwise, that hadn't been utilised for a good hard fucking. No room was sacred, not even the basement...

Maybe the basement would be best. Kill two birds with one stone, so to speak, Albie's burning need to be fucked—or to fuck, he wasn't fussy about who's cock went where—and his desire to watch Gareth suffer in a humiliating fashion before he died.

“Up or down?” Gio murmured in Albie's ear while sliding his arms around Albie's waist and trailing featherlight kisses down his neck.

“Down.” The word tumbled from his lips with a breathless gasp that was soon chased up by a bitter whine of complaint when Gio's hands...and his lips disappeared. “Why did you stop?”

Gio huffed out a laugh. “Not keen on falling down the stairs, tesoro... And no point of revving you up too much if this is being put on hold until Gareth succumbs to death.”

Albie trailed after his fiancé, intent on picking up where he'd annoyingly left off. He hurried downstairs to the basement, pushing open the door of the room where Gareth remained restrained and his cock—while disappointingly at barely half-mast—encased in the broken strings of Albie's violin. Pausing on the threshold, he glanced at the object in Gio's hand and wondered how he'd gotten it prepared so quickly. A thought that existed in his mind for two breaths at most before snorting softly and realising that Gio would've had the syringe readied earlier...

Shaking his head, he walked the short distance to the desk and leaned against while watching as Gio made a performance of administering Gareth with the drug contained in the syringe. Grinned to at the wide eyed expression Gareth wore, the

absolute terror that blazed in them as he begged in a rasping whimper for Gio to not do it.

“Please...please... whatever that is... I don’t want it.”

“Pity you didn’t give your own victims the choice of ingesting a drug or not... we, at least, aren’t hiding it from you. The exact composition of the drug...well, you don’t need to know anything more than *it* won’t kill you.”

Because no, the drug itself was relatively harmless so long as Gareth didn’t have any unknown cardiac issues. An injectable form of Viagra that had proven to be quite effective in the past... in Georgio’s line of work that was.

His breath hitched as he watched the slow press of the plunger as the drug was injected into an iliac artery and Albie reached down to stroke his cock through his pants. He’d never considered himself to have a medical kink, and yet everything about this was arousing... although it could easily be explained away by the end result it was contributing too.

“How long... how long until it begins to take effect,” he asked, watching as Gio dropped the empty syringe into a nearby rubbish bin.

“As short as twenty minutes.” Gio crossed the room with a few quick steps and didn’t hesitate to reach for Albie. “It will still require an external stimuli for it to be effective.”

“Well, it’s already working on me,” Albie rasped, grabbing one of Gio’s hands and pressing it against his hard cock. “And I didn’t even take it.”

EIGHT

Surging forward, Gio captured Albie's lips with a kiss—brutal and passionate. Attached at the hip since they were born, and at the lips since they were fifteen—so to speak—their love and desire for each other had never waned...had never faltered, not even when they shared their darkest of fantasies. A hunger that went deeper than the desire of the heart that Gio had so often heard others speak of. It sunk right into the very depths of their souls, entwined with the bloody darkness that came with their mafia blood and danced with the music they created together. His hands never strayed far from Albie when they were in the same room, and often resulted in the losing of clothes while also forgetting where they were. Maybe they should've cared more about keeping their expressions of love private, but Gio didn't care who witnessed it... And in fact, their discovered exhibitionist streak became a delightful game as they attempted to earn the frustrated, embarrassed curses of their cousins by being caught fucking in places where they weren't expected to be.

So, fucking Albie in front of a man chained to the wall of their basement—one that they intended to kill in the end—didn't dampen his arousal, Gio thought to himself, and in fact, it might've stoked it further. It wasn't as though they'd hadn't shared a fantasy or two like this before and had even come close to enacting it. Although... 'like this' might've been stretching it. Their fantasy had involved a lot more blood, knives, and physical interaction with the man they'd fantasied about killing...slowly. Gio knew he couldn't bring himself to share Albie with Gareth even before his fiancé's creativeness with the man's body had made it impossible for it to happen.

Not wishing to pull his lips away from Albie's yet, Gio fumbled with his fiancé's pants and soon yanked them open. Sliding a hand inside them, he freed Albie's cock from his boxers and caressed its hardened length with long languid

strokes, pulling ragged moans from Albie which Gio eagerly swallowed.

Reluctantly he stopped kissing Albie, and glanced in Gareth's direction, the confused disgust displayed on his face as heady of an aphrodisiac as Albie's moans. "Open your eyes, amore mio, and look at him...look at how he's watching as I pleasure you," he whispered in Albie's ear while his gaze remained fixed on Gareth. "Fuck, you love it, don't you, amore mio, that he's watching us."

"Fuck, yes..." The words escaped Albie's lips in a heated rush and were chased after by a ragged moan that sent another bolt of lust straight to Gio's balls. "And you're enjoying it too," Albie didn't hesitate to point out, his hand brushing against the hard cock restrained by Gio's pants, and his hips bucked at the touch, desperate for more...

Desperate to be buried deep in Albie's arse... but in order to do that, they'd need to forgo watching Gareth's reactions. Gio found that as much as he wanted to make Albie come... to mark his fiancé inside and out, he also didn't want to miss Gareth's reactions to it. And especially not when the man appeared to be far more turned on by watching two men than he had by the het porn they'd been playing for him.

"You're sick fucks," Gareth rasped, the words ripped from this tear ravaged throat and infused with a heat that wasn't all anger. Shame lingered among the consonants too...along with fear...and horror. But regardless of his inner turmoil, Gareth couldn't hide his arousal from them.

The show...had finally begun.

"Sick fucks?" Gio arched an eyebrow. "And why would you say that?"

"Only sick fucks use drugs to—"

Gio snorted and shook his head. "We've already covered this, Gareth... and honestly, if that's your definition of a 'sick

fuck' well then...it takes one to know one... as juvenile as it might be to say.”

The ruddiness of anger vied with the blush of arousal for dominance over Gareth's skin as the man's fury at Gio's accusation intensified. A frustrated roar began to work its way free of Gareth's throat only for it to be drowned in a ragged moan when his gaze once more flicked to Gio's fingers. Collecting the drops of precum forming at the tip of Albie's cock left him with an exciting conundrum...either lick them clean himself or force Gareth to do it. Honestly both propositions appealed to a degree, though maybe under different circumstances, and with a different man. Gio still wasn't prepared to share even a taste of Albie with this man.

Decision made, Gio made a performance of licking Albie's precum from his fingers, returning several times to swipe more of the pearlescent liquid from his fiancé's cock.



Albie's attention was torn. Caught between relinquishing himself to the pleasure Gio was giving him, and the need to watch his handiwork achieve its devastating best. When he'd started to create art with his broken strings, Gareth's cock at the centre of it, he'd not been a hundred percent certain of what the final outcome would be. He never knew if there'd be enough tension created in the strings to force them into the flesh of Gareth's cock... never knew if it would simply decorate it with bruises, or if the desired effect of bloody, mutilated flesh would occur.

Taking a long, slow breath, Albie attempted to regain control over his impending orgasm. He didn't want to come too soon and miss out on the finale of his creation. And whatever was going to happen...it was going to happen soon.

Albie's gaze narrowed in on the streaks of blood already beginning to stain the broken violin strings, the tears in Gareth's flesh where the threads were anchored as they fought against the engorging flesh. Prayed too, the flesh held, and that what broke the tension being placed on the strings was their slicing through Gareth's cock.

The ragged moans that were ripped from Gareth's throat, infused with horror and fear, quickly changed, becoming instead pained cries as the man screamed, his foreskin tore.

And that was just the start of Gareth's pained misery.

The pain of the strings digging into his flesh, tearing at it, wasn't enough to overwhelm the effects of arousal and Viagra. Blood ran down his legs, tears streaked his cheeks, and was soon joined by a bloodcurdling scream. The tension on the strings snapped right as cum spurted out of the man's mutilated cock.

Better than his expectations...and yet, Albie knew that next time he inflicted this upon basement guest, he'd leave nothing of the victim's cock attached to their body.

Shifting his attention back to Gio, Albie curled a hand behind his fiancé's head and yanked him in for a kiss. Soft and sweet was definitely not on the menu. Their need for each other drive by a desire to come and the strange eroticism of what they'd witnessed.

"We are definitely doing that again," Gio said with a soft sigh, his forehead pressed to Albie's.

"What? The hand job. I didn't think that was ever in any doubt," he replied with a smirk.

Gio huffed. "No... I was meaning the little performance we witnessed."

"Hmm...yes, I think we will do a repeat of it... with improvements of course." His words punctuated with kisses. "Though first we need to clean the stage."

“Clean the stage.” Gio chuckled and shook his head. “That’s...one way of putting it. We’ll need to put him out of his misery too before we go plant a few more grapevines in the vineyard.”

Want More?

Albie and Gio’s book, *Until Death*, is a part of the House of Bolton Series where the mafia meets the world of high fashion. The series contains a mix of pairings including so far: MF, MM, FF. You can find the rest of the series here: <https://books2read.com/MJGreen>

ABOUT MJ GREEN

A New Zealand born romance author, MJ can be found these days living in the southern most parts of the country enjoying the long summer nights and bemoaning the even shorter winter days. More recently she's become an empty nester which now means she has more time to devote to the characters in her stories.

When she's not writing, MJ can be found walking through the nearby parks, reading books, and watching anime.

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HERE COMES SANTER CLAUS



K.L. Hiers

Mark Fettle has come out to the woods to find a missing Santa Claus, but his true purpose is much more sinister. He has to hide the evidence of a crime, one he committed, and hope that he gets to it before anyone else does. But something is watching Mark, a local cryptid of legend, and keeping himself out of jail soon becomes the least of his worries.

Trigger Warnings:

Murder, claustrophobia, dubious consent, monstrous anatomy, and monstrous intercourse with tail play and knotting.

Mark Fettle had grown up hearing stories of the Santer as far back as he could remember.

It was a giant monster often described as a beastly cat or as a twisted combination of a cat and a wolf. Some said it had a long tail like a whip, but then others claimed the tail was clubbed. Still more said its tail had eight separate thick knots and would use them to beat its prey to death. No one could actually agree on much except that it was fast, strong, and dangerous.

The Santer was blamed for everything from livestock deaths to crop failure and even bad weather. Sightings had first been reported over two hundred years ago and persisted to this day. Just last month, a woman claimed the Santer had broken into her house and made off with her prized goldfish.

It had become so commonplace that parents would often tell their children if they didn't behave and brush their teeth then the Santer would come get them. Mark's own mother had threatened him with a visit from the Santer for not doing his homework.

Cryptids were far from unheard of in the South. There were dozens of them, each with unique variations depending on where the story was being told. From the Wampus Cat to Mothman, there were countless colorful critters who went bump in the night and got up into all kinds of mischief.

Mark thought the stories were ridiculous.

He was a practical person who preferred to make opinions based on evidence, not goofy tall tales that had been stretched so far any inkling of truth they once held had been wrung out. The Santer, for example, could have been a mountain lion. Although they hadn't been seen in the Carolinas for almost a century, he suspected the original stories of the Santer got started because of someone having a run-in with one.

With all the moonshine that was probably flowing in these hills back then, it would have been easy to mistake a regular mountain lion for a giant monster cat beast.

Especially when it was getting dark, just as it was now.

And strange noises came out of the trees, like the ones Mark was hearing right this very second.

And the shadows danced around and played tricks on his eyes, and...

Shit.

He needed to get it together.

Yes, the forest was creepy at this twilight hour, but he knew there wasn't anything out here that could hurt him except maybe a black bear. He blamed the vanishing daylight for getting him so spooked, and he tried to ignore these were the very woods where the Santer was rumored to nest during the winter.

He hadn't cared when his mother had wagged her finger and said the Santer would come get him for not finishing a math assignment, and he shouldn't care now.

He was here on a mission, after all.

To save Santa Claus.

Every year, Santa Claus climbed Chimney Rock, a three hundred foot outcropping high in the mountains of the state park. Santa Claus was really a professional climber of course, but they would rappel down in full costume. There were always free cookies and hot chocolate, and it was the park's most popular event.

The Santa in question was a man named Lionel Huff. He'd been doing the Chimney Climb for three years and knew it well. Up he'd gone, all the way to the top, and then...

Nothing.

He'd somehow managed to vanish completely.

Helicopters and drones circling the top of the mountain confirmed there was no sign of Lionel or his climbing equipment. He had been wearing a bright red Santa suit, so he shouldn't have been hard to spot.

Mark had joined the call for volunteers to help search the mountain and surrounding woods, but he didn't actually care about finding poor Lionel. His true reason for being out here was inherently selfish.

He had to move a body.

Mark had killed a man three days ago and buried him in a shallow grave not far from Chimney Rock. With the army of volunteers swarming the area, it would only be a matter of time before the body was found.

He had to work fast.

Mark remembered where he'd buried it easily enough, and he made sure to request that area to search. It had rained recently, and the rocky ground was treacherously slick. Even though Mark was out here to dig up a corpse, he did wonder what had happened to Lionel.

Lionel might have fallen, hit his head, and gotten disoriented. He could be wandering around the woods right now, lost and looking for help.

The Santer could be out here too, looking for a snack...

Mark dismissed the intrusive thought, though he double-checked that his flashlight was working just in case.

As the sun continued to drop, the temperature went right along with it. The air was chilled enough that Mark could see his own breath, and he pulled up the hood of his coat. He had found the grave over an hour ago, but he waited until it was getting dark to dig. The rocky soil hadn't allowed him to bury the body more than a foot down, and he was thankful no animals had gotten to it yet.

He'd been waiting for a more opportune time to move the body, and burying it here had been an act of desperation.

For a supposedly rational man, Mark hadn't been thinking clearly when he murdered his best friend.

Mark had wrapped the body in a big tent and bungee cords, and he already planned to rebury him in a new grave outside of the search radius. It was going to be grueling dragging Jon's body all that way, but—

No, *not* Jon.

Jon was his best friend.

The bastard Mark had buried wasn't.

Mark refused to let himself think about it right now. It would only distract him from what he had to do, and...

Wait, this couldn't be right.

Mark dug deeper, dread creeping up his spine.

Jon's body was gone.

Mark's mind reeled, and he scrambled to come up with a solution that didn't end with him going to jail.

He hadn't seen anything in the news except everyone scrambling to find Lionel. Even as sensational as a missing Santa was, he was confident that someone discovering a body was much more newsworthy.

Someone had found the body, moved it, filled in the hole, and not reported it to the police.

Yet.

Mark's stomach sloshed.

What if someone was trying to blackmail him?

No, that was ridiculous. No one had seen what happened, and he'd left nothing on Jon's body that would lead back to him. Even if there was some microscopic forensic evidence

that he'd missed, it would be easy to explain away since they were best friends and worked together at the bank. There was no logical reason for anyone to have stolen the body and then covered the grave back up.

The grave Mark had just dug out again.

It was supposed to be below freezing with a chance of snow tonight, and he had no interest in being out here stumbling around in the dark. He would sort out what to do about a missing body later. He got back to shoveling to fill the empty grave, fighting against the dwindling sunlight to finish.

A twig snapped behind him.

Mark jumped, whirling around as he scrambled to turn on his flashlight.

The thin beam didn't show him much except for trees and rocks, and there was no sign of what had made that noise.

Mark's adrenaline sent his heart into overdrive, and clouds of his own frantic breath fogged his vision. His skin prickled with goose bumps even beneath his many layers, and he could not shake the creeping feeling that he wasn't alone.

Of course you're not alone, he told himself. There were people out here looking for Lionel.

"Hello?" Mark called out. "Is someone there?"

Nothing.

Wind, a faint rustle of leaves above, and then nothing.

Mark wanted to go home.

He packed up his collapsible shovel, threw on his backpack, and left.

The sensation of a thousand eyes upon his back made him walk faster, and he was soon jogging as he hurried through the brush to get back on the main trail. It was too easy to imagine something creeping up behind him, and the fear-fueled thought was so great that Mark started to think there really was

something coming at him. Panic commanded his legs to suddenly bolt, and he sprinted forward, trying to navigate the terrain by the beam of his flashlight.

It was dark, too dark to be moving this fast, but he didn't dare slow down.

He had to get out of here. He had to run. He had to—fuck!

His foot slid when it hit damp rock. His momentum pitched him forward, and he went down. He threw up his arm to catch himself and spare his face from kissing the rock, but his elbow and knees were not so lucky.

Mark froze as he was to survey his injuries.

Skinned knees, for sure. His arm didn't feel great, but he thought he'd be able to move it. He'd have some colorful bruises to show off, but nothing seemed broken except for one of his backpack straps.

He laughed.

God, he'd lost his mind.

Mark knew he was being silly.

There was nothing out here worth getting so worked up over. He was acting like an idiot. He'd always been a rational person, and *rationally* he had absolutely nothing to be afraid of.

It wasn't as if Jon had become a zombie and was coming after him for revenge.

With a grunt, Mark stood.

His flashlight was on the ground a few yards ahead, and he walked toward it. The beam was pointing away from him, lighting up the gnarled roots of a tree. The ground looked strange, too *black* somehow, and then...

Mark's toe caught something—maybe a root?—and he was going down again.

But this time he didn't stop.

The strange blackness was a *hole*.

He flailed his arms out, trying to save himself, but it was too late. He was falling a distance great enough to give him time to think about how much it was going to hurt when he landed.

Probably a lot.

That was the answer.

It was going to hurt a *lot*.

Something grabbed his coat, yanking him right out of the air.

“Shit!” Mark squeaked, his voice cracking as his descent was so abruptly interrupted. His backpack flew off his shoulder and his coat cut into his pits, but he crossed his arms tight to keep himself from slipping out of it. The hood of his coat must have snagged on a rock or a tree root, and right now it was the only thing keeping him from falling.

Don't look down, don't look down, don't look down—

Darkness.

All Mark saw was a pitch-black hole.

He had no idea how much farther away the bottom of this hole was, and he highly doubted it would be pleasant to land on. Looking up only revealed the night sky, and he groaned in frustration.

Great.

He was stuck in a hole, night had fallen, and it was cold.

It was so cold that his nose and lips were numbing now. Snot was running over his top lip, and he couldn't wipe it off. His lower back and stomach were exposed from his coat being hitched up, and the chilly air was unforgiving.

Mark tried to think.

Rational, yes. He was supposed to be a rational person. He could figure this out.

His flashlight was up top somewhere, so it would be of no help. His backpack had fallen to the bottom of the hole, so also not helpful. His phone was in his back pocket, but he wasn't sure if he should try to move his arms yet. It felt like his coat was the only thing keeping him from falling and therefore alive. He didn't want to risk slipping out of it and falling to what would probably be a miserable end.

Mark regretted coming out here now. He'd been so worried that someone was going to find Jon's corpse that he'd felt he had no choice. There was probably something poetic about him dying to hide the body of his murdered best friend, especially since he'd done the murdering.

Gravity was already pulling at him, and he became very aware of how heavy his body felt.

How long could he hold his arms like this?

Fuck.

"Help!" Mark screamed. "Someone! Help me! Please!"

His voice echoed back to him, haunting and low. The space beneath him must have been quite large, and that was not comforting in the slightest. He shouted until his throat was raw and the only thing he could utter were hoarse squeaks.

He couldn't feel his hands now.

It was getting harder to keep his arms crossed, and his feet were tingling.

He had to try for his phone.

Taking a deep breath, he slowly moved one arm, using the other to maintain what he hoped was an iron grip on his coat. It was hard to tell when his fingers had no feeling except a distant sense of pressure that ached from the bitter cold consuming them.

He didn't want to move too fast and risk dropping his phone, so he carefully reached for his back pocket as if he were Indiana Jones and his phone was an ancient artifact on a pressure plate.

Steady, yes.

Nice and steady.

It took him two tries to find the seam of his pocket because his fingers were so numb, but he was able to finally slip in.

Nothing.

His pocket was empty.

For fuck's sake.

His phone had to be in the other pocket. He didn't think he'd dropped it when he fell the first time, but that was certainly possible.

It was getting colder.

The air stung Mark's eyes and the inside of his running nose, and his entire body shivered now. His face throbbed from the frigid air's bite, and his attempts to call for help again were pitiful squawks. The panic he'd felt in the woods was back, and it flooded his core with a jittery rush he had absolutely nowhere to put.

He'd never felt so small.

So *weak*.

One wrong move and he'd fall to his death. He'd never been so vulnerable, and being confronted with how very fragile he was filled him with a burst of rage. He refused to let this be the end for him. He was not going to die in a stupid hole because he was out in the damn woods after failing to move a stupid body.

Mark had to try for the other pocket.

He didn't dare switch arms, so he had to keep reaching behind himself to get to it. It was awkward, and he had to twist himself ever so—*crrraaacck*.

What the fuck was *that*?

The sound was coming from above him.

It reminded him of a branch swaying in a strong wind, and terror seized him as he realized it must be whatever held the hood of his coat. He'd turned his body too far and upset the branch's grip by shifting his weight.

"God, please—"

Down into the hole Mark plunged.

It was a shorter drop than before. He landed almost immediately, pain exploding in his right ankle as he collided with the ground. He tipped backward, his shoulder hitting something hard. He sucked in a quick breath of air to power a strangled scream, and he tumbled over onto his side.

His ankle was on fire, his shoulder ached, and he tasted blood. He struggled to draw his knees to his chest, fighting to get feeling back into his limbs. It was cold.

It was just so damn *cold*.

Hypothermia.

That was a thing, right?

He might be freezing to death. That would explain why he was so tired. It would be surprisingly easy to drift off, and he welcomed the agony as a beacon to ward off sleep.

He had to stay awake.

He was not going to die down here.

Mark tried to reach into his pocket, cursing his frozen fingers as he fought to locate his phone. It had to be in there. It had to be.

Please, please, please—

There!

Mark squinted against the glare of the woefully cracked screen as he tapped at it. It was after seven o'clock in the evening now, and he realized he had no idea how long he'd been hanging before he fell.

Thirty minutes? An hour?

It didn't matter.

What mattered was getting help.

He fumbled to activate an emergency call, but...

No.

It wouldn't connect.

He was in a fucking hole, and there was no signal.

If he wasn't afraid of his eyes freezing shut, he would cry.

Now what?

Die from exposure while he waited for someone to notice he was missing?

Scccrch, sccrrrch.

Or get eaten by whatever was coming toward him.

Mark wrenched himself into a sitting position, using his uninjured leg to help propel himself away from the sound. His back hit cool stone, and he prepared to use the last of his strength to fight for his life.

It was *big*.

Moving slowly.

Deep, heavy breaths.

A bear? Had he fallen into a bear's cave and disturbed its hibernation?

Mark kept tapping at his phone screen in an attempt to turn on the flashlight, and he was blinded instantly when he was

successful. He turned the light toward whatever was coming at him, and he heard it *growl*.

He blinked rapidly, praying his vision would adjust so could at least see whatever was about to eat him.

It was...

The Santer.

The beast stood on two powerful hind legs with a broad humanoid torso. Its arms were too long for its body, though doubtlessly useful for running on all fours. Its fur was dark, maybe black, and its head had a long snout like a wolf's. Its ears were taller than a wolf's would be, though they had the same arched shape.

And the tail!

It was long, hairless, and sleek with a pointed tip and...

No club and no knots.

Guess that meant the whip crowd won that debate.

The Santer was dragging something behind him, and Mark tilted the flashlight to see what it was.

It was a blue tarp tied up with bungee cords, a tarp that seemed to be wrapped around something roughly the size of a human body.

Jon!

Mark laughed hysterically.

The Santer cocked its head.

Mark tried to quiet down, worried that he'd somehow offended it. He couldn't stop now that he'd started, though, and he grinned like a fool.

He'd come out here pretending to look for Santa Claus and found the Santer.

That was hilarious.

Santa.

Santer.

Santer Claus.

And Santer Claus had found the body he'd tried to bury.

Absolutely hilarious.

Mark's laughter devolved into a sob, and he pleaded weakly, "Help. Help me... Please?"

"Help," the Santer repeated in a deep rumbling voice.

"Please?" Mark was too far gone to question how the Santer could speak or at least mimic him. He was too desperate to care who rendered him aid as long as he didn't end up like the corpse the Santer was holding. "*Help.*"

The Santer grabbed him.

The stories had said it smelled like sulfur and dead flesh, but all Mark could detect was earth and pine. Its fur was coarse, its claws sharp, and Mark closed his eyes as he waited for it to devour him.

His body was full of lead and numb save for the throb in his ankle. He'd wanted to go down swinging, but he was simply too weak.

"I hope I give you indigestion," he mumbled.

The Santer grunted.

Mark was aware of being carried now. He'd dropped his phone, but that hardly mattered. He wanted this to be over with already. He wanted the pain and the cold and the horrible pounding of his heart to stop. His last few conscious thoughts were angry and defiant, and he managed to swing at the Santer one final time.

His furious punch was more like a soft tap, but he drifted into the darkness satisfied that he'd at least tried.

It was warm.

So blissfully, wonderfully *warm*.

Mark was very surprised to find himself waking up.

He must have passed out.

Which meant the Santer hadn't eaten him.

Or had he imagined that?

He was definitely alive, and the throb of his ankle was a stark reminder that falling down that damn hole had been plenty real. The cold was strangely gone, and he could feel his fingers again. He tried to move, but he was wrapped up in some kind of big fuzzy blanket.

He opened his eyes, expecting total darkness and finding a faint blue glow. He couldn't identify the source, but he knew now that he wasn't tangled up in a blanket.

It was the Santer.

The Santer was curled around him and hugging him against its chest, and Mark froze. The Santer's fur on its chest and stomach was much softer than the rest of its body, and Mark hesitantly buried his face in it. He was probably wiping his snot all over it, but it actually felt wonderful.

Judging by the Santer's slow, steady breathing, Mark assumed it was asleep. After he'd passed out, it must have brought him back to wherever this was. What little Mark could see was rock, so he was down inside a cave.

He didn't see any sign of Jon's body.

He didn't know if that was good or bad.

Mark was at least lying on something soft and thick, perhaps some kind of nest.

The Santer had certainly spared him a miserable death freezing in the cold, but...

Why?

And what the hell did it do with Jon's corpse?

Mark allowed himself a few more moments to rest, but he knew he couldn't stay here. He had to figure out how the hell he was going to get out and probably leave the country.

He wasn't about to trust a mythical monster with body disposal.

Mark turned his head away from the Santer's chest, scanning the cave around him.

The glow was emanating from mushrooms crowding the top of the cave. They were growing in thick clusters around the stalactites, and their dim light was enough now that Mark's eyes had adjusted that he could see fairly well.

It was a cave.

That was about it.

There was still no sign of Jon's body, Mark didn't see any way in or out, and he was now aware of the sound of running water though he couldn't see its source.

Damn, he really had to pee now.

The longer he lay there, the worse it got.

He now had two choices.

Risk angering the Santer by trying to get up to pee or risk angering him by peeing right here?

Indecision was a stone in Mark's gut, and he squirmed miserably. He'd already thought he was going to die twice so far today. The first time was falling down that damn hole. The second was meeting the Santer and thinking he was going to be a snack.

What was one more stab at death?

Fuck it.

He needed to go.

As carefully as Mark could, he rolled out of the Santer's powerful arms. He kept going until his back hit the edge of the

nest, and he waited.

The Santer continued breathing steadily.

Mark lifted his head to take a peek to make sure the Santer was still sleeping.

Good.

Grunting through the pain in his ankle, Mark struggled to stand. The closest wall of the cave was only a few feet away, and he shuffled toward it so he would have something to lean against. He missed the warmth of the nest now and shivered. He glanced back at the Santer.

Still asleep.

Now...

Where to pee?

The cave was small, barely the size of Mark's living room in his tiny apartment. Over half of the space was taken up by the big nest that he'd been napping in with the Santer. The rest was bare, smooth rock and a tiny stream that trickled down the far wall. The water seemed to be coming right out of the rock and disappeared through a small crevice below.

Perfect.

Cave toilet.

Mark shuffled over to relieve himself, and he had to bite back a groan. He hadn't realized how badly he'd needed to go. He took another look around the cave. It remained free of corpses, though he saw a dark tunnel on the far side. It appeared to be the only way in or out.

He needed to figure out how to limp his way over there and

Right as he was giving his dick a final shake, the Santer grabbed him from behind.

"Fuck!" Mark squeaked.

It was a good thing he'd already taken care of business or he might have peed himself right there on the spot.

"Sleep," the Santer growled.

"What?" Mark blinked as the Santer carried him back to the nest.

"Hurt. Sleep." The Santer shook his head and huffed as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Mark scrambled to tuck his dick into his pants, grunting as the Santer plopped him back in the nest. The jolt made his ankle throb anew, and he groaned in pain.

The Santer gestured at his leg. "Hurt."

"No shit!" Mark hissed.

The Santer crouched, sniffing at Mark's ankle.

This angle provided a spectacular view that indicated the Santer was, anatomically speaking, quite male.

Mark stared at the ceiling of the cave. "What, uh, what are you doing?"

"Hurt." The Santer tugged at Mark's boot.

"Fuck!" Mark squirmed. "What the *fuck*?"

The Santer ignored him and tore the laces of the boot.

Mark tried to pull away, but the Santer grabbed his calf. He couldn't break free, and Mark's fear soared. He had no idea what the Santer was going to do or why he wanted to take off his boot.

Was it in the way of eating his toes?

The Santer hummed, an eerie purring sound, as he removed Mark's boot.

Truthfully, Mark felt immense relief. His foot must have been swollen, he realized. Being trapped inside the boot had

been exacerbating the pain. While it was far from a cure, it was a big improvement.

The Santer peeled off Mark's sock next, still humming. He pulled a long strip of cloth from his nest and then wrapped it loosely around Mark's ankle.

Mark glanced at the nest. It was hard to make it out exactly, but it appeared to be made from a mix of leaves and fabric. A piece near his hand appeared to have been taken from a sleeping bag. He shuddered to think about what happened to the person inside it.

The Santer finished wrapping Mark's ankle and then gently laid it back in the nest. He crawled up to lay beside him. "Sleep."

"I... Thank you?" Mark hated how unsure he sounded, but he was having difficulty processing what was happening right now.

The Santer had tended to his injury and...

Was not going to eat him?

The Santer wrapped one of his thick arms around Mark, dragging him against his chest like before. His voice was softer as he said, "Sleep."

Mark wanted to argue, but he had no idea what to say. His ankle hurt too much to protest much or try escaping again. He thought about that tunnel he'd seen earlier, and he figured that had to be the way out. The Santer wasn't using that narrow crevice by the Cave Toilet to traverse so that tunnel had to be it.

Now Mark just had to get to it.

Sleep came easily wrapped up in the Santer's warm embrace. Mark was still quite exhausted, and he let himself fall into a deep sleep. He knew he was losing time. He knew there were probably people looking for him by now, and he had no idea how long he'd been down here. Without the sun,

he had no way to track time, and his phone was certainly gone, lost back in some other part of the cave.

When he woke up, his phone was the first thing he reached for out of habit.

He found nothing but the dry nest around him, and he flinched when he realized the Santer was gone.

Mark sat up to confirm it, looking all around to make sure the Santer wasn't somehow hiding in the ceiling somewhere.

He was alone.

The Santer had buried him in the nesting material, perhaps to keep him warm in his absence. Mark definitely missed the Santer's body heat as he rolled out of the nest again, and he grunted as he struggled to his feet. He still couldn't put any weight on his injured ankle, and he ended up right back on his ass. His toes were also particularly unhappy with the temperature, and he was suddenly afraid of frostbite.

Mark didn't see his boot or his sock anywhere, but there were bits of fabric in the nest. He grabbed a strip of what might have been a section from a tent and used it to wrap up his foot. It was better than nothing.

He tried again to stand, but he had to crawl toward the wall so he had something to support him. He shuffled along toward the tunnel, and he realized he was going to have to crawl some more. The tunnel was only around three feet high, and he wondered how the hell the Santer fit through it.

It didn't matter.

He had to go.

There was no telling how long the Santer would be gone, and Mark couldn't wait here to either freeze to death or be the Santer's next meal.

He dropped on his hands and knees to move forward, feeling around as he plunged into darkness. He lamented that

there weren't any glowing mushrooms here to help light his way, but he decided he could try to navigate by touch. It couldn't be that hard, and he didn't imagine that the Santer had carried him too far from the hole he'd first fallen through.

Mark took his time to feel the cave floor in front of him to make sure it was solid before scooting ahead. It was bitterly cold, and his face was getting numb again. The air was chilly enough to sting his eyes now, but he kept going.

The tunnel opened up into another cave, and judging by how Mark's sniffles echoed, it was large.

Shit.

He wasn't sure how to proceed, but he decided to follow the cave wall to his left. He immediately ran into big rocky structures that blocked his advances.

Stalagmites, his brain supplied, because the G stood for *ground*.

Mark worked his way around them, but he was slow. He had to take breaks often because even dragging his ankle behind him hurt. Whenever he stopped, it was harder to get going again as the cold set in and made him drowsy. It would be so easy to fall asleep, and his brain warned him that was a sign of hypothermia.

Or that he just needed a nap...

No!

He had to move.

Mark lurched ahead, still being careful to feel the ground in front of him to make sure he didn't go over the edge of something unpleasant and deep. He became aware that he had found another tunnel because there were walls around him, and his head bumped into something. He paused to feel around more and confirmed he was indeed in a small tunnel.

Very small.

Mark's elbow caught on something that wasn't smooth rock, and he landed on his chest to save his chin. Panic fueled a frantic effort to right his position, and he lurched upward too quickly and hit his head. The pain rocked his senses, his anxiety soared, and he didn't know what to do except try to move.

He wanted to run, but there was nowhere to flee except to keep flailing forward. He smacked his head again, the pain enough to make his eyes water, and he sobbed as he tried to bolt. There was nowhere to go except into the tunnel in front of him, and he flailed as his shoulders lodged between the narrowing walls of rock.

Oh no.

No, no, no.

He was stuck.

Mark wailed, and his own scream echoed back in his ears. His chest heaved, his eyes burned, and he scrambled to free himself. His brain prompted him to shift in the wrong direction, and he became even more trapped.

One of his arms was pinned at his side between his body and the cave wall. The other was free to wriggle uselessly above his head, but he couldn't focus long enough to figure out how to get unstuck. His struggling only made it worse, and his breath came in ragged pants that prickled his throat with icy air. He kicked his legs and barely felt his injured ankle, the sensation lost in his adrenaline fueled panic.

The walls were shrinking, making him feel heavy and small, and he was suddenly aware of the millions of tons of rock that currently surrounded him. The weight of it all was crushing him, and his heart was pounding so hard and fast that he swore it was going to explode out of his chest. Its frantic pulse expanded until his entire torso throbbed with it, and he sobbed brokenly.

He couldn't move.

He couldn't see.

He couldn't *move*.

He couldn't *see*.

He was trapped, helpless to escape, and soon he was convinced he'd somehow flipped onto his back because he was disoriented. He was floating in the darkness, unsure of which way was up, and he clawed at the unforgiving rock around him. He screamed, he cried, and he howled in gasping chants.

The sounds coming out of him didn't even register as words, only noises that tried to give birth to pleas for help and fizzled out as guttural groans.

Mark was going to die down here.

He screamed, tears and snot running freely as he cried. He would likely freeze to death first. Being stuck in this tunnel was like being wedged inside a freezer, and his face and hands were already numb. If the cold didn't get him, then starvation would.

How long would it take him to starve?

A few days? A week? Without water, it would certainly be faster, wouldn't it?

He wondered if the search team had given up yet. Maybe they had found Lionel and decided to leave. He didn't have anyone at home waiting for him, and that meant no one to realize something was wrong. If he didn't show up to work, perhaps some of his friends might be concerned, but they might assume he was sick and didn't call in.

It could take days for anyone to figure out that something had happened to him.

Days he didn't have.

He was so fucked.

So completely and utterly fucked.

Mark deliriously thought he should have stayed with the damn Santer. Being eaten would have been better than the hell of being trapped here and knowing absolutely that he was going to slowly die.

It was getting harder to breathe, and the pressure around his chest was crippling. The walls were closing in around him, certainly about to smother out his last few breaths from the sheer pressure.

This was it.

This was going to be how he died.

He was going to hyperventilate himself into oblivion because he couldn't stop panicking. Perhaps he would suffocate from the rock moving in around him and crushing the last of his air from his lungs. He was running out of time. He couldn't do much except twitch and pant for breath he couldn't seem to take. His lungs ignited into twin infernos as his chest heaved and he sobbed, damning the cold and his own stupidity for coming out to the woods.

No, not that. Not the woods.

This was because of his stupidity for trusting *Jon*.

If he hadn't trusted Jon, he wouldn't be in this damn mess because he would have never had a damn body to worry about moving while pretending to look for Santa Claus.

Lionel.

Whatever.

Some fucking Christmas this was going to turn out to be.

He would be spending it dead.

Claws grabbed his ankle—the *injured* one—and he screamed.

Something had Mark's ankle and was pulling back the way he'd come.

Still in the grip of his terror, Mark found a new surge of adrenaline and struggled fiercely. He came out of the tunnel into open air that he eagerly breathed in to power a wretched scream as he swung his fists and kicked his good leg.

“Stop.” It was the Santer. “Breathe.”

Mark flailed as he found himself being dragged into a tight embrace. He was cradled like a baby, and he held on to the Santer’s fur like a lifeline. He couldn’t stop trembling, and he was still panting frantically. The panic wouldn’t release him, and he had no idea if he’d been spared dying in that tunnel just to die here at the hands of a monster.

“Breathe,” the Santer said.

Mark could tell the Santer was carrying him, but he didn’t know where to.

“No.” The Santer placed one of his big paws on Mark’s chest. “*Breathe.*”

Mark gasped.

The Santer rubbed his chest, and Mark grabbed his paw.

It was warm, strong, and he held it tight. His chest hurt so badly from how he’d been gasping for air that it felt as if he was breathing in shards of glass. Still, he tried to listen to the Santer’s command. He continued to breathe, however broken it was, and he focused on the heat of the Santer’s paw.

It was reassuring, a beacon of heat in a cold darkness, and he tangled his fingers in between the Santer’s claws—fingers? Were they fingers with the claws retracted? Toe beans? No, finger beans. It didn’t matter because they were *warm* and *strong* and *safe*, and the Santer had rescued Mark from a certain death.

Again.

“Stupid. *Stupid,*” the Santer grumbled under his breath.

Mark couldn’t argue that.

Maybe fleeing the safety of the nest hadn't exactly been the best idea, but Mark had been very concerned about being eaten. He moaned as the Santer returned him to said nest, and he'd never been so happy to be in a bunch of leaves and debris. It was warm, soft, and he was ready for another nap. He gasped as the Santer's big paws dragged over his body, and he squirmed in protest when one came a little close to his crotch.

"Hurt?" the Santer demanded.

Mark shook his head.

The Santer continued his probe of Mark's body from head to toe, and it was then Mark realized he was checking for any new injuries. He had the pleasure of listening to the Santer fuss like a parent fussing at their child, and he whispered, "Thank you."

"Eh?" The Santer paused.

"Thank you." Mark rubbed his nose. "For saving me. Again."

The Santer grunted.

"Can I..." Mark fidgeted. "Can I leave?"

"No."

Mark frowned, watching the Santer warily as he lay down beside him. He welcomed the Santer's embrace because he was still freezing, and he shoved his hands into the Santer's fur to warm them. "Why?"

The Santer grunted again.

"Why can't I leave?"

"Snow." The Santer rubbed Mark's back. "Much snow."

Mark remembered the weather report and scowled. "What? Are we fucking snowed in?"

"Yes."

“For how long?” Mark frowned.

“Not long.” The Santer nuzzled Mark’s hair. “Rest now.”

“But you’ll let me go?” Mark pressed. “When the snow’s gone?”

The Santer snorted. “*Rest.*”

That wasn’t a no, but it was definitely not a yes either.

Mark got settled in and sighed, the residual jitters of his earlier panic ringing throughout his body. He was exhausted but wired, and he couldn’t keep still.

“What?” the Santer grumbled.

“Why did you save me?” Mark blurted out.

“Death brings more men,” the Santer replied. “Men disturb my sleep.”

“You mean... they’d find you?”

“Yes.”

Mark gasped. “The body.”

“Yes?”

“The dead one. The dead man.”

“Yes.”

Mark swallowed thickly. “You moved him?”

The Santer pointed up. “Men find.” He pointed down and shook his head. “Never find.”

“So, you didn’t want anyone to find it.” Mark tried to put the pieces together. “Because why? More people would come?”

“Yes, and disturb sleep.”

Mark scoffed.

He almost couldn’t believe it.

The Santer had dug up Jon so no one would inadvertently disturb his sleep here in his little cave. He wasn't sure if he should ask for details, but he decided it was probably best not to ask how.

If the Santer was truly invested in keeping his home off the radar, Mark figured he'd do a good job of it. The how wasn't important.

And it was most likely gross.

"So, uh, is that all you do?" Mark asked. "Sleep?"

The Santer shrugged. "Eat."

The very mention of the word made Mark's stomach growl. "I don't suppose you have, uh, something to eat right now?"

The Santer sighed.

"Is that a no?"

"Rest. Eat later."

"Okay. Sure." Mark fidgeted again.

The Santer curled around Mark as if preparing for sleep again, and Mark tried not to wiggle. It was very comfortable being in the arms of a giant beast, and he finally had feeling back in his face and hands. The heat that radiated off the Santer warmed the nest and seemed to even raise the temperature of the cave.

Other than the nagging pain in his ankle and the last tingles of adrenaline, Mark actually felt pretty good.

He was still trapped in a cave with a giant monster, but the body he'd been so worried about had been taken care of and the chances of being eaten had dwindled. Surviving this ordeal was very likely, and he did his best to drift off to sleep.

His dreams were unpleasant, echoes of his earlier panic mixed with splashes of blood and Jon's screams, and he woke with a start. He forgot where he was, fighting to break out of

the Santer's hold. He screamed as claws grabbed him, and he punched at the Santer's broad chest.

"No," the Santer soothed in a low growl. "Safe. Safe now."

Mark watched as the Santer's fur *glowed*—a beautiful, iridescent blue that was brighter than the mushrooms around the cave. It was mesmerizing and enough of a shock to kickstart Mark's brain into remembering everything. "Safe. Right."

The Santer reached for Mark again, but he hesitated. He leaned back on his haunches and simply said, "Safe."

Mark had flailed over to the edge of the nest, though he couldn't get too far because of his ankle. He was on his back, propped up on his elbows, and he stared at the Santer's glowing fur. "So, you... you really do glow in the dark?"

The Santer huffed, and the light dimmed.

"No! Wait!" Mark frowned. "I like it. I... I think it's beautiful."

The Santer's fur glowed brighter again, and he tilted his head in a curious sort of way.

"Do all... Santers... do that?"

"Santer?"

"Yeah. You." Mark pointed at the Santer.

"*Krrranguuul.*"

"What?"

The Santer huffed in annoyance. "Not Santer. *Krrrangal.*"

"Kringle?" Mark wasn't sure he was hearing the Santer correctly. "As in, Kris Kringle?"

The Santer blinked slowly. "*Kringle?*" He pointed at himself.

"Yes?" Mark was even more confused.

“Kringle.” The Santer nodded.

“Wait, your *name* is Kringle?”

The Santer—Kringle—nodded again. He pointed at Mark, his head cocking the other way as if he were asking a question.

“Me? I... I’m Mark.” Mark sat up slowly.

“Mark.” Kringle nodded, and he smiled, flashing his big, sharp teeth.

Mark tried to use the rational part of his brain to determine what was the best course of action for dealing with a giant glowing furry monster.

Especially one who could talk and was a surprisingly fantastic cuddler.

“Nice to meet you, Kringle,” Mark said, offering his hand.

Kringle bowed his head and sniffed at Mark’s hand.

“Right. Uh...” Mark reached for Kringle’s paw.

Kringle pulled his paw away with a loud snort. “What?”

“You just...” Mark sighed. “Let me see your paw?”

Kringle narrowed his eyes, his glow flickered, but he slowly offered his paw out to Mark.

Mark gently took hold of it and gave it a small shake. “There. See? That’s how you say hello when you meet someone. You shake hands.”

Kringle examined Mark’s hand as if it might bite him, and he put his other paw on top. He shook Mark’s hand. “Yes?”

“Yeah!” Mark smiled. “There you go!”

Kringle smiled and shook harder.

“Okay, okay, easy.” Mark patted Kringle’s big paws. “Careful.”

Kringle’s ears flattened, but he stopped shaking Mark’s hand, though he still held it.

Mark cleared his throat, not sure what to say now.

Kringle was staring at him and not blinking, and Mark couldn't identify if he was merely curious or trying to decide whether or not to eat him.

"Don't suppose you saw Santa Claus around here somewhere while you were digging up bodies?" Mark asked.

"Santer? Not Santer." Kringle scowled.

"No, not Santer Claus. *Santa* Claus." Mark shook his head. "Big red hat? Red suit?"

Kringle stared. He picked at the nest and held out a scrap of red fabric.

There was no telling what it had been, but...

Shit.

Mark cringed when he recognized it.

It was part of Jon's hat.

Kringle must have realized Mark knew where it was from because he quickly hid it away. He seemed upset, and he asked quietly, "Man in hole? Friend?"

"He was." Mark gritted his teeth. "He was my best friend actually, and I killed him." He surprised himself by finally saying it out loud. "I killed him," he said again, fighting the quiver in his voice. "I buried him there, but I had to come back when everyone was searching for Lionel. I thought they might find the body and I freaked out."

"Why... kill?" Kringle frowned. "Eat?"

"No! I wasn't going to eat him!" Mark sighed heavily.

He didn't know why, but the abrupt need to confess was overwhelming. He'd been carrying this weight for days—not just worrying about Jon's body being found, but the guilt of having taken his life.

Jon had been his best friend, after all.

Even after what Jon had done, he missed him.

“The truth is...” Mark took a deep breath. “He was going to kill me first. He made this big deal about coming out to Chimney Rock like we did when we were kids. We were going to camp out for a few nights, maybe watch Santa make the climb, but...”

Kringle petted his hair gently, neither prompting or seeming to pass judgment. He appeared concerned.

“It was a trick.” Mark’s stomach dipped, awash in dread and remorse. “He wanted to get me out here alone to kill me. I’d found out he was stealing money. A lot of money. We had a big fundraiser to benefit kids in need for the holidays. The bank we work for was a sponsor, and I realized what he was doing, and...”

Kringle’s brow furrowed. He probably had no idea what Mark was talking about.

“Right, so. I told him to give the money back or else I was going to turn him in. To the police. Other man people who punish bad man people.” Mark fidgeted. “He promised me he was taking care of it, and then he invited me out to come camping. I should have realized what he was doing. But he was my best friend. I didn’t think he’d... I never thought...”

Kringle continued to pet Mark’s hair.

“He came at me with a shovel,” Mark said quietly. “This collapsible e-tool thing he got in the Army. But he tripped, he dropped it, and I... I hit him with it. Just *once*. It was just once. All I wanted was for him to stop. But then he stopped *moving*... So, I used it to bury him.”

Kringle hugged him with surprising tenderness. “Bad man.”

“Yes.” Mark’s eyes welled up with tears. “He was a bad man. But he was also my best friend... I...” He burst into tears, clinging to Kringle’s chest as he let everything out.

His guilt, his pain, and his grief for a man he'd loved like a brother.

When he was done, Mark tried to wipe off his face and sniff back any remaining tears. As rational as he'd always prided himself to be, there had been nothing sensible about the situation.

He'd been fighting for his life, and when it came down to letting Jon kill him or having to kill Jon, well...

Mark had chosen to survive.

"Kill bad man," Kringle whispered. "You good man."

Mark smiled weakly, and he squeezed Kringle's arm. "Thank you. You're a good Kringle."

"Yes." Kringle beamed.

Mark's heart did something strange then. It sped up and skipped a beat, and he cleared his throat as he tried to get his rampaging emotions under control. "So... we're snowed in?"

"Yes."

"But we have... food?" Mark thought it might be awkward to ask so soon after confessing to killing someone, but even murderers needed to eat.

"Yes."

"Can I have some of it?"

"Yes." Kringle let go of Mark and then crawled toward the back of the nest. He turned back around and he had...

Some dead fish.

Great.

They didn't smell at least and appeared to have been rubbed in some kind of chalk or pale dirt. Still, they were very much inedible in this state.

Mark grimaced. "I can't eat that."

“Eh?” Kringle frowned.

“I can’t eat raw fish. Do you have anything... cooked?”

Kringle looked thoughtful, popping the whole bunch of fish into his mouth. He dug around the side of the nest again. He offered out a pack of chicken flavored ramen with a big smile. “Cooked.”

“Perfect. My favorite.” Mark accepted the package. “Thank you.”

Kringle nodded, settling back into the nest.

Mark dove into the ramen, crunching noisily on the raw noodles. It wasn’t the worst thing he’d ever eaten, and it was better than nothing. The noodles were miserably dry, and he glanced longingly over at the water trickling down the wall. He set down the ramen and tried to stand.

His ankle disagreed.

Mark grunted as he dropped flat on his ass, and he sighed.

“Hurt?” Kringle asked.

“Yeah, I did something to my ankle. I can’t move real great.” Mark rolled over on his hands and knees.

“What?”

“I’m trying to get some damn water.” Mark crawled forward, yelping as Kringle grabbed his uninjured ankle to drag him back.

“Wait.”

“What are you doing? I’m just going to get some water!”

Kringle pulled Mark right into the middle of the nest. “*Wait.*” He stood, lumbering toward the far cave wall. He curled his tail around and around until it made a sort of cup and used it to catch some water. He came back, and he offered his tail out to Mark.

“O-Oh. That’s... handy.” Mark thought it was a little weird to drink from a tail, but he was too parched to care.

Kringle pawed the top of Mark’s head, petting him gently. “Good.”

Mark was surprised by the tenderness in the gesture, and he paused in his gulping to gasp, “Thank you.”

Kringle kept petting him while he drank and then went back to get more. He continued to pet Mark’s hair, and it was oddly soothing.

Mark drank until his stomach was sloshing, and he shook his head. “I can’t. I’m full. Thank you.”

Kringle drank the rest of the water himself and then whipped his tail out to shake off the excess water. He looked at the noodles Mark hadn’t eaten yet. “Hungry? More?”

“No, I’m okay.”

“Good.” Kringle curled back into his usual spot, raising his arm as if to invite Mark back over for snuggles.

“You’re not... what I expected.” Mark shuffled over, being mindful of his ankle. He stretched out beside Kringle and grunted as he was dragged into a big, warm hug.

“You think Kringle monster.” Kringle ran his paw along Mark’s back, and he sounded sad.

“Well, yeah.” Mark frowned. “You look... scary.” He regretted it as soon as he said it, but he couldn’t take it back now.

Kringle sighed. “You scary to Kringle too.”

“Really?” Mark stroked Kringle’s chest slowly. “Right, dumb question. We don’t exactly have the best relationship with anything not human. Or even other humans.” He cringed, trying not to picture Jon’s bloody face. “Or you know, trees or nature in general. We kinda suck.”

Kringle hesitantly bowed his head to nuzzle Mark's hair. "Not you."

"I'm not scared of you either. Now." Mark laughed. "Sorry, I was before. But uh, I'm... I'm okay now." He slid his fingers through Kringle's fur, watching the glow shift as if reacting to his touch.

Kringle grumbled, and it almost sounded like a laugh. "Yes. Okay."

Mark shivered when Kringle's claws dragged over the back of his neck, and he was surprised by the pleasurable response the alien touch woke up in him. He'd been through a lot in the past however many hours it had been, and he was pretty stunned it had come to this.

After all, he'd already thought he was going to die how many times?

He'd accepted that his life was over more than once, and now here he was snuggling with the Santer—the very creature he'd first been scared of in the woods when he'd still believed it was his imagination getting carried away.

And the Santer had a name.

Kringle.

Okay, that wasn't exactly his name, but close enough.

Kringle was kind, generous, and Mark didn't know how he could ever thank him for saving his life—not to mention helping him get away with murder and being surprisingly understanding about it. He was in awe of this fantastic beast, and he suddenly had a thousand questions for him.

"So." Mark fidgeted.

"Yes?" Kringle dragged his claws back down Mark's back.

"Are you the only one? Of you?"

"No. Many." Kringle purred sadly. "But far away."

“How old are you?”

“Old.” Kringle shrugged.

“You really just hide out in this cave all the time? That’s why no one sees you?”

Kringle’s lips curled up in a smirk, and his fur glowed until it was bright white and then...

He vanished.

“What the fuck?” Mark could definitely still feel Kringle’s fur and his strong arms, but he couldn’t see him at all.

Kringle was completely invisible.

Kringle slowly came back into view, the light of his fur first, and then the rest of his body followed. He was definitely smiling, and his long tail curled around Mark’s waist. “Ta-dah.”

Mark burst out laughing. “Seriously? *Ta-dah?*”

“Yes.” Kringle beamed.

“Okay, that’s pretty impressive.” Mark rubbed Kringle’s fur. Although the glow was fading now, it was still very soft. “That’s how you get around, huh? You just go all invisible?”

“Yes.”

“Well, that’s cool.” Mark settled back against Kringle’s chest, using Kringle’s shoulder as a pillow. “You glow in the dark, you can turn invisible, and you’re super big and strong.”

“Yes.” Kringle chirped curiously. “You... not?”

“No!” Mark laughed. “I can wiggle one ear.” He tilted his head to demonstrate.

Kringle responded by twitching both of his ears.

“Show-off.” Mark chuckled. “You, uh... have any idea how long we’ll be waiting for the snow to melt?”

“A day. Maybe more.” Kringle shrugged his broad shoulders. “Snow comes. Snow goes.”

“Okay.” Mark stretched out his legs. “What do we do until then?”

“Rest. Eat.” Kringle bumped the top of Mark’s head with his nose. “Talk?”

“Yeah. We can do that. We can talk.”

Hours passed, and Mark learned everything he could about Kringle and the Santers.

Krungles? Krangals. Whatever.

They were an ancient species that had lived deep in the mountains for eons, and they’d taken to staying underground to avoid contact with people. Kringle admitted that some of the livestock damage that had been blamed on them might be true, as hungry younglings would often go for an easy meal. He, however, refused to take responsibility for any stolen goldfish.

Mark wished his stories were half as interesting as Kringle’s, but other than murdering Jon, he didn’t have much else to share. Kringle did seem genuinely curious about his life in the city and everything that came with having a job and a car. He was particularly intrigued by the idea of flying in a plane, and Mark noticed that Kringle’s fur glowed whenever he got excited.

It was cute.

Kringle was also very curious about holidays, and Mark did his best to share everything he knew about Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, and even the Winter Solstice. They talked about other holidays too, and Kringle quickly developed a fascination with the Easter bunny. He kept asking how big the Easter bunny was, how well fed he might be, and if it would be possible to catch him. Trying to explain that the

Easter bunny wasn't real did little to deter Kringle, and Kringle said he would be looking for him that spring.

Mark couldn't be sure, but he was pretty confident Kringle wanted to eat the Easter bunny.

They circled back to the topic of Christmas, and Kringle was intrigued by decorating the tree and the exchanging of presents. Mark attempted to share that this time of year was special to a lot of different faiths, and he personally thought of Christmas as more of an idea than a real holiday. It was a special time for sharing laughter and joy, to be with loved ones —

“And presents,” Kringle interrupted.

“Yes.” Mark laughed. “And presents.”

They talked until Mark was drifting off to sleep again, and he slept hard. When he woke up, he had no idea how long he'd been out, though he did feel well rested. His ankle still hurt horribly, but he needed to go use the cave toilet.

He was willing to ask Kringle for a lot of things, but not *that*.

Kringle was still sleeping, and Mark carefully wiggled out of his hold. He crawled toward the wall so he could handle his business and then head back to the nest. The cave's temperature was actually quite warm now, and Mark decided to take off his coat. He didn't want to get too hot when he returned to cuddling with Kringle.

As he limped over, he paused to watch Kringle sleeping.

The last twenty-four hours had been pretty magical.

Yes, terrifying.

Yes, also stressful and painful and agonizing at times.

He wasn't even sure that it had only been a day. It could be closer to two or three by now, but the amount of time didn't matter so much as the quality of those hours had been so great.

He couldn't remember the last time anyone had listened to him, really listened to him, and been so attentive and respectful.

Mark's heart fluttered, and he smiled.

Wait.

No.

He was hot for the Santer.

Well, not exactly. He was hot for *Kringle*, the gentle creature he'd gotten closer to over the course of this deranged adventure. Kringle's kind nature and eager curiosity were so endearing, and Mark definitely thought those big, strong paws of his were pretty alluring. He wanted to know what they'd feel like dragging over his bare skin, and he was definitely curious about that thick co—

Shit. No!

Mark limped back into the nest, trying to curtail his demented fantasy. The snow would be gone soon, and Mark would go home. It was hard to imagine not seeing Kringle again, and it made him wonder what the future would hold if he wanted to nurture their blossoming friendship.

Could Mark come back and visit? Was that safe? Or would it inadvertently risk drawing too much attention to Kringle's home?

Kringle could turn invisible, but...

Mark sighed as he lay back down next to Kringle. The safest thing for both of them would be for Mark to forget this ever happened. He didn't want Kringle to be in danger because of him, and the best way to make sure his existence stayed a secret was to pretend he didn't exist. Mark's rescuers would certainly have questions for him, including how he'd survived out in the cold, and he needed to come up with some kind of story.

Maybe he could say it was Christmas magic.

The thought made him snort, and he wrapped his arm around Kringle's thick waist. His heart fluttered as Kringle's paws drew him in close, and a flash of heat unexpectedly lit up his loins.

Shit.

That needed to stop right now.

It was the stress, the anxiety, the danger, the warmth of Kringle's powerful body, the silky slide of his fur...

Shit.

Mark inhaled and tried to banish his perversion.

It was much easier to feel Kringle's claws since he'd taken off his coat, each sharp point catching the sweater he'd been wearing beneath it. His face was hot now, and he debated taking the sweater off.

No, that was a bad idea.

He needed to keep clothes on. Not take anymore off.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

Mark's dick was hard now.

Fantastic.

He sighed, and it must have been loud because Kringle stirred.

"Mark?" Kringle asked, his voice hoarse with sleep.

Mark tensed, trying to take stock of where exactly his body was in relation to Kringle's. They were holding one another and their chests were flush, but Mark's hips were drawn back enough so that Kringle shouldn't notice the current situation.

"Morning. Evening. Hi." Mark cleared his throat.

Kringle's fur glowed a little, and he purred. "Hello."

That deep purring didn't do Mark's dick any favors, and he closed his eyes. "Sorry. Just woke up to use the cave toilet and, uh, I'm gonna try to nap."

"Oh." Kringle sniffed the air, and he grunted. "Mate?"

"What?"

"You smell..." Kringle nosed along Mark's cheek and then down into the crook of his neck. His claws dug into Mark's sweater, and he exhaled shakily. "You smell like mate."

"I-I do?" Mark squirmed. "Heh, well, that's, uh... that's a hell of a thing to say."

"Mate." Kringle dragged Mark's hips up against his own.

Mark tensed when he felt that he was clearly not the only one aroused. Kringle's cock was hard, and Mark could feel the heat of it through his pants. He shuddered, his own dick twitching in reply. "I mean, yeah, but I, I don't think that's a good idea. I don't even know how we'd—Oh! Fuck!"

Kringle flipped Mark onto his back and climbed right on top of him, still sniffing and rubbing at his throat.

Mark grabbed Kringle's shoulders, panting. Being manhandled like that sent a hot lick of lust up his spine that fried his brain, and he couldn't get his tongue to function and spit out any protests. What came out was a moan when Kringle's cock pressed between his legs, and he pulled at Kringle's fur.

Kringle let out a growl that pricked Mark's skin with goose bumps, and he nosed down Mark's chest. "Mate?"

"Yes. Yes, I think so. I... I don't know exactly what you're —" Mark squeaked as Kringle snapped the button off his pants. "Oh *God*."

Kringle scooted lower, and Mark's skin was so hot that Kringle's cold nose felt scalding when it pressed against his stomach. Mark pulled his sweater and shirt up to give Kringle

more access, and he inhaled shakily as Kringle fumbled with his zipper.

It didn't last long beneath Kringle's powerful paws, and Mark distinctly heard it snap. The hot huff of air from Kringle's nose tickled Mark's belly, and he watched his pants vanish in a quick and determined tug,

Except he still had a boot on, and Kringle grumbled in annoyance as he paused in his divesting to remove it.

Mark's mind spun wildly, and he was both eager and terrified.

Yes, he was horny. He was absolutely horny for Kringle, though he had no clue what sex of any kind might mean for them given that they were different species. Still, hesitation muddled Mark's desire, and he groaned as Kringle finally popped off his boot and pants with a greedy growl.

"Wait, wait!" Mark pleaded.

"Yes?" Kringle tilted his head.

"D-do you have human intelligence or greater?"

Kringle grunted.

"Okay, not counting that answer, but yes." Mark cleared his throat, his cock bobbing as Kringle peeled off his underwear. "Can you talk and communicate with language? Yes. Yes, you can."

Kringle tilted his head. "What?"

"It's the Harkness test!" Mark groaned. "Just, just let me get through this. To make sure you are a sentient creature that I can have sex with."

Kringle pressed his nose to Mark's hip and purred, the vibrations trembling through Mark's core.

"Ar-are you of sexual maturity for your species?" Mark stammered.

“Matur-ty?” Kringle struggled to repeat the word.

“Have you mated before?”

“Yes. But not...” Kringle’s brow wrinkled. “Not for a very long time.”

“But you’re old enough? Right?”

“Very old.”

“Okay, good.” Mark hugged Kringle close, seeking his warmth as the cool cave air made him shiver. “Then let’s fucking do this.”

Kringle bared his teeth in a snarl, and he ducked his head to go right for Mark’s cock.

“Shit!” Mark’s hips bucked as Kringle sucked his dick into his mouth in one quick, hungry slurp. He’d prepared himself for the sharp press of teeth, but there was nothing but slick, pulsating heat. His eyes rolled back and he sobbed from the instant increase in pressure, gasping, “Easy! Easy! Fuck!”

Kringle popped off with a confused grunt. “No?”

“No, no, no!” Mark waved his hands. “It was good. It was very, very good. Just, uh, slow. Can we do slow? Slow. Go *slow*. Please.”

Kringle’s lips curled back as if he was pouting, but he lapped at Mark’s cock at a much more reserved pace. His tongue felt vaguely rough, the way a cat’s would be, and it was wide and incredibly thick.

Mark petted the top of Kringle’s head, lifting his hips to chase his tongue. The unique texture was incredible, and he wanted more. “Yeah, just like that. Just like that.”

Kringle made that purring sound again, licking Mark from his balls up to the head of his dick in long, greedy laps. He licked until Mark was whimpering, and then he took Mark’s dick back into his mouth to gently suck him.

“Ah... God.” Mark groaned.

Kringle parted Mark's thighs, and something tickled his groin.

Mark snapped his head up to see what it was, and he gasped when he realized it was Kringle's tail. "O-oh. Tail. That's your tail."

Kringle paused fellating only long enough to stick the tip of his tail into his mouth. Once it was slick, he pushed it right against Mark's hole to spread his saliva. "There. Mate."

"Is, is that gonna work?" Mark squirmed.

"Yes." Kringle suckled Mark's cock noisily.

"Look, because in my experience, spit is terrible lube and—oh!" Mark jerked as the tip of Kringle's tail pressed in. It was barely as thick as a finger, but the sudden pressure was still a shock. The slick quality of Kringle's saliva was also a surprise, though it was a welcome one. "Okay, I-I think this will work."

Kringle purred.

Mark closed his eyes for a moment to drink in the sensations of Kringle's hot mouth and slippery tail. The heat was searing, the pressure tight, and he let himself surrender to it. He hadn't had a partner in quite some time, much less one that was so attentive, and it was nice to be serviced.

Serviced by the Santer—ha.

Mark groaned as Kringle's tail pressed deeper, though the stretch was smooth, no doubt thanks to the tapered shape of it. He felt not the slightest discomfort, and the pleasure was sweet. Kringle's tail filled him until his breath caught, and the patient, wet suction of his mouth around Mark's dick sent zings of electricity right into Mark's very core.

Here he was, stranded in an underground cave with a monster, and he was having the absolute best time. Any concerns or worries he had about escaping had vanished, and his only focus was holding on to this blissful feeling for as long as possible.

The air was warm, charged somehow, and Mark forgot that they were snowed in. Winter had ceased to exist within these walls as the brewing simmer felt like summer's sunshine pouring in all around him. The magic of coupling with a beast hadn't been lost on Mark either, and he stared at Kringle in complete awe.

God, it was *good*.

It was so damn good.

Only a few days ago, he had thought the Santer was nothing more than a myth. Now Kringle was here in worship between Mark's thighs, coaxing out the most fervent pleas from Mark's lips.

Pleas for more, harder, faster, then slower, for anything, anything at all, but please never stop—

Kringle stopped.

“Ah!” Mark grunted. “What is it?”

“Mate.” Kringle crawled up Mark's body, his fur glowing brightly. “Yes?”

“Yes?” Mark looked down and saw Kringle's erect cock.

It was definitely big, though not as ridiculously proportionate as it could have been given Kringle's enormous size. It was still impressive, looking much like a human's cock except it was pointed and emerging from a furry sheath.

“Can I...?” Mark reached for it, but he hesitated.

“Yes.” Kringle nosed Mark's cheek. “Please.”

Mark slid his fingers down the shaft of Kringle's cock, taking in the feel of it. It was smooth, wet, and feverishly hot to the touch. He could barely close his hand around it, and he guided it to his hole, stroking steadily.

“Mark...” Kringle breathed out his name in a low growl, and he grazed his teeth over Mark's shoulder.

“Feel good?”

“Yes.”

Mark rubbed the tip of Kringle’s cock against his ass. He spread his legs to frame Kringle’s wide hips, trying to be mindful of his ankle.

As if sensing his apprehension, Kringle grabbed Mark’s calf on that side to support his leg. His giant claws easily wrapped all the way around and squeezed gently as he urged, “Yes. *Mate.*”

“Mate,” Mark whispered, pushing Kringle’s cock in. The first taste of penetration stole his breath away, and his groan joined Kringle’s in a chorus that echoed through the cave. “F-fuck.”

Kringle tensed, and his hips rocked forward a fraction of an inch. He seemed to understand his size and strength, and he was clearly taking care not to hurt Mark. He rubbed and licked Mark’s shoulder as he slid his arm beneath him to cradle him close. “Mate.”

“Yup. Mate. That’s me.” Mark was nearly giddy when Kringle thrust again, and he braced himself on Kringle’s chest. He groaned as his body swallowed up Kringle’s thick cock, and he let his legs ease apart to take him deeper. “Oh, f-fuck.”

Everything about this moment was exquisite, from the bulging press of Kringle’s dick to the teasing prick of his claws. Kringle hugged Mark closer, and it was like luxuriating in a warm, velvety soft cloud. Mark stroked Kringle’s fur as Kringle thrust again, pumping his hips in a hypnotic rhythm that left Mark breathless and moaning.

“More,” Mark pleaded.

“More?” Kringle echoed breathlessly.

“Yes, please. Please, please!” Mark cried out when Kringle slammed into him, and his vision fuzzed over with little stars. “Holy *shit.*”

“Mark?” Kringle sounded worried, and he froze.

“No! It’s good! So good!” Mark peppered Kringle’s cheek and neck with kisses. “Please. Again, do it again.”

A low roar rumbled from the back of Kringle’s throat, and the sound echoed in the small space. He clung to Mark, fucking him as forcefully as before with heavy slams, each punctuated with a deep growl.

Mark took it all with delighted moans, though he became keenly aware that the base of Kringle’s cock was swelling. It prevented Kringle’s full length from penetrating him, and Mark missed its depth immediately.

“What’s that?” Mark groaned. “What’s happening?”

“Knot.” Kringle’s teeth danced over Mark’s skin.

Mark was confident there was a lot implied in that simple word that he didn’t understand, but he didn’t want to stop. Not when the pressure was so sweet, the pounding was choking out the sweet whimpers from the back of his throat, and it was everything he could do to hold on for the most incredible fucking of his entire life.

The strange bulging in Kringle’s cock felt like it was getting even bigger and then—pop, it pushed inside of Mark’s body and kept Kringle from pulling out.

Mark cried out, blown away by the new stretch and tight fit, and he shuddered as he realized Kringle was coming inside of him. The hot rush of his load was another incredible sensation, a volume that no mere man could ever hope to produce, and the sudden increase in fullness made Mark’s breath catch.

Kringle’s fur lit up so brightly that it illuminated the entire cave, and Mark had to squint to shield his eyes from its intense glow. Mark arched up, forcing the knot to pull harder, and he rubbed his cock against Kringle’s fur. He inhaled sharply, tensed, and he let out a broken whimper as he came. His heartbeat roared in his ears like a thunderstorm, booming and

endlessly fierce, and he was intimately aware of each frantic pulse of come painting Kringle's soft fur.

Even after his cock was spent, his body still twitched as if it hadn't realized his climax was over. He didn't know what to do with himself except to ride it out, grinding down on Kringle's cock as shudders continued to radiate from his core to his fingertips and toes. His face was scalding hot, his mouth dry, and his eyes blurred with tears.

Kringle cradled him tenderly, his voice hoarse as he murmured, "Mate."

"Mate," Mark agreed, choking out a small laugh.

"Good?" Kringle asked, and Mark swore he sounded shy.

"Very good." Mark wished he was better with words, as good was simply not adequate for describing what had just happened. "It was amazing. Fucking amazing."

"Like Christmas?" Kringle perked up.

"Yes." Mark laughed. "Just like Christmas." He wiggled his hips slightly. "Okay, but what is that exactly? Your knot?"

"Knot." Kringle peeked down between them. "No?"

"No." Mark swept his hands through his sweaty hair. "Humans don't have knots."

"Oh." Kringle seemed confused. "Ask for Christmas?"

"I just might."

They held each other and basked in the searing glow until Kringle's knot went down. Once they could separate, Kringle took it upon himself to lick Mark clean, purring all the while. He also displayed impressive flexibility by licking himself clean, and Mark was mesmerized, not to mention a tad envious.

"Rest?" Kringle asked. "Rest now?"

“Yes.” Mark groaned and stretched lazily. “Lots and lots of rest.”

Kringle seemed satisfied that they were both clean now, and he helped Mark get dressed. He enjoyed playing with the zipper of Mark’s coat, but ultimately released it so Mark could zip up. The heat they’d created earlier had dimmed somewhat, and Mark was eager to curl up in Kringle’s arms for warmth.

Kringle’s fur remained alight with a soft glow, and Mark drifted off listening to his sweet purring.

He felt good, *damn* good, and he had never felt so wrung out before in his entire life. His very bones were heavy with exhaustion, and he barely had a moment to bask in the glory of what they’d shared before sleep took him.

Getting fucked by a monster was apparently quite the workout.

Mark woke up to Kringle gently nudging him, and he grumbled in reply. He couldn’t tell if it was actually morning or not, but it definitely felt like it was too damn early to be awake. “Good morning, Kringle. I think.”

“Snow gone,” Kringle said quietly, curling around Mark and hugging him tight.

“Oh. Okay.” Mark didn’t want to say anything else.

If the snow was gone, that meant Mark could leave...

And he didn’t want to.

The memories of what they’d shared flooded over him in a visceral wave that tightened his chest and made it hard to breathe. He knew they hadn’t known each other very long and he’d probably lost his mind, but this couldn’t be the end. He had no idea how being with a monster would work or even if it could, but he wasn’t ready to give up what could be the start of something truly magical.

“Home?” Kringle pressed.

“I...” Mark’s eyes prickled with tears. “I really don’t want to go.”

“Yes.” Kringle sighed. “But home. You home.” He looked up at the cave ceiling. “This my home.”

“What if I stayed?” Mark blurted out.

Kringle snorted. “No stay.”

“Why?” Mark pushed Kringle away. “Why can’t I?”

“Men.” Kringle nodded toward the tunnel. “They come.”

“Looking for me, you mean? Come on. They’ll never find this place!”

“You did.”

Mark scowled. “Okay, yes, but hear me out! I could stay here with you! They’ll give up eventually and—”

“No.” Kringle tried to reach for Mark again. “Not safe.”

Mark pushed Kringle again, his anger taking him by surprise. “This is bullshit! You *mate* with me and now you’re kicking me out the second you can? That’s it?”

Kringle’s expression grew saddened. “Not safe.”

“You’re an asshole!” Mark was ashamed for giving himself to Kringle now, and everything they’d shared clung to his skin like a sticky film of filth. He fought to stand, snapping, “Fine! You got what you wanted, so you’re getting rid of me—”

“Christmas!” Kringle pleaded, standing now to help steady Mark as he teetered. “Presents, yes? Kringle give present—”

“Yeah, great. Orgasms are so thoughtful.”

Kringle gestured between them. “No! *Christmas*, Kringle give presents—”

“Are you trying to say you mated with me because you were feeling the holiday spirit? Are you fucking serious right now?” Mark scoffed disgustedly. “Just stop! Please, just fucking

stop.” He hated that he needed to lean on Kringle or else he’d fall over. “Stop.”

Kringle’s ears drooped, and he nodded. “Yes. Stop now. Christmas.”

“Just take me back.” Mark couldn’t even look at Kringle. “Now.”

Kringle swept Mark up into his arms, and Mark closed his eyes to make sure he wasn’t tempted to sneak any last peeks. He could still feel the ache in his body echoing the memory of Kringle inside of him, but he refused to cry. This was the final dip of the horrific roller coaster, and he had to get off the ride now.

He had to forget about Kringle.

As angry as he was, Mark still didn’t want to see any harm come to Kringle, and he vowed to say nothing of his time here. It only seemed to take Kringle a few seconds to carry Mark out of the cave and up out of the hole, and he gently laid him down on the ground a few yards away near some tree roots.

Probably the same stupid roots that Mark had tripped over before.

Mark finally looked at Kringle just as he turned invisible, and he said, “Thank you. For... saving me. I...” He swallowed thickly, forcing down a mix of equal parts regret and bile. “I wish I could have stayed.”

There was a faint shimmer of blue in the air, no doubt a tease of Kringle’s glowing fur somehow showing through his invisibility. “Me too.” He sighed. “Christmas, Mark.”

“*Merry* Christmas,” Mark corrected. “You say Merry Christmas. Or Happy Holidays. But be careful.” He offered a strained smile. “That one pisses some people off.”

The shimmer vanished, and there was only silence.

Mark watched the ground and the residual patches of snow for any sign of Kringle's movement. He saw nothing and assumed Kringle probably jumped directly back into the hole. He hugged himself, barking out a short sob.

That was it.

It was over.

The Santer had saved him, mated with him, and then abandoned him.

Why couldn't Kringle have just eaten him?

That might have hurt less.

When the search party found Mark, it was easy to mask the true reason for his sorrow. After all, he'd apparently been missing for three days and presumed dead or dying from exposure to the elements. He said nothing about his miraculous savior and mumbled his way through a brief explanation of getting lost while looking for Lionel—who, by the way, was totally fine and had snuck back to his car where no one could see him to enjoy some brandy.

Turns out Lionel was actually part of his own search effort, but he teamed up with volunteers who didn't know who he was and he was too drunk to realize he was searching for himself.

Mark almost laughed.

At the hospital, the doctor was very concerned about the big scratches she found around Mark's hips and back, and he fibbed and said he must have been injured during a small tumble through some branches.

She clearly didn't believe him, but she didn't ask any other questions.

Perhaps she assumed the true cause was something embarrassing.

The truth was certainly humiliating, and Mark figured he was giving off a pretty pathetic vibe. Of course, there was no way the doctor suspected he was ashamed because he'd been rejected by the Santer after sleeping with him.

His ankle was badly sprained with no signs of tearing or breaks, so he wouldn't need any surgery. He had crutches and several rounds of physical therapy to look forward to, and he'd be out of work through the New Year. His hospital room was flooded with flowers, balloons, and all sorts of gifts from strangers who'd heard about his story on the news.

Because yes, of course, the poor idiot who went missing for three days looking for a drunk Santa Claus rock climber was newsworthy.

While Mark appreciated the kindness and insisted on donating all of it, each new gift stung and he grew to resent them.

He didn't want more flowers or candy.

He wanted Kringle back.

Mark was discharged from the hospital and spent the days counting down to Christmas in a miserable funk. He put off his family and friends as much as he could, often citing his exhaustion and pain from his ordeal in the wilderness. Everyone was very gracious, but Mark did feel bad for lying to them. His sprained ankle wasn't the injury that was giving him so much grief.

It was his broken heart.

He knew three days was a very short amount of time to care about someone so much, but the volume of affection he felt for Kringle was staggering.

Sometimes Mark wished he'd just stayed at home that day.

He'd instantly regret the thought, deciding that any moment spent with Kringle was worth the ache in his chest. He wouldn't trade their time together for anything, no matter how

brief it was, though he did wish it had ended differently. He'd considered returning to the cave, but he didn't think he could handle being rejected again.

The police came by to question Mark about Jon's disappearance, but he quickly realized he didn't have anything to worry about. Someone else at the bank had discovered Jon's theft and reported it. The working theory was that Jon had fled the country with the money, and they were asking Mark if he had any idea where he might have run to.

Mark said he hadn't seen him since they went camping, and that at least wasn't a complete lie. Technically, the last time he'd seen Job was down in the cave with the Santer dragging his corpse around, but he wasn't about to say that.

The police thanked him for his time and left.

That was it.

Mark ran through multiple scenarios in his mind, like the police coming back to ask more questions about the camping trip, but he at least knew one thing for certain:

There was no way they'd ever find the body.

Christmas Eve arrived, and Mark canceled plans with his family. He wasn't in the mood for company, parking himself on the couch with some heavily spiked eggnog to watch holiday movies and try to pass out. He put his pre-lit fake tree up about a week ago but hadn't bothered to decorate it.

With only the television and tree lights on, his tiny living room felt warm and cozy. It reminded him of being back in the cave. He tried not to think about that, and he let his vision focus on the colorful lights. He'd always preferred to have multicolored tree lights above all else, but now the blue ones made him think of Kringle's soft glow. Soon, his time with the Santer was all he could think about, and he let a few tears slip.

He looked at his phone.

It was after midnight.

Merry Christmas.

Too bad Santa Claus wouldn't be bringing him the one present he so desperately wanted.

Mark closed his eyes, trying to fall asleep and think of a world where the Santer was another stupid myth like Santa Claus and—

Thwump.

Crickkk.

Thwump.

His front door had just opened and then closed again.

Was it the police?

Had they found his backpack with the murder weapon and put the clues together? Had they somehow managed to find Jon's corpse in spite of it being hidden down in a cave with a mythical monster?

Shit!

“What the fuck?” Mark bolted up and into action, grabbing the closest weapon—the TV remote. He could hear footsteps, heavy ones, and they were getting closer.

And yet, he couldn't see anything...

He dared to hope.

“Kringle?” Mark whispered as he lowered the remote.

The air shimmered, and Kringle appeared. He was holding a lumpy box wrapped in newspaper. His tail wagged, and he smiled. “Christmas, Mark!”

Mark dropped the remote and bolted over to jump on Kringle, wrapping his arms around his neck. “Kringle!”

There was a heavy whump as Kringle dropped the present, and he crushed Mark against his chest. He rubbed and sniffed Mark's hair, murmuring, “Mark.”

Mark didn't know when he'd started crying, but he let it all out, sobbing into Kringle's soft fur. He had really thought he'd never see this gorgeous monster again, and he still couldn't quite believe he was here. He clung to Kringle as if he might disappear if he dared loosen up his grip for a second.

Kringle purred, rocking Mark gently. "Christmas, Mark."

"Yes, it's Christmas." Mark laughed. He took a few deep breaths to steady himself and get his tears under control. He pulled back so he could look at Kringle's face, and he petted his ears and the sides of his face. "What are you doing here? How, how did you even find me?"

"Mate." Kringle sniffed the air. "Find. Present."

Mark thought back to what Kringle had told him in the cave, and he scrunched up his nose. "Were you... Were you trying to tell me that you'd come at Christmas?"

"Yes!" Kringle lit up. "Christmas safe. Men gone."

"*Shit.*" Mark grimaced as realization dawned on him. "You wanted to wait until the people cleared out from the search. When it would be safe. You weren't... You weren't just dumping me?"

"No!" Kringle shook his head, and he pressed his nose to Mark's brow. "*Mate.*"

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I'm so fucking dumb—"

"No." Kringle pressed his mouth to Mark's cheek. "Not dumb. Mine."

Mark blushed, and he kissed Kringle's snout. "Thank you."

"Present!" Kringle bounced excitedly, keeping one arm around Mark as he kneeled down to grab the box. He sat right on the ground with Mark in his lap, and he handed him the box. "Present now. Christmas."

"You got me a present?" Mark laughed in delight. Whatever it was, it was fairly heavy.

“Open. Open now.” Kringle nudged Mark’s shoulder.

“Okay, okay.” Mark chuckled as he tore away the paper. He opened the box to find a very large rock and several packs of ramen. He assumed the rock was from the cave, and the ramen was all the same chicken flavor he’d eaten while he was down there. “Wow. Thank you, Kringle.”

“Like?” Kringle asked shyly.

“Yes. It’s a beautiful rock, and you know how much I love ramen.” Mark laughed again as he hugged Kringle. “Wait! Shit!” He frowned. “I don’t have anything for you. I really didn’t think I was going to see you again.”

“No.” Kringle beamed. “You.” He poked Mark’s chest. “Present.”

Mark blushed. “That... that might be the nicest thing anyone’s ever said to me. This might actually be the best Christmas I’ve ever had. Thank you. For everything.”

Kringle purred and cuddled Mark close. “Mine. Mate. My present.”

“Yours.” Mark sighed happily. “I have no idea how this is going to work, but we’re going to make it work. I promise. I’ll never doubt you again. I want you. End of story.”

“Yes.” Kringle ran his claws through Mark’s hair adoringly. “Want you too.”

Mark smiled. “Merry Christmas, Kringle.”

“Christmas, Mark.”

“Merry.”

“No. *Mark*. Not Merry.”

“Whatever.”

ABOUT K.L. HIERS

K.L. “Kat” Hiers is an embalmer, restorative artist, and queer writer. Licensed in both funeral directing and funeral service, they worked in the death industry for nearly a decade. Their first love was always telling stories, and they have been writing for over twenty years, penning their very first book at just eight years old. Publishers generally do not accept manuscripts in Hello Kitty notebooks, however, but they never gave up.

Following the success of their first novel, *Cold Hard Cash*, they now enjoy writing professionally, focusing on spinning tales of sultry passion, exotic worlds, and emotional journeys. They love attending horror movie conventions and indulging in cosplay of their favorite characters. They live in Zebulon, NC, with their family, including their children, some of whom have paws and a few that only pretend to because they think it's cute.

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THE GIFT



Alexis Jane

Will has a plan. A secluded getaway, a college professor who can't resist him, and a sadistic streak a mile wide. On paper, it's the perfect winter break, especially after he'd meticulously mapped out his every fantasy down to the minute. But when his partner in crime shows up ahead of schedule and starts to improvise, Will has to scramble to keep his carefully crafted Christmas adventure from unraveling faster than a hastily wrapped present under the tree.

This is a Dark/Horror MM Romance.

CW - gore, murder, dubcon, noncon, torture, deception, infidelity, food, alcohol, mentions of drug use, mentions of suicide, inappropriate relationship.

“It’s beautiful out here.”

Will smiled but kept his baby blues on the road, hands at ten and two. As much as he wanted to look over at his passenger, maybe say something cheesy and immature like *The view is pretty good in here too* while maintaining eye contact long enough for Rowan to blush and look down at his lap, the dirt track down to the lake house was tricky even without the ice and first dusting of snow.

“I didn’t realize it was going to be so remote.”

That had Will smiling even wider. At least on the inside. It would have given the game away to let his excitement show too much. He stifled his glee as best he could, desperate to leave off the grand reveal as long as possible.

“I’m pretty sure I mentioned it.”

Rowan made the teasing sound that was his habit when he was disagreeing but wanted to sound as if he wasn’t too old to take a joke. “You said *private*. And, I believe, *cozy*.” His voice cracked a little as Will’s old two-door Ford bumped over a knot of exposed tree roots which had invaded what passed for a road.

“It is.” Will glanced over, gratified when he saw the tension around Rowan’s dark eyes and something like apprehension that was making his lips press together. “So cozy. And the view is worth it. And besides, didn’t you say you wanted to get away?”

“Yes. Yes, I suppose I did.”

They both knew it was more than that. More than simply craving a vacation. They needed to go someplace where they wouldn’t be spotted together, where no one knew them, where they could hold hands without people asking questions or adding two and two and getting that the college professor was

fucking a student. Even if Will was twenty-one no one was going to prison over it.

It was enough that Rowan didn't want to lose his job and it had taken Will three full months to persuade him they could get away with sneaking around, that Will was worth it, that his body was ready and that Rowan should get in a car with Will without telling another soul where he was going or who he was with.

Promising Rowan that Will's virginity would be his Christmas gift to him finally did the trick. It wouldn't be difficult to pretend it was his first time. He'd done it before with a decent amount of success. And Rowan was a nice guy so Will was sure he would make it good for him, or be convincing at least. With a little luck, he'd put on a performance that would hook Rowan a little longer, or at least long enough for the main event.

The car broke through the tree line, and Rowan let out a soft "Wow," as the cabin came into view. The listing had said 'cabin' anyway, although it looked pretty palatial compared to some of the places Will had stayed in the past. It had two stories that rose above them, as well as one cut into the cliff below. This opened to a small cove with a firepit and jetty out to the water, a wraparound deck on the ground-level floor overlooking the wide expanse of lake, and a view of the mountains on the other side. There wasn't a soul in sight for miles. No boats on the water, only the birds in the sky and Will's burning anticipation for company.

He pulled up outside the front door so they could unload their bags and the box of supplies he'd brought with him. Letting out a deep sigh, he smiled over at Rowan, who seemed as if he'd relaxed a little, although his eyes were fixed on the house beside them. "So. What do you think?"

"This place is amazing." Rowan brushed his fingers through his thick dark hair, pushing a few stray strands away from his face. "How long has your family had it?"

“Oh, we’ve been coming here as long as I can remember.” Will unclipped his seat belt, wondering how much he should embellish. “Mom always told me Dad won it in a poker game from an old business partner, but I think she was making that up.”

“And they won’t mind us using it?”

Will smiled at the implied *we won’t get caught, will we?* Unable to put it off any longer, he stretched over the center console to whisper, “They won’t ever know we were here,” against Rowan’s lips before taking them, pressing hard, his tongue impatiently seeking entrance, wanting to taste the uncertainty and desperation that spilled from Rowan’s mouth every time they were together like this.

At first, Rowan kissed him back the way he always did—reluctant, cautious, as if he were the virgin needing to be wooed and cajoled into letting Will slide his fingers under the edge of his panties, despite how wet and desperate Rowan was for him.

Will fucking loved it, loved the work, loved the effort of seduction. It wasn’t as if he hadn’t done this sort of thing before, taken men who wouldn’t have dared look at him twice and ended up with them on their knees begging for him, but Rowan was going to be a first. Not his first fuck or even the first man he’d broken. He was going to be far more special than that.

It took Will by surprise when Rowan suddenly surged forward, more assertive than he’d ever been, mouthing desperately at him, licking into Will’s mouth for a change, groaning and pulling him closer. He didn’t hate getting a taste of all Rowan’s years of experience, kissing back with the same intensity until Rowan pulled away as suddenly as he’d started, glancing away and wiping his mouth.

“Sorry. Sorry, I...”

“Hey.” Will cupped Rowan’s cheek and forced him to look back. “Don’t be sorry. You know how I feel about you. You know I—” He found the space where those three little words should be was always more effective than saying them out loud, so he sighed instead. “It’s why we’re here, right? So we can be ourselves. Not be afraid.”

“I know.” Rowan lay his hand over Will’s and nodded. “I guess I just... Shall we go inside? Where it’s warmer?”

It sounded like a good idea even if the car was plenty warm enough. It was small and cramped and hardly conducive to seduction. As they got out and pulled their stuff from the back seat, a light dusting of snow started to fall. Rowan looked up at the gray sky, a few flakes landing on his lashes and in his dark hair, and for a second Will felt a little regret that what was between them wasn’t going to last much longer.

“You think it’ll snow much more?”

Will shrugged and hoisted his gym bag onto his shoulder. “Maybe. Why? Worried we’ll get snowed in?”

Rowan laughed. “You genuinely think your car can make it back up that track if we do?”

“I could think of worse things than spending the winter here with you.” Will said it quietly, almost a whisper. For once, it wasn’t a calculated response. He really did think it would be nice to have all the time in the world to spend with Rowan, able to go slow, not rush, make him suffer week after week and not the short few days he had planned. As much as the idea warmed him, he also felt a little sad that it could only ever be wishful thinking on his part.

It hurt more when he saw a similar expression playing out on Rowan’s face. “Another time?”

“Yeah,” Will replied as he pulled the key from his pocket. “Another time.”

The first sign something wasn't right was that the door to the cabin was unlocked. For a second, Will thought he'd brought the wrong key as it didn't feel right in the lock, but when he tried the handle, the door swung open. If anything was out of place, he wouldn't have known it, having never stepped in the building before. Thankfully, the online listing had up-to-date pictures, so he managed to give Rowan a quick tour of the living area and kitchen they had walked into. He then took him upstairs to the master suite to dump their bags and make out a little on the bed. It might have turned into more but Rowan broke the mood far too soon, suddenly suggesting they get the groceries from the car before it started to get dark.

"Uh," Will groaned as he rolled away from him. "You're far too sensible. Can't I suck your cock first?"

Rowan blushed like he always did whenever Will said anything slightly lewd, although the small smile that crept onto his face was a dead giveaway that he would very much like for Will to do exactly that. "We've been driving for four hours. I'd kinda like to take a shower, eat, and then..."

"And then...?" Will waggled his eyebrows in a way he knew was ridiculous and relished in the chuckle it produced as Rowan poked and prodded him to stand.

They were still joking around as they came down the stairs, although when Rowan suddenly froze on the spot, his face going blank with shock, Will thought he might have misstepped. That was until he caught up and spotted what had Rowan so spooked.

"I thought I heard voices."

Someone stood in the middle of the room, wearing sweats and a ratty old college hoodie, feet clad in thick socks which had seen better days and a bowl of cereal in one hand. The other was midway to his mouth, milk dripping from the soggy flakes and splashing in the bowl.

“Lewis? What the hell?”

Lewis grinned and shoved the spoonful into his mouth, not bothering to swallow it before saying, “I could say the same thing.” The words were meant for Will, but once his gaze slid over to where Rowan was half-hidden behind him, Lewis’s expression lit up. “And who is this?”

Will let out a deep sigh. This wasn’t exactly how he had seen his precious days away playing out but it wasn’t as if he couldn’t improvise in a pinch. “This is Rowan. He’s a friend.”

“Friend. Right.” Lewis sounded as if Will thought he was an idiot.

Will ignored him, turning to Rowan instead. “This is Lewis. My brother.”

Rowan didn’t seem to be able to tear his eyes away from their intruder. “I didn’t know you had a brother?”

“Stepbrother,” Lewis chimed in. “Estranged.”

“You’re not estranged,” Will scoffed, moving to the kitchen to get a glass of water. They looked enough alike, both a similar shade of blond with the same slightly angular features, for most people to accept it. “You’re just an asshole.”

Lewis acted unbothered, managing to drop down into one of the sofa chairs without spilling a drop from his bowl. “Whatever. I thought you would be headed back home, being that it’s Christmas and all.”

“I have the flu, obviously. I’m bed-bound and staying in the dorm so I don’t infect Grandma.” Taking a large gulp, he turned and leaned back against the kitchen counter. “What’s your excuse?”

“Like you said.” Lewis smirked. “I’m an asshole.”

In the moment, Will couldn’t have agreed more, that was until he realized the whole time they had been speaking, Rowan hadn’t looked away from Lewis once. Then he had a

whole bunch of other feelings. “Well, it’s been lovely seeing you. But as you can see, I kinda have plans.”

“Is that his nickname or something? Plans?” Lewis laughed at his own joke, then turned to look up at Rowan, who was still standing on the last step of the stairs. “Maybe I’d like to have plans myself.”

“If I wasn’t clear, you’re going to have to make your own someplace else.” Will slammed his glass down on the table and it seemed to jolt Rowan from his fixation.

“Maybe I should go—”

“No.” Will didn’t shout but he could feel himself starting to lose control. Taking a breath helped. The fact Rowan listened to him when Will suggested, “Why don’t you go take that shower while I sort this out? I can get the groceries,” helped even more.

It didn’t go unnoticed that Lewis tracked every second of Rowan’s movement until he disappeared from view. As soon as Will was sure Rowan was out of earshot as well as sight, he stormed across the room.

Lewis had the presence of mind to put down his cereal before Will had a chance to slap it out of his hand. Anyone else would have been at a disadvantage but Lewis was quick to defend himself when Will launched his attack. With one swift movement, Lewis managed to knock him down and pin him to the floor with his overly muscled physique before Will could even get a scrappy punch in.

Lewis chuckled at Will’s furious expression, making Will boil with anger. Which was probably why Lewis did it.

“Brother?” Lewis asked. “Seriously, that’s the best you could come up with?”

“Fuck you.”

Spittle flew off Will’s lips and landed on the corner of Lewis’s mouth. His tongue flicked out to lick it up and he

hummed. “God, yes please.” His hips canted up against Will’s crotch and Will could feel Lewis was already hard. Annoyingly, his own cock decided it wanted a piece of the action too and started to strain against the inside of his underwear.

Will hissed at the friction and the unwelcome pleasure. Under normal circumstances, he would have been more than happy to indulge Lewis’s whims. It wouldn’t have been the first time Lewis had pinned him down and fucked him six ways from Sunday right before he’d been about to leave for his day job or leave to visit his real family. Will might moan about it, make excuses, and literally fight on occasion but he secretly loved it, loved how badly Lewis wanted him. Or not so secretly being that Lewis would whisper in his ear how he knew every one of Will’s dirty little thoughts and how he could make all his dreams come true. His timing couldn’t have been worse this time though.

“We can’t,” Will hissed, trying to wiggle free but only succeeding in making it easier for Lewis to get a better grip on him. “He’ll hear us.”

“He won’t.” Lewis’s forearm landed across his throat, the other hand managing to loosen Will’s fly and find its way into his underwear. The first graze of his thick fingers against Will’s sensitive head had him mewling like a virgin. “You can make a noise, baby. You know I like that.”

“Jesus fucking Christ, get off me.”

“Come on.” Lewis pressed his face into the crook of Will’s neck, his lips wet against Will’s skin as he started to slowly jack him, and whispered, “We can play happy families if you want. What do you say, baby brother? You think we can get him to play Daddy for us? Maybe watch us fuck and then help us do our homework afterward?”

Getting some leverage, Will managed to get close enough to kneeling Lewis in the balls that Lewis rolled off him laughing.

Will scrambled away, his hands quickly working to do up his jeans. “What the fuck is wrong with you?” Probably the same thing that was wrong with himself seeing that he didn’t hate the idea of a little role-play. Maybe another day they would have the chance to try it out but not right then. Rowan was going to be his first and he wanted the occasion to be something special. Nothing could go wrong. He’d planned everything too meticulously.

“And what the fuck are you even doing here? You weren’t supposed to arrive until Wednesday. I haven’t had a chance to soften him up yet.”

Lewis laughed, tipping his head back against the floor as if he was having the time of his life, then pushed himself up effortlessly to prop his back against the side of the chair he’d been sitting in. “I know. I did read the checklist.” He didn’t need to tell Will how he felt about the checklist again, only rolled his eyes. “But I couldn’t wait.”

“You’re like a child.”

“Seriously? You never snuck a peek at your presents under the tree on Christmas Eve? Never gave one a little shake or peeled back the edge of the paper to guess what was inside?”

“You’re going to scare him off.”

Lewis held up his hands and glanced around. “Where is he going to go? Lock your car keys in the safe and hide his coat and shoes in case he gets outside. I already locked all the doors and windows, so there’s a slim chance of that. The house phone is unplugged, there’s no Wi-Fi, forest to the left of us, a lake to the right, and there he is. Stuck in the middle with us.”

Lewis made it sound so easy, seemed so relaxed about the whole thing, as if it was no big deal, as if he’d done it a hundred times before. It wasn’t as if they had come up with the plan on a whim, but even after all the planning and contingencies, Will was still worried something would get fucked up. It wasn’t even that he was worried about getting

caught, but he knew how these things went for people, how it would be almost impossible to fulfill the perfect fantasy in his head. So he wanted to get close—close enough to live off the memory for a long time.

“I wanted—” Will let out a breath, feeling weirdly awkward about what he wanted, as if it was too perverted even for Lewis. “I wanted to have tonight with him. To...y’know.”

Lewis’s eyes went wide and for a second he looked about ready to laugh. To his credit he managed to get his amusement under control and his voice was almost level when he asked, “You wanted to *romance* him?” Will didn’t reply but his face must have said something, as Lewis whistled. “Wow, that’s cold, man. Okay then.”

In one lithe motion he jumped to his feet, adjusted his cock, which still looked as if he would be ready to go if Will gave him the green light, and straightened the shoulders of his hoodie. “Get yourself upstairs and do your—” He waved his hand vaguely in the direction of the stairs. “—thing. Get him all loved up or whatever. I’ll whip us up a nice family dinner so we’re fully fueled for round two.”

Will blinked. “You’re going to cook?”

Lewis seemed almost offended. “I can cook.”

“Right.”

There was a flash of something frightening that passed over Lewis’s face, not angry exactly, not cold or blank; it was almost the absence of whatever made him human, as if he was regarding him as prey, not a playmate. Will would have thought he’d imagined it, it passed so quickly, if it weren’t for the way his body reacted instinctively and left his heart racing and stomach bottomed out even after Lewis smiled again.

“Just get up there before that hunk of meat gets out of the shower.” Will did as he was told, only stopping on the stairs to look back when Lewis called out his name. “You never told me. That he was so pretty.”

Will shrugged. “Does it make a difference?”

“I suppose not.” Lewis dipped his head for a second. “You know you don’t have to go through with this if you’re not sure. I could leave right now. You could have a nice couple of days and let him go, none the wiser.”

Will smiled softly. “Are you kidding? I’ve never wanted anything more in my life.”

The shower was running when he got up to the master suite. Rowan’s clothes were neatly folded on the king-size bed, what he planned to change into laid out and ready. It looked so neat, so controlled. Will wanted nothing more than to fuck it up, throw the lot on the floor, crease the perfectly ironed shirt, rip his underwear to shreds, scrunch the clothes Rowan had been wearing in the car into a tight little roll and stuff them in his suitcase, then burn it. He was pretty sure in contrast to his own hastily stuffed gym bag, Rowan’s luggage would be immaculately packed, each of his belongings pristine and perfectly placed.

It was fascinating to Will how controlled Rowan could be. It was what had drawn him to the professor in the first place, the way he had spotted him sitting primly in the corner of the campus cafe, grading papers and sipping matcha. He’d looked ethereal amongst the bedlam of college kids. He’d been new in town, apparently, new enough not to have gotten to know anyone and nervous enough that he took his lunch on the other side of campus away from where he’d thought he might bump into any of his students. His calm but quiet voice, his effortless but controlled way of moving, never a hair out of place, never a grease stain on his shirt, never late, never standing out—only to Will maybe. And only because Will couldn’t look away. Not when he wanted to...well, fucking destroy him, if he was honest. Never in his life had Will wanted to ruin someone as much as he wanted to ruin Rowan.

It took all of sixty seconds to strip down; he hauled off his shirt and stamped his jeans into the carpet, leaving both where

they fell and heading for the bathroom. Rowan had shampoo spilling down the line of his shoulders, his hands in his hair and his back turned to the door. It actually took Will's breath away for a second, seeing him naked for the first time. He had been able to tell the guy was muscular—he'd spent enough time pushing Rowan's limits of how far and how long he would let Will's hands rove over his body when they were making out—but he had no idea he was a Greek god under all that starch. The muscles of his back were clearly defined, everything flexing as he moved, lean but firm. His ass was perfect, and his legs were worth worshiping. The effect was almost dazzling enough to distract from the patchwork of scars, marks, and bruises that were hard to miss even through the steam.

The glass shower door creaked as Will opened it, and Rowan whipped his head around as he pushed back the suds that were threatening to spill into his eyes. He seemed nervous, then relaxed a little as his eyes flicked down to where Will's cock was still hanging heavy after his tussle with Lewis. He'd started to go soft but when he caught sight of what Rowan was packing, his dick started throbbing again.

“You scared me.” Rowan certainly didn't seem scared but Will wasn't paying much attention to his face. “Did your brother leave?”

“Did you think it was him creeping in here with you?” Will slotted himself up behind Rowan, almost groaning with pleasure at the sensation of skin on hot skin. “I saw the way he was looking at you. Is that what you were hoping?”

Rowan shuddered. “Don't even talk about it.” He pulled away, turning to rinse his hair, using one hand to wipe the water from his face. “Is he gone?”

Will shrugged and pulled Rowan closer. “He will be. He wanted us to eat together before he left.”

“We should probably—”

Rowan's move to leave the shower was easy enough to curtail. "Hold on. There's no rush. This is probably the one place he won't disturb us." Will slid his hand between them, taking hold of Rowan's dick where it hung from a thick thatch of dark hair. It was an electric experience. Will was almost giddy with it.

It wasn't the first time Will had Rowan's cock in his hand. He had managed to get Rowan to third base after a gargantuan effort on his part, but since that first time—when he'd practically had to rape the guy before he let Will put his hands down his pants—illicit bathroom blow jobs and jerking each other off in his car in a darkened parking lot had become a regular, if infrequent, occurrence. Having Rowan completely naked was new though and somehow it felt as if he was seeing him for the first time.

"We can't," Rowan whispered, half-heartedly batting him away.

"Why not?" Will kept a firm grip, slowly pumping his hand, as if Rowan's objections were only an act. Which he was fairly sure they were, given how he flushed from his chest to neck and his breath hitched with every stroke and a bead of precum oozed from his slit. "Oh my god, that is pretty. Damn it, we should have done this sooner."

"I don't wanna fuck you with him in the house."

"Who said anything about fucking?" He glanced up at Rowan through his lashes. He knew how he looked wet, knew how to work his cock-sucking lips to their best advantage even before he was on his knees. He could be irresistible if he wanted to. Case in point. "Please? Just an appetizer?"

Rowan didn't exactly agree but he didn't try to get away when Will sunk to the floor either—he only pressed his face into the crook of his elbow when Will took him into his mouth. Rowan's other hand found it's way to the back of

Will's head, and he didn't hate the way Rowan fisted his hair, half fucking his throat before he finally came with a grunt.

Will stayed on his knees, spitting his mouthful of cum into the swirling eddy of the drain and jerking off between Rowan's feet. He was a little louder than necessary when his orgasm finally erupted out of him, mostly to embarrass Rowan, but it wouldn't hurt if Lewis was listening. He wanted him to know, wanted him to squirm a little too.

"Goddammit." Rowan sounded less like he'd just come and more as if he was actually annoyed. "We shouldn't have done that. Why can I never say no to you?"

"You know why," Will said, getting to his feet, his knees only protesting a little as he ran his hands up the sides of Rowan's body to steady himself. "You don't want to. And yes, we should have."

"Your brother is downstairs."

"Cooking up a storm. He won't care what we're doing up here. Come on." He pushed Rowan's wet hair back and then trailed his fingers down the side of his face. "Don't tell me you didn't like the danger a little."

Will was really hoping this time he would see a crack in Rowan's resolve. Instead, he could practically see Rowan doubling down as he clenched his jaw. "It's not a joke, Will. I could lose my job. You could lose your scholarship... What if he tells someone? Tells your family?"

"He won't, I swear." Will didn't have any problem being sincere about that, at least. He didn't have a scholarship, or any family who would care for that matter. The scholarship thing had been Lewis's idea. He'd figured it would help to sell the story that Will had just as much to lose as Rowan and make it easier to pull him into the net of Will's scheme.

Will had already been working on Rowan when he'd run into Lewis at a party. They'd hit it off almost immediately —'hit it off' meaning that they'd spent two days holed up in

Lewis's trash pile of an apartment fucking each other's brains out and smoking enough pot to make Will think he'd lost a couple of IQ points.

He'd let slip about his little hobby sometime between Lewis eating his ass and shocking the pizza delivery guy by opening the door stark naked. Lewis had laughed for about twenty minutes and almost choked on his Meat Lover's twice before he came up with the idea that maybe Will could up his game if he was into it. Getting guys to fall for him and manipulating them into humiliating themselves was one thing, but Lewis's plan had Will practically salivating.

Of course, the plan didn't involve Lewis showing up before Will was good and ready.

"I know he comes across like a bit of an asshole but he's a good guy." For the first time, Will started to feel his control on the situation starting to slip away. He scratched around the depths of his mind to try and come up with a way to regain his foothold. "He was the only one—" He paused, ducking his head for effect. He thought the cracked voice might be enough, but he sniffed just to make sure. "He was the only one who supported me when I came out. He might be rough around the edges but he's a good guy, I promise." When he looked up, he felt nothing but relief when he saw the apologetic expression on Rowan's face. "He'll be gone after we eat and you'll never have to see him again, I swear."

Sighing, Rowan nodded. "Okay," he said, kissing Will gently on the mouth. Will had to fight back a *whoop* when Rowan added, "I trust you," as he led him out of the shower by the hand.

The only thing better was when the two of them finally made it to the bottom of the stairs and he caught a whiff of whatever Lewis had been cooking.

The round dining table appeared as if it had been set by an interior designer, not a thirty-something stoner. There were

three place settings, all with wine glasses and napkins. There was even a centerpiece, which looked particularly holiday appropriate with holly and ivy and drooping sprigs of mistletoe. There were fucking *candles*—red and gold candles in glass candlesticks.

Will didn't know where to look. It was so over the top. If it hadn't been for his stomach rumbling at the delicious smell of something Italian coming from the kitchen, he would have burst out laughing.

"Well, this looks..." Rowan sounded similarly taken aback as he came to stand at Will's shoulder.

"Romantic!" Lewis appeared from behind the kitchen counter wearing oven gloves and carrying a large plate of garlic bread to the table.

Will huffed in surprise. "When you said you were going to make dinner I thought... I don't know. You were going to heat up some ramen or something."

Lewis frowned, pulling the gloves from his hands. "Are you kidding? I thought tonight was special. I wanted to make it nice for you."

"It looks..." Rowan shook his head as if he couldn't bring himself to believe it, sounding awestruck when he said, "It looks amazing."

Lewis beamed. "Just wait 'til you taste it. I got the recipe from one of those food bloggers who write out their life story before they get to the actual recipe."

"I appreciate your sacrifice." Rowan smiled, small and shy, and Will didn't like it at all.

Clearing his throat, he started for the kitchen. "I'll get the drinks. Beer okay?"

Lewis scoffed. "Are you kidding me? I got the good stuff open next to the sink if you wanna grab it."

Something about his attitude sounded off but Will went to grab the bottle—red wine with an Italian name which sounded fancier than anything he would ever pick up—exactly as he was told.

He forgot about his discomfort when he turned back around to see Lewis helping Rowan with his chair, pushing it in behind him as if he was a fancy waiter, treating Rowan like a girl. For a moment his hackles rose when he thought he saw Lewis run his fingers across Rowan's shoulders, but he realized he didn't have anything to worry about when Rowan didn't react. If Will had done that, Rowan would have squirmed away like he did when anyone tried to touch him unexpectedly, so Lewis clearly hadn't made contact at all.

Still, Will didn't like the fact Lewis was acting as if this was his date. Calling him out on it without riling Rowan up again was going to be tricky, so he figured the path of least resistance was simply to roll with it and try to savor the anticipation for as long as he could.

Lewis had set out the three chairs so they were spaced evenly around the circular table, which annoyed Will, but he smiled as they all sat down, trying to move his seat a little closer to Rowan without Lewis noticing. Knowing him he would make a huge deal out of it. Even though Lewis wasn't his actual brother, he was doing a bit too good of a job pretending to be one.

“You know, you didn't have to go to all this trouble.” Rowan looked as if he was a little overwhelmed by the effort Lewis had gone to, and Will could kind of understand it. He was grateful in a way. To him, romance was throwing a towel over the wet spot or always carrying lube in his pocket. It didn't occur to him that Rowan would actually like to be spoiled. It was probably because Will had rarely had the time or resources to pull off something like this. His games were often short and sweet by necessity—he'd taken the instant gratification of getting what he wanted and then disappeared

like a ghost in the night. Playing the long game, with the stakes being something much higher than tears, was a different thing altogether. It did make him wonder if Lewis had played this same scam before. It hadn't occurred to him to ask, and now wasn't exactly the time to bring it up.

"It was no trouble," Lewis said, shaking out his napkin and laying it on his lap. The action made Will raise his eyebrows at him, wondering why he was acting fancy all of a sudden and not simply tucking it in his collar. But Lewis only grinned at him, picked up a plate without breaking eye contact, and served up a portion of lasagna to Rowan.

Rowan took the plate and beamed at him. "Wow, my favorite."

"Get out of here." Lewis snapped his attention to Rowan, and it was the last straw. Thankfully the table was small enough that Will was able to land a pretty good kick to Lewis's shin without having to stretch or knock over any glasses. Lewis didn't react other than to raise an eyebrow at him, but at least his attention was off Rowan. "It was the least I could do being that I kinda gatecrashed your... What is this?" He picked up his knife and waved it between Rowan and Lewis. "Study group? Romantic getaway?" He lowered his tone and leaned in. "Dirty weekend?"

"How about none of your business?" Will shot Lewis a warning look, trying to get across that he was making Rowan uncomfortable. Which was the end goal after all, but not so soon and certainly not like this. He knew Lewis thought it was stupid, but for Will, it was the build up that was the good stuff—pushing a man to a point where he would do anything, like boiling a frog, gradually increasing the temperature until any request seemed reasonable. It was insane, the things he had gotten men to do. But there was a method to it, a system. One that Lewis didn't give a fuck about apparently.

"Come on. What kind of a big brother would I be if I didn't look out for you?" Lewis seemed almost sincere. If Will

wasn't in on it, he would have completely bought it, just as Rowan seemingly did.

"You don't have anything to worry about," Rowan said, calm in a way that had Will surprised, given how nervous he'd been earlier. "I'm definitely a one-man kinda guy."

Something about the answer made Lewis pause, and he swallowed hard, looking as close to emotional as Will had ever seen him. "Well, that's good. I'm glad to hear it."

After that Lewis seemed to hunch over, stabbing his food and frowning down at his plate. Rowan didn't seem to notice, and Will didn't feel much like trying to figure out what was going on in his head, so he continued to pile salad on his plate and tried to make conversation with Rowan, pretending Lewis wasn't in the room at all.

They talked about classes Will would have taken if he wasn't only pretending to be enrolled at the college where Rowan worked, and Rowan talked about books he had read that he thought Will might like. Or at least the person he thought Will was. In the past it hadn't been as necessary to fabricate a whole new persona to reel someone in. Being hot and young and willing to do whatever men wanted him to was usually enough. Rowan had been different though, a hard sell, too interested in Will's education, too uptight to let him do much more than palm him through his immaculately pressed khakis for weeks on end. The pay off was going to be worth it, but, goddamn, Will was looking forward to being able to quit pretending to be interested in economics once this was done.

They were having a discussion on an FT article that thankfully Will had read the week before, when Lewis's fork suddenly clattered to his plate and he covered his face with his hands. Rowan and Will fell silent, so they both heard clearly when Lewis asked, "So, are you fucking then?"

"I'm sorry, what?" Rowan looked flabbergasted.

“Jesus, Lewis.” Will dropped his cutlery so he could clasp his own hands together before he punched Lewis square in the face.

“What?” Lewis dropped his hands to his lap and sat back so abruptly he made his chair rock. “Is this not acceptable dinner conversation? Should I be weighing in on international trade policy?” He glanced between the two of them, back and forth, before his furious gaze landed on Rowan. “Tell me. Is he fucking you?”

Will was ready to start yelling, his hands already on the sides of his chair ready to push himself up, when in a calm and soothing tone Will had never heard before, Rowan replied, “No.”

“So, you’re telling me—” Lewis swiveled in his seat until he was directly facing him. “—that when you two were upstairs not ten minutes ago, he didn’t fuck you.” When Rowan only balled up his napkin and placed it on the table next to his plate, Lewis added, “Or you fuck him?”

“That is none of your fucking business,” Will snapped. All his bravado and anger snuffed out when Lewis leveled him with the same expression he’d had earlier. There was something primordial about it and Will’s body couldn’t help but shut itself down, his defense mechanisms kicking in with no conscious thought, the lizard part of his brain knowing instinctively that he was standing in front of a predator.

“You,” Lewis said quietly, not having to raise his voice to be heard in the quiet room. “Wait your turn.”

When he turned back to Rowan, he didn’t ask any more questions; he simply waited. Rowan didn’t seem fazed at all by Lewis’s behavior. Will didn’t know if he was stupid or just really, really brave. But either way, his response was to relax back in his chair and fold his arms across his chest.

“He gave me a decent blow job in the shower and then jerked off at my feet.”

“Decent?” Will couldn’t help picking up on that. He’d always prided himself on it being a talent rather than a chore, and ‘decent’ didn’t come close to hitting the mark.

Rowan shrugged. “It was fine. I came, which is the point, right?”

Will’s pride stung. “Yeah, but—”

“Hush now,” Lewis growled, not taking his eyes off Rowan. “The adults are talking.” He sighed and tilted his head. “But before now. It’s been weeks. He must have stuck it in you by now?”

Rowan shook his head. “No.”

“No?”

“It’s what we agreed. And if you think I can’t tell *you* have been intimate with him, then you have another think coming.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Will couldn’t help but butt in. “He’s my—”

Rowan’s gaze landed on him with an expression that said *Seriously? Don’t even bother.* “You really thought I was going to buy that brother thing?”

“Stepbrother,” Will murmured, as if it would make a difference.

“That’s different.” Lewis appeared a little less scary now and more scared, as if he actually cared about what Rowan thought of him. “That wasn’t part of—”

Rowan let out a laugh that was as bitterly cold as the wind outside. “Right. Because it’s one thing for me to be fucking it but you can do whatever you like—”

“Now, hold on a minute—”

As Will watched the two of them ping-ponging back and forth, a thought suddenly popped into his head. “Wait.” It seemed ridiculous but he couldn’t stop himself from asking, “Do you two *know* each other?”

For a second, the silence was dense. The only thing Will could hear was the sound of his heart beating. Until Rowan sighed and turned to Lewis. He didn't say anything, only glared at him with an expression which said, *I'm not angry, just disappointed.*

Lewis groaned and let his head fall back, like he was a teenager who'd been asked to clean his room. "Don't look at me like that."

"Don't—? Three months! Three months and you couldn't keep your mouth shut until we'd finished eating?"

"I just... I really missed you."

All the time Will had known Lewis, he'd never thought he could look so vulnerable or sound so affectionate. Also, Will was starting to question his own sanity. Watching Lewis switch between Psycho Lewis, who made Will want to crap his pants, to Whoever-the-hell this Lewis was, gazing at Rowan all gooey-eyed and sweet—he was getting whiplash.

It was even weirder when Rowan reached out and took Lewis's hand in his. "It was your idea to go no contact."

"I know. I thought it would be fun but... I really missed you."

Rowan smiled sweetly, looking at Lewis as if he was starving before he leaned over. Lewis met him halfway, pressing their lips tight with an intimacy that could only have come from years of practice. They breathed into each other's mouths, breaking the kiss and pressing their foreheads together for a moment with closed eyes before sitting back in their seats.

"I've got to know, though." It was bizarre when Rowan picked up his knife and fork and started tucking into the meal on his plate as if nothing weird had just happened. "What was the plan?" He looked between the two of them, waiting for an answer. Getting nothing, he clarified. "For me. Come on, you lured me out here for something. I'm dying to know."

Will blinked. Twice. He caught Lewis's eye, but the man only shrugged, following Rowan's lead and starting to eat. "It was your idea, kid. You can do the honors."

Not knowing what else to do, Will swallowed to try to clear the lump of tension from his throat. "Um. Well, I guess. Lewis was supposed to come tomorrow. I was going to get you drunk enough that we could get you to fuck the both of us. At the same time. And then... um... take pictures?" He winced at having to say it out loud. "And then... um... blackmail you?"

Rowan nodded approvingly. "For money?"

"Uh... yeah. I guess. And maybe anything else we could think of. Maybe get you to dig a deeper hole for yourself until..."

"Until what?" Rowan looked genuinely curious.

"I don't know, really. Until you... broke."

Rowan nodded again, at him and at Lewis, who seemed to be waiting for his verdict. "It's not a bad plan. Although I can tell you from experience, you gotta make sure your mark doesn't leave a suicide note 'cause that only complicates things."

"Christ." Lewis huffed out a laugh, picking the beef from between the pasta sheets with the sharp tines of his fork. "I'd forgotten about Baltimore. That was a nightmare."

Will's gut dropped to his knees. "S-suicide? Oh no, I wasn't thinking—"

Lewis barked out a laugh, and Rowan looked a little surprised. "Oh, kid. What did you think was going to happen?"

Will could only shrug and ask himself for the first time what exactly his game plan would have been. It was odd how the realization snuck up on him—that he'd not paid much attention to the how and why after getting Rowan to the cabin and tricking him into fucking him and Lewis. As he sat there, watching the two men enjoying their meal and feasting on the

sight of each other, he started to wonder how exactly he had come up with this stupid idea. Or whether he had been the one to come up with it at all.

Thinking back to that day when he and Lewis had planned this out, through the haze of whiskey and smoke and sweat, it was hard to remember exactly what had happened. Who had first suggested the idea of taking things further; who had started waxing poetic about how great it was to be out in the woods—how private, and how loud you could be with no one to call the cops. He was pretty sure Lewis had been inside him when he'd started to whisper in Will's ear, asking if he'd ever dp'd before and telling him how great it was, and how he'd shared a guy at a party with the guy's boyfriend and the guy had never even known. Will had come with the image of Rowan helpless and crying and getting spit roasted by the two of them. It was so fucked up.

And now he was fucked.

“So, um...” He swallowed hard. “What now?”

Both Lewis and Rowan looked at him questioningly. Rowan shook his head and nodded toward Will's plate. “Now we eat. Seriously, you have to try it. Lewis is a really good cook. Much better than me.” He smiled over at Lewis and got a happy grin back.

“I'm just happy you brought dessert.”

Rowan chuckled and picked up his glass of Chianti. He and Lewis clinked their glasses together, and although Will didn't make a move to lift his, they both reached over and tapped their glasses against his where it sat next to his untouched meal.

The suggestion to eat seemed to be simply that, a suggestion, as they didn't even seem to care when he didn't take a bite. Will had been in plenty of awkward situations, even some dangerous ones too. Up until that day, he'd always thought himself someone who could wriggle out of any mess

he found himself in with a smile and a joke. He'd prided himself on being able to think on his feet, quick-witted and manipulative enough that his bravado wasn't unfounded.

But watching Lewis feed Rowan a forkful of pasta and giggle, and Rowan confidently reaching across to cup Lewis's cheek, Will didn't have the first clue how to play them. Because they had all the angles covered. For the first time in his life, he felt as if he was out of ammo, all the resources in his arsenal used up. Whatever he could think of, scrolling through contingency plans in his head, he discarded almost immediately because he was pretty sure they would have thought of that already.

In the end, as the meal wrapped up and the two of them were simply sipping wine behind empty plates, he figured he should forget trying to come up with an angle and simply leave.

"Well," he said, taking a breath and trying not to sound as if his lungs were having trouble remembering how to function. "This has been... fun and I'm sorry it didn't, y'know, go the way I thought it was but don't worry about me. I'll get going and leave you to it. The cabin is paid up until Monday, so stay as long as you like."

He swallowed hard, hoping his legs wouldn't buckle if he got up and headed directly to the door, planning to not even stop to get his bags—simply get in his car and go. But when Lewis looked over at him, his lips curled ever so slightly in a small smile, Will couldn't make his body lift him out of the chair.

"Oh," Rowan said, sounding apologetic. "I think you've got the wrong impression. Probably my fault."

"No, it's fine." The way Will's body was vibrating from all the adrenaline made his voice tremble. It was annoying that he couldn't make it stop. "You've clearly got some catching up to

do, and I feel bad enough for ruining your plans, so I'll get out of your hair."

"Ruined our—?" Rowan looked confused, but when he glanced at Lewis, who hadn't taken his eyes off Will, he seemed to relax and chuckled. "Oh my gosh, no. You haven't ruined a thing, silly."

"And besides," Lewis added, folding his arms across his chest. "Where are you going to go? Good luck finding your car keys, or your shoes for that matter. The doors and windows are locked, the house phone is unplugged, there's no Wi-Fi." He smirked and Will thought he might actually piss himself. "Forest to the left of us, a lake to the right, and there you are."

"There I am," Will whispered, the realization of what was about to happen hitting him like a sledgehammer to the chest. "What are you going to do?"

Lewis looked to Rowan for the answer but Rowan only laughed. "Don't look at me. It's your gift, darling."

"In that case." Lewis's eyes lit up as if it really was Christmas morning. "I think I'd like to open my present." Quickly wiping his mouth with his napkin, Lewis stood, stole a kiss from Rowan, and walked away from the table. He had to pass Will to go to the corner of the room where his bags were carelessly thrown, and he trailed his fingers over Will's shoulder as he walked behind him. Will shuddered so hard at the contact he thought he was going to puke.

Picking up an old battered duffel, Lewis carried it into the middle of the living space, unzipped it, and turned it upside down. When a mess of hardware—hammers and pliers, knives and crowbars—spilled out and clattered to the ground, Will was pretty sure he crapped himself.

Lewis threw the limp bag away, not paying any attention to the mess he'd just made and instead focusing all of it on Will. Any amusement drained from his expression until all that was left was the monster Will had only caught glimpses of until

then. Tilting his head, Lewis narrowed his eyes. “So,” he said, his tone cold enough to rival the ice forming on the balcony outside. “Tell me again how you’ve been fucking with my husband.”

There was a beat before Will moved. He didn’t think, only shoved his chair away and bolted for the stairs. Or he would have if his knee hadn’t caught the table leg as he leapt up. The pain was excruciating but it didn’t stop him, only slowed him momentarily. He was halfway up the stairs before he realized they weren’t chasing him.

When they’d been eating, leaving Will to his thoughts, he had gone over every possible escape route. And come to a dead end every time. He cursed himself, knowing that he was in a cage of his own making, figuratively and literally. He’d thought about every possible contingency to keep Rowan in the house without a thought that he might need to get out.

He took the stairs two at a time, his only possible options being that Lewis hadn’t locked the windows on the upper level or, failing that, he was hoping there was a way up to the attic and then the roof. His lungs were burning by the time he reached the top floor, mostly from the effort of trying not to scream. He pinballed down the short hallway, managing to hit every doorframe and piece of furniture as he sprinted, his shoulders protesting almost as loudly as his panic was spurring him on.

Stumbling from one room to the next, he tried every window, each time his sliver of hope burning down like a match, each failure blackening him on the inside, his lungs getting smaller and smaller, his gut clenching hard, vaguely registering that his jeans were sticking to his thighs where he had pissed himself, clawing desperately at the slightest possibility that he might make it.

After his fourth attempt to smash one of the windows with a chair, his arms aching from the effort of swinging the thing and the resultant jarring impact, he heard a noise behind him.

Not close, but enough to chill him into dropping the chair, his chest heaving as he panted, not wanting to turn around and face whatever was going to happen next.

“That’s double glazed.”

Rowan sounded calm, relaxed. As Will slowly turned, he wasn’t sure what he was expecting to find, but Rowan leaning back casually against the doorframe, silhouetted against the bright hallway, his hands in his pockets and an apologetic smile on his face, was not even close.

“You’d need one of those punch things.” He made a gesture as if to demonstrate. “Y’know, like you keep in the car in case it goes into the water.”

“I don’t have one of those.” It was the dumbest thing to say, but for the life of him it seemed so normal between them for a second.

Rowan nodded, his smile broadening. “I know.” He straightened up, taking his hands from his pockets. Although he didn’t move, Will took a step back. “Why don’t you come downstairs? Lewis was only messing with you about the whole jealousy thing.” Will shook his head and fought back the urge to beg. Mostly because tears were so close to the surface he was scared to open his mouth. Rowan looked disappointed. “This doesn’t have to be difficult. You might even like it.”

A hysterical laugh bubbled out of Will. “He has *knives*. And a fucking *hammer*.”

Rowan shrugged. “To be fair the hammer is mine.” Will reeled back but Rowan only looked amused. “Sorry. Joking. Sorry.”

“Will you let me go?” Will’s voice was so pitifully small, watery and weak, he wasn’t sure Rowan heard him at first. Especially as he took so long to answer.

“Honestly? If things had gone the way you had planned, if I had asked you the same thing, would you have let me go?”

The sob came out of nowhere, one huge exhalation as the last glimmer of hope was extinguished. “I only wanted to have some fun.”

Rowan grinned. “Oh, sweetheart. It’s going to be so much fun, I promise.”

There was something about his tone that made the last thread of sanity in Will’s mind snap, sending him bolting across the room, not caring Rowan was standing between him and the door. In his panic, he actually thought he could get past him and flee to another room. He was quick and young, stronger than Rowan with the adrenaline flowing through his body. And when he barged past him, pushing Rowan off balance, emerging from the dark of the room into the brightly lit hallway, he felt a glimmer of hope for half a second. The glimmer was snuffed out when a heavy blow to the back of his head made his vision burn white and his knees gave out before everything went black.

His awareness came back in pieces. A bad smell as a cloth covered his mouth and nose. Being lifted on each side, his feet dragging along the floor. The cold metallic slide against his skin accompanied by the snip-snip of scissors. A pillow being placed under his head and a draft from somewhere on his bare skin. Voices. Normal, conversational voices.

“She didn’t text you again? Seriously. You gotta tell your mom to chill.”

“Yeah, ‘cause that would go so well. She’s worried about the weather. Apparently, Jackson closed its airport, so now she’s convinced we’re going to get stranded.”

“Maybe we should have gotten her some Valium for Christmas.”

“I feel like that would be more of a gift for the rest of us. Oh. Speaking of gifts, I think yours is waking up.”

“Well, hello there, sleeping beauty. You wanna open your eyes for me?”

Will tried to pull his head forward from where he had his chin tipped back but found it difficult to move, and even though he wanted to keep up the pretense a little longer, his eyelids began to flicker open.

The room was pretty much as he remembered it from what he could see, even if he was splayed out on the living room rug. The light was low and ochre warm, only the colored lights on the Christmas tree breaking up the sepia effect. His body was aching and when he made to roll over, he found he couldn't move his arms, as if they'd been strapped at his elbows. His legs, although bent at the knees, were splayed and equally stuck.

A jolt of adrenaline got his heart pounding and he started to pant. He could see Rowan crouch down beside him out of the corner of his eye, and he ran a featherlight touch down his cheek. "I think it's excited."

"He's not the only one."

It was harder to get a glimpse of Lewis, having to look down the length of his own naked body. Both Lewis and Rowan had changed into loose fitting t-shirts and basketball shorts. They seemed relaxed, and for some reason that made Will feel better. Although the sweet smell coming from the bottle Rowan was waving under his nose might have had something to do with that.

"You ready, sweetheart?"

Will coughed and his chest hurt. "For what?"

Rowan frowned as he pulled off his shirt, looming over him as he stood and moved to stand between Will's legs. "Isn't this what you wanted? The three of us? Making memories?" He slowly lowered himself down until he was caging Will beneath him. "I know you wanted to fuck me. I hope you don't mind switching."

"I didn't think—"

“Thinking is overrated,” Rowan practically purred, then slid back down Will’s body.

The panic was short-lived. As soon as Rowan took Will’s flaccid dick into his mouth, Will could only focus on the trail of Rowan’s lips—the warm, soft drag of his wet mouth as he teased the blood away from his brain to his groin. Rowan sounded as if was having the time of his life. Even when Lewis came closer, he didn’t stop groaning as he sucked.

“You like that, kid?” Lewis smiled down at Will. Or rather the monster who had occupied Lewis’s shell did. He didn’t appear as frightening as he had before, but still had those dead shark eyes that would have made Will’s dick shrivel if it wasn’t being so expertly played. Lewis didn’t seem to require a reply. “He’s good, right?” he asked as he tugged Rowan’s shorts down, just enough to plunge his cock inside him if Rowan’s muffled yell and the way his body rocked was anything to go by. He didn’t stop mouthing at Will even though he did pull off to pant and rest his forehead against Will’s thigh for a moment. When Lewis slapped the back of his head in a way that did not sound playful at all to Will, he got back to it. Lewis smirked and fucked him harder. “He told me all about how much you like to suck his cock. Said he thought you might be better than him. What do you think?”

Will panted and tried to shake his head again. “I-I d-don’t know. I—”

Lewis pulled back, making Rowan whine around Will’s dick. “How about you remind me, eh?”

Rowan pulled off Will’s dick with a pop, leaving Will cold as he wiped his mouth and reached for something out of Will’s view, ignoring Lewis as he walked toward Will’s head.

As Lewis settled down behind him, Rowan’s lubed fingers slicked between Will’s cheeks. “You’re seriously going in like that?” Rowan asked, looking over Will’s body as if he was a piece of furniture. Will thought he was talking about the fact

Lewis's cock had just been in his ass until he added, "If it bites you, don't come crying to me."

Lewis hummed and looked down, his inverted face making an already unreal situation even more surreal. His callous hand palmed over Will's throat as Rowan's cock pressed hard against his asshole, both sensations making his skin prickle as Lewis asked, almost lovingly, "You wouldn't do that, would you?"

Will tried to shake his head and speak but at that second Rowan's fat head popped inside his body and Will clenched his teeth against the pain.

Lewis tutted like a Sunday School teacher and shook his head, mumbling, "Better to be safe than sorry." Out of Will's field of vision, the sound of metal clanking was diluted as the pain of Rowan fucking him transcended into pleasure. When Lewis reappeared, Will was so caught up in the building pressure of his own orgasm that he didn't register what Lewis was holding in his hand until the heavy metal pliers were already in his mouth and Lewis said through a grin, "Open up, kid. This won't take a minute."

It took a hell of a lot longer than a minute even though Lewis didn't take all his teeth. When Will could hear his own thoughts over his screaming, he thought Lewis was efficient enough that he must have done this before, but it still took an eternity. After each pull, Lewis would spray something metallic tasting in his mouth and move on to the next tooth with no emotion. Will tried to fight, but he couldn't even turn his head, let alone get away. As much as he struggled and writhed, it did no good, not with Rowan inside him, his iron grip on Will's thigh and hip, seemingly oblivious to everything going on above Will's waist, absorbed in chasing his own pleasure.

By the time Lewis was satisfied enough to plunge his cock between Will's swollen lips, Will was hysterical, praying Lewis would choke him enough to make him pass out. Instead,

Will lapsed into delirium, glancing against lucidity when it was the most cruel. Choking on the blood Lewis fucked into his airway. Rowan twisting his junk so hard, he felt his balls rip. Biting. Punching. The hammer. Someone slapping his face to wake him. A needle piercing his skin and his veins burning before his heart exploded into action and he was wide awake again. The hammer again. The tip of a blade sliding into his skin right above his pubic bone, burning deeper as it traveled all the way to his sternum. Hands there, pulling the skin. Hands inside him, scorching like they were coated in acid. Screaming. Screaming until there was no air left in the room. And all the time, Rowan moving inside him. Like Will had wanted. Like he'd promised. Like his Christmas wish had come true.

“Jesus, he’s hot in here.”

“Oh my god. I can feel you.”

“Come on, Baby. Fuck my hand.”

“Squeeze tighter. I’m gonna come. Fuck I’m gonna—”

“Oh yeah, that’s my boy.”

At the end, there was icy cold, creeping wetness, and the sound of rushing water. And a blessed darkness that he welcomed with what remained of his broken, open arms.



“God, it’s beautiful out here.”

Lewis gazed over at Rowan and couldn’t have agreed more. The snow had finally stopped and the clouds had broken, pulling back enough that the moon shone down over the blanketed landscape, the frosted tops of the trees, and the still, shimmering surface of the lake, silvering everything but the inky black sky. “It sure is.”

Rowan glanced at him over the top of his steaming mug of cocoa, doing a double take when he saw what Lewis was looking at. Rowan scoffed and shook his head, but Lewis could see he was secretly pleased. Which pleased him. Making Rowan happy was surprisingly rewarding even after all these years. It didn't hurt that Rowan spoiled him rotten in return.

"Are you warm enough?" Lewis leaned over slightly so he could adjust the duvet Rowan was burritoed into, pulling it up to his chin. They had both been tired after their date and the subsequent cleanup. Lewis could have easily fallen into bed immediately but Rowan had wanted to savor the moment, so they had showered and bundled up and made use of the outdoor heater on the deck.

"You don't have to fuss over me, you know?" Rowan said, looking as if he didn't mind the fuss at all.

"I know, I just..." Lewis sighed, and shuffled a little closer. "I wasn't kidding earlier. I really missed you."

Rowan leaned over and kissed him, chaste and gentle in a way Lewis had never thought he would enjoy until he'd met Rowan. "I missed you too. I think the wait was worth it but I'm not sure we should do it this way again."

Lewis nodded, pressing his temple to Rowan's. "Agreed."

Rowan was quiet for a long time, which wasn't unusual, but Lewis found himself asking, "Everything okay?"

Rowan shrugged but after a little jostling admitted, "He was good, wasn't he?"

Lewis hummed in agreement, adding as a joke, "You missing him already?" He was a little taken aback when Rowan didn't respond. "Seriously?"

"I liked him." Rowan shrugged again. "He was fun. You have to admit he was fun. Plus, it was a lot of groundwork for one night." He looked worried when he turned to look Lewis

in the eye. “Did you really like it? Should I have gotten you the flying lessons instead?”

Lewis laughed, wrestling his arm from the comforter so he could cup Rowan’s jaw and pull him close. “I loved it. I promise. He was perfect.” Rowan still seemed unconvinced. “I tell you what. Someone—” He jostled Rowan again and finally got a smile. “—has got a birthday coming up soon. How about we do it the other way around for your special day? One night of groundwork and months of fun after?”

Rowan beamed angelic in the moonlight. “I’d love that.”

“Good.” Lewis sat back in his seat, cocooning his arm again before it dropped off. “It’s settled. How about we go upstairs and get some sleep? We’ve got an early start tomorrow if we want to get to Mom’s before lunch.”

“Five more minutes?” Rowan pouted and somehow made his eyes impossibly big and almost irresistible. “It’s almost finished.”

Lewis sighed as if he was irritated but couldn’t be, not when Rowan grinned with happiness and laid his head on Lewis’s shoulder, the two of them gazing out over the frosted trees and the blue-black sky and the icy lake, its serene surface disturbed only where a slowing stream of bubbles was breaking—the last remaining trace of the car nestled deep below and an unmarked grave.

ABOUT ALEXIS JANE

Alexis Jane is the dark-half of author Alex Jane.

Exploring the visceral side of MM romance, her stories delve into horror themes, profoundly problematic relationships, and violence while holding romance and love at their core—no matter how misguided it might be.

It's love...but darker.

Because some happy endings come harder than others.

<https://linktr.ee/alexjane>

<http://alexjane.info/love-but-darker/>

DECK THE HALLS WITH
VENGEANCE



Briar Kearney

The Russo family has held power over more of New York City than any other family for as long as most can remember. Matteo Russo had always known he would inherit his father's iron fist and his men's loyalty one day. What he hadn't known, or planned for, was that he would fall head over heels for Leif Wilson, one of the New York Police Department's own, and what keeping Leif could cost him.

Instead of joy and peace, Christmas Day brings nothing but a challenge; not only to Matteo's power, but his heart. He won't sacrifice his position any more than he's willing to sacrifice Leif, but vengeance doesn't come cheaply.

The clock ticks, his heart and future hanging in the balance, and Matteo decks the halls of New York City with vengeance.

This is an approximately 14,000 word short story with a HFN that stands alone, and characters with an upcoming series of their own. It contains on-page violence, death and inappropriate use of Christmas decorations.

DECEMBER 25

Winter in New York was pretty brutal, and Leif Wilson had lived in a bunch of shitty apartments over the years, with barely functional, or even outright broken, heating systems. He'd learned to invest in good sheets, thick blankets, and thermal underwear. They weren't attractive, but they kept him warm, and Leif was a simple creature at heart.

He lived in another world now, it seemed. Matteo Russo's world, where the floors were heated from underneath, and winter didn't appear to touch his sprawling apartment. His sheets were silk instead of fleece, and it was much nicer falling asleep when the windows didn't rattle with the force of the wind, and there was no threat of water pouring in around the light fixtures when the snow later melted. He wasn't sure he'd ever slept as well or as deeply as he did in Matteo's apartment.

Theirs. He forgot occasionally, but it was his home too. Leif had given up his own shitty apartment a couple of months ago.

Sometimes Leif woke up like this too: to strong, warm fingers kneading at his thighs and soft lips surrounded by stubble moving over his skin. Sleeping anything *but* naked on silk sheets was a crime; Leif wasn't sure anyone would ever be arrested for it, but he wasn't going to pick that hill to die on. So the fingers and lips had easy access to all of him.

He arched his back, thrusting up against the mouth pressed to the skin of his hip, and he felt the warmed silk slide against his shoulders and ass. As he settled back into the bed, he blinked and looked down at the draped mound of silk between his legs.

"Good morning," Matteo murmured, looking up from under the edge of the sheet as he spread Leif's thighs gently. His dark hair blended in with the dark sheets, his skin and the swirls of black ink across it less obvious against them than

Leif's own pale hue. "And Merry Christmas to me." He pressed a kiss to Leif's navel, his stubble scratching at the tender skin, and then settled himself between Leif's legs as he slid his hands up Leif's sides.

Leif opened his mouth to greet him, but Matteo leaned up and kissed him before he could gather his words. He tangled his fingers in the fingers of Leif's left hand, stretching their hands up above Leif's head and settling his chest more firmly against Leif as he nipped at his bottom lip, following it with his tongue and encouraging Leif to open his mouth wider. His other hand trailed back down Leif's side and between his legs, two fingers teasing at the ring of muscle and slipping further inside to press at his inner walls.

Leif had already been half hard when he'd first opened his eyes, and his dick was throbbing by the time Matteo slipped a third finger into him and pressed impossibly closer. Searing heat burned a line along his inner thigh as Matteo settled more firmly between his legs. He removed his fingers at the same time as he let go of Leif's hand and broke the kiss, leaving Leif empty and wanting. A sound far closer to a whine than he'd ever admit to left Leif's mouth, and Matteo chuckled low in his throat as he curled his fingers around Leif's hips and tilted him up.

"I've got you," he murmured, sliding his hands down Leif's thighs as he eased himself into the space his fingers had left behind.

As he pushed in, Leif's breath left his lungs, and Matteo took his mouth again as he bottomed out.

Matteo kissed like a storm, only letting Leif fall into the eye of it for fleeting moments—just enough to reorient himself before the next onslaught. Leif had gotten good at rolling with the waves, letting himself drown in the sensations without losing himself entirely. He wrapped his legs around Matteo blindly and squeezed, surrendering to the kiss.

Merry Christmas to *him*.

He laughed breathlessly into Matteo's mouth as Matteo kneaded the cheeks of Leif's ass and nipped at his bottom lip on the next thrust.

"Is something funny, *amorino*?" Matteo's lips curved up against Leif's as he pulled himself halfway out, swallowing the sound of protest as he lifted himself away from Leif. His eyes were dark, molten mahogany in the dim lighting, crinkling at the corners as he grinned. There was a dimple underneath the stubble on his cheeks that still made Leif's stomach swoop and soar like he was on a roller coaster, even months after seeing it for the first time. Leif ran his hands over the thick black swathes of ink decorating Matteo's left bicep and arm and clutched at him, chasing Matteo's mouth with his own.

Matteo rocked into Leif again, a short thrust that pushed Leif back against the mattress and pillows and punched his breath out. His skin was searing hot against Leif's palms, the muscle rippling under his touch as Leif held tight. Leif's blood was heating everywhere Matteo touched, a slow, relentless boil inside and out.

Leif cried out when Matteo pulled himself almost free, only the tip of his dick still inside. One of his hands slid around to the small of Leif's back and lifted him up as he thrust, the slap of his skin against Leif's lost to the stars that burst behind Leif's eyes when Matteo slid home.



Leif was beautiful, his hair ruffled and eyes still heavy lidded as he watched Matteo from over the rim of his faintly steaming espresso. The mug was oversized; Matteo remembered buying it for soup rather than coffee, but Leif had

claimed it the first time he'd sat at the breakfast bar and watched Matteo make him breakfast.

It was the only mug that could hold even close to enough coffee, apparently, and Matteo hadn't had soup in it since. It rarely ever made it back to the cupboard at all, cycling between Leif's hands, the sink, and the drying rack. The dishwasher was growing on Leif, but he was still leery of it with a few things. Like anything bigger than a plate and his favorite mug. Matteo wanted to start every morning for the rest of his life seeing Leif's hands wrapped around it.

He put the pan in the sink and took the dish towel from over his shoulder to hang it over the rack. He shifted their dishes from the counter into the sink, and when he looked up, Leif was shrugging into his jacket.

It was cruel that Leif had to work at all on Christmas Day, but Matteo would have him back in his arms soon, and then it would be *days* before he would have to let Leif leave them again.

"Four thirty?" he asked as he padded across the living area. He snagged the scarf from the back of the sofa on his way to Leif, holding it out as he got close enough.

"Four thirty," Leif agreed, taking the scarf and draping it loosely around his neck.

Matteo took another step in and drew Leif closer, one hand around the small of his back and the other cupping the side of his neck. "Is that present on the coffee table for me?" he asked, rubbing his thumb over Leif's collarbone. The skin was still faintly red there, even after the tinted moisturizer Leif was still a bit mad about having had to buy had taken the flush out of it. Matteo couldn't lie—the fact that Leif let him mark him up anyway egged the beast in his chest on to see just how much he could get away with.

"Yes," Leif said, sliding his own hands across Matteo's chest and hooking them briefly into the chain tucked beneath

his T-shirt. “You can open it when I get home.”

“I’m going to be busy cooking dinner, then unwrapping something else when you get home,” Matteo said against his lips, hooking his own finger into the back belt loop of Leif’s pants. He didn’t resist the temptation to slide his other hand lower and playfully cup the curve of Leif’s ass as he pressed a teasing kiss to his mouth.

“Is this a Christmas present, or are you living out some kind of house-husband fantasy?” Leif asked, laughter lurking under the words.

Matteo kissed him again, sweeping into his mouth and flattening his palm against Leif’s back to press them together from chest to thigh. He’d be a house husband for Leif if that was what Leif wanted—at least when they were at home together. He could conduct the business he needed to during Leif’s work hours and delegate the rest; it would be perfect.

“See you for dinner,” he murmured, pulling back just far enough to take in the sight of Leif’s glazed eyes and kiss-swollen lips. He licked his own, chasing the taste of Leif and hints of coffee, and grinned as Leif’s gaze dropped to his mouth. “Can’t wait to unwrap *you*.”

Leif’s cursing made it through the door just before it closed, and Matteo chuckled all the way back to the coffee machine.



The warmth from the morning and their activities had long since faded, the only remnant of it leaching into Leif’s palms from the cardboard coffee cup he was clutching. Matteo was too gentle with him for there to be more than a lingering ache in his muscles that barely counted, and it was only noticeable when he really focused on feeling it.

The week between Christmas and New Year's didn't mean an awful lot to the criminals of the city, but for the first time in years, Leif *did* have some time off booked, and he was counting down to it. His captain had blinked at him when he'd asked to take the entire week, and Leif had not said anything about Matteo's methods of persuasion, those that had convinced him to ask in the first place, but his captain had approved it without much hesitation.

He didn't get the same sorts of callouts that he used to get as a beat cop on holidays, but it still got extra weird and chaotic every time there was some kind of wider celebration. Leif had... he checked his watch: an hour and forty minutes until he clocked out. Matteo had promised to be at home waiting for him, and Leif was looking forward to not leaving the apartment, or wearing pants, for at least the next forty-eight hours. Preferably not for the entire week, but he knew that they'd have to at least answer the door at some point.

It was time for them to start making their own holiday traditions. Leif would die before he said that to Matteo, already feeling heat rise in his cheeks at the thought of the smile he'd get in response. It would be somehow smug and indulgent and adoring all at once. Leif was pretty sure that smile should be an arrestable offense, but if he did arrest Matteo, he'd have to explain it to his colleagues at the NYPD, and he wasn't interested in doing that just yet. Things were still new and shiny enough that Leif wanted to keep their relationship private until they settled into what their future would look like. He wanted to be steady and unshakable before anyone else came into their space and brought reality with them. They had enough shadows to figure out between them before they let any floodlights in.

He didn't want to *share* Matteo, or that part of his life, with any of the other parts.

Not yet.

Ronnie Geyer, his partner, had dragged them out to chase down a lead that hadn't given them anything more than they'd had when they'd started. It was Christmas Day, and Leif had tried to say that literally nothing made less sense than trying to convince people who hardly wanted to talk to them on a regular day to talk to them on an actual holiday. Some kind of optimistic, festive fever had obviously taken hold of Ronnie, though, and Leif had found himself trailing after him through Hell's Kitchen.

He'd bitten back "I told you so" more than once, in the holiday spirit, but he was going to make sure he kept count to give Ronnie his due when he got back in the New Year. It had been an absolute waste of a day, and Leif was leaving the second they got back to the precinct even if it wasn't technically the end of his shift.

Ronnie knew because he wouldn't meet Leif's eyes for the last hour they spent trying to get something out of the supremely unhelpful witnesses who definitely knew more than they were letting on. He was verging on sheepish by the time they called it quits, but he was pissed about the paperwork he still had to do before he'd be able to clock out for the day. He didn't have the nerve to even insinuate that Leif should stay a second later but was pissed off enough about it that it had dominated their conversation all the way down West 56th.

"We shouldn't have to do a report if we got nothing fuckin' useful out of it—"

It wasn't snowing, but the wind was bitterly cold when it picked up, and it chilled Leif all the way to his bones. The cold was muddling his instincts, the discomfort signals distracting him from everything else, but Leif's instincts were sharper than most, and he realized that something was wrong.

The hair on the back of his neck was standing on end beneath the scarf Matteo had wrapped around his neck before he left that morning, and his skin was prickling in weird places. It wasn't just that he was being *watched*—New York

was full of millions upon millions of eyes and cameras, and surveillance was inescapable—but he was being watched with purpose.

If his continued grumbling was anything to go by, Ronnie didn't seem to feel it. He didn't appear to need Leif to participate in the conversation at all, because they made it all the way up to the alley that they needed to cut through to get back to where they'd parked without him so much as raising his eyebrow at Leif.

There wasn't another way to the car that was as quick, and Leif knew that Ronnie would tell him to grow a pair if he tried to go around. It was freezing cold, the middle of the afternoon, they were cops, and there was nothing out there that they should be afraid of, in Ronnie's eyes. Leif had no idea how Ronnie still thought that, after everything they saw and the reality of the streets they policed, but he did. He would go down that alley with or without Leif, and Leif couldn't let him go alone.

Chances were that Ronnie's thinking was right anyway. Leif was paranoid, and he admitted it sometimes. Not freely, and not often, because it was absolutely warranted, but he would admit it sometimes. It was the middle of the day, and they *were* both armed, after all. The alley wasn't deserted either, like it would have been if they were in a bad horror film.

There was no way Leif was admitting to paranoia this time. It and the tangents it was taking were staying tucked up nice and private in his head, where they belonged. Some eggnog that night, maybe a massage, and there was a slim chance he might tell Matteo about it. Heavily edited, of course, to make it funnier and Leif's wiggling out more ridiculous than it felt at the moment. He'd already had to put his foot down about the people Matteo had gotten to follow him around in the early days of their relationship. There was no way he could roll that back without losing all the high ground he'd taken. Leif's lips twitched at the thought as he toyed with the edge of the scarf.

Give Matteo an inch, and he'd take a goddamn mile, and Leif would end up with permanent tails.

Ronnie was three steps ahead of Leif, still droning on about the report he had to write that Leif really could not give less of a shit about, when the loud *clang* of a trash can tipping over came from way too close.

His hand was already on his gun, his heart in his throat, and there was another sound—like something falling out of the can? Leif glanced across the alley, seeing the trash can rolling and garbage spilling from it. A glass bottle hit the pavement like a thunderclap, clinking loudly as it rolled away.

Nervous laughter bubbled up in his throat, and he looked sheepishly at Ronnie, who was turning to look at him.

“I *know*—” he said, holding up his free hand as he met Ronnie’s eyes.

His wide eyes, and mouth, and the shadow that loomed up behind him with a hand crudely curled and waving at Leif over Ronnie’s shoulder.

Pain burst across the back of his skull and in both knees as the alleyway disappeared into starbursts of light and then was swallowed by the dark.



The streetlights were shining through the apartment windows, the sun gone and clouds rolling in, as Matteo basked in the smell of the roasting pork. He'd never tell Leif just how many people had come to the apartment to make sure Matteo's plan came to life as perfectly as it could. His right-hand man and best friend, Benny Cortese, would hold it over Matteo's head until something else came along, but it wouldn't matter afterward. Matteo just wanted to see Leif's face when he

walked through the door and saw the winter wonderland he'd created. Whatever came after wouldn't matter.

Thank fuck, Benny wasn't anywhere in the vicinity to read that sappy thought directly from Matteo's mind. He readjusted the dish towel draped over the counter and then glanced down at the watch on his wrist.

It was after five in the afternoon, and Leif was supposed to have been home before four thirty. Matteo had told his men—men that Leif still hadn't figured out were tailing him, which just told Matteo that he'd done the right thing—what time he was expecting Leif home too.

His phone vibrated on the counter as though it had read his mind.

It wasn't Leif's contact icon, though, or either of Matteo's men. It was Benny.

Matteo swiped across the bottom to answer and brought it to his ear.

"Where are you?" were the first words he heard.

"At home." Matteo straightened, his hip bumping against the counter.

"Tommy's dead," Benny said abruptly. "Cops found his body at Pier 96."

Tommaso Ricci was one of the men Matteo kept on Leif. Alongside Benny, he was one of Matteo's oldest and most steadfast friends—one of the best of his men. He wasn't the only man on Leif, but he was the one who was supposed to keep Leif *safe*.

"And Luca?" Matteo squashed down the wave of startled grief and curled his hand around the cold edge of the marble counter. Tommy wasn't the only man on Leif that day. "Benny. Where is Leif?" He could grieve Tommy later, in the dark, when Leif was safe and asleep in his arms.

“I don’t know.” Benny’s voice dropped, quieter and with a hoarse edge. “We haven’t found either of them, but... Matteo, the cops found Leif’s partner too. His throat was slit, and he was dumped in an alley off West 56th, maybe nine or ten blocks from where they found Tommy.”

The counter edge bit sharply into the meat of Matteo’s palm as he gripped it hard enough to hold himself up.

“I’m on my way to you,” Benny rushed to add as Matteo’s pulse thundered in his ears. “Stay put until I get there.”

He didn’t respond but put his phone down on the counter, the *beep* of the ending call hanging in the air. The glow of the screen faded quickly as Matteo sucked in a breath and braced his other hand against the counter, steadying himself.

Leif.

He moved across to the oven, turning the dial until it clicked, and the hum of it slowed.

Matteo would wait until Benny got there, but he wouldn’t wait a second longer.

DECEMBER 26

Leif's mouth was full of blood, and the skin around it was tight, angry, and throbbing. Everything below his hips was distant and vaguely numb. Not so numb that he couldn't feel anything at all but just dampened and fuzzy. Like the fog from his head had filtered down through his neck and left bits of itself behind to infect the rest of his body.

Some kind of zombie virus, maybe. He'd watched a zombie movie not that long ago, curled into Matteo's side and pretending to concentrate on his book instead of being sucked in by it. He hadn't wanted to watch it at all to start with, and he wasn't about to let Matteo know he'd been right without working for it at least a little.

He blinked, his eyelashes thick with something and sticking together like they didn't want him to open his eyes either.

It didn't matter whether they were open or closed, really. Leif likely wouldn't see anything anyway. He'd only taken in flashes of things since he'd seen Ronnie's face, his wide-open brown eyes, and the waterfall of blood that had spilled down the front of him. He'd seen the rolling trash can, a small carton with noodles hitting the ground, last thing before everything skipped like a scratched CD. His hand was still twitching and flexing around the remembered shape of his gun even though it was long gone.

Still somewhere in the alley, maybe. With Ronnie. Which was Leif's mistake, really. Ronnie couldn't be trusted with anything that needed to be kept safe. He'd lost his badge once, and they'd made a game of seeing how many of them could steal his gun right from his belt. More of them had succeeded than Ronnie would ever admit. Leif's fingers twitched again, the curve of the trigger still there even though it wasn't really there.

One of the first lessons they learned when they were given their gun and badge was how important it was to keep their gun safe. On them, preferably, or in a physical safe. It wasn't ever supposed to fall into civilian hands and *never* into a criminal's.

Leif's gun wasn't with him. Leif's breath caught, his chest tight and angry like his face.

Leif wasn't where he was supposed to be either, and neither was Ronnie.



Matteo's thighs ached dully from how long he'd been crouched by the open drawer that held Tommy's body. Benny had greased palms or cracked skulls to get him in there—Matteo didn't really care what he'd had to do, only that it had gotten done. It wasn't the first time he'd walked into the morgue for the same purpose, but there had never before been the same undercurrent of fear and rage sparking beneath his skin.

It was a strange new sensation and entirely unwelcome. The tired, burning grittiness of his eyes overlaid it. It had been the longest night of his life, and he still had far more questions than answers.

Tommy had short, dark hair and an impeccable crew cut. He was one of those men who could have been anywhere between thirty and fifty years old, alternating between unremarkable and intimidating. Lying in the drawer, he was unfamiliar to Matteo like he hadn't ever been in life.

People like to say that the dead look like they are sleeping, and perhaps some of them do, but Tommy didn't. One side of his face was scratched and grazed, the sharp line of his cheek broken like the bone beneath it must have been. There was a

single straight cut on his other cheek, beneath his closed eye. There was nothing peaceful in the stillness that had stolen over him, and the fire in Matteo crackled and spat with satisfaction over the fact that whatever had happened to Tommy, he'd fought against it. They might not have found the body of whoever had left the marks on him and taken his life—had as good as taken *Matteo's* own life when they'd spirited Leif away—but Matteo knew that they had paid a blood price to take what they had.

The rest was his to take when the city eventually gave them up to him, which it would.

It always did.

He pushed himself up to his feet, tearing his eyes away from Tommy's face to glance over the rest of the closed drawers. One of them held the dead cop—Leif's partner—too. Matteo knew that they were connected even if none of the other players had put the pieces together. Their bodies had been found the better part of ten blocks apart, and the NYPD had no reason to think that they'd been in the same place when they'd been killed. They didn't know that Leif was Matteo's, or that Tommy had been shadowing him. They didn't know that another of Matteo's men had gone missing either, or that he was wherever Leif was.

These were pieces of the puzzle that only Matteo had.

Pieces he would use to burn down the world of whoever had dared to touch what was Matteo's. He brushed the backs of his fingers against the curve of the non-grazed side of Tommy's jaw.

Benny was standing beside the door, ramrod straight and focused on Matteo when he looked up and met his pale eyes.

“What do they know?” he asked quietly, curling his fingers up over his palm to grasp his sleeve and pull it down until he could cover his hand and push the drawer holding Tommy's

body closed. Leif wasn't back in his arms yet, so his grief had to wait.

"There was blood in the alley that didn't belong to the dead cop," Benny said quietly. "Haven't gotten results on whose it actually is yet, just that it couldn't have been his. Could be Tommy's or Luca's."

"Or Leif's." Fire licked up his throat behind the words, and Matteo curled his fingers around the edge of his cuff. Leif's blood type was AB negative.

Benny didn't acknowledge the words, but Matteo knew he had heard them.

He let Benny hustle him out of the building and back into a car.

He listened to the rumbling of the city around them and the low hum of the SUV engine as Benny drove him back to the apartment that likely still smelled like the roast pork he hadn't touched when Leif failed to come home to share it with him. He was going to open the windows when he got home, the cold be damned, because if he had to smell it for much longer he might lose his mind. He'd put Leif's gift to him away until Leif could give it back to him himself—he'd tucked it into the drawer beside the neatly wrapped gift he'd been waiting to give to Leif too.

New York had never felt so big as it did right then, knowing that someone had put both one of his men and one of the city's detectives in cold drawers at the morgue and disappeared into thin air with another of Matteo's men and the detective who had—no, who *was*—Matteo's walking, beating heart.

New York was the perfect city to make someone disappear, and Matteo knew the truth of it so intimately that it sat like a block of ice inside him. There were too many people to ever reliably keep an eye on just one, and Matteo had *tried*. And failed.

“Matt—” Benny’s voice cracked as it broke through the fog, and Matteo realized that they’d stopped, and Benny was standing at the open door, holding something out to him.

The perfect bow caught Matteo’s attention first. The red-and-green ribbons were fine and woven tightly together, tied neatly around something.

Matteo took it from Benny without thinking, rubbing his fingers across it, and realized instantly that it was a lock of hair.

It was a familiar light, sandy brown, curled at the ends, and stained and faintly sticky with something thick and dark.

It was *Leif’s*. It had to be.

There was a small black “2” printed on the flat of the ribbon that set Matteo’s teeth on edge.

“Where was it?” Matteo forced the question out from behind his gritted teeth. Someone had carried that to him. Had cut the lock from Leif’s head after making him *bleed*, tied it with a ribbon, labeled it, and made sure it found its way into Matteo’s hands.

“Blank envelope under the wipers,” Benny said. A muscle jumped in his tight jaw, and he breathed in slowly before meeting Matteo’s eyes. “Thought it was a ticket, but it was... that. The two, it’s...”

“It’s what?” Patience was a thing of the past.

“The cut on Tommy’s face,” Benny bit out. “I looked at the cop. Leif’s partner. He had the same cuts all over him. Not on his face, but on his hands and in his neck. It looked like the same cut, the same line, it was the same fucking *size*.”

A line. A “one.” Matteo breathed out slowly. The bodies had been “one.” He looked down at the lock of bloodstained hair, cradled in his palm.

Two. Message received, loud and clear.

DECEMBER 27

It was cold, and quiet, and Leif wanted Matteo.

He wanted to be home, with the heated floors, and their silk sheets, and Matteo all around him. The plastic of the zip tie around his wrists wasn't cold anymore, but the edges dug in when he forgot it was there and tried to move his wrists apart. Everything else was cold, and the ache went right to his bones, deep and relentless.

There was a cut in his palm, a short straight line down the mound beneath his thumb. It wasn't the only place his skin had been broken, but it was the only place Leif could see why it hurt. Everywhere else was just a muddled, blind tangle of pain that kept threatening to sweep him away. He was scared that if he let it take him, he'd never find his way back.

He had to hold on—had to stay where he was—because surely Matteo was coming, and Leif had to stay where he was so Matteo could find him.



Two mornings. Two mornings had passed without Leif in their bed or in Matteo's arms. His people, and the NYPD, were swarming the city in search of him, but they hadn't found anything. There was no sign of Luca Russo either. He was Matteo's cousin on his father's side, a couple of years Leif's junior and younger than Matteo by more years than he cared to think about, especially knowing he was out there too. Blood and loyalty aside, Matteo had handpicked him as much for his talent with a handgun as the fact that he looked like any other clean-cut college student walking the streets of the city rather than what he really was. He was supposed to be Leif's ticket out of the firing line if needed; he wasn't supposed to be *in* it.

Luca's brothers—hell, most of Matteo's men in general—had taken his disappearance almost as personally as Matteo. New York was their city.

Matteo had spent the night in his office with Benny, trawling through video footage and as much documentation as existed about the shadier parts of their dealings. Matteo was a sensible man; he hid his tracks well, and he controlled his people even better. Keeping them happy meant they had no need to betray him. He was as confident as he could be that nobody from *inside* was behind this. He had no shortage of enemies in the city, but Matteo didn't know what had triggered this attack. Who had snapped badly enough to think up the plan and then put it into action?

Did they know Matteo too well, or not well enough?

By taking Leif, they said they knew more than they should—but taking him also said they didn't know what Matteo would do to get him back. Because if they did know and did it anyway?

Matteo liked that thought least of all. The worst foes to come up against were people so far off the planet and out of touch with reality. Most of the people who challenged him were predictable, reasonable in a way that meant he could control them. If he pulled a particular lever, they would veer the way he wanted them to.

He didn't know which lever to pull yet, or where they would veer.

He couldn't gamble on it, because they had his cousin, and they had *Leif*.

"Hey," Benny said quietly. His hand landed on Matteo's shoulder, warm and steady. "Want something to eat?"

Matteo started to shake his head. Empty was better for his knotted, roiling stomach. He'd forced down a bagel the day before at Benny's insistence and swore he could still feel it sitting like a stone.

There was a sharp rap on the door, and Benny snapped to attention, his grip on Matteo's shoulder tightening as he shifted his weight.

Benny relaxed a second later as Matteo recognized at least one of the men in the doorway as theirs. The familiar figure was definitely the one controlling the unfamiliar one.

"Brought you something." Carmine Russo, another of Matteo's cousins, was standing as tall and straight as the weight of the man slumped over his arm would allow him to.

Matteo turned his chair further, planting his feet on the ground and his hands on his bent knees as he looked the man over properly. He wasn't much taller than Carmine himself, but he was heavysset where Carmine was lean, and his breath was whistling and wheezing out of him in a way that meant he hadn't come quietly or willingly. Teeth, or ribs and lungs, or all of the above. His hair was a deep red, the kind that wouldn't show bloodstains like the lock of Leif's hair sitting on Matteo's desk did. An uncommon color, really, and maybe not the definitive proof Matteo needed, but it *did* narrow his focus by providing an important potential clue.

"And what is this?" Matteo asked, fixing his gaze on the man's half-hidden face.

"This"—Carmine shoved him forward, his booted feet slipping under him and only Carmine's grip keeping him from toppling over—"is Seamus. He hasn't told me his last name yet, but I don't think that matters much. He was delivering a gift for you."

"A gift?" The cold grip on the back of Matteo's neck, the one that hadn't really gone away since the moment he'd heard Benny's voice over the phone, tightened.

"A gift." Carmine's voice was cold, and he jerked his head toward where Gian DeMarco was standing behind them in the doorway, a cheerful green-and-red-and-white-striped envelope held between two fingers. Gian came further into the room,

skirting around Carmine and Seamus, and put the envelope down on Matteo's desk.

Still at Matteo's back, Benny stiffened at the sight of the envelope.

Matteo understood. Bodies and a lock of bloodstained hair. What fresh horror was this third item?

"Has Seamus told us anything useful?" Matteo asked.

Carmine shrugged as Gian came back toward him, carrying the aluminum chair from the corner. It didn't bode well for Seamus.

"Spat at me," Gian said as he put the chair down and leaned close to Seamus. "Did say 'Merry Christmas,' though. Couple days late, but doesn't seem like he's any good at keeping track of time."

Carmine snorted. "Entertaining, but not exactly useful."

"Do you have anything you'd like to tell me, Seamus?" Matteo asked.

The Irishman's hands were wide, long fingered, and dusted with pale freckles. Hardly dainty, and the knuckles were rough in a way that told Matteo he knew how to use them. Had they touched Leif?

Fire licked at the back of his throat at the thought, and Seamus threw his head forward as he spat on the floor between Matteo's feet.

He trusted Carmine and Gian—perhaps not as much as he did Benny but as much as he had Tommy. Carmine was family by blood as well as choice, and his youngest brother was likely wherever Leif was. If there had been anything to scare out of Seamus, they would have managed to do it. If the man was still prepared to disrespect Matteo to his face, it supported his insanity theory. The options were getting fewer with every new piece of information that came to light, but Matteo didn't like any of them.

It was past time for a return message and a gift of his own.

Matteo got to his feet and turned his back on Seamus and the rest of the room, going to the corner that was lit up with soft, warm strings of tiny lights. Benny loved Christmas enough that he spent the last week of every November making sure that everywhere he spent time was appropriately decorated. Matteo's only conditions were that it stayed out of his way, hence the corner, and that it got packed away on January 1st. He plucked a tinsel garland from the decorated tree. He pulled it free, examining the length and the shining colors, and then rolled the metal cable between his fingers. It wasn't overly thick, but it didn't feel like it would be easily snapped either.

It felt like it would hold enough to cause the damage he wanted.

He wrapped it around his hand loosely, closing his fingers into a lax fist as he crossed the room back toward where Carmine and Gian had forced Seamus down into the chair and tied his wrists to the armrests with zip ties. Benny was watching from near his desk, his dark gaze intent.

"Merry Christmas to you too, Seamus," Matteo said warmly as he crouched down in front of him, still toying with the tinsel garland wrapped around his fingers. "Season's greetings, perhaps, and may you miss a very"—he pushed himself up, circling to the back of the chair as he wrapped the garland around Seamus's throat and secured both ends in the same tightly clenched fist as he yanked—"happy New Year."

Seamus's boots slid and slapped uselessly against the slate floor as Matteo pulled the garland slowly and relentlessly in toward himself.

The skin didn't part like butter beneath a hot knife, but it *did* part. Matteo, and the steel wire beneath the green-and-silver tinsel, was the irresistible force, and Seamus's throat was not the immovable object.

Matteo listened to the thick, wet sounds spilling from Seamus as his blood did the same, watching the fall of red down the man's chest dispassionately.

He tied the tinsel garland in a loose, looping bow around the mess of Seamus's neck and released his grip entirely. The gurgling hadn't completely silenced, and he was still twitching, his wide, pale eyes staring past Matteo to the ceiling, but Matteo had never been a particularly merciful man.

"Leave him where they found Tommy," he said coldly, stepping back and accepting the towel Benny handed him. His hands weren't drenched in blood, but there was enough there to spot his fingers and palms. He didn't want to get blood all over his third gift.

When he opened the envelope, there was only one thing in it.

The edges of the Polaroid were pristine and perfect, a glossy and aggressive white around the darkness of the image itself. Matteo knew that whoever had successfully hidden from him for so long already wouldn't have been so stupid as to leave their fingerprints on a Polaroid, but he still moved it with his fingertips pressed to the sharp corners instead of the shiny surface.

The focus of the picture was one hand. The blurred shape of the other hand was obvious. Black plastic, a zip tie, was around the two wrists. The fingers that Matteo could see were curled and pale and too sharply outlined to have been moving at all.

A wide, thick band of silver, split into three sections, was around the thumb in the foreground of the picture. It was the twin of the ring hanging on the chain around Matteo's neck, and it had been on Leif's thumb two mornings ago.

DECEMBER 28

The fingers gripping Leif's chin were rough. The skin itself and their hold on him. The last time someone had gripped Leif's chin, it had been Matteo. His touch had been gentle and followed by a kiss. It was one of his favorite ways to change the subject or stop Leif in his tracks entirely. He'd done it the first time they'd ever kissed—taken Leif's chin in his fingers and then cradled his whole face as he kissed him. His hands had been huge and warm and gentle, holding Leif like he was something fragile and precious.

This time the fingers were cruel and dug into the underside of his jaw, sliding up until they pressed into the hinge, and he opened his mouth on a pained gasp that tore at his dry throat on its way out. He couldn't see, but hot, sour breath puffed out across his face as the grip tightened even further. Another hoarse gasp came out, and tears stung at Leif's eyes behind the cloth tied over them. The corner of his mouth was cracked, and fresh blood oozed down and over his lip, sharp and tangy as he sucked in a shallow breath.

He didn't know how long it had been, where he was, or *why* this was happening to him.

The soft strains of music filtered in past the thundering of his heart in his ears.

“... on the fourth day of Christmas, my true love gave to me...”



“And in a horrifying spectacle, a dead man adorned with tinsel has been found at Pier 96,” the newscaster said, shuffling the papers in front of her until they were in a neat

pile. “The NYPD have yet to confirm if they believe that the grisly scene, found at an early hour this morning, is connected to the dead man who was found there on Christmas Day.”

“Witnesses said that there was an ornate bow wrapped around the dead man’s neck, with a startling array of Christmas decorations scattered around his body,” the other newscaster, his face severe and voice pitched higher than Matteo would have expected, picked up. “The NYPD has advised us that it is an active investigation, and the identity of the victim has not been released. That is much the same as the comments regarding the Christmas Day murder. There has been a heavier-than-usual uniformed presence in the city over the past few days.”

“The NYPD has been out in force throughout the city, Bruce, even as no new information has been released about the slain police officer, who was also killed on Christmas Day, or his missing partner.”

“That’s right, Natasha, they are keeping a tight lid on whatever they do know. There are a couple of families out there who have had the worst Christmas of their lives, and we can only hope that answers are forthcoming.”

“Answers, and justice, Bruce.”

The television went abruptly dark, silence falling over the room.

“The NYPD is starting to put it together,” Carmine said quietly from somewhere behind Matteo. “It won’t be long before they come knocking.”

“Let them,” Matteo bit out. His jaw ached, and he curled his hand into a fist, the sharp flare as the edge of his nails bit into the meat of his palm taking the heat from the dull pain sitting behind his eyes.

He was still torn. The Irish wouldn’t have been his first guess. They hadn’t been until their man—Seamus—had ended up in the aluminum chair. The relationship between them and

Matteo had always been stilted but not particularly antagonistic. He had a distant, ambivalent kind of respect for Eoghan Sullivan, who had emerged from the bloody, long-running leadership spill as the last man standing. Enough to let him get on with his business as long as it didn't interfere with Matteo's own. They steered clear of each other, and Matteo still hadn't figured out when or why that had changed. Benny had leaned on their people *hard* in an effort to turn up if there had been any kind of pissing contest that could have escalated into something more serious, but nothing had emerged. Matteo was not a gentle man, and he was not feeling particularly reasonable, but Benny had made it clear that the consequences for holding back anything that could lead to finding Leif and Luca would be far worse than owning up when asked. Carmine and Domenic would extract their own vengeance if Matteo let them off leash.

Nobody had come forward, and Matteo had to trust that meant there was nothing for them to tell. It also meant that the Irish had been watching Matteo more closely than he liked to think.

There was no other explanation for how they'd zeroed in so successfully on Leif.

Matteo was waiting for the next shot to be fired so he knew where to aim his own. He couldn't fire first—not unless he wanted a war with Eoghan Sullivan and to lose whatever chance he had to ever have Leif back in his arms.

The heavy thud of multiple sets of feet snapped Matteo out of his fog. There was still a phantom itch across his palms where the garland had dug in the evening before, and he pressed his nails deeper into the spot as he twisted around to look at the doorway.

Benny and Gian were there, windswept and sparking with something that wasn't frustration. The difference hit Matteo like a spray of icy water to the face, and he pushed himself to his feet, twisting to face them properly.

“What?” he demanded.

Gian lifted a red-and-gold envelope between two of his fingers.

The icy-water feeling slid from the back of Matteo’s neck and down his spine at the sight of it. Carmine came up to his side, a vibrating wall of warmth close enough to almost vibrate Matteo along with him.

“Where was it?”

Benny and Gian shared a glance that Matteo didn’t have the time or focus to decipher before Gian stepped forward, holding it out to Matteo.

He turned it over and slid the edge of his fingernail beneath the point of the sealed flap, flipping it open. There was a single piece of thick paper inside, the edges gilded gold. Matteo pulled it free of the envelope and flipped it back over. The text was in red, blocky capitals.

It was an address that Matteo didn’t know.

Carmine reached around him, tilting the card up to look at it.

“That’s... out in Dumbo,” he said after a few seconds. “A storage facility over the bridge.”

Their influence in Brooklyn was stronger than anything the Irish had out there. Brooklyn was where Tommy and Matteo had first started out, before the seat of power in Manhattan had become Matteo’s too. Why would the Irish want Matteo closer to his *own* territory than somewhere else? Hell, even going further out into Queens would have been smarter.

“What do you want to do?” Benny asked.

Matteo blinked, reading over the address again. A storage facility.

Was that where Leif was?

Was he finally going to be able to bring Leif home?

“Get two groups ready and have them behind us,” he said, and his fingers twitched. The card bent slightly beneath them, and he breathed out, steadying himself. “Make sure the cops aren’t on the same trail. We’re ending this now.”

“Are you sure that’s—” Gian swallowed his words before Matteo met his eyes and nodded sharply. “On it.”

He spun and disappeared through the door. Carmine’s hand landed briefly on Matteo’s shoulder as he edged around him to follow after Gian. Matteo shifted his gaze to Benny, who was still standing in the doorway and watching Matteo.

Matteo strode toward him, expecting him to step aside, but he didn’t move. Matteo was a big man and knew how to use his size, but Benny had a couple of inches on him in height and more than a few pounds in sheer bulk.

“I’m—”

“No,” Benny interrupted. He pressed against Matteo’s chest with a shaking but firm hand, curling his fingers into the fabric of his shirt. “Behind me, Matteo, or not at all. It’s not an option.”

The fear and rage thrashing inside him roared at Benny through his ribs. The fire burned in his eyes—he could *feel* it—but he let Benny step in front of him as he reached up to touch the ring on the chain around his neck. He hooked his finger into the chain, rubbing his thumb along it as they moved down the hallway before letting the chain fall back against his sternum.

Carmine and Gian were in the idling SUV at the curb when Benny hustled Matteo out of the building and into the back of the driver’s side.

The city traffic didn’t care even a little bit for Matteo’s nerves as Carmine drove them out of Manhattan and over the bridge into Brooklyn. He and Gian spoke quietly in the front of the car, and Matteo stewed in silence in the back. Benny

spent most of the drive on his phone, the glow of the screen visible in the corner of Matteo's field of vision.

When they were over the bridge, Matteo straightened as Benny slid a Glock across the seat toward him.

"Fan out when we get there," Benny ordered. "Arturo, Brandon, and Daniel are coming with backup. Cover us."

Whatever Gian and Carmine said didn't make it through Matteo's ears, but he knew that they'd follow Benny's orders just as willingly as they did his own.

Gian pulled up to a small building a few long minutes later. It was old and weather-beaten, and the smell of the river and exhaust fumes hung heavy in the air as Matteo got out. It looked like it had been a shop, once upon a time, before all of the storage containers had been brought in. The fences looked like the only reason they stood up to a stiff wind was the holes in the chain links. There weren't even floodlights.

Further down the block, two more of their SUVs pulled in. Matteo recognised Arturo and Daniel before the building demanded his attention again. Benny followed him across the cracked concrete and patches of dirt and overtook him right before he crashed through the doors that weren't even locked.

The room reeked of blood and piss and wet, rotting wood.

Matteo didn't know whether it was vomit or rage, but it seared a path up his throat and choked him as he gripped his gun. It was bitterly cold in the abandoned shop front, plastic sheeting flapping in the icy wind, doing nothing to keep it out.

It took a few long seconds for Matteo's eyes to adjust to the dim lighting and for the clump of shadows in the corner to resolve into shapes and edges that vaguely resembled a person.

It took another second for him to recognize the deep-blue scarf, for his hands to remember the softness of it and his lips to remember the last fleeting taste they'd had of Leif's as he wrapped that scarf around his neck, for bone-deep terror to

wipe his mind utterly blank as he shoved his gun back into the holster. It left the beast behind his ribs free to claw up his throat and out of his mouth. Something guttural, something terrible and animal escaped his mouth, and Benny wasn't quick enough to stop Matteo from crossing the space between them and the corner in a handful of steps.

Time stretched, an entire lifetime in the slow *drip-drip-drip* of blood against the concrete that grew louder the closer Matteo got. It didn't take more than a heartbeat to recognize the bruised, bloodied face cradled between his hands, but an eternity passed between that beat and the next.

Even beneath the blood and the marks and the swelling, Matteo's hands knew that it wasn't Leif between them. The face was wider, the jaw too square, and the neck not quite long enough. From a distance, his eyes had been tricked, just like he'd planned for everyone *but* him.

Matteo had thought he'd been clever, using the similar coloring and passing resemblance between Luca and Leif to his advantage. What could be better than a secret bodyguard that could double as a decoy in a pinch? A bodyguard who Leif knew but would never suspect of following him and who would easily be able to explain away any random encounter if Leif *did* recognize him. A bodyguard that Matteo knew wouldn't hesitate to step between Leif and danger if the situation called for it. A bodyguard who—

Luca's head lolled in Matteo's grip, slippery with the blood they shared, and a shallow, rattling breath ghosted against the inside of Matteo's wrist. His dark lashes were smudges against the pale, bruise-mottled gray of his face.

Matteo swallowed down the burning. "Luca? Can you hear me, *leoncino*?" He locked one hand behind Luca's neck to hold his head steady. "I'm here, Luca." He heard footsteps and a faint splash and prayed to a God he hadn't believed in for a long time that Carmine wasn't far. He cursed himself for sending Domenic out of the city, chasing another lead, as he

heard Benny call out, then the sharp crack of a gunshot, and he tore his gaze from his cousin's face to keep an eye on the door.

He heard another crack and Gian's distinctive shout and then the pounding of more feet. No panic. His men wouldn't falter.

Luca was what they'd lured Matteo out for. The heart-stopping moment where Matteo had thought it was Leif had been just that. The scarf was a ruse, and the rest was a fleeting trick of his eyes and the light because Leif wasn't there.

There was a pulsing, aching heat behind his eyes as he shifted his weight, rolling up on the balls of his feet as he looked back at his cousin. Luca was trembling, but it was so faint that Matteo could only tell by feel. His eyes didn't flutter, and the wet rattle in his breath said that if they'd been moments later, Matteo might never have heard it again at all. He smoothed his hand down the expanse of the scarf, the soft wool cold and damp, with hard bits where blood had dried that caught on his palm as he ran down it.

It had been around Leif's neck three days ago, but Matteo knew that Leif—wherever he was—wouldn't have begrudged Luca whatever comfort it had brought him in the cold and the dark. Matteo would let him have that to the end.

There was another round of gunfire and then the pounding of feet drew closer.

"I'm sorry," Matteo murmured, pressing his forehead to Luca's. It was like ice to his skin, and he set his jaw against the grief swelling at the back of his tongue.

A hoarse cry sounded from the doorway.

Matteo stepped back and let Carmine crowd into the space he'd occupied, let him hold Luca through his last few desperate gasps for air and make all the wounded, raging sounds that were locked behind Matteo's teeth.

He'd let his cousin grieve for the both of them and make the city streets run scarlet in his wake.

Leif was still out there, and Matteo was done waiting for the next gift to be delivered. They'd taken Leif and spilled too much blood—Matteo's *own* blood, in his city—for him to not send another gift to Eoghan fucking Sullivan.

DECEMBER 29

The ridges in the ring on Leif's thumb were familiar. He knew every tiny particle of it, every bump and dip and edge of the thick silver band, and there was a deep, warm comfort in the feel of it under the pad of his thumb. It kept him anchored to his body when everything else kept trying to sweep him away.

His hope had started to waver, somewhere in the dark.

It had been such a long time since the alley, since Ronnie, even though Leif knew nothing more specific than that. He'd been so sure that Matteo was coming for him, had curled all of himself around the embers of hope to stop them from sputtering out in the cold. Matteo didn't hesitate to protect what was his, and if there was something Leif didn't doubt, it was that he was Matteo's. Matteo liked to act like Leif had been his from the moment Matteo had first seen him and decided it, but Leif knew better.

It hadn't been set in stone until Leif had seen behind Matteo's mask, until he'd seen far enough past the label of *criminal* to see the man wearing it. Even now, as desperately in love with Matteo as he was, Leif still sometimes felt torn between his duty and his heart. Ignorance, willful or not, could only take him so far.

He'd asked Matteo—made him promise—to never put Leif in a position where he had to choose between them. Matteo hadn't hesitated to make the promise, and afterward, Leif had wondered why. Had the promise been so easy to make because it meant nothing? Because Matteo didn't really care about keeping it, because surely he'd tire of Leif before push ever came to shove? He'd shaken the doubts off as best he could and had settled into their warm, quiet life together, but the cold and the dark and the hands that weren't Matteo's on his skin had crept into all the tiny cracks and laid Leif's doubts bare and open.

Had that moment come? Matteo hadn't made Leif choose between his duty and his heart, but maybe something had forced *him* to make that choice, and he'd chosen his duty.

Leif didn't know how else it could be that he was still there. He didn't know why he was still there. He didn't know when or how it was going to end.

He swallowed, his cracked lips dry and the skin in the corner of his mouth splitting open again as he rubbed harder at his ring. Matteo had given it to him. It was proof that Leif was Matteo's.

Matteo was coming.

His closed eyes burned, his breath caught, and somewhere in the distance, there was the sound of sirens.

The embers of hope inside him crackled and sputtered as he kept rubbing at his ring, over and over and over. The sirens weren't for Leif.

He'd heard them too many times already to think that they meant salvation.

Nobody was coming.



Matteo's knuckles were split and broken, lines of blood drying in the creases. The sharp, piercing pain had dulled to something flatter that sat beneath his skin. Nothing he'd done had prevented him from making a fist again or from otherwise using his hands. They would hold, and that was all that mattered. Matteo just needed to hold himself together until Leif was safe, until nobody could rip him away from Matteo again, and then he could take a moment.

Just a moment, for Tommy and Luca, and to prepare himself for what would need to be done to consolidate his control over the city again.

First, though, he needed to find Leif.

The dried blood on his hands had led him to the man in front of him.

Alistair Walsh.

Matteo's men had managed to capture two of their newest enemies the day before. They'd taken to the hunt with a fervor that had pleased the beast in Matteo, swarming the city and the Irish haunts until they'd scared some snakes from their holes. Arturo and Domenic had put the captured men on their knees in front of Matteo and Benny, trussed up and wild-eyed. Benny had made them scream everything they knew, giving enough—giving them *Alistair*—that when their purpose was served, Matteo had allowed a quick death.

Their bodies had tumbled into the East River without fanfare, but a basket of old glass-milk bottles, filled with their blood, was adorned with more tinsel, red and gold to match the last envelope, and left in front of a coffee shop that Matteo knew would make sure Eoghan received his gift.

He wasn't sure it was Eoghan himself who was behind this one, but it sure as hell was happening right under his nose.

Matteo wanted to make sure the Irishman saw what came next with wide-open eyes.

He stepped forward and jammed his thumbs into Alistair's mouth, pulling to the sides as he dug the tips of his fingers into the hinge of his jaw and forced it open. A bitten-off hiss escaped Alistair as he tried to gnash his teeth against Matteo's thumbs. Matteo pulled harder at the sides of his mouth, away from his teeth, and bared his own teeth in a snarl as he leaned over Alistair.

“The choice is yours,” he hissed. “But I need you to make it quickly, Alistair. So if you ever want to leave this room, you’ll tell me”—he pushed his thumbs as deep as they’d go while Alistair gagged—“where”—he curved them so that the tips dug into the soft, spongy flesh—“Leif”—he wrenched Alistair’s head up, the man’s pale eyes rolling back—“is.”

It fell from Alistair’s bloodied lips eventually. The city gave Matteo what he’d been searching for, in choked-off, hitching spurts, and Matteo was going to thank the city in turn.

With blood.

The pipe that had been resting in the corner of the room was cold against Matteo’s palm and fingers when he gripped it tightly and lifted it. The edges were sharpened, as he’d asked. It was lighter than it looked, and hollow, but still solid enough for his purpose. He just needed it to make the hole for him.

“Open his mouth,” he said, and Benny wrenched Alistair’s mouth open.

Matteo tested the weight of the pipe in his hand, glanced between Alistair’s face and the pipe, and steadied his grip. He breathed in and plunged the pipe down Alistair’s throat.

A gargling scream rang out when the edge of the pipe hit the back of his throat, and Matteo held the angle steady and pushed and pushed until muscle and flesh and skin gave under the pressure, and the scream died out to breathless, wet whines.

“Light him up,” he bit out, letting the pipe go and stepping back. He kept his feet under him out of sheer pigheadedness and watched as Gian and Arturo came forward.

The gasping turned shallow and desperate as Gian fed the delicate gold wire through the hollow pipe, his huge hands deceptively nimble as he threaded the light-studded wire into it while Arturo held the violently twitching Alistair still. There was a thin battery pack attached to the end that would sit neatly in Alistair’s mouth when they were done.

Benny guided him out of the room when Arturo started making new paths for the string of lights. There was another room across the hall, dimly lit and silent except for the faint hum of the heater, when Benny shut the door behind them.

The scream that left Matteo's throat came from deep in his chest, something animal and with teeth of its own that tore him up on its way out. He tasted blood.

The scream had started as a spat-out "coward" but didn't ever make it to an actual word.

Fleeing the city to Jersey? Taking *Leif* across the Hudson from Matteo?

Matteo wanted to set them on fire slowly and warm Leif's cold hands—the photograph was seared indelibly into the back of his eyelids—over the crackling flames as they burned.

Benny squeezed Matteo's wrists tightly, bringing them together and lifting them up to examine his hands as he loosened his grip slightly.

Matteo let him, willing his shoulders down from under his ears.

"You with me?" he asked hoarsely. He'd do it on his own if he had to, if there was no other choice, but he wanted Benny at his back—

"Always," Benny said without hesitation. He covered Matteo's bloodied hands with his own and gripped them, his fingers slipping into the spaces between Matteo's own. "Always, Matteo, but we are not going across the river without a plan or without backup. We'll bring Leif home, I promise. Do you trust me?"

Matteo trusted Benny with everything he was. Trusting him with Matteo's chance to get Leif back felt like something else entirely.

"I need him, Benny." Matteo's eyes stung with strain and exhaustion and more desperation than his body could contain.

“I know.” Benny yanked him in, releasing his hands to wrap one arm around his shoulders and press his other hand to the back of Matteo’s head, holding him there for a moment. “I’ll help you bring him home, I promise.”



New York never really slept, and New Jersey was close enough that it was much the same. Matteo wasn’t going to wait a moment longer than he absolutely had to; he didn’t give a shit about the hour or who had to haul themselves out of bed, but he knew he had to give Benny a chance to get their ducks in a row. So he didn’t fight it when Benny forced him to sit down with a big coffee and a hero sub that he’d gotten from somewhere—stuffed with thinly sliced meats and cheeses—while he rallied their men. Matteo didn’t taste a bite of it, but he forced it down and chased it with the coffee and some water. The warmth helped, slowly spreading out from his chest to his arms and legs.

Matteo flexed his fingers, the flimsy plastic bottle crinkling loudly beneath his grip. The bit of water left in it sloshed back and forth as he lowered it to the table. He left the scraps on the paper as he pushed up and away. His legs felt steadier beneath him with the warmth from the coffee and the weight of something solid and substantial in his stomach.

Leif was across the river, in New Jersey, and Matteo was going to take him back.

Whatever it took, when Matteo came back over that bridge, it would be with Leif safe in his arms.

The door opened quietly, and Matteo looked up, expecting Benny’s massive shadow but not finding it. He took a couple of hurried steps forward when he recognised Carmine’s shape in the doorway. Carmine wasn’t supposed to be anywhere near

whatever came next. Matteo had already lost Tommy, and it had cost them both Luca. Domenic was with his mother; Matteo couldn't put Carmine in the firing line.

His cousin's eyes were dark and bloodshot when he looked up at Matteo.

"No, Carmine," Matteo said, reaching out to grip Carmine's arms firmly.

"I'm not staying here," Carmine bit out, gripping Matteo back with so much force that it sent ripples of pain shooting up toward his shoulders from his elbows. "I can't."

"You are." Matteo held tight as he drew Carmine into something that wasn't quite an embrace but wasn't not one, letting the pain come. He'd earned it. "I need you here."

Safe, he didn't say. Carmine ran hotter than Luca ever had, was far less receptive to reason, and Matteo wasn't sure he was ever going to be able to give his cousins an order again. He didn't doubt himself often—*couldn't* doubt himself often—but he'd wanted Leif too much to deny himself. He'd thought his standing was strong enough to weather whatever doubt or scorn it sowed.

He'd been proven wrong multiple times since Christmas Day, had lost more than he had ever thought it would cost to hold onto the happiness he'd found, but he wasn't willing to lose more.

Whatever blood price had to be paid to return what was Matteo's would be paid by those bold and stupid enough to take it from him in the first place.

DECEMBER 30

It was raining, the thundering of sheet after sheet of water against the roof ringing in Leif's ears. Everything was drowned underneath the relentless pounding. Leif's hearing was probably the only sense that he hadn't been deprived of, but that didn't help under the rain. All he could taste was the leftover blood in his mouth, gritty and dry from the rag that was tied there whenever he wasn't being force-fed stale water or cold, slimy soup. The last thing he'd really seen had been Ronnie's face and the shock in his eyes, however long ago that had been.

Long enough that Leif wasn't sure he was ever going to see anything else.

It was okay, he supposed. He remembered Matteo's face—hundreds and hundreds of snapshots flicking across the darkness that had swallowed his eyes and not let go—and that was keeping him company in the cold and the dark.

The rain was louder on the roof of wherever he was than it had ever been against the windows of their apartment, but Leif was tired. Time was moving slow and thick, and Leif's blood felt slow and thick in his veins too.

He rubbed his thumb over his ring, breathed out shakily, and let his memories bleed out from behind his eyes and muddy the darkness with the remembered warmth of Matteo's chest against his cheek and the muffled patter of rain against the windows.

It would end eventually, one way or the other. Until then, and maybe even after, Leif had his memories.



Matteo's men spread out in formation, four dark arrowheads piercing the pre-dawn darkness. The city lights were eerie in the rain, and the mist left behind hovered above the pavement and asphalt as they moved through the night. It sank into the space between the fabric of Matteo's clothes and his skin, prickling with goosebumps.

He'd convinced Carmine to stay as far behind as he could. That was waiting on the riverbank with reinforcements that Matteo was determined would stay there. Even if their target knew they were coming—Matteo fucking *hoped* he knew they were coming—there wasn't much chance of him having enough men to overwhelm Matteo's.

As the edges of the building started to solidify through the haze, Gian's group split away from the rest and veered to the left as they came up on the small warehouse. The flickering lights were pale and barely visible through the grimy windows.

Matteo didn't know how many of them were waiting in the warehouse or the shadows around it. The information hadn't been that specific. Maybe Benny had gotten more information than he'd shared with Matteo, and Gian was following his orders. Maybe he was following his own initiative or the cold justice that they were seeking.

They'd all been wronged, and they were there to make right what they could.

No lives they took now were going to bring Tommy or Luca back, but there was something to be said for vengeance in its purest form.

Blood for blood.

An eye for an eye.

A life for a life.

Matteo palmed the gun at his hip, focusing on the weight of the spare ammunition clips in his pockets as he followed

closely behind Arturo. The rain gathered on his lashes and the tip of his nose, dripping slowly down as they moved through the night.

The NYPD was still looking for Leif too, but Matteo knew they wouldn't have crossed the river to New Jersey. All of his men knew how important it was to keep the police out of this conflict, and they had enough interested parties within the department's ranks to know that they were chasing other leads within the city itself. It pleased Matteo, at least a little, to know how doggedly they were still looking for Leif even if they were on the wrong track. He deserved that loyalty. It wasn't the NYPD's fault that Leif and his partner had ended up in the hands of the Irish, and it wasn't their responsibility to fix it.

That was Matteo's fault and responsibility both.

"Come on," Benny said from behind him. His hand landed between Matteo's shoulder blades briefly, propelling him forward. "Eyes forward. Arturo, hold point."

They kept moving, and the muffled cracks of gunfire and raised voices came as the men to their right split off too, a repeat of the night Matteo had found Luca, but they didn't bring dread. Just a hungry anticipation. Matteo had spilled almost more blood at his own hand in the past few days than the rest of the year combined, and he was itching to spill more. He was there for Leif, and Cormac Kelly, who was exactly where Alistair had told Matteo he would be.

Half a dozen figures came rushing out, and Arturo pressed backward, covering Matteo with as much of his body as he could. Gunfire came from behind them, and Matteo drew his own weapon. His hands were steadier than they'd been without it, and he slipped around Arturo as he raised it and took a shadow in the head.

It crumpled without fanfare, and heat flashed across the highest point of his cheekbone as his hair fluttered with

displaced air. Matteo kept moving, ducking his head and breaking into a run toward where light was spilling out around more shadows.

They dropped around him as he went, the muffled *crack crack crack* ringing in his ears, and a violent metallic screech cutting through as a bullet ricocheted off the sheets of corrugated steel around the door. Matteo dropped his shoulder in the direction of the man coming toward him as he burst through the door.

The weight that hit him wasn't insignificant, but Matteo was heavier and coming faster. The man didn't stand a chance. He hit the ground with a cry, scissoring his legs and barely catching Matteo's calf with the toe of his boot.

Benny shouted from behind him, and Matteo kept moving, pivoting and bringing his own boot down on the man's face. Bones and cartilage crunched beneath his heel, pushing out a wet, gurgling cry. He lifted his foot away and then fired down into the bloodied mess, the cry abruptly silenced. He looked up, lifting his gun as he went, and saw Cormac Kelly a few yards away, turning away from him.

The soles of his boots thundered off the concrete floor as he gave chase.

It was a short chase, only into the middle of the open section of the warehouse, where Matteo's own men ringed Cormac in, and he skidded to a stop.

Matteo kept going until they were almost chest to chest, firing a shot blindly at one of the hanging lights as he grabbed the back of the man's neck, angling his head up. He shoved the barrel of the gun into Cormac's mouth, close enough to hear the crackling sear as the hot muzzle hit the roof of the man's mouth, relishing in the full-body flinch.

"Your men didn't hesitate to give you up," he whispered, barely an inch from Cormac's face. "Alistair told me your name before I asked a single question, and Eoghan... well.

Eoghan knows we're here for you, and I don't see him coming to your rescue. Do you?"

Matteo's men would never have gotten so out of control without him taking action to mitigate the fallout. He hadn't decided what he was going to do about their relations with the Irish in general, whether he was going to hold Eoghan Sullivan responsible for his rabid dog and what it had cost Matteo, but it was enough to have the man who had spearheaded this at his mercy in that moment. He trembled under Matteo's hand as he wrapped his fingers around the front of Cormac's throat, the thin skin over his Adam's apple rippling as he swallowed.

"Where."

Matteo squeezed the curve of his throat lightly.

"Is."

He rested his finger on the trigger.

"Leif?"

A moment later, Cormac's screams cut through the night.



The concrete was cold and hard, and there was a sharp edge to whatever Leif was leaning up against. Moving him wasn't unusual; it had happened more than once, but there had been something urgent about it this time. Right after he'd woken, Leif had struggled and writhed, spitting his fury around the gag, but he didn't have the energy to waste anymore.

Nobody who was moving him ever reacted to it beyond a carefully targeted blow. His throat, solar plexus, kidney, the vulnerable place where ribs met cartilage. Something that left him breathless and disoriented. They'd leave him propped up,

gasping around the gag, until time warped away again. Until the next time they moved him, and the cycle started again.

Leif didn't know what was more terrifying: the thought that he'd only been gone for hours, and it had felt so long, or that he'd been gone for days or weeks, and it was still going.

Maybe the urgency was his. The rain had quieted down to something dull on the edges of Leif's awareness, not loud enough to drown out the sounds around him. There was the odd rumble of traffic, overlaid with other city sounds. The water and soup they'd tipped down his throat were still sloshing in his belly, his knees still stinging where the grazes on them reopened every time his pants came off, and he was forced to kneel until he either relieved himself or his keepers lost patience. The fact that he wasn't aching to go, no stabbing pains, was as close to a time marker as he had.

He was trying to swallow, the muscles in his cheeks and jaws working around the gag, when he heard raised voices.

His keepers were usually silent and unflappable. Leif had heard a few voices, but none of them had been familiar. He'd picked out a thick Irish brogue, a Spanish-sharpened New York accent, and someone who obviously only knew what Italians sounded like from the movies. None of them had ever spoken directly to him, and the newest raised voices weren't for Leif either. There were footsteps pounding on concrete, the splintering of wood and the drag of metal across the concrete, and men barking orders.

Leif's heartbeat picked up, still sluggish but faster, and he shifted to get the blood flowing in his heavy legs again. Warm blood beaded on the outside, at his knees and the split skin on his wrists. When he swallowed, he tasted the thick copper of it.

The muffled *crack* of a silenced gun rang out, and Leif tipped his head back as his eyes stung and burned.

Someone had come. Whether it was for Leif or not, someone had *come*.

They wouldn't leave him there.

They couldn't.



Matteo released his hold on Cormac, and the Irishman hit the ground with a wet *slap*.

Matteo wiped his hand against his shirt until the blood was gone and flexed his fingers before closing them into a fist. His knuckles ached, the lines across them stained red again, but he took a heartbeat to wipe those across his shirt too.

He wouldn't touch Leif with that much of Cormac's blood still on his hands.

Benny and Gian and Arturo had cleared out the rest of the men that Cormac had managed to sway to his cause, so when Matteo broke into a run toward the back of the warehouse, there was nobody left to challenge him. He kept his gun up—his heart was in his throat at the thought that Cormac had left a man behind to make sure that Matteo *couldn't* win—but there was nobody waiting in the shadows of the rickety back room.

Nobody except Leif.

Most of his face was hidden behind a blindfold and a gag, but Matteo would know him anywhere just from the way his own heart pounded faster. Shafts of moonlight and streetlight came through the windows and the plastic-sheet patching in the roof, making Leif's hair and skin and the ring on his thumb glow dimly.

"Leif," he breathed out.

Leif stiffened, his legs jerking and slipping against the concrete as his head turned blindly toward Matteo.

Something garbled and muffled came out from behind the gag, and Leif jerked again. It pushed Matteo back into motion; he crossed the room in a handful of strides and went to his knees gracelessly at Leif's side.

His fingers trembled as he reached around to the back of Leif's head, feeling for the knots of the blindfold. They were tight, Leif's hair matted around them, and he eventually just loosened it enough to slide it up and over his forehead and away from his face.

Leif blinked at him in the darkness, his eyes huge and mostly black in the dim light and against his pale face.

He was the most beautiful thing Matteo had ever seen.

"Leif," he repeated, swallowing around the lump in his throat as he fumbled with the gag. "Leif, baby—" The gag fell away easier than the blindfold, and the bloodied, cracked skin in the corners of Leif's mouth stole Matteo's breath.

Something strangled and hoarse left Leif's mouth, his dry lips parting around the sound as he reached for Matteo with hands still bound at the wrist.

"I'm here," Matteo said, curling his hand around Leif's and bringing them to his lips. He pressed a kiss to the icy skin over Leif's knuckles. "I found you. You're safe; you're safe, and it's almost over, Leif."

Matteo's knife was still strapped to his ankle, and he made a wordless, hushing noise as he reached for it. He took Leif's hands gently, settling them against his own thigh, and slid the gleaming blade between them until it hit the zip tie before he jerked it up and cut cleanly through the plastic.

One of Leif's hands went to his chest, scrabbling weakly at his shirt, and the other slid off his thigh, twitching violently.

“Ma-Matteo—” Leif choked out, throwing himself forward, and Matteo wrapped his arms around him, swaying back on his heels as he cradled Leif to his chest.

“I’ve got you, baby,” he murmured into his hair, closing his eyes against the searing sting as Leif relaxed into him. It had taken five days, but Leif was in Matteo’s arms again. Leif was where he belonged. “I’ve got you, I promise.”

ABOUT BRIAR KEARNEY

Briar Kearney is an Australian author who writes books with a healthy dose of action, suspense, angst and hard fought happiness. She runs primarily on coffee and Instagram reels of pet dogs, and can be found on various platforms here <https://linktr.ee/briarkearneyauthor>

SOLDATINO



Leigh Kenzie

Marcus

Thief. Con man. Dedicated son of the D'Angelo Family.
The problem? I hide a secret that could tear my life apart...

Allesandro

Il Padrone. Master. Head of the Martelli Family. I'm ruthless
and I get what I want, no matter whose secrets need spilling...

This is not a romance and does not contain a HEA or HFN.
It can be read as a prequel to the completed Vendetta Series.

Trigger Warnings:

Torture, Murder, Homophobia, Captivity,
Domination/submission, Stockholm Syndrome.

MARCUS

“You really want to go into the Martelli Family territory and try to steal from them?” I stare at my father in shock.

“Do you have a problem with that?” His dark eyes, the same I see in the mirror when I look at myself, make it clear what my answer should be. I swallow hard, forcing myself to remain silent. With a grunt, he nods his head as if I’m agreeing with him. “That’s what I thought. Now get your ass in gear and grab everyone. We have shit to do and I want to clear out. It’s getting too hot here.”

I can’t disagree with him. We’ve burned this town as much as we could. Although where the fuck the money has gone, I don’t have a damn clue. I’m often the one they send in to steal the shit or help on the cons, but by the time the money is split up, there’s never enough for me to get away. And fuck do I want to leave them.

It’s not that I don’t love my family. But they’re exhausting. It’s drama upon drama. Despite not getting to finish school or, hell, even be in it consistently growing up, it’s the same type of shit I saw there. Constant digs and petty power struggles.

My father rules the family with an iron fist. My mother? She stays in the background, but if anyone thinks she’s weak, it’s the last mistake they’ll make. While my father may enforce the rules, she’ll push his buttons and damn if you know which way she’ll jump for the most part, except never in the defense of me. No, my older brother and younger sister seem to get that approval.

Michael, the golden child. He’s already brought in a wife and one child. His wife’s pregnant—again. Using the wife and kids for a con is helpful at least, but I could do without the crying and Michael trying to lord over the fact he’s the one

already making the family into an empire. Like really? What empire?

Claire, or Sissy, as we call her, is a two faced bitch. She'll fucking smile as she twists a knife deep in the back of someone. Ask her best friend from years ago. Oh wait, that's right, the kid is stuck in a long-term nursing facility at twelve years old over her shit. But good ole Dad loves his little princess. I've learned not to fuck with her. She's too damn good at finding pressure points and blackmail.

Really, the whole fucking family sucks. I can't afford to leave, and even if I could, what the hell would I do without them? We've burned more bridges than I care to think about and it's not like I'd ever go straight. Heh. Straight. That's my closest guarded secret. If my family ever found out I was bisexual...fuck. No, it's better if I keep my head down, work for the family and hope that eventually I'll make it somewhere better—or that my family gets a personality change. Is a miracle too much to ask for? At least the new town should have some shiny things to steal. That always puts me in a better mood... We just need to dodge the Martelli Family and it'll all be okay.

ALLESANDRO

“Do they think I’m an idiot?” I turn toward my Second, watching on video feed as a man tries to sneak into one of our warehouses while three others in black keep watch. I’m at my desk with Luca standing next to me.

My office is still in transition now that I’ve taken over from my father. I haven’t decided whether I like this desk or not. The cherry color is too bright, despite how ornate it is, and I make a mental note to switch it out. I want dark colors, ones more fitting of my position. Behind me, our Family motto makes it clear that we must have courage and loyalty in order to gain victory. It’s something all of our men are taught. That’s the only item I plan on keeping in this room.

“From what I gather, they’ve done this to several territories. I’m surprised they’ve managed to stay alive so far.” Luca responds, his eyes never leaving the screen. With his classic good looks, most tend to underestimate him. It’s something I’ve used to my advantage many times over.

This is the first territorial dispute I’ve faced on my own since my father died. Good riddance to him. He taught me the coldness of fury, the hardness of leadership, and the strategy of a mafia boss, but the ice in his veins overshadowed all of that. However, I can’t deny his technique for growing an inner circle, and I wonder if the man slipping inside the warehouse would be an excellent option for me.

“Put a man on them. I want to see what happens if they believe they’re successful.” I turn away from the feed, knowing my men will follow my commands without any hesitation.

“Yes, Padrone.” Luca taps a few keys to give the order. I’m not sure who he chooses, and fuck I really don’t care. I’m more interested in how this will play out and what that man

will do when I have him on his knees in front of me—because he will be on his knees.

“Come. Let’s go to the next item on the list.” I stand up and leave the room with Luca following like a good little puppy, just as a Second should.

I whistle a happy tune as I make my way to my second favorite guest room in the mansion. Opening the door, I step in and smile at the sight in front of me. The man tied up in the chair struggles against the binds, his mouth gagged, muffling the sounds of his distress.

I walk toward him, circling him until I stop in front of him. Gesturing to Luca, I draw my Second closer, nodding at the man. With a vicious smile, Luca roughly yanks the gag out.

“Fucking hell!” The man spits out, his body vibrating with fear. It doesn’t help that this room has thick rubber flooring with a drain to collect any...fluids. There are also so many fun toys scattered around that the man’s eyes keep darting toward.

“Tsk. Do you kiss your wife with that mouth? Then again, the whores you visit make it clear just how dirty you are.” I grab a seat and move it toward him, turning it so I’m sitting the wrong way and pillowing my arms on the back. “You probably thought we wouldn’t care about a couple whores, did you? After all, they’re invisible to people like you. You come to our whorehouse, do your deed, get off, and leave. Now, that’s all fine. But where you fucked up is damaging the merchandise. That keeps my whores out of rotation, meaning it hurts my profits. You see where I’m going with this?”

“Fuck. It was just a whore. Why the hell do you give a shit? I’m sure you can get more. It’s not like she was even good. I did you a fucking favor.” I glance toward Luca and tilt my head. With a savage grin he grabs a knife. At the sight, the man pales considerably. “Wait. We can talk about this. We don’t need to rush into things. How about if I pay you? I have money. You can recover the costs of her...leave of absence.”

“So now you’re concerned about the cost of my business. So kind.” I flick a finger at Luca, who pulls up his own chair, gently stroking the man’s arm, which is tied down on the armrest of a chair that has seen more blood than most hospital operating rooms. “However, since you weren’t exactly cooperative in the beginning, and to be honest, you’re a fucking asshole, we’re going to take it out of your hide. Quite literally. But don’t worry. You’ll still pay. I’m currently in the process of draining your bank accounts as well.”

“But my wife! And kids!” His eyes are wide as they dart around, unable to concentrate on any one thing, the fear finally pressing into his system fully.

“Eh, maybe your wife can take the place of the whore you fucked up. After all, you said they’re replaceable.” I smile at him, knowing this will be an excellent lesson for anyone who dares try to fuck with my merchandise.

I lean back and listen to the screams as Luca starts skinning the man. It’s a delicate process, and while gory, there’s a certain level of beauty in it. The fact you can separate skin from what’s underneath...it makes me wonder if the man I saw sneaking into my warehouse will end up here or if he’ll make better decisions.

MARCUS

“You did it,” my father almost purrs as I hand off the backpack I was carrying.

Shrugging, I’m not sure why there was any doubt. It wasn’t a hard job, and all I needed to do was grab a gun to prove I could circumvent the Martelli’s security. “It wasn’t that hard. I actually expected more of a challenge.”

I drop into a seat at the table my family is sitting at, the festive atmosphere making my ears hurt like hell. A bunch of Christmas songs blare out into the bar and red and green lights are tacked up along the ceiling, casting what I imagine is supposed to be a cheery vibe, but in this dingy dive looks garish more than anything. The one thing I’m surprised by is the clientele. While there are plenty of listing drunks, there’s a few men and women who stand out. The kind I know must deal in cash for a tumble. I catch a couple looking at me, and I carefully let my gaze only go toward the women, but one of the men stands out, and I can’t help darting quick looks at him. He’s sitting next to a woman who must be in the same profession, but she pales in comparison.

He’s a twink with glossy red lips that I can only imagine would look damn good spread around my cock. *Fuck*. I quickly avert my eyes, throwing myself into engaging with my family instead. For a moment, I panic when Sissy’s eyes narrow at me. I wonder if she saw the way I looked at the man, but surely not...

“Do we have a plan for what’s next?” my brother asks nasally. I lean slightly away, worried I’ll catch whatever germs he’s picked up—unless it’s from his habit of snorting things he shouldn’t be. Why the fuck he’s the favorite is beyond me.

“They always have a Christmas party at the aunt’s house. Lots of valuables in there.” My father taps his fingers along

the table excitedly. I know he's thinking of the payday, but fuck...

"That is a much different job than what you had me do." Leaning forward, I lower my voice. "A warehouse and a home have much different security. Not to mention if you're wanting me to go in while people are there...I definitely don't want to go in afterwards..."

"Too much for you, brother?" Sissy taunts me, smirking as she tosses her dark hair over her shoulder.

"You're a fucking b—"

"Marcus! Don't you dare finish that sentence. Leave your sister alone." I bite my tongue at my father's scowl. Shaking my head, I shrug in defeat. That bitch is always going to win their approval no matter what, and the waves of arrogance from her highlights it.

"We need to check out the security more if that's your plan." I roll my shoulders back, trying to formulate a list in my mind of everything that needs done beforehand. "And do we have a list of targets or am I just grabbing whatever I can get my hands on?"

Exchanging a look with Michael, my father clears his throat. I don't trust it all. "We'll have a list for you. You just figure out a way to gain entry."

"Alright." I sip the beer I'm drinking, wishing it was something harder, but knowing it's more important to keep my wits about me.

"With that, I'm headed out to Alicia," Michael states, even as we all know he's probably going to stop and find a whore on his way back to his marital bed. Not like my father gives a shit since he's already producing heirs. And probably bastards.

"Very well, I need to catch up with your mother. Make sure you don't stay out too late." He follows a beat later, and I almost relax, except for Sissy still being there.

She stands up and slides closer to me, leaning into me. “Don’t think I didn’t notice you watching that twink. You step outside the line and I’ll make sure Dad knows. He won’t take kindly to having a fag of a son. It’ll be just one more disappointment. Hell, I’d be surprised if he lets you live.”

“Jesus, you’re a piece of fucking work. I wasn’t looking at him but his companion,” I lie, just as always, the way it rolls off my tongue feels like ash to deny myself again and again.

“If that’s true, then you should be more excited. She’s headed right this way.” With a suspicious look at me, she continues, “but isn’t it interesting that you knew exactly what guy I was talking about?”

“Hi there. I hope I’m not interrupting,” the blonde woman says as she comes closer, drawing a finger down my cheek. It takes everything in me to hold still. She’s not my type at all, but Sissy is cataloging every move of mine.

“Not at all. Why don’t you take a seat and I’ll buy you a drink? Maybe we can get to know each other better...” I drop my voice, making my innuendo clear. It’s awkward as fuck with my sister sitting next to me. I need to shake her off, though. Maybe if I can leave with the woman, it’ll be enough.

“Hmm...we could do that. Or you could just follow me back to my place. I promise you’ll have a good time.” She winks at me and caresses the bottom of her neck, drawing my gaze to her breasts. I wish I could say they interested me, but on the Kinsey scale, I fall more toward men than women and she’s not doing it at all for me.

“Oh, of course he’s interested,” Sissy says mock sweetly. “He’d be a fool to say no. And he’s not that, are you, Marcus?”

I clench my jaw at the threatening edge of her last statement. The whore’s brow furrows as she glances between the two of us, unsure of the undertone. I’d explain, but what’s there to say about a homophobic family and a bitch of a sister who tries to

grab me by the balls? Like I'd ever follow her lead on anything.

"Of course I am. I'm merely waiting for you to get out of here, sis. I'd hate to be rude and just leave you. You know how father would react to that," I parry back. She curls her fingers into fists, and I almost laugh. Standing with a huff as she knows I have her there, she whirls around and stalks out. I give a sigh of relief, but a quick glance at the woman near me says I'm still in for a long night.

After a few moments from when the door closes on Sissy, I turn my attention to the woman fully, trying to figure out what to say. Instead, her mouth twitches as she leans into me fully, whispering in my ear, "I'm not the one who wants you. A certain...gentleman is waiting. If you'd like to follow me, we thought you'd do better that way as your uh...table did not seem to be the most *friendly* for that."

My cock twitches just at the thought of that man and I'm tempted to give in. Shooting a look at the doorway again, I'm unsure if it's wise. There's such a chance that Sissy would come back and try to catch me. Then again, if I don't leave with this woman, I'm in even bigger trouble. Fuck my life. She sits watching me, not pushing me, and I finally stand, gesturing for her to lead. I hope to fuck I'm not going to screw this up.

We weave through tables, heading to the back. When she slips out the back door, I hesitate briefly before following. The shadows are deep in the alleyway, but I have no problem making out the tempting man from earlier this evening.

"Mmm...hello," he purrs as he comes closer. "It looked like you were interested. Sherry volunteered to go get you in case that's what was stopping you."

I blush. There's something about his attitude, his brightness that makes him seem far larger than I am. I may be almost twice his size, but there's no question he has a swagger I've

never seen before. Normally my interactions are nothing more than fumbling moments in a dirty bathroom or back alley, but this man doesn't seem the type to fumble. Then again, he doesn't seem the type to do it for free either.

Clearing my throat, I stammer, "Wha-what's your name?"

"I'm Mattie, cutie. I thought perhaps we'd get to know each other better if you'd like...on the house this time even."

I blink, unable to believe the offer. I look around, but Sherry has already left and I don't see anyone else hanging around. My mouth is too dry to speak as my cock thickens at the thought of fucking Mattie, or hell, maybe he'll fuck me. It's been forever. I wave him on, and with a wink, he whirls around and practically sashays down the damn alley before ducking into an unmarked door. My hands shake as I nudge it open, cautious if anyone other than Mattie is waiting. Thankfully, when I enter, he's the only one I see.

MARCUS

“Do you need some liquid courage?” Mattie calls as I step further into the room.

I study my surroundings. I’m not sure what type of building this is, but it’s a small setup. It’s open floor, although I assume the other door I can see is a bathroom. Otherwise, there’s a kitchenette, a semi living quarters if it can be counted and then a rather large bed that takes up the majority of room. For his profession, that seems to be the best investment. Paint is peeling off the walls, but I can see he’s tried his best to make it livable. There is even a tiny fake Christmas tree on the little counter space he has. My heart clenches at the sight because even a whore is more grounded than I am in this life. I can’t remember the last time my family even celebrated the holiday, much less stayed in one place long enough to have decorations.

“No,” I respond, moving forward and placing my hands on his hips. His chocolate brown eyes are fucking enchanting, and when I pull him closer, I’m relieved that his dick is as hard as mine. He grinds against me before grabbing a handful of my hair and yanking me into the dirtiest, hottest, most dominating kiss than I’ve ever had. Fuck. When I finally back off enough to breathe, I lean my head against his, focusing on the pleasure coursing through me. “Do you...?”

“Do I what? Have supplies? Top? Bottom? Whatever you want, you can have it.” His slim fingers caress the back of my neck and I shudder from the gentle touch. It must be a damn Christmas miracle, but there are too many options. My indecision must be obvious because he steps away before taking my hand and leading me over to the bed. “Why don’t I help you get a bit comfortable, hmm?”

I almost forget to breathe when he unzips my pants and pushes them and my boxers down. Feeling partly foolish half-dressed, I shrug off my shirt as well. The humiliation at being naked when he's fully dressed shouldn't be so fucking hot, yet my cock disagrees. He smirks before kneeling and enveloping me in his hot mouth, taking me completely without even gagging.

"Fuck!" I scramble to keep my balance, throwing my hands onto his shoulders as my knees shake. The way he slurps and swirls his tongue around me should be fucking illegal. When he taps my legs, I carefully widen my stance, leaning onto him more to stay upright. He pops off my cock and captures one of my balls in his mouth, gently sucking on it before going to the next. "Oh my god. I...I'm going to come!"

At my exclamation, he once again goes to my cock, and it's only seconds before I'm flooding his mouth with my cum. His hand is in his pants, jerking off, and it's only a moment later before he comes as well.

I wanted to do far more than a blow job, but fuck if he doesn't know exactly what to do. I tumble back, thankful he put me close to the bed. I wipe my forehead, unsurprised it's covered with sweat as I stare down at him with wide eyes. That's...that's never happened before. Not coming so quickly and so fucking hard with one blow job.

He stands gracefully and caresses my cheek before walking across the room and grabbing a bottle of water. He sits next to me and opens it before handing me the bottle. I quickly drink half of it before offering him the rest.

"Nah, I'm good. Go ahead and finish it." Shrugging, I quickly down the rest of it.

"Are you in town for business or other types of pleasure?" Mattie takes the empty bottle from me, setting it on the nightstand as he shuffles up on the bed.

I join him, even though I still feel relatively boneless. Leaning heavily against the headboard, I cut my eyes toward him. “I don’t believe I said I was new into town.”

“Nah, but I know most people who are in this area. You’ve never been here before and you look like a traveler. The type to not settle down, perhaps?” Mattie crosses his legs as he twists his upper body toward me.

“Hmm...I tend to move around for my job. As does my family.”

“The family that clearly doesn’t approve.” Mattie’s nose scrunches in distaste. I snort as that’s a fucking understatement.

“That would be correct. They’re...well. Them,” I mutter, not able to describe them properly, especially as the pleasure from before finally leaves my body, pushing me into a state of exhaustion. “Fuck. I didn’t realize I was so damn tired. I should get out of here.”

“Or you could just take a nap and we could go round two when you’re up next.” Mattie’s mischievous expression is almost enough to have me stay, but it’s not worth the ire of my family.

“Gotta get back.” I shake my head regrettably, but when I go to slide out of the bed, things get hazy. “Oh damn. Maybe I’m more tired than I thought.”

“Here, just rest. I’ll wake you in a bit.” Mattie murmurs as he helps position me better, rubbing my chest. Something feels off about this whole situation, but fuck if it isn’t relaxing. I’ve never spent the night with a man and there’s something here that makes me want to do it.

Still...I know I can’t. It’s too dangerous. For me, and even for him, if my family found out. I struggle again to get up, but the pressure from his hand rubbing circles on my chest increases. Or at least I think it does. Either way, the struggle is over almost before it begins and I fall into sleep. Panic still

chases me, but so does a contentment of finally being myself...

ALLESANDRO

I lean in to kiss Zia Giavonna on her cheek, happy as always to see her, even though I'm impatient for the games to start. My father's sister is the closest relative I have and one of the few who showed me any love growing up. Which is likely why my father tried to keep us apart. Her husband, my Zio Teodoro, has always been by my side as well. Neither of them were overly involved in the Family. My aunt firmly put aside because of her gender and my uncle has taken on more of a counselor position. The only thing that ties them more heavily to the family is operating the high-end whores out of a segment of their house. Cops don't look too close at rich families who are expecting deliveries and when those cops and politicians are on the payroll, anyway? They really don't give a fuck.

"Merry Christmas," I murmur as I pull away.

It's her annual Christmas ball and I know to expect plenty of high-end people here. They all come to rub their elbows with me, to whisper words of desire and request favors. Thank fuck Luca will head some of these people off. It was tiring watching my father handle this. Doing it myself is even worse. I'm not surprised my mother always avoided them.

"Ah, my dearest nephew. I am so glad you came." She pats my cheek as if I'm still a young child. "Perhaps now you can relax a bit. And maybe you'll meet someone special."

I refuse to crush the hope in her eyes, even as Luca chokes on a laugh. "Perhaps. I have a good feeling about tonight. But I'll let you get back to preparations. I know that you're busy. Save a dance for me?"

"Of course. And don't worry, I made sure some of your favorites are being served. And yes, yours, too, Luca. Like I'd

forget about my nephew's best friend." With that, it's a whirl of a dress before she's gone.

"You know...it always surprised me they decided to go for a more Mediterranean look than the Renaissance that your father favored. Or at least something more Italian, I guess." Luca's quick change of subject is certainly appreciated. Our relationship is...unique. I try not to let my aunt and uncle know too much about it, but given the way I was taught by my father, I'm sure they already know too much. Although my aunt seems to ignore it completely.

"I think it's the color scheme. My aunt has always loved vibrant colors." The ballroom certainly proves that with the bright tiles. I step out of the room and make my way to the library. It's always the one place I feel comfortable. Likely because it's the room neither of my parents would be caught dead in. Pouring us each a whiskey, I take a seat on one of the armchairs. "Do you think he'll show up?"

"Yes. The whore gave us good intel and since the fucker was stupid enough to have his actual ID on him, we know even more about him. Marcus D'Angelo, aka Marcus White, aka Marco Dami, aka Marcus Styles. He must not have had enough time to make a new one. Do you really plan on letting him get away?" Luca sets down the electronic pad he was carrying and gets comfortable in the other armchair across from me.

"I'll certainly let him think he's gotten away. Thanks to his dumbass brother, we know a few things they plan on looking for. I've gone ahead and added a GPS tracker to the items. I plan on making sure we catch him and bring him back. Then his training can begin..." I stretch out my legs, widening them as Luca's gaze drops to my thickening cock. Luca licks his lip as he stares, and I press my palm against my hard on. "Is there something you want, Boy?"

"Yes, Padrone," he responds breathlessly, so absolutely beautiful in that moment of desire and need.

“Then get on your knees and crawl to me.”

My command spurs him along, and by the time he reaches me, I'm lucky there's not a damn wet spot on the front of my suit. My aunt would kill me. Thankfully, my Second wastes no time unzipping my pants. Standing, I let him pull my boxer and pants down fully as he kneels in front of me.

He leans forward, smelling my pubic area, but not taking my cock in his mouth yet. Gripping it at the base, I move it toward his open mouth. I take a moment to trace his lips with it before feeding it to him steadily. It hits the back of his throat and he gags, but I still go further. His hands immediately go to my thighs and I snarl. At my wordless direction, he clasps his hands behind his back, giving himself over to me completely.

I grip his hair tightly and fuck his mouth without a damn care. He tries to suck me but can't because I'm not giving him a chance. Instead, I'm using him just for my pleasure. The tears and snot from his constant gagging spurs me on, and I imagine what Marcus will look like when he's down on his knees for me. That thought triggers my orgasm, and I shove so deep in Luca's throat that he doesn't have a choice but to take every. Single. Drop. I give him.

I lean forward, breathing hard from such a rush. Once my legs cooperate, I slowly remove my softened cock from Luca's mouth, and he keels over, gasping desperately. It seems I cut off his oxygen a bit too long. Shrugging, I really don't give a fuck. He's alive. This is my due as Master of this Family.

Once he regains his breath, he goes to stand, but he's still shaky. I've already gotten dressed, but I notice Luca's suit pants have a wet spot in them. Snorting, I gesture to it and he flushes red, mumbling something. Clasp his shoulder, I steer him toward the bedroom my aunt insists on keeping for me. “Let's see if there's something that will fit you. Zia Gia will not be thrilled if you show up to the ball in cum stained pants.”

I have a feeling this ball is going to be quite the show...and this is a promising start.

MARCUS

The sound of live classical music fills the air in the ballroom. I'm passing out glasses of champagne in my ill-fitting waiter uniform. It was the easiest method to get into the mansion. Thank fuck whoever did background checks didn't look too closely at mine as I hadn't had time to set up as deep of a cover as normal. Typically, I wouldn't go in like this, but my father made it clear it needed to be tonight. Fuck the fact I didn't get to do near as much research as normal. At least before I left the whore the next morning, I was able to ask some general questions that didn't seem to raise any flags. I can't believe I was so fucking tired I fell asleep. If my family had caught me strolling in late...

I shake it off, biting the inside of my cheek when the live music changes to jingle bell rock—done by a string quartet. Rich people. Can't account for fucking taste. I have one last glass of champagne to pass off before I can escape this room and head for what should be a good payday. I send a signal to my family using a button on the side of my watch. Sissy should hopefully make a bother of herself and draw the guards flanking the entryway toward her so I can slip out.

I'm eyeing the door so carefully that when I hold out the last glass of champagne, I'm not paying attention to the person who takes it.

"I don't believe I've seen you around." Startling, I glance at the man and my fingers twitch on the serving tray. His vivid blue eyes study me and a chill races down my spine. It takes everything in me to stay still. I recognize him from the pictures my father showed us. Il Padrone. The supposed Master of this city and the leader of the Martelli Family. "Do you not speak?"

“I’m sorry, sir. I’m new here. To the city. And just filling in for a friend.” I stammer, unsure why he’s affecting me so much. I note his Second is slightly behind him and his eyes aren’t friendly as he stares at me. For a moment, I worry the game is up, but then Il Padrone merely tips his head to me.

“Then I hope I’ll see you around. Please be careful. You never know what lurks in the city—or in a family.” With that cryptic comment, he moves away gracefully, as if he’s dancing through the crowd. He may as well be for how they part for him. His Second hesitates briefly as he glares at me before he follows his so-called Master. My family may be fucked up, but there’s no way I could handle calling someone Master.

I stroll closer to the entryway, my heart pounding as the guards haven’t left yet. Still, I keep steady. It’s only if you look guilty that people tend to take a second look, especially those who are merely waiters or some service oriented job. It’s like we’re invisible, which makes it all the more interesting that Il Padrone bothered to stop and address me.

Exhaling, the men finally make their way down the hallway. Amateur move not to leave one behind, but Sissy is damn good at distractions. I don’t look around, but move purposely out of the ballroom. If Michael did his job, the cameras won’t pick me up. If they do, hopefully the guards will still be distracted because once we get our hands on our big payday and I’m out of here, it’ll be time to move on. There’s no way I’m risking retribution from this Family. I’ve heard the horror stories.

I ignore the fancy paintings and sculptures. They’re not going to be easy to move and it would be a pain to get them out of here. From the schematics we were able to find, there should be a master bedroom not too far from here. I take the hallway down until it ends before making a right. It should be here somewhere...

I quietly open and close a few doors before finding it, just as I hear footsteps getting close to the corridor I’m in. I slide into

the room, gently closing the door and flattening myself against the wall next to the door so when it swings open, I'm not visible. I didn't need to worry as the footsteps pass right by me.

I grab my penlight out of my pocket and look at the room closer. I stifle a snort because damn. As polished as the rest of the house looks, this is garish in a nouveau riche way. And I know they've had money far longer than anyone should have rights to. But there's frothy pink everywhere and gold leaf all over. Fuck. Are those dolls? Stepping closer to the window seat, I blink at the collection of vintage dolls. How the hell can you even sleep in a place like this? I mean sure, mafia and all that, but fuck if I wouldn't be worried about the dolls coming to life. There's no accounting for taste.

Yanking myself from the disturbing scene, I walk over to the closets. There isn't much out in the main bedroom so that's likely the best place to find the treasures on my father's list. I open the first closet and it's all men's clothes. Shrugging, I poke around, not expecting to find any jewels, but there's sometimes cash lying around. Sure enough, the fucker put it in a damn shoe. God knows why. It took me less than a minute to find it. I don't bother with anything else, the thick bundle looks to be all hundreds.

Heading to the woman's closet, I brace myself for more of those terrifying dolls, but thank fuck, it actually looks... normal. Huh. Weird considering the rest of the room, but whatever. I flick through the silk dresses, rattle the shoes, but I'm not seeing anything. Tapping a finger to my lips, I reverse course and walk into their ensuite bathroom. This one appears masculine, an exact opposite of the clusterfuck of a bedroom. It's all chrome and brass, polished surfaces and a hint of cedar in the air. Ignoring it all, I go drawer by drawer, feeling around for any hidden buttons and sure enough, I find my jackpot.

I hit the button and there's a quiet click. I run my fingers around the mirrors of the his and her sinks, but it's not those

that are hiding the goods. Turning around, I notice there's part of the wall that looks slightly off. In fact, it's slightly ajar. It must blend in perfectly when closed, but now it's enough for me to pry open.

There's the beautiful treasure. More cash. But more importantly, jewels. They're easy to fence and small enough I can stuff them in my pockets. Despite the outfit being ill fitting, it has a couple last minute tweaks of our own with multiple pockets sewn in all over. I clean the safe out quickly of all the cash and jewels that can fit, disappointed I'll have to leave some of them behind because fuck if I can figure out a way to get that tiara. Although who the hell needs a damn tiara, anyway?

There's a black thumb drive just chilling there. We've gone the route of corporate espionage before, but the idea of fucking with the Martelli Family? Not exactly high on my to-do list. Then again, it could be my way out. A separate payday that makes it easy to move on from my family. Maybe find love or some shit. I snort silently because fuck if that'll ever happen. Love isn't for men like me.

Making a split decision, I palm it and close the safe, stalking out of there with my heart pounding. I hit the button on the side of my watch, hoping my family comes through for me. It's not comfortable putting my trust in others, even those related by blood. Two short flashes back and I'm good to go. I crack the door open but don't hear anything. Striding through the hallways, I can barely believe that nobody is around. It's eerie. There's arrogance and fucking stupidity. It appears the Martelli Family isn't nearly as intelligent as I've been led to believe.

I leave out the back where the servants come and go. I disappear into the darkness and start jogging. Once again, I shake my head at the lack of security as I stroll right off their land. It doesn't take long before I'm on the main road and my family's van idles nearby. I open the door and jump in.

Closing the door, I feel pinpricks along the base of my neck. Something isn't right. Usually there's celebratory calls, but the feel in the vehicle is grim. Turning around, I eye the occupants carefully. My father is in the front seat, Sissy next to him. Michael is sitting behind me. I go to say something, but I'm not fast enough. Michael grabs me in a headlock, and while I thrash against him, my father pulls out into traffic like there's nothing wrong. Sissy turns up the music, and that's when I know. I'm fucked. I try to fight harder, but Michael is a fucking cheat and I feel the prick of a needle in my neck.

Shit. As things start to go fuzzy, I wonder just what the hell their plan is. Will they really get rid of me? I'm their golden goose. But then I hear Sissy mutter one word and I go cold. Because golden goose or not, there's no way my family will have anything to do with a fag. I stop fighting unconsciousness. Maybe I'll be lucky and they'll kill me while I'm under. Then again...with family like this? When have I ever been lucky...

MARCUS

I blink rapidly as I wake up. My stomach contents want to rebel as I fight against whatever drug they injected me with. Fucking hell. Swallowing the bile down, I try to move only to find out I've been restrained. I'm laying on cold concrete with my wrists bound and my ankles. Shit. This isn't a good sign. Worse, I'm in what appears to be a walk-in freezer. No wonder I'm shivering so damn much. When the door opens, I almost sigh in relief.

"Ah, looks like our fag brother is awake." Sissy's high-pitched voice grates against me, not to mention the slur. Then again, I'm used to them throwing out their homophobic insults. Never directed at me personally, but that's because I managed to keep mine quiet. How the hell did they find out?

"What the hell are you doing?" I try to growl, but my teeth chatter too much for it to be effective.

There's no answer. Instead, Michael, who I didn't notice originally, grabs me and drags me out of the freezer. I don't have much time to appreciate the warmth when I'm hoisted up on what looks to be a hook that meat carcasses hang from. Fuck. I can't do shit dangling from here.

A slap takes me by surprise and I blink against the jarring sensation. My heart sinks when it's my mother who is standing in front of me. "Mom—"

"Don't you dare call me that. You have shamed the entire family." Her words break, but damn it, so does my heart. While I knew this would happen, there was always a kernel of belief that my own mother wouldn't betray me over who I preferred in my bed.

"Come now, Rosalina. I think it's best if you leave this to us..." My father's usually stern voice is soft as he guides her

away. I choke on the rage that floods me. I've done how much for them and this is how they repay me? Nobody dares speak until my father returns. He scrubs his hand over his face, his shoulders slumped in what can only be disappointment. "Marcus...I can't believe this. That you would defile the family name like this."

"I have not defiled the family name. I'm the one who goes in and gets the job done. It doesn't matter what happens elsewhere. What would you do without me? Sure Michael and his wife can do cons. Sissy helps with the fencing. But I'm the one who takes the largest risks!" I can't believe the bullshit they're peddling. Not after everything I've done.

"I can do more than help with the fencing. I can easily take over your job." I roll my eyes at Sissy's remark, because there is no way in hell she could manage what I do. And yet, when I look at my father, he seems to be strongly considering whether she could. "Papa, you know I can. I've just never been given a chance. Let's get rid of him and then move on. We don't need someone like him."

"And I don't want my kids growing up with such a deviant in their life. Think of your grandkids."

"You bastard!" I snarl at Michael as I fight against the chain holding me up. "I love my nephew and soon-to-be niece. I would never do anything to harm them."

"Your very existence harms them." Sissy and Michael give an almost perfectly in sync response. Their disgust making me recoil. I knew my family was homophobic, but this is fucking ridiculous.

"Enough." Father holds up his hand and we all subside. I hold my breath, hoping to God that he sees reason. I'm his son, Goddamnit. "Marcus...I cannot abide by this. You've turned your back on all that is decent—"

"Decent?! For fuck's sake, we're criminals!" I can't hold back anymore. My anger and hurt bleed together as I face the

man I thought loved me.

“We may be criminals, but we’re honorable. You...you have tarnished that. From this day forward, you have no family and my only son is Michael. You are not a D’Angelo. You are not worthy of that name.” With that proclamation, he seems to have aged ten years, yet there’s no pity in me.

“If that’s how you treat me, I don’t want to be a D’Angelo.” I’m so distracted staring at my father that I don’t see the punch coming. My head snaps back, and I can feel the blood drip from the corner of my mouth. “What the fuck, Michael? If you want to fight, get me down and we’ll fucking fight.”

“Keep the D’Angelo name out of your mouth, period. It is an honor to be one.” With that, he belts me again and there’s nothing I can do but take it. Three solid hits in a row with my head rocking back each time.

“Enough, Michael.” I whimper when my father’s voice breaks in, hoping that he’s come to his senses. “You may not kill him. If you and Claire want to teach him a lesson, fine. But leave him alive. It’s a warning not to mess with our family.”

Before I can open my mouth to call out, Michael changes position and jabs me in the stomach, robbing me of my air. I barely make out my father’s steps leaving the room as Michael continues to use me as a punching bag. Strung up like this, there’s nothing I can do, and when he circles around and delivers a kidney shot, I gag from the pain, spitting up bile. When he finally steps back, he’s breathing hard and covered in sweat, but I know I’m going to be covered in bruises. Hell, I’m dizzy, nauseous, and hurt all over.

“My turn.” Sissy’s happy voice alarms me. I’m the one who taught her self-defense and I know not to underestimate her. There’s only so much of me to go around. I can’t make anything out with my eyes already swollen shut from Michael’s punches. “I’ve been dreaming of this since I knew

you were a fag. It was just a matter of time before I found proof.”

“Fuck!” The burning sensation of a knife sliding into my skin shocks me. I’m not sure why when I’m the one who gave her a knife during self-defense training. Fuck if I ever thought it would be turned on me.

“Remember, you’re not supposed to kill him,” Michael says to Claire, but I’m lost in a world of blood and pain as she slices me open again and again. The room is spinning. and I choke as I try to keep the vomit back.

All of a sudden, I hear pounding steps and gunfire, my siblings swearing, and while I want to ask what’s going on, I can’t get my mouth to work. Fuck, all of this is too much. I don’t know who is coming—whether it’s to my rescue by some stroke of magic or yet another nail in my soon-to-be coffin.

“Keep calm. Let me get you down.” I can’t make out the rough voice speaking to me, and at this point, I don’t care. I simply give my weight over to him and accept the rush of unconsciousness barrelling at me. I’m done with this. Maybe when I wake—if I wake—it’ll make more sense.

ALLESANDRO

“Cazzo!” I work with Luca to try and get Marcus down, but I’m not sure he’s going to make it at this point. He’s covered in blood and severely beaten. “Shit, alright, let’s get him to the house. Call Dr. Sorini. I want him to meet us there. Let him know what he’s walking in on.”

“Yes, Padrone.” Luca punches a number into his phone as he transfers the rest of Marcus’s weight over to me. I don’t hesitate or bother looking around. I know my men will take care of the trash.

“Please! You can’t do this!” Marcus’s sister dares plead as she’s pushed onto her knees, already disarmed by my men. I snarl under my breath but don’t respond. She’s a fucking cunt who doesn’t deserve a minute of my time when I need to see to the injured man curled into me.

I rush to the limo, thankful the driver is able to help me get Marcus in with me. Luca slides in next to me, putting his phone into his pocket. Right now, it’s a damn good thing I’m preoccupied, because all of his family would be nothing but a stain on the cement floor. It would cut the vengeance Marcus deserves short, but fuck.

Between Luca’s report when we caught them crossing into my territory and Mattie’s intel, I knew they were homophobic. But who the hell cuts down their family like this? Casting him out, as much as that sickens me, I imagined was likely. Trying to kill him? Fuck. That. I snarl under my breath as we finally get to the house.

Our Family doctor is waiting outside, and it barely takes anytime to get Marcus to the medical wing. Thank fuck we have such a good supply of medical items on hand. I think Dr. Sorini is going to need them. Shaking my head, I back away as the doctor and the nurse he brought takes over. There’s nothing

I can do hanging over them. Instead, I turn on my heel and make my way to where we keep our ‘guests’. By now, they should be set.

“Who do you want first?” Luca is barely keeping up with me, but I don’t bother slowing down. Not when I need an outlet for this rage. “The father and sister are here. We’re still trying to find the mother and sister-in-law. The brother, unfortunately, decided to try and attack. They had no choice but to kill him. Too easy of a death, but at least we don’t have to worry about him.”

“Like I’d worry about these assholes. They’re nothing compared to our Family. Marcus is the only one who even has talent. I’m not sure how they thought they’d manage without him. I want the sister. Mattie’s report made it very clear she was going to be the one to start shit. We’ll leave the father for Marcus to deal with.”

I walk into the torture room, pacing along the walls and touching various instruments. There’s so many options and not nearly enough ways to hurt her before she’d die. It’s a fucking shame. The door opens with a bang, and I don’t hide the feral smile at the sight of her. Her red cheeks from the indignation of her position quickly pales at the sight of my expression. Luca quickly forces her to the middle of the room and we lock her into the manacles hanging from the ceiling. Moving to the side of the room, Luca raises her onto her toes with the machine we use to shorten and lengthen the chain.

“So you’re Claire.” I look her up and down, wrinkling my nose. For as dark of eyes as Marcus has, hers are the exact opposite. They’re so light I’m not sure what color they are. I’m sure she’d probably make a pretty penny at the whorehouse, and for a moment, I entertain the idea of making her work there. But I don’t want to make my whores suffer her presence, not to mention the customers. We have a reputation to uphold, after all. “You fucked up coming into my territory.

And more, you fucked up going after the only person in your family I'm actually interested in."

"What?" She recoils as much as she can, the chains making noise at her sudden movement. "Why would you be interested in a fucking fag?"

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I sigh. Shaking off the stupidity in front of me, I turn and crook my finger toward Luca. Without a word, he practically glides toward me. His eyes are dilated already, and I smirk at the reaction. Grasping the back of his neck, I pull him all the way toward me, attacking his mouth in a savage kiss while grinding my hardening dick against his already hard one.

I don't pull back at the shrieked outrage, enjoying the taste of Luca on my lips and, most of all, loving the way that bitch is so pissed off. Finally, I pull away and let Luca slump against me as he works to get his breath back. After a couple moments, I push him back slightly before turning my attention back to my current...problem. If she can be considered that.

"As you can see...I don't give a fuck what you think." I stride over to the wall and grab a random tool while calling out to Luca, "Strip her."

While I have zero desire to see her naked, the psychological component is always worth it. Nothing like making someone feel put on display by stripping them of their clothing. She came into this world bare, and she'll go out of it that way, too.

"You disgusting perverts!"

Her shrieks are worse than nails on a chalkboard. Honestly, I'm doing Marcus a favor if this is what he's had to put up with his whole life. Coming back to her, I tilt my head, scrutinizing her body. Nope. Still don't get it. Women just... don't do it for me. Luca chuckles at the pliers in my hand, and I give him a quick wink.

"Open her mouth." He immediately obeys like the good Boy he is, and I reach it with the pliers, grasping one of her teeth

before pulling on it savagely. Brute strength only gets me so far and it takes several yanks before it finally comes out. I drop it on the floor to be cleaned up later. “There’s one. Let’s deal with the rest of these teeth before I cut your viscous tongue out.”

She spits at me, the blood landing on my pristine suit. Cocking an eyebrow at her, I shake my head in disappointment before backhanding her enough to make her sway. Thankfully, Luca steps up and steadies her so I can continue my... dentistry.

“You know. This gives a whole new meaning to the “All I Want for Christmas Is My Two Front Teeth” song.” I snort at Luca’s droll observation as I continue. By the time there’s a pile of teeth at her feet, she’s covered in sweat and crying. As much as I want to cut out her tongue, I’m rather bored by this whole process.

“Well, fuck.” I place the pliers on the work table nearby and frown at this bitch in front of me.

“Still pissed but she’s just not giving you anything to really work it off, is she?” Luca backs away as well since the bitch is just hanging there, sobbing like she’s innocent and we’re the big bad wolves. *This? This is who they expected to take over for Marcus?* Because yes, I was listening in. They were stupid enough to bring the trackers with them and didn’t even look through the bag to see one of them had a damn microphone on it.

Glancing at the clock, I take my gun out of the holster and wait until she’s staring at me before I raise it. I don’t bother saying anything, just fire a bullet and watch her eyes turn sightless and a strangled sound cut off before it could really start. The aftermath of death is never pretty, but it’s nothing I haven’t seen hundreds of times over and hell, one day it’ll come for me. “I want to go see Marcus, anyway. By now, Dr. Sorini should have some answers. He’d fucking better.”

“Do you think you should clean his sister’s blood off you first?” Luca asks as he once again tries to keep pace with me as I leave the carcass behind and head for the medical wing.

“He may as well get used to the way we do things in this Family. Blood is a way of this life. It’s not petty cons and thieving. He’ll get his hands dirty.”

“You know he may not want in, right?” I cut Luca a glare, unwilling to discuss that possibility. “Alright, just making sure, Padrone. I don’t want another incident...”

“There won’t be.” My voice is cold, hard, unforgiving—just like me. I walk into the recovery room, and like expected, Marcus is already on a hospital bed, a guard next to him and Dr. Sorini standing over him.

“Padrone,” the doctor nods to me, “He’s going to need time to recover. Whoever did this was quite viscous. I don’t see anything that will cause permanent damage, though. I’ve already written out the instructions and can come tomorrow to check in on him again.”

“You’ll stay here. I’ll make sure a maid has a room available for you.” I dismiss him immediately, ignoring his protests. Luca plucks the paperwork from his hands, humming as he goes through it. “Are you awake, Marcus?”

Marcus tenses before moaning at the movement, but he opens up his eyes to stare at me. The fear there is well earned. He knew my reputation before his family foolishly tried to infiltrate what didn’t belong to them.

“Yes.” His dark eyes regard me steadily as the fear is pushed down. I bite back a smile, because that’s exactly what I want to see. I need someone who will be afraid but not too afraid. Someone who will listen to my commands, respect them, and follow them.

“It’s ‘yes, Padrone’ or ‘yes, Master’.”

“I will not address you that way.” Marcus’s voice cracks, belying his calm expression.

“You will. In time. At least I’m giving you the chance to do so. Your sister was not that lucky.” I bring his attention to the blood covering my suit and carefully watch his countenance. Surprisingly, he doesn’t show anything. It’s quite fascinating—and promising. “Get some rest. As soon as you’re healed, you’ll start training.”

“Why?” He struggles to sit up but can’t. Luca moves forward to help, but I gesture for him to stop. Until Marcus asks for help, I will not provide it.

“Because you are being given an option. You can become a Martelli. You’ve lost your right to your family name, but instead, I’m granting you the opportunity to have a far better, stronger one. Think on it. We’ll leave you to rest for now.”

“It won’t be as easy as saying yes, would it?” Marcus slumps back against the bed, watching me warily.

Snorting, Luca exchanges a glance with me. “Of course not. Every Boy needs to be trained, especially mine.”

With that, I pivot on the heel of my foot and head out of the room with Luca half a step behind me. It’s going to be an interesting experience for the both of us, I’m sure. But one thing I know for certain? I’ll win in the end. I always do.

MARCUS

One Month Later

I sit on the edge of the bed, staring around me in disgust. Once I healed, Allesandro brought me to a “guest room”. Also known as my prison. It’s stripped almost bare of most things, operating under a reward/punishment system. Let’s just say I’m too fucking stubborn to earn the luxuries I could have—at least, according to *him*.

We’ve gone several rounds on my refusal to bow to him. From his “playroom”, where kink seems to be the name of the game, to one very memorable trip to the “black room.” Shit, that place is more fucked up than anything I’ve seen. It’s a damn good thing I don’t suffer from claustrophobia. It’s almost complete sensory deprivation, and he wields it to his advantage. Everything is black, a single light bulb that he’ll turn on when it amuses him or he’s willing to feed the occupant—which isn’t often enough. Chained to the wall with an open toilet and shower mocking me since the chain doesn’t go that far. I wish I could say I didn’t crumble, but fuck. By the time I was let out, I was more than willing to recognize him as Il Padrone and listen to his rules. Too bad it didn’t stick...for him, at least.

The door opens, without a knock, of course. Boundaries? Not a thing here. I’ll admit he’s fucking hot as hell as he strides into the room, his suit hugging his body perfectly, and those vivid blue eyes don’t miss a damn thing. The way he catalogs everything with a curl of his lip shouldn’t arouse me, but fuck that level of arrogance is downright intoxicating.

“Here.” He points to the ground in front of him, but I stay propped up on the bed. “I wasn’t asking.”

“And I’m not a dog.” Those eyes turn stormy before the embers of anger are smothered just as quickly as they came.

The control he has must be insane. Nothing I've done has been able to get a full reaction out of him.

“No. You're my Toy. But you could very well be one of my Boys. My inner circle. A chance very few are given. Something other than a toy soldier. Or would you like to meet the same fate as your sister and brother?”

I swallow hard at that. It's not that there was any love lost between us at the end, but still...there's a pang of guilt that hits me. I'm here, alive, and while not in the best of situations, still relatively pampered. And he's right. I have the chance to become far more than I am right now. Rolling my shoulders back, I exhale and slide out of the bed, walking toward him slowly. I stop short of him, tilting my chin up in defiance if he expects me to kneel.

“Mmm...you certainly are fun.” He grasps my arm, pulling me closer until I'm right up against him. “There, that's better.”

When he nuzzles the base of my neck, my knees shake from the pleasure, even though I wish he'd leave me alone. My hands curl into fists as I try to regain my control. “S-s-stop.”

“Never. You're mine. Don't forget it. Everything about your life is now under my control—your pleasure, your pain, every moment you're awake or asleep—I'm the one in charge.” The growl goes straight to my dick, and when I try to lean away, he strengthens his grip on me. “Once again, you refused to address me correctly. You seem to have difficulty learning your lesson. Let's go.”

It doesn't take long for him to guide me out of my “room” and to the playroom. It's the kinkiest area I've seen. I'm sure it could set some porno stages to shame. He gestures for me to undress, and I obey. Some things aren't worth the argument.

He leads me over to the manacles hanging down from the ceiling. I'd been expecting the spanking bench again. I'm not sure why since he changes it up so frequently. Once I'm

locked in, he bends down and locks my ankles to the floor as well. Fuck. This is not off to a good start.

He walks over to the wall where he keeps his instruments. There's so many it's almost impossible to categorize them all. Not to mention the various glass cabinets. This time, he grabs a flogger, and I choke back a sigh of relief. It's nothing new at least. Then he pockets something I can't make out before heading back toward me. He stops right in front of me, caressing my cheek gently.

"If you're good, you can have so much. This Family takes care of its own. But you must submit. Give in. Do you understand?"

I meet his eyes, and for as much as I've fought him, I can't deny there's a connection we have. The longer I stare at him, the more sure I am of that. He's patient and waits for my response. Part of me wants to give in, but I can't. I've already been stripped of my identity once before when my own mother cast me out. To put my faith in a mob boss? I'm not sure my heart could take being pushed out again.

"No."

"No, you don't understand or no, you refuse to submit?" His hand moves down to my neck, squeezing it lightly before letting it go. It's his way of making sure I know he's in charge. He's used it enough over the month I've been with him.

"I will not submit. And no. I don't believe that you will take care of me in any way—other than pain."

There's a flash of pain across his features, here and gone, and for a moment, my heart clenches at the sight. It's such an odd sensation. As if I'd have the power to make him feel...it must be my imagination. Flights of fancy, as my father would have said. Usually when beating me for daydreaming.

"Yes, there's pain. Especially when you disobey. But I will give you pleasure as well. More than you think you can

handle. And when you think there's nobody around for you, this Family will be."

I go to say something, but he shakes his head, silencing me. He walks around me and runs his fingers over my back and down to my ass. I wish I wasn't so responsive to him, but his touch alone has my cock hardening.

When I hear the snick of a lube cap, I almost tense, but his gentle humming keeps me calm for some fucking reason. He doesn't say anything as he slowly opens me up. One finger, two, and then three moving in and out of me but carefully avoiding my prostate. There's not shit I can do either with the way I'm spread out, unable to move at all.

"I'm going to show you how much pleasure I can give you, even when there's pain. By the end, you will be begging to be mine. You already are, but you need to admit it to yourself. I'll take you apart piece by piece until you can."

He takes his fingers out, and I blush at the fucking whine that escapes me. Slowly, he inserts something into me. I have no fucking clue what it is, but it brushes up against my prostate, pressing down as if curved. It comes to rest against my taint, fitting snug like it won't move.

"Fuck!" Suddenly, it vibrates and damn my prostate feels fucking good. It's almost a good thing I'm locked in because the vibrations grow stronger, and my knees shake with pleasure. The vibrations carry along my taint, and I shiver from the onslaught of pleasure. I'm so caught up that until the first strike hits me, I didn't remember he has a flogger as well. "Damn it!"

His chuckle reverberates throughout the room, tinged with anticipation. I already know how this is going to go and fuck if this isn't the most exquisite torture yet. Fuck. Another strike hits me, and then the vibrations intensify. Strike after strike and it does nothing to bring me down, endorphins flooding my

body. I'm already at the onslaught of an orgasm when he suddenly turns off the massager.

“What—”

“You're not coming that easily. Not until you're ready to admit your place here. If I could, I'd take every memory of your family away. They didn't deserve you. I may be hard. Callous. But I will not turn my back on you.”

I shiver at the way he delicately touches my skin. His kindness breaks me more than the harshness, and fuck he's playing me like a fiddle. I know it. He knows it. Why the hell is he doing this?

He walks away and switches out the flogger for a cane. Fuck. I'm screwed. The way he stalks back to me, it's like a lion and I'm a goddamn gazelle. There's nowhere for me to go. No way for me to escape. Not even my mind will give me a choice to be anything but present.

“Please...” I drop my head, unable to look at him.

He doesn't respond, his footsteps loud in this room as he continues closer and moves behind me. He doesn't bother warning me before the cane hits my ass, a fiery lick and a whistle through the air. My entire body reverberates from it and because my ankles are locked down they take too much of the brunt. I struggle to keep upright with the strikes he rains down, but it's not possible. He doesn't make a fucking sound. Nothing. And he doesn't keep a steady rhythm. I can't even anticipate when a blow will land.

I scream until I'm hoarse, only for him to turn on that evil, way too fucking good vibration. For a moment, he stops the strikes and just lets me feel the pleasure, but I know it won't last. I embrace it though, even as I hate it. Fuck it feels so good. Just as I start to crest, he stops it again, waiting until the edge of oblivion slips away, before smacking my ass again.

It continues, rinse and repeat until I'm going out of my mind. Time loses all meaning, and I swear if he so much as

breathes on my dick, I'm going off. Tears of frustration and pain mix together, and I can't bring myself to give a fuck as he turns the prostate massager on again but grasps the base of my cock, forming a makeshift cockring so I can't come.

“Tell me. Submit to me. And then I'll let you come.”

I want to shake my head again, but every ounce of emotion has been wrung out. He's finally succeeded where pain can't break me, pleasure fucking can. “I submit.”

“Tell me...who do you belong to?”

I gulp at air, knowing the next part is the hardest. It seals my fate forever. But for some reason...it feels like freedom. “To you, Padrone.”

He eases his grip on my cock, stroking it instead. With one brutal twist at the top and sharp command of “come”, I fall into the best damn orgasm I've ever had and into a future that should scare me.

ALLESANDRO

Two Months Later

The music from the club almost drowns out my thoughts, and the three-piece suit Marcus is wearing isn't helping with distractions. He's come a long way since he first truly submitted. And not just in his attire—although that's significantly better than what he used to have.

I make sure to check in on the clubs regularly. It's good to keep my men on their toes, never knowing when I'll stop by to inspect everything. The scent of fear is always so arousing...

"If you keep staring at him like that, we're not going to make it out of here before he's face down on a table and ass up," Luca murmurs in my ear as he sits down next to me.

"There could be worse things..." It's not like anyone would stop me. Not in my own fucking club.

"Yes, but I know you want to get to the main event tonight. There will be time for dessert afterward." Grunting my agreement, I stand, buttoning my suit and tugging everything in place perfectly. "Are you sure he's ready for this?"

"If he's not... Well, we'll think of something at that point." It's a risk, but I have to know. "You know that's the last part to becoming a Boy."

"But to choose...?"

I slash my hand through the air, silencing Luca's worry. I can't let that change my perspective now. This is the ultimate test to see if Marcus truly has what it takes to be one of my Boys and not just a soldier. He has to earn the right to be a Martelli, and while this will be difficult for him, I believe he is capable of it. I fucking hope so...

I gesture for Luca to come and he joins me with a sigh, not pressing the issue. I stride over to Marcus, who is standing next to the railing. Touching his back, I drag his attention from the dancing bodies below. He turns to me without pause, just as I've trained him.

"It's time for us to leave. We have one more stop to make."

He cocks his head but doesn't question it. Guiding them through the club, I barely repress a sigh of relief when the limo pulls up. I'm too keyed up for this to drag on. I slide in with Luca and Marcus not far behind.

The driver already knows where we're headed, so I sit back and enjoy the ride. It's further out from the city, but the quiet is necessary—or at least preferred. Not to mention the nature surrounding the old work building. It lends a certain menace to the scene. Always good for guests and even a reminder to ourselves that we're the villains and never the heroes.

As the limo slows down and finally stops, Marcus's body tenses, but I ignore the questioning glances he's sent me so far. I've managed to get some work done on my tablet, but now I set it aside. It's time that we see what Marcus is truly made of.

It's the scent more than anything that permeates in this building. Bleach and despair. As we come closer to the small room our guest is being held in, the smell becomes even worse. Cutting my eyes to Luca, I want to ask him who the fuck didn't clean the asshole when he was transferred over here. But that would ruin the surprise, so I force myself to keep quiet.

Opening the door, I gesture for Marcus to go in first. Luca follows before I enter. The man tied to the chair and Marcus stare at each, both seemingly unsure how to react to the other.

"Dad?" Marcus finally breaks, his voice hoarse as he takes in his father. I certainly didn't keep him in the best condition, but he's alive, which is far better than he could have been.

His father says nothing. Not even an acknowledgement. I snort at the stupidity of this man. With practiced ease, I draw my gun and then shock Marcus by offering it to him. I know Marcus is carrying, too, but this way I'm making myself vulnerable as well.

“End him. Join the Family completely. Once you kill for us, you're in for life. Unless you betray me. I would hope you wouldn't be that fucking stupid.” I shrug and gesture for Luca to follow me out. We crowd inside a room that has screens, letting us see what's happening.

“You think he'll go through with it?” Luca asks. “Or do you think he'll come at you and try to shoot his way out?”

“I believe he's been trained well enough not to fuck this up. There's people who can be broken by cruelty. Marcus... Marcus is interesting. He needed a gentle approach. Making him think I care...that broke him more than anything. It'll be useful to know for later on as we grow the Family more.”

Luca keeps his mouth shut. He has only vocalized his opinion a couple times on the entire process but enough to know that I won't change my mind. I need men I can count on, men who will submit. They have to give me everything—their submission, their bodies, and willingly stain their souls with blood. That kind of loyalty can't be bought, and anyone doing it for money isn't worth my time. For now, I keep my eyes focused on the screen, because what happens next will tell me just how successful I've been.

MARCUS

“Marcus.” My name on my father’s lips is nothing more than a sneer. I stumble back at the venom, although I should have expected it. “So this is how you repay the family? That man killed your brother. Your sister. And your mother. He took joy in telling me every moment of their deaths. And you’re what? Sucking cock? You must be if you’re here in a suit, while I, who have honor, am tied to this chair.”

“Father—”

“Don’t call me that. You’ve turned your back on the D’Angelo family. On everything I’ve taught you. If it weren’t for you, my children and wife would be alive.”

He spits at me, and I stumble back. The very idea that he hates me this much astonishes me for some reason. “You disowned me. You tossed me out. And you think you have the right to judge me? For what? Joining a Family that actually has shown they...cared? Sure, they may have some fucked up ways of doing it, but they didn’t let two family members string me up and almost kill me. Hell, after I stole from them, they treated my wounds and offered me a spot among them. You think I dishonored the family? Fuck that. You did that on your own.”

My father scrunches his nose, looking away, as if the very sight of me disgusts him. “Had you not been a fag, there would have been no problem. You dishonored us by your very actions before you committed treason. I’m not sure you didn’t give away our location to begin with.”

“I never gave us up. But you know what? Had I known who you really were...who you all were...maybe I would have. Or maybe not.”

I wait for a beat until he finally turns his head to stare at me. He opens his mouth, but before he can say anything, I raise Il Padrone's gun and put a bullet through his head. It's like all the oxygen is sucked out of the room for a moment. The body of my father is slumped in the chair, held up by rope, and yet...I can't feel anything. Not an ounce of regret. Not any joy. There's not even a satisfaction to it. Just...emptiness. A frozen tundra that stretches beyond all I can measure.

I'm not sure how long I stand there before the gun is gently tugged out of my grip. It breaks my oblivion, and I turn, almost surprised to see Luca standing there. He takes the gun from me and passes it over to Il Padrone. I thought he'd be smiling. Smug. Something other than the grave expression he wears. But it settles me. It's like he knows exactly what it's like to close a chapter, only to start anew. To let go of the past, even if it's through violence.

When he comes closer, he grasps my shoulders and brings me in. It's somewhat like a hug, but not quite. There's comfort perhaps, but slightly cold, and for that I'm grateful. I'm not sure I could take him being anything other than he is right now.

With a tug of my arm, he guides me out of the room, leaving behind the bitter ending of my family, and moves to a different room. It's larger, lighter, and most of all, there's a bed. I blink rapidly, wondering if he's thinking I need a nap like some fucking child, but he doesn't stop there. Instead, we head into an adjoining bathroom.

I jump when hands land on my shoulders from behind. Glancing over my shoulder, I relax when I see it's Luca. He squeezes my shoulder before saying, "Strip."

Il Padrone already has the water turned on, and I carefully take my clothes off, my gaze never leaving his. I'm surprised when Luca steps into the shower with me. He bats my hands away when I go to wash myself. After he takes time making sure I'm thoroughly cleaned, we step out, turning the water

off. Il Padrone hands us towels, and I stiffen when he finally speaks.

“There’s now blood on your hands for this Family, and you are ours completely. Never doubt your position here.”

I can’t speak. The emotions now crashing over me twist my mind and my soul, dragging me into a hazy in-between sensation, as if reality is warped around me. When Il Padrone leads me out of the bathroom, I almost stumble. Luca quickly places his hands on my hips from behind, catching me. I inhale sharply. *Why? Why do they feel so safe?* I shake my head but can’t figure it out.

“Kneel.” I hit my knees at Il Padrone’s command.

“Let everything go. You exist for us right now.” I shiver at Luca’s voice as he deepens it.

“And for me, always. You will never be free of me.” Il Padrone runs his fingers through my hair before gripping it tightly, the pain focusing me like nothing else could. “Take my cock out. I want to see you choke on it.”

I move my shaking hands up to his pants and undo them, sliding them and his underwear off. His cock is already hard and leaking, and I lick my lips at the sight. I try to lean forward, but the grip he has is too tight. He inches forward, and I open my mouth, ready to accept whatever he gives me. Without any easing, he shoves in, hitting the back of my throat and forcing me to swallow him down. I fight my gag reflex but still end up choking. He doesn’t decrease his thrusts, forcing me to take him again and again.

I try to push against his thighs but his growl stops me immediately, and all I can do is hang on. Everything falls away. The anxiety. The crushing sadness. Hell, even the weird feeling of relief. All that matters in this moment is the man in front of me and the man behind me, whose hands stroke my shoulders as I continue to pleasure our Boss.

Il Padrone pulls out before coming, and I whimper at the loss. My throat hurts like hell, but I flush in want. He chuckles as he tugs my hair up and my body follows naturally. “Get on the bed. All fours.”

I scramble to obey, unsure of what will happen, but ready for anything at this point. I hear clothes being removed and them whispering but can't make out what they're saying. Suddenly, the bed dips and rough hands run over my ass. A sharp slap follows, and I arch my back from it. The bed moves again. This time, it's Luca climbing in, and he moves in front of me. He's on his knees, his cock at the perfect height for me to take it.

“We're going to play a game.” I go to look back at Il Padrone, but Luca grabs my hair. I'll be surprised if I have any left after this. “You're going to make Luca come. The sooner you do it, the less pain you'll be in. Because you're going to discover that I don't need fancy tools to prop me up.”

I swallow hard, not doubting his words. He's a composer of kink and I'm merely one of his instruments. Even Luca is nothing more than a side note, a valued one certainly, but we move along to his beat only.

Opening my mouth, I stare up at Luca, his wicked smile and blond hair falling in his eyes making him seem more rogue than normal. He winks, and as I take him into my mouth, I tense, waiting for the next strike. When nothing comes, I relax, enjoying the sounds I'm drawing from Luca. He's moaning, and unlike Il Padrone, he's letting me take this at my pace.

Smack. Smack. Smack. I freeze from the hits, but Luca shoves forward more forcefully in response. Gagging, I try to focus on Luca's dick, but suddenly, Il Padrone's blunt fingernails are digging into my back. I shift, trying to get away from them but can't. There's nowhere I can go, especially as Luca tightens his hold on me, fucking my mouth like it's just another hole. Fuck, I'll be surprised if Il Padrone didn't draw blood.

On and on it continues. Strikes, nails digging in, and changes from harsh thrusts to light. It's a melody of my pain and their pleasure. Yet, somehow I'm hard. I try to make sense of it, but every time I try, they drag me away from my thoughts, until all that matters is them. All that matters is this Family. And fuck isn't that something else. *Who the fuck knew sex could be so much more than an orgasm?* A way to tie ourselves to each other instead.

Eventually, Luca gives in and comes with a roar. I choke on the amount of cum, some of it seeping out of my mouth. I cough, trying to get my breathing under control, but I'm immediately assaulted by a blunt head pushing against my asshole. Thank fuck I can feel that he's put lube on, but he hasn't prepped me at all.

I whimper, trying to move away, but Luca holds me still. At least he pets my head gently as Il Padrone works his way all the way in. After several small thrusts, my ass finally loosens enough for him to really push in and pull out. He speeds up, and I cry out from the force. I'm still way too tight for the way he's going at me.

He lowers himself over me, enveloping me, and while he props one hand next to me, the other squeezes my throat, cutting my oxygen. I go crazy panicking.

"Stop!" Against everything in me, I manage to still, just as he lets up on my throat. I take deep dragging breaths, knowing my voice is going to be fucked up from what they're putting me through. "You're going to come. And I'm not even going to touch you. Do you understand me?"

"Y-y-yes, Padrone." I've never come touch free before and now he expects me to manage it? On his fucking word?

He pulls out and, after a pause, pushes back in. It's smoother this time. He must have added more lube and I manage to start pushing back against him, hoping I can get off.

“You haven’t seen anything yet, Boy.” His deep growl sends goosebumps down my arms. When he changes his angle of hips, I almost believe I can come without a hand on my cock. He hits my prostate like he’s drilling for oil and ohmyfuckingsgod. I can’t believe how good it feels. “Now, come!”

He squeezes my throat again, and this time it’s like magic, the way the pleasure and pain interweave. The orgasm that had been out of my reach crests over, and I scream silently, cum landing all over the bedspread. His pace picks up even more somehow, and soon, he’s coming, but I can barely pay attention as black spots start to overtake everything. He lets go, and I breathe in, fully appreciating oxygen for probably the first time in my life. I flop onto the bed, not giving a shit about the wet spot. Every bit of strength is wrung out of me.

The next thing I know is I’m being shaken awake. I blink my eyes repeatedly as I listen to Il Padrone’s commands. I struggle to get out of the bed, but thankfully, Luca helps me up and Il Padrone uses a wet cloth to wipe me down. Between them, I’m able to get my clothes on, and we leave for the limo that’s waiting outside. The air is cold enough to wake me up a bit before we slide in. I take one last glance back, but I don’t waste anymore time on it. Not when I have an entire future ahead of me.

ALLESANDRO

Six Months Later

“Are you ever going to tell him?” Luca’s question doesn’t surprise me, but I continue setting up the chessboard. It’s one of my favorites because all of the pieces are actually toy soldiers. It was a fitting gift from my uncle.

“Why would I?” I get up and pour us both a glass of whiskey, leaving the decanter and an empty glass out. We’re in my library, and when I sit back in the oversized chair, I take a healthy swallow of the amber colored liquid.

“You don’t think he deserves to know that you’re the one who had pictures taken of him in a compromising position and sent to his family? Or that you used Mattie to do it? Especially considering—”

“Enough,” I snap out. “He doesn’t need to know. My plans for the future are my own. You know them because you’re my Second. Don’t make me rethink that. Right now, Marcus is performing perfectly. I knew he’d be what we’d need, and he has become a fine tuned strategist. He is my War.”

“Very well,” Luca mutters. “Is it going to be like this each time?”

“It may be. It may not.” I shrug as I pour whiskey in the empty glass. A moment later, a knock interrupts us. “Either way. You don’t get a say in this. You will always be my first Boy, but you must curb your jealousy. We rule this city and the way to do it is a strong inner circle. My father’s lessons are never far behind us...”

“Nor is his cruelty,” Luca sighs and I don’t reply. Instead, I gesture for him to get the door.

I smile as Marcus strides in for our nightly chess game. He’s learned well. And so what if I stole him? He tried to steal from

me first...I simply made sure I was getting the best Christmas present possible. One Boy, all wrapped up, and ready for what's to come in this life we lead. It's bloody, it's dangerous, and my Boys will be my crowning jewels, even if they're splattered with red.

The End

ABOUT LEIGH KENZIE

Leigh is a dark M/M romance author from Texas who writes villains of varying degrees. She considers coffee a major food group and her family fears broken coffeemakers. She writes in her spare time, forced to the keyboard by characters entirely too vocal in her opinion and often falls victim to plot monkeys. In between creating mayhem with her characters and friends, her hope is to transport readers to fictional places and provide darkness with a twist.

Links

Complete Vendetta Series: mybook.to/TheVendettaSeries

Facebook Group:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/1506178892899619>

Other media links: <https://linktr.ee/AuthorLeighKenzie>

SILENT KNIGHT



Davidson King

Can someone have both all the luck and none at all? For Ezra Acker the answer is yes. Life just *is* for him...until one Christmas when everything shifts and he finds out he has a silent knight who has been protecting him.

A world Ezra didn't know existed is trying to kill both him and his knight. Can they survive the holidays and have a happily ever after or will Heaven and Hell see to it they don't?

EZRA ACKER: AGE TEN

The first time it happened, I was ten. I was living with the Kimbers, my fifth foster family. I got off the school bus and started walking the five blocks to their house. It wasn't in a great part of town and, Natalie, my foster-for-now mom, always said to keep my head down and walk fast. So, I did and never had a problem...until today.

I'd made it three blocks when I crashed into something solid. I fell backwards, my school bag flattened on the ground under me.

"You should watch where you're walking." I didn't recognize the voice but when I looked up, I did recognize the face. Morris Fieldman. He was sixteen and loved bullying younger kids. He'd never bothered me before but likely because I stayed off his radar. Until now.

"Sssorry, Morris. I was trying to get home; dinner will be ready soon and I have to be on time."

Morris's laughter was cruel and that was when I noticed two other people with him. Them I didn't know but it likely didn't matter.

"It's not really your home though is it, Ezra? You don't have one, or a real family for that matter. Mommy and daddy didn't want you and left you on the doorstep of a church like an afterschool special. Only, there's no happily ever after for you, is there?"

I swallowed down my sobs as Morris taunted me and his friends laughed. When I made to get up, Morris pushed me down with his foot.

"Stay down there, that's where dogs belong."

A sound in the alley behind Morris made us all jump and when the three of them turned to see what it was, I didn't pass

up the opportunity. I grabbed my bag and ran faster than I ever had before.

That night as I was getting ready for bed I heard Natalie talking to Mr. Kimber—Alex.

“That’s the path Ezra takes home, Alex. Police said those three boys were almost unrecognizable. Animalistic tears over their faces and chests. Alex, their hearts were gone.”

“Then find a new route for Ezra to take, Nat. What do you want me to do? Coyotes are a thing.” Alex didn’t like me, but he tolerated me because Natalie was a kind woman and loved children.

“That’s not a solution.”

“Nat, it’s sad, but what choice do we have. We both work.”

I’d find my own route if I had too, but I wanted to know about the boys. I rushed to Henry’s room, he was another foster kid who I knew had a tablet.

“Henry,” I whispered.

“What?” He was groggy because it was well past our bedtime.

“Can I borrow your tablet? I heard three kids were killed and—”

He jumped out of bed and hit the light. “Dead?”

I nodded and he pulled his tablet out of the bedside drawer.

“Natalie said they were torn apart.”

Henry’s big green eyes widened and as soon as the tablet was powered up, he searched local news and read the article out loud.

“Three boys were found in an alleyway between Henderson Boulevard and Cooper Street this evening. It appears they were mauled by animals, likely coyotes. Their hearts were missing, and identities weren’t revealed right away.”

That was the same alley that noise came from...where I ran.

“Oh wow,” Henry said. “There’s an update. *The identities of the boys are Morris Fieldman, Issac Cooper, and Larry Hillston.* I know those kids.” Henry was twelve, older than me.

“I...Henry, I was there.”

His head jerked my way. “When?”

“Today. Morris and those other kids were bothering me. When we heard the noise in the alley, I ran.”

Henry placed the tablet down and gripped my shoulders. “Don’t tell anyone.”

“What, why?”

“You’re a foster kid, Ezra. Don’t make waves, just be good, quiet, and no drama. Take a different way home, try going around Bonnie’s Bakery. It’s a little longer but it’s on a main street.”

Like I said, Henry was older and I looked up to him.

“Okay, Henry, I won’t say anything.”

I didn’t say anything, and their deaths were ruled as a freak animal attack. The search for the coyotes lasted weeks but no one ever spotted even one.

That was the first time I was saved by my silent knight, only I didn’t realize it until years later.

EZRA: AGE TWENTY

My life was weird after that. I was mugged once and, in the paper the next day, I saw the mugger, labelled a serial mugger, was stabbed behind a grocery store...two weeks later my wallet with all the contents was returned.

Three times I was almost assaulted on the subway and each time the power cut out and the would-be attackers disappeared.

That was my life. Odd happenstances, oh and did I mention the decade of constantly feeling like someone was watching me? Yeah, but strangely it wasn't terrifying. It was comforting.

As much as Henry said I'd be good if I kept my mouth shut, I only lasted at the Kimber's another four months. I was in a total of fifteen foster homes until I aged out.

My life wasn't glamorous, and from an outsider's perspective probably downright sad. I lived above a Mexican restaurant, so all my clothes smelled like spices no matter how many times I washed them. It was loud because the owners kept their doors open until two in the morning and then the kitchen staff had to arrive at five am for prep.

My work life consisted of being a janitor at Legend Hill Hospital five days a week and working at Crane Comics on the weekend. I loved Crane Comics and wished for more hours there so I could stop cleaning up after patients.

But I had work, paid my rent and bills, and even had some left over for food. Go me.

"Feliz Cumpleaños, Ezra." Mrs. Lopez was sitting outside her restaurant when I exited. I was working the night shift at the hospital.

"Gracias, Mrs. Lopez."

"Please tell me you're not working on your birthday?" She quirked a brow.

“A week before Christmas and being the only one who has no family to celebrate the holidays with, I got all the doubles.”

I wasn't feeling sorry for myself. I'd make good money.

“You come to the restaurant tomorrow, birthday dinner on me.”

I leaned down and kissed her weathered cheek.

“You're the best. Have a good night.”

As I walked to the bus stop, the familiar tingling on the back of my neck made me smile. I wanted to turn around and beg them to show themselves, but I was too afraid they'd run and I'd be all alone again.

“Happy Holidays,” the bus driver said as I got off at my stop right in front of the hospital.

“You too.” I waved and went inside to start my sixteen-hour shift.



“Ezra, I need some help on the ER floor.” Gia was an emergency room nurse who was always kind to me.

On my first day working at the hospital she saw me eating alone and sat beside me with a smile, a wink, and a barrage of questions, claiming she wanted to make a new friend.

“Coming,” I said into my cellphone and hit the elevator button down to the first floor.

Likely it was a bodily fluid spill. She said I was the only one who ever cleaned it properly and honestly, I liked helping her. She was my friend and she made me feel useful.

“I'm here to save the day.” I smiled as I approached her.

She spun, her tight brown curls bouncing as she did. “Ezra, thank you.” I noticed tear stains on her cheeks and all my happiness drained.

“Gia, what happened?”

That was when I noticed the blood spatters all over her scrubs. My eyes trailed down the corridor and there were two bodies, a doctor and another nurse, on the floor.

“This guy came in, gunshot wounds, we had him on the gurney trying to stop the bleeding but couldn’t find the source.” Tears began falling freely and I pulled her close.

“It’s okay, breathe.” I rubbed her back and scanned the area.

A security officer was down also...it was so quiet.

“He...he cut Dr. Hu’s throat,” she hiccupped. “I...”

“Where is he, Gia?”

“Ran out of the hospital. Ezra, there’s a mess, the patients I —”

She called me down here to help clean up so she could get to the other patients in the ER. She was falling apart but had to make sure the other patients were okay. That was the kind of person she was.

“The police will deem this a crime scene, Gia. I can’t touch anything.”

She stared blankly at the carnage before us and nodded slowly. “Right.”

A minute later the emergency room was filled with police, and patients were being transferred out. I held Gia as she explained to the police everything that happened.

“Thank you, Ms. Grant.” The detective handed her his card. “If you think of anything else, please contact me. Until then, you’ll need to bag your scrubs and hand them over to us. Then you can shower and change.”

All emergencies were being routed to a different hospital for the time being since the area was closed off. Gia was being sent home and when she asked if I'd stay with her, there was no way I'd say no.

I stood in the hallway as she cleaned up and listened to the sounds of patients and staff scurrying around. The prickling on the back of my neck intensified and I darted my eyes in the direction I believed I was being watched, but no one was there.

"Ready?" She smiled weakly as she came out. The scent of honeysuckle clung around her and I was sure she'd spent a good fifteen minutes scrubbing her skin.

"I am." I held my arm out at my side and she tucked right in.

It was a little awkward walking that way but she was my only friend and she was scared.

"My car is in B lot."

I nodded and we walked in silence to her car. I didn't drive. It wasn't that I couldn't, I just didn't own a car.

"Are you okay to drive?" I asked when I saw her hands shake around the steering wheel.

"Yeah, I need a minute." She closed her eyes and took a breath. "Why was he there, Ezra? He wasn't hurt, just played hurt, and for what, to kill doctors and nurses?"

"Did he say anything?"

Gia opened her mouth a few times and then faced me. "He wasn't making sense. He was yelling, kept asking 'where is he where is he.'"

"Never said who he was looking for?"

She shook her head. "We kept asking who he was looking for hoping he'd stop. When Alvin came in and lifted his taser, the man charged him, stabbed him, and ran out of the ER."

"Okay, take a few breaths. Let's get you home. You'll feel better when you're inside your own house."

She did as I asked and soon we were driving out of the hospital lot and onto the street toward her place. She didn't speak and I wasn't sure what to say so I'd be a presence. Something that made her realize she wasn't alone.

Growing up, and even now, I often felt like I was alone. When I was scared, being by myself was the worst...even with the secret stranger or whatever I knew was watching me, I lacked a physical being to hold my hand, hug me, just be with me.

“Can you come up with me?”

There was no way I was leaving her alone so I smiled and said, “As long as you need me, Gia.”

She lived in a nice brownstone. I knew she could afford it because her grandmother left it to her when she died. It was in a safe neighborhood and you could feel the love the moment you stepped over the threshold.

“How about I make you some tea and you find a ridiculous movie to watch?”

“You'll stay?” Her dark brown eyes widened.

“I meant what I said, Gia. I won't leave you.”

She rushed into my arms and I hugged her as hard as I could because she needed it.

“You're the best.”

“Yeah yeah. Now find that movie while I get your tea.”

I'd been to Gia's place a few times so I knew where the kitchen was. I rummaged for a few minutes before I found everything I needed and went about making tea. I saw some cookies so I put them on a plate, why? Because times of absolute carnage called for sugar.

“What movie did you find?” I shouted when the kettle whistled.

I placed it all on a tray and made my way to the living room. “Couldn’t hear you, the tea was screaming at me, so what movie are we—”

You read how in movies the main character stumbles upon a moment in their life that has them freezing in place. They can’t speak or move. You yell at the screen for them to do something but they don’t.

I used to yell too, but for the first time I understood it. You could see something so unbelievable, so mind altering that you lose your ability to move or form any words.

I should have dropped the tray but again, frozen. I wasn’t sure what I was seeing.

Three people...maybe people, they didn’t seem human. They were standing in Gia’s living room. One had Gia by the neck, dangling her a few feet from the ground. She was alive, but struggling. The other two were staring at me. Eyes the color of blood, skin as gray as concrete, and the aura of all bad things wrapped around them.

“There you are,” one of them said with a hiss like a snake. “We’ve been looking for you.”

My gaze darted to Gia, she was looking at me, struggling to breathe.

“Um...can you put my friend down?”

Really, Ezra, that’s what you say?

The one holding Gia laughed, it sounded like rocks tumbling over metal and I flinched.

“Where is he, human?”

“Who?” Because I really didn’t know what they were talking about.

“The hospital,” Gia wheezed, and I darted my eyes back to the man asking me questions.

“You were at the emergency room tonight?”

He nodded. "Looking for you."

"Why?"

He took another step closer...very much not human.

"Where is your protector?"

If I wasn't two seconds from pissing my pants I'd laugh.
"My what?"

"Games." Creepy dude tsked. "Your friend is only alive for as long as we feel she's valuable. If you won't answer us then she isn't important." He waved his hand toward the creature holding Gia and I reacted.

I tossed the tray full of tea and cookies at the thing in front of me. "No!"

"What..." He shook off the moisture like I didn't just scald him with hot water. "You're a bother."

"Tell me something I don't know. Let my friend go and I'll take you to him."

I had no idea where he was, who he was, what he was...if there even was a person to take them to. But I didn't want Gia dead.

"This isn't a Hollywood movie, human. Faith isn't something I have. Your friend dies when she has no value left. Take us to him."

"I can't do that if I know you'll kill her after I do." I was talking out of my ass.

The creature cocked his head and took two more steps toward me. Now he was flush up against me. I had to crane my neck to see his face since he had to be pushing over six foot five.

"You don't get it, do you, little one." He growled. "These are not games we play. You aren't understanding...let me make it clear."

He looked over his shoulder and jerked his head. I didn't even get a chance to scream. The crack of Gia's neck breaking, the crash of her body going through the glass table, the smell of blood.

"Are you understanding me now, human?"

Gia. Her big brown eyes were staring at me, lifeless. My only friend, all I had. Gone. Happy birthday to me.

"Take him," I heard the creature order and suddenly I was being swept up into someone's arms. As I was dragged from Gia's home, I looked into her eyes until I could no longer see her.

The sound of her body breaking echoed through my mind. I was so far gone I didn't even realize air was whipping around us. I blinked and saw clouds around me. Sky...I was flying.

"Sleep," whoever held me said, and darkness surrounded me.



I opened my eyes to a dark room. The scent of musty, moldy, dustiness filled my nose and I sneezed.

"Awake, finally." The creep who was in Gia's home stepped forward. "Life means very little to me. I understand humans have guilt, a conscience. This is something my kind don't possess." He tilted his head, his red eyes narrowed. "You got your friend killed. Tell me something, Ezra, how many more will have to die for your stubbornness?"

I didn't know what they wanted from me. I'd tried to save Gia, I thought...no, I was playing games.

"I lied."

The creature hummed. "Yes."

“Not about what you think. I don’t know who you’re looking for, I don’t know anything about whatever this is.”

The creature lifted his gray hand and long black nails scraped over my cheek.

“All these years, you never realized you were protected? How many who dared trifle with you was lost to this world. How anyone who slighted you disappeared?”

The prickle on the back of my neck, the feeling of never being alone.

“There it is.” The creature smiled, razor sharp teeth and a tongue as dark as night. “You knew.”

“I felt—”

“Something.”

I nodded. “But I never saw who it was. I don’t know who it is.”

“Hmm.” He stepped back. “Perhaps that is true.” He ran his fingers over the stone wall of the room, and the sound made my teeth rattle. “Whenever you were in need, he’d show.”

“Sometimes after. He never showed himself.”

“By that logic, he should be protecting you now...where oh where could he be, little human?”

It was a good question. I sure could use some saving right about now.

“I don’t know,” I whispered in defeat. I couldn’t give him what he wanted which meant my life wasn’t of value and I knew death would be greeting me soon.

“Then let’s get his attention, shall we?”

I snapped my gaze to him as he lunged for me, tearing me from the ropes I’d been tied down with.

“What are you—”

With me clutched in his grip, he crashed through the window, and once again I was flying up, up, up. The night was freezing. I looked down and could see all the Christmas lights getting farther away.

“Will he save you, little human? Will he finally show himself to rescue you from death?” the creature growled in my ear. “Let us find out.”

Suddenly, I was freefalling through the clouds, icy wind cutting at my skin. I wasn't sure if I was screaming because all I felt was pain, fear, and alone.

The lights came closer and closer and I braced myself for the end. I didn't want to see it. My life wasn't grand enough for it to flash before me. With my eyes closed I fell...until I wasn't.

Warmth surrounded me, the cold melted away, the fear was gone. I blinked my eyes open but couldn't see anything, just whatever was surrounding me. Black wings. My finger brushed over one and it was like petting a rich leather jacket.

It was as if I was floating and I sighed in relief. Then my body jolted and I gasped. Another slam, then I was tumbling and rolling onto the cold ground.

“No more hiding, Senon!” I turned my head and saw the creature; he wasn't looking at me but something behind me.

What I saw could only be explained as extraordinary. A man, with golden hair, glowing honey brown eyes, a body I swore was chiseled from my wet dreams, and the largest black leather wings I'd ever seen...okay, I'd never seen leather wings before but these were magnificent.

“You dare take what is mine,” this man...no, my protector shouted. Even in anger it was musical, I could listen to him forever.

“It is not him I seek, Senon, but you.”

“You die this night, Diabolus. To Hell I shall return you.”

Like rock hitting rock the two collided above me, battling in the air. I rolled as far from it as I could. I knew in my head I should take the opportunity to run, but my heart was keeping me rooted to the spot. If this Senon guy died, the demon creature thing would kill me anyway. But as I watched the two of them tear each other apart, something bloomed in my chest. Senon was going to win.

As fists and claws ravaged them, each impact was like thunder, and nails sparked against flesh brightening the sky. They flew so high I could no longer see them, but the sky lit up from the storm their fight caused. Drops of rain fell and suddenly more.

Crashes, flashes, a storm covered the entire town, and I sat and waited for my protector. I knew he'd return. The constant in my life, my silent knight.

A loud whistle from above forced my gaze skyward. Something was falling...fast. I stood and ran to get out of the way but when it hit it rocked the ground and I stumbled.

I spun around, there in a heap of skin and bones was the creature. A quiet thud sounded behind me and I smiled.

"You won. I knew you would." I turned and finally faced my protector.

He looked at me with warm eyes. Like a force was tugging me, I fell into his chest and almost cried as he wrapped his arms around me.

"More will come, we must go, Ezra. Hold on tight."

There wasn't anything in this world I wouldn't do for my silent knight.

I knew I was flying but this wasn't a flight of fear, it felt like home and dare I say it...love.



We landed on the roof of my building to the sounds of people laughing and the aroma of spices filling the air, and I was released.

“Ezra Acker, you are home but it is not safe for you here. Diabolus was only one and—”

“One what?”

He cocked his head and regarded me with clear confusion. “A demon.”

“You say that like I’m supposed to know what he was?” And holy hell, he really was a demon?

“How could you not tell? He was gray and looked nothing like a human...and he flew.”

I chuckled and gestured toward his whole body. “You flew, are you a demon?”

“I am part demon, part angel, but more unique than Nephilim.”

He was so honest, and I realized he’d answer all my questions. “What is more unique than a Nephilim?”

He cupped my cheek and smiled. “I will answer all your questions. First, gather all you need—essentials only.”

“Where am I going?”

“With me.” That was all he said. As if that would be enough and I’d willingly just go with him. Spoiler alert, I willingly went with him.

It took me fifteen minutes to get my things together and then we were flying again. So strange how I felt no fear in his arms hundreds, maybe thousands of feet from land.

I watched Christmas lights become less and less. Festive colors replaced with miles of trees and snow. I didn't want to shout and ask questions so I blindly trusted him.

We landed on the lip of a cliff and I gasped when cold air rushed around me as he stepped away.

“We are here.”

“No, we are on a mountain...I'll die here.”

He chuckled and waved his hand over a part of the rocky mountain and it quietly crumbled away revealing a door.

“Come.” He took my hand, and I followed him across the threshold.

Whatever I thought I would see when I walked inside a mountain, this wasn't it.

The scent of cinnamon and sugar tickled my senses and warmth encased me. A crackling fire off to the side was contributing to that. Tucked away in the corner was a Christmas tree but there was also a fully lit menorah on the mantle. This was a home, and I swore I'd see a grandmother walk out of the kitchen with a freshly baked pie any second.

“Wow,” I whispered.

“Do you like it here?”

I nodded and moved further into the space. The couch screamed comfort, the blankets and throws called to me, and the smells made my stomach rumble.

“You are hungry.” Senon raced toward the kitchen; the place was open concept so I could watch.

“Is this where you live?” I asked as I plopped my bag and backpack on the floor.

“I have lived wherever you have been. This is what I created for when you finally joined me.”

Suddenly all the questions that had been swirling around my brain began to bubble.

“Why haven’t you shown yourself to me until now?”

“It wasn’t needed. Tonight you would have died had I not, all the other times that was not the case.”

“But you said this place was created for when I joined you, how was I ever to do that if you didn’t introduce yourself?”

“It would have happened soon, Diabolus pushed the timetable up by a few years.”

“Years?” Okay, I didn’t mean to shout but Senon didn’t even flinch when I did.

“Sit.” He motioned to the breakfast bar. “I will cook you a meal and tell you a story.”

I did as instructed and gave Senon my complete attention.

He started cutting up vegetables and without looking up, told me the story of how he became my knight and why I never knew my parents.



“It was December twentieth, two thousand and three—”

“That’s when I was born.”

He nodded. “Yes, don’t interrupt or this will take forever.”

I mimed zipping my lips.

“I was summoned by your mother.” He held up a finger when I opened my mouth. “Her name was Sylvia and she was a Great Divine. They are the ones who control the heavens. She fell in love with a human man, your father, Arthur Acker. You were not to be born, for none of the Great Divine had ever

bore a child. There was no way of knowing what you'd become."

He poured oil into a skillet and I lifted my jaw from the counter.

"Your father was killed before your mother was even showing her pregnancy. Demons, in force, came for him in the night. Sylvia was devastated and the Divine Kingdom feared what your birth would cause. War perhaps between good and evil, nobody knew. So it was ruled that you would not be born."

I gasped but he went on as if he hadn't just told me the goodest of good were okay with killing me.

"Your mother wouldn't hear of it, so she fled the kingdom and summoned me."

He sighed and looked right at me. "I don't belong to either the divine or the demons yet I am both. The only one of my kind. Your mother believed I'd want to protect another unique being. I could not have refused her if I wanted to for she was a Great Divine."

I smiled, and he placed chicken in the oil.

"She stayed with me until your birth and told me to watch over you forever without fail. Protect you silently, only to reveal myself when you were of a certain age. On your day of birth she brought you to a church."

"She's alive?"

He shook his head. "No. She lingered, unable to part from you. I warned her to flee because I could not protect both you and her. But she stayed, and Abaddon found her, and killed her." His light brown eyes glittered with the promise of tears. "He was sent by the Great Divine to locate and kill you. Sylvia wouldn't give you up and therefore, she died."

"Geez." I swallowed and stared at the wooden bar under my fingertips. That was a lot.

“Sylvia named you Ezra Acker, giving you your father’s last name, and I was afraid that was how they’d find you. They never did. It wasn’t until you were ten and bullies tried to hurt you and I removed them that a tendril of awareness began to spark.”

“They were kids and you—”

“Protected you. It was...is my duty. Any who touch you must perish.” Again, he held up his hand to stop me from interrupting. “Abaddon can track evil, so those who harmed you would hold your divinity. All Abaddon would need to do was search their memories and find you, but if they were dead, he couldn’t.”

“So not some sort of love lust or anything.” I chuckled nervously.

“No. But I do love you, Ezra Acker. You were eighteen, you were running late for work and stumbled over an open drain. Inside you found a litter of kittens, drowning and hungry. You scooped them up, spent the last of your money and got them food and things to clean them. When they were fine you dropped them off at a shelter and lost your job for that.”

I could feel how wide my eyes were. I remembered that day. I knew I’d get fired from the bowling alley, but it was fine, it was a third job I was already having trouble keeping.

“And that’s when you fell in love with me?”

“I’d never felt such a feeling as I did that moment. All I ever did was what I was ordered to do. I looked at you as a job. Until that night. And every day after, I watched you give more to this world than this world gave to you.”

He leaned over the counter and cupped my cheek in his warm palm.

“I can see the Great Divine in your eyes.”

“My silent knight.” I laughed.

“Is that what you call me?”

“I never knew who, but I knew someone was watching over me, quiet and valiant. Yeah, that’s what I call you.”

“I like it.”

I sighed and sat back. “But this Diabolus was looking for you, not me.”

“Yes. As I said I am unique. One of a kind some would say. Abaddon is my father and my mother an angel, I do not know her name. I was born both in lava and water, in light and darkness. Touched by the Great Divine and cursed by Hell itself. Abaddon wants me to sit at his side knowing it would bring war to both good and evil...much like you. But I never will. Diabolus thought if he brought me to him, it would give him all the riches he could ever want. He didn’t realize you are more valuable than me. He only knew I cherished you and protected you.” He chuffed.

“Funny if you think about it. Diabolus had a chance to hand you over to Abaddon but didn’t realize the treasure he held.”

My mind was reeling. He loved me, his mom was an angel, Senon’s dad killed my mom, who was a Great Divine, demons are not only real but they tried to eviscerate me...*Do I have magical powers?*

A plate was placed in front of me full of seasoned chicken, veggies, and fingerling potatoes.

“Wow that was fast.”

Senon shrugged. “I have a way of speeding things up.”

So, magic is real.

I tucked into the meal, surprising even myself with how I could eat after having all this information thrust upon me.

Once I was done, I sat back and realized I was alone. I slipped off the stool and meandered around the large space.

There was a corridor on the opposite side of where I was standing, and I made my way down it. I passed a bathroom that was insanely luxurious. A clawfoot tub, ivory and gold settings, a large window overlooking a forest—which, weird since we were inside a mountain.

“Senon?” I called out when I reached what appeared to be the master bedroom.

“Ezra.” Drying his wet hair, he entered the room from a door off to the side. “Apologies, I tried to tell you I was going to wash up but you were absorbing everything I had told you.”

“I have so many questions and—”

“I imagine you do.” He motioned toward a sitting area hugged by enormous bay windows.

I sat in one of the plush chairs and he did the same.

“Where are your wings?” I couldn’t believe I’d only just realized they weren’t on display.

“They tuck away when I am not in need of them.”

I nodded, that seemed reasonable. “So, the powers of good and evil both want us dead?”

“In a manner of speaking. My father would much rather I sit beside him but he is not a stupid demon. He realizes I could and would never. He would rather I die than fight on the side of the Great Divine.”

“And would you fight beside the ones who helped murder my biological mother?”

Senon sat across from me, his gaze boring into mine as if I truly were as precious as he claimed.

“No. Perhaps at one time I might have but, Ezra, understand something. I am born of darkness and light. When I kill I do it without remorse, and yet I warm at the sight of a man rescuing kittens.”

I chuckled. “You’re an enigma.”

“Perhaps.”

“Off topic...what’s with the Christmas tree *and* the menorah?”

Senon smiled so brightly my heart practically burst with how gorgeous he was.

“You celebrate both. You are Jewish, your father was and when Sylvia gave you his last name it was to honor that. But many foster families you have been with celebrated Christmas. During the holidays in twenty ten you claimed how you loved both Christmas and Chanukah.”

Damn...he really had been watching me.

“That’s maybe sweet, maybe stalkerish.”

He didn’t say anything after that, simply watched me, waiting for what I’d do next I supposed.

“Senon—”

“I love my name on your lips.”

Okay, cue heavy blushing. “Senon.” I smirked. “Where do you stand now? What happens to us next? Can we fight and win and simply live our lives...well, can I live mine because you’re likely immortal.”

“I stand beside you, Ezra. Sylvia called upon me and I answered. I do not regret that choice. We always fight. Humanity does it every day. Why is today or tomorrow any different?”

“Um.” I laughed nervously. “We fight to keep our electricity on, not to survive demons from Hell tearing our skin off to wear as a cape.”

Senon furrowed his brow. “That is a very dark visual.”

“I need to know what’s next.” I sighed, all the adrenaline from earlier washing away, and sadness over the loss of my only friend returning. “Gia died for me, Senon.”

“Yes, I am sorry for your loss.”

His eyes were filled with sincerity and deep in my bones I wanted to curl on his lap and let him console me. But I couldn't. I had to sit with all of this and really let it sink in.

“I'm tired.”

“Of course.” He stood. “You can have this room. I will stay in—”

“No way. I'll take another bedroom if there is one or I'll sleep on the couch.”

I could see he wanted to argue but he acquiesced and led me to a room across the hall.

“You are safe here, nobody can invade this sanctuary.”

I wanted to ask more, like how, but I truly was exhausted.

“Good night, Senon.”

I shut the door and starfished on the bed. I hadn't even checked out the room, I just let sleep consume me.



When I woke, I wasn't sure if I'd dreamed everything but as soon as I sat up and surveyed the gorgeous room—definitely not my bedroom over the Mexican restaurant—I knew everything really did happen.

To my left, on a sun yellow chair was my backpack, and my duffle was on the floor beside it. Senon must've brought my things in from the main area of the house.

I needed a shower, clean clothes, to brush my teeth, and then something to eat...and coffee, for sure coffee. Then I could address the fact demonic and divine beings wanted me dead.

By the time I left the bedroom Senon was placing coffee, scrambled eggs, bacon, and cut fruits on the table.

“That looks and smells amazing.”

His smile was pure radiance and the slight blush at my compliment warmed my heart.

“I hope you enjoy.”

“Aren’t you eating?” I started scooping eggs onto my plate.

“I wasn’t sure if you wanted me to.”

Rolling my eyes, I motioned to the empty chair in front of me. “No matter how crazy everything sounded last night, the fact remains that you saved me. If you wanted me dead, I wouldn’t be here. Besides, I hate eating alone.”

Silently, he sat, filled his plate, and began eating. I waited until he was halfway through to begin today’s drilling.

“I’m having a hard time understanding that you love me... over kittens.”

He nodded. “Love isn’t really something one can explain. There’s always that moment when it takes you by surprise even though it’s been gradual. For me, I never looked at you any way other than that of a child in need of protection. When I saw you caring for those kittens, it was then I realized you’d become a man and the heart I always knew you had, became attractive.”

“So what’s the game plan? We can’t stay here forever.”

Senon’s gaze traveled the space. “Actually we could. I have everything you’d ever need here.”

“No, Senon, I can’t. I have commitments. Speaking of, I need a phone so I can call both of my jobs and let them know I’ll need a few days off. I’ll claim it’s the flu.”

“I placed your cellphone on the charger in the living room after you went to sleep.”

“Perfect, thank you.” I stood and carried my dish to the kitchen. “Let me make some calls and then I’ll wash up the dishes.”

“No need, go do what is needed.”

“Senon, let me, please. You were nice enough to cook, the least I could do—”

I was properly silenced when Senon waved his hand and the mess disappeared.

“Now go make your calls, Ezra.” He winked and strolled out of the room.

The comic shop was cool with it and wished me well, the hospital was a different story. My boss informed me the police were looking for me since I was good friends with Gia and was seen leaving with her the night of her murder. I had to get down to the station as soon as possible. Senon was going to love that.

“Senon?” I called out when I couldn’t find him. When I got no response, I opened the sliding door where the view of the forest was. Bizarre that where there should be a mountain there was foliage.

“Senon?”

“Up here.”

I looked above and there he was chilling in a tree.

“Uh, watch doin’?”

“I wanted to give you privacy and I love sitting high and watching the world.”

I nodded because yeah, I could understand that. “Listen, I have to go down to the police station.”

He cocked his head, and in a flash landed in front of me. “Why?”

“I was seen leaving with Gia the night she died. I have to talk with the cops or else it might appear I was running.”

“You don’t have to be a part of that world ever again, Ezra.”

“Senon, I am a part of that world. Sure, it has its faults but it’s mostly good. I don’t want my name tainted.”

“I see. What will you tell the police?”

I hadn’t thought about it. “I’m open to suggestions.”

“Perhaps the truth. The man who came into the hospital followed you both, came into her home, killed Gia, and you ran out of fear.”

“And when they ask what the man looked like?”

“Tell them...but leave out the demon qualities.”

I snorted. “Okay.” When I turned to get ready Senon grabbed my arm.

“Ezra, you must listen to me.”

“What’s up?”

“Once we leave this sanctuary, you’re no longer safe. Which means, never leave my side, do as I say, no matter if you like it or disagree, do I make myself clear?”

My eyes widened at the seriousness of his words.

“I guess but—”

“No, if you do not listen to me, we both will surely not survive. We are leaving this space that I am quite sure Abaddon knows exists...maybe not where but for sure that we are in hiding. Once we are exposed, he will take advantage of the opportunity. Therefore, you must listen.”

“Okay, Senon, I promise.”



Senon walked beside me into the police station dressed like an average person. Okay, scratch that. He wore jeans, a black t-shirt, and Converse like a normal person but he was insanely hot. Even the female cop working the front counter was gawking.

“Hey.” I waved in front of her face successfully snapping her out of her lustful “I want to lick the immortal” trance.

“Sorry, how may I assist you?” She smiled, her attention flicking to Senon every few seconds.

He was oblivious to her affections and a part of me warmed to know he said he loved me, and she wasn’t even a speck on his radar.

“My name is Ezra Acker, I was told the detective in charge of the Gia Grant murder wished to speak with me.”

Crime wasn’t uncommon in this town but judging by her expression, it certainly was known through this district.

“Please have a seat over there and Detective Hurst will be with you shortly.”

Senon and I sat in the very municipal looking waiting room. Me, I was riffling through a year-old magazine. Senon was like a watch dog scrutinizing every person around us, entering the building, or talking too loudly.

“Mr. Acker?”

My attention snapped to the sound of my name being called. The detective looked maybe thirty with sandy blond hair and brown eyes. He was in good shape and thankfully smiling.

“That’s me.” I stood and Senon followed.

“Are you his lawyer?” The detective addressed Senon.

“No, a friend.”

Hurst nodded curtly. “Well, friend, I’ll need to speak with Mr. Acker alone, so I’m going to have to ask you to wait here.”

I knew this was going to happen, I even warned Senon on the ride to the station that there was no way they’d let him in with me. He scoffed...and here we were.

“I do not think—”

I squeezed Senon’s bicep. “It’s fine, I’m with a detective, safe as could be.”

Not against Abaddon, I was sure that was what Senon wanted to say, but there was no choice.

He growled but sat back down, shooting daggers at the detective.

Detective Hurst chuckled and motioned for me to follow him. After shooting Senon a quick smile I joined the detective.

The interrogation room was how one would expect it to be. Cinderblock walls, gray floors, one-way glass, a table, and a couple of chairs.

“I apologize for doing this in an interrogation room, Mr. Acker, but it’s easier to concentrate than on the floor.”

I waved him off. “No big deal. I want to help.” Even though there’d be no way anything I said today would assist the police in Gia’s murder...since they were looking for actual demons.

“I appreciate you saying that. Now, I spoke with the hospital staff, and many if not all stated you and Gia Grant were very close and left together after the attack at the hospital?”

“Yes, she was scared and admittedly I was too. Neither of us wanted to be alone so I went back to her place with her.”

He nodded. “That’s when everything gets fuzzy, Mr. Acker. Gia wasn’t harmed at the hospital but shortly after she was

found with her neck brutally snapped and you were in the wind. Care to fill in the blanks?”

Yeah, the interrogation room wasn't a coincidence. I suspected this would happen, though they weren't wrong to think I did this.

“I was in Gia's house when three guys broke in. One held Gia and another was asking where someone was, but neither Gia nor I knew who he meant, and I said so but he wouldn't believe me. He got angry and told his friend to kill her. He...” I swallowed, closed my eyes, and tried desperately not to hear the sound of Gia's body breaking. “He killed her.”

“So there were three men?”

“Yes.”

“What happened after that.”

“The one who seemed to be the leader, grabbed me and they took me with them.”

“You were kidnapped?”

I nodded. “They kept accusing me of lying, that I knew where some guy was, but he never told me who they were looking for and I thought maybe it had to do with what happened at the hospital, but I was terrified. My best friend was dead, and I thought I was going to die.”

Detective Hurst was scrutinizing me. “You're an orderly at Legend Hill Hospital and work part time at Crane Comics and somehow attracted lethal killers who killed a nurse and kidnapped you in order to find some mystery man you don't even know the name of?”

When he said it like that it sounded crazy. “Yes.”

“Mr. Acker—”

“I get it, it sounds insane. I don't understand it myself. But I got away from them and hid. I called my boss to take time off and he told me I needed to go to the station.”

“Why didn’t you come here to begin with?”

Frustration and weariness began settling in my bones and I wiped a hand over my face. “I was scared. I hid. Not the best choice but I came here to do the right thing.”

“Did you get a name of any of the men?”

“They kept calling the leader guy D.” I’m a terrible person who lies.

“D? That’s it? A description?”

Fuck my life. “The leader guy was large like over six-one, bald, kind of looked like Thanos from The Avengers movies, you know?”

“Right...and the others?”

“I can’t remember, I’m sorry.”

Detective Hurst sighed. “Mr. Acker, I’m finding a lot of this hard to swallow. Was it possible this had nothing to do with you and everything to do with Ms. Grant?”

Oh wow this was taking a turn. “I don’t understand?”

“The hospital was attacked and then Ms. Grant’s home. She’s the common denominator here. Has anyone been threatening her? Perhaps the someone this D was looking for was someone Gia was working with or something?”

How in the hell did he maneuver over to that theory? “Uhh...I suppose, but if that’s the case Gia never said anything to me. Trust me, I’d have ratted on the guy if it would have saved Gia’s life.”

The detective was silent for a moment then slipped a business card across the table. “Please call me if you think of anything else and in case I have further questions, I’ll need a number to call you.”

I shot off the number and Detective Hurst walked me out to where a very nervous looking Senon was pacing.

“Ready?” Senon glared at the detective and pulled me closer to him.

“Yeah.”



Senon didn't relax until we were back at his mountain sanctuary. Once the doors shut, he exhaled loudly.

“I did not like you disappearing with that human.”

“Senon, he's a detective, what did you think he was going to do?”

He stormed over to the kitchen and began clanging dishes, pots, and pans around.

“Senon, relax, I'm fine.”

He shook his head but started taking food out.

“Senon?”

He was chopping onions so forcefully they were turning into mush.

“Senon!” I yelled. “Stop!”

He slammed the knife down, rounded on me, and barricaded me against the refrigerator.

“I cannot deal with something happening to you, Ezra. It would destroy me.”

His breath fanned across my face, his eyes glowing with vulnerability, fear, and possession.

“Senon,” I whispered and tenderly ran my fingers over his cheek.

“Ezra, I—”

“Love me, I know.” I pressed my lips against his and without hesitation Senon wrapped his arms around me and lifted me so I could hook my legs behind his back. I was being carried, but to where I didn’t know or care. Senon’s tongue was like silk, caressing my own, making me hunger for so much more.

I was pressed against what I assumed was his mattress and clothes were literally being torn from our bodies in a frenzy. Only when naked flesh touched naked flesh did Senon calm and his kisses soften.

“Oh, Ezra.”

“I’m here, I’m safe, and I want you very much.”

My fists gripped the sheets as Senon’s lips travelled down my neck until he had my nipple in his mouth. The tug shot straight to my dick and I arched my back, moaning like a wanton slut, but I didn’t give a shit. I wanted him to pound me into the bed and stay there forever.

“Senon, fuck!”

He chuckled and released my tender nipple, moving to the other one, and I swore I was going to come before he even made it to my cock.

“I need—”

“I know what you need, Ezra. I’ve always known.” His eyes locked with mine and I practically came apart when he swallowed me down.

I’d never been worshiped like this. My life was one night stands where it was a race to get off and get out. Two people chasing a climax so we could move on with our lives. Senon treated me as if my orgasm was a gift and as he sucked me like my come was the secret to immortality, I wanted him inside me.

“Senon, please fuck me!” I tugged on his hair and my dick slipped from his mouth.

“I love hearing you beg.” He hovered over me, his gaze never leaving mine as he reached over to the bedside table and pulled something from the drawer. “I want to bury myself inside your tight hole, but I will not hurt you.”

I whimpered; dirty talk was a surprise but I was all for it. Senon squeezed lube on his fingers and I spread my legs wider as he began probing my hole readying me for...yeah, that was a big cock.

He nailed my prostate each time and the tingle at the base of my spine was getting stronger.

“Senon, I can’t...please.”

He chuckled and removed his fingers, leaving me feeling the loss and chasing relief.

“Breathe, my love,” he whispered against my ear, and the press of his cock was like a balm to my desperation.

I was so full, gloriously and perfectly full. I both wanted him to move and needed him to stay. When I couldn’t take the stillness any longer I dug my nails into his back, unable to speak but craving his movement.

The slide out was torturously slow and I tried to clench my hole to keep him in.

“Hold on to me, precious.”

He slammed in, giving me everything I desired as he fucked me into the mattress relentlessly. I was sure I was screaming in pure ecstasy, clutching on to his body, aching and thirsty for every glorious brush of his cock over my prostate.

“I’m coming.” My climax barreled through me and Senon fucked me through it, his own orgasm coating my insides making me come again. I couldn’t stop, and I never wanted to. This was bliss and torture, everything I never had and always hungered for.

When we were both spent, Senon rested atop me, my legs and arms flopping limply, neither of us moving. With a smile on my face I slipped into a blissful sleep only vaguely aware of Senon cleaning me and tucking me in, his arms protectively wrapped around me while we slept.



Buzzing. Over and over again. I blinked, my eyes heavy with exhaustion. Senon woke me several times to ravish my body through the night and there was no way I was fighting him off. I felt cherished, loved, and sore. Wonderfully sore.

The buzzing stopped and I realized it was my phone...that was still in my pants' pocket. Senon was sleeping so I slid away from him—who knew he was a cuddler—and reached for my pants.

Once I had the phone in hand, I hit the button to listen to the voicemail.

“Mr. Acker, this is Detective Hurst. Last night a patrolman picked up three men harassing a woman in the park and we’d like you to come down to the station to see if these were the same three men you saw the other night. If you could call me back as soon as possible to arrange a line up or even if you could look at their photos, I’d appreciate it. Bye.”

“Uhg.” I plopped down against the comfortable pillow.

“What’s wrong?” Senon turned, his brows furrowed with worry.

“I have to go back to the police station because some cop picked up three men last night and they want me to see if it’s the same people who killed Gia, which we know they won’t be but if I don’t go it’ll become a headache.”

“I told you, Ezra, you never have to go anywhere. We can stay here forever.”

I smiled and pressed a sweet kiss to his soft lips. “I can’t do that, Senon. For a while that’d be nice but there’s a world out there I sometimes like being a part of. Anyway, if these guys were dickbags maybe I say it was them and this ends.”

I slid out of bed and walked to the bathroom to relieve my bladder, shower, and brush my teeth. I called the station while the water warmed and told them I’d be down in about an hour.

Sure enough, forty-five minutes later Senon and I were entering the police station.

“Ezra Acker here to see Detective Hurst.”

The cop at the counter nodded and asked for me to have a seat.

“I’m going in with you this time.” Senon clenched his jaw and damn I wanted to straddle him and have my wicked way with—

“Mr. Acker?”

I jumped when the detective called my name.

“Yes...sorry, I was daydreaming.”

Senon smirked as if he knew where my thoughts had wandered off to.

“Right this way please.”

I was glad when no one stopped Senon from coming back with me.

“If you could sit right here.” He gestured to a seat across from his desk. Senon leaned against the wall, arms folded. Detective Hurst snorted but said nothing. “I’d like you to look at some pictures first. If we need to do a line up then we can but I’d rather not have to subject you to that.”

“Thanks.”

He placed three mugshots in front of me. I'd never seen any of those men before but I wanted this to end. I apologized to the powers that be for what I was about to do and threw these men under the bus.

"They look very familiar."

"That man there is Declan Garrity, which fits with you saying they called him D."

Okay this was almost too perfect. He was bald too.

"Did they kill anyone else?"

Detective Hurst took the photos back. "Not this time but all three have been in and out of prison for the last twenty years. None have an alibi for the night your friend was killed and you taken, so I think this will be pretty cut and dry."

I slumped in my seat, relieved that maybe now I'd be left alone.

"Is that all, can I go?"

"In a few. I wrote up your accounts of the evening when Ms. Grant was killed and you taken. If you could read it over and sign it for me?" He slid the paperwork over to me and I started reading.

"Detective, you got a sec?" a police officer said when they popped their head in.

"Sure thing. I'll be right back, Mr. Acker, take your time."

Once he left, I looked at Senon.

"You lied," he whispered with a smirk.

"You heard him, they were bad guys."

Senon chuckled. "They are very bad man. Rape, murder, robbery, assault."

I jerked back. "How'd you know all that?"

He tapped his head. "I can see the darkness and light in every human. You did the world a favor today, your lie is forgiven."

I laughed and was about to ask if I'd be punished later when the building shook as if something exploded right outside.

"What the hell!" I jumped up and Senon was beside me in a second.

"We have to go, Abaddon is here."

"What!" I shrieked but didn't hesitate to follow Senon as he ran.

Another blast and the ceiling came down over several officers. Dust filled the air making it hard to see or breathe.

"Senon!" I shouted, and in a flash, he was gripping my hand.

"Don't let go."

I nodded and kept up with him as best I could.

"Where are we going?"

"We need to get outside to take flight. Fleeing is our best bet."

I was all for getting the fuck out and if Senon was afraid of his father, I sure as shit was too.

The station was in pure chaos, nobody paid attention to Senon and me as we raced through the building avoiding debris.

Senon's grip on my hand was unforgiving and I didn't even care that he was crushing it. We had to get out of here together.

Gun fire began ringing out behind us and I knew something or someone had breached the station and the police were attacking. My heart ached at the thought of the police falling, not realizing the reason this was happening was because of me and Senon. They had families...it was Christmas.

“Senon.” I stopped, his body jerking to a halt.

“Ezra, we can’t slow or stop, we—”

“We can’t leave them. They’ll all die.”

“And so will you if we stay.”

My vision became watery. “No one life is more important than another.”

Senon’s gaze flicked over my shoulder and then met mine again, I could see the conflict resting there.

“I promised your mother.” A tear slipped from his beautiful eyes and in that moment, I knew this was likely our last moment together.

I pulled him to me and pressed my lips to his. Cement and dust rained around us but for a few breaths I pretended Senon and I were alone, flying through the clouds, swirling with the air, not a care in the world.

“I love you too, Senon,” I whispered against his lips.

“Ezra,” he sobbed. “You will die.”

I smiled and stepped back. “I won’t have anyone else die for me.” I couldn’t bear to look at the anguish in his eyes any longer, I spun and raced toward the mayhem, toward the screams and gunfire.

I came to a screeching halt when I turned into the main area of the station. Police were hunkered down behind their desks shooting in one direction. I followed their aim, eyes widening at the sight before me.

A demon for sure. Black as the dead of night, blood red eyes, teeth the shape and size of swords, and so tall the roof no longer existed.

He was going to kill them all.

“No!” I shouted as loud as I could. “Take me, Abaddon, I’m who you want!”

The demon spun, eyes like slits, a grin as evil as sin itself.

“Ezra.” Abaddon’s voice shook the floor. “Son of Sylvia the Great Divine.”

“Yes, leave them be and you can have me.”

He chuckled darkly. “I was going to have you regardless, they were just appetizers.” He motioned toward the police who had ceased firing but had their guns aimed at the demon. I knew the moment Abaddon took a step toward me they’d try and defend my life. I couldn’t let them do that.

“But you wouldn’t have gotten me as well.”

I turned at the same time Abaddon did. Senon, his dark wings spread wide, armor I’d never seen adorning his entire body.

“Son,” Abaddon hummed.

“Leave these humans alone and I will stand at your side.”

“Senon, no—”

“And let Ezra live.”

“Senon, I won’t allow you to do that.”

A small tug on Senon’s lips told me he intended to honor my mother’s promise. “Ezra, go toward the police officers, now.”

Abaddon wasn’t taking his attention off Senon and I was torn between running toward the cops and wrapping my body around Senon and begging him not to do this.

“Senon, please,” I cried.

He said nothing, from his back he pulled out a wicked looking weapon. Part ax, part sword.

“Advance on him, Father, and we will battle to the death and I’m not so sure you believe you can win.”

I took a step to Senon but he shook his head. “I love you, Ezra Acker. Your mother would be so very proud of your

strength. Now, please let me honor my promise to her and keep you alive.”

My body ached as if it were being torn in two. I could barely see through the tears and anguish crumpled me to the floor. Arms around me dragging me were unfamiliar and I realized police officers were covering my body...protecting me.

My whole life I thought I was equal parts lucky and unlucky. Roaming through life alone, just getting by, surviving but never living. I wasn't alone, ever. My mother and my father both died for me, Gia died for me, these police were willing to die to protect me. And across the station I watched as the man I loved faced off with his own father, willing to give up his existence to protect me.

I was so very tired of it all. I couldn't go back to the hospital or comic book store, not after this. Not without Senon in my life.

I wasn't important enough...he was.

I waited for my moment. Watched as Abaddon nodded.

“Very well, Senon. You stand at my side and rule, you battle with me and for me. Do this and your human, your pet can live.”

Senon didn't relinquish his weapon but he lowered it.

“If you harm any of them our deal will be forfeited and I promise I will kill you, Abaddon.”

Abaddon stood even taller and hummed. “Understood.”

With one last look at me, Senon walked toward his father who now had his back to us.

Senon slid his weapon into the holder on his back...I was out of time.

I was part of the Great Divine. It had to mean something, and maybe nothing, but I couldn't let Senon do this, but these police would all die if he didn't.

I closed my eyes and prayed. “Mother, hear me, if you can give me strength, I can’t do this life without him. I don’t want to. You sent him to protect me but it will kill me if he dies. Please, Great Divine, I know you want me gone but maybe my existence can do amazing things. Please.”

When I opened my eyes, Senon and Abaddon had just stepped out of the building. I moved back, all of the officers’ attention was with the demon so no one saw me.

Attached to the wall, glass case shattered, was a fireman’s ax. I pulled it out and exited through a hole in the side of the building. My hope was to flank them.

If anyone noticed I was gone they said nothing. I peered around the corner, they were coming. Abaddon in front. I pressed my back to the brick and listened.

“Please let this work,” I whispered one last time.

A dark talon appeared. Knowing I’d need to reach, I leaped onto the dented newspaper stand in front of me, lifted my arm, and swung. The ax embedded itself into Abaddon’s chest, his roar like thunder, but I didn’t let go. Not when he arched back and tossed me about.

“Ezra!” Senon’s voice was like sun on a cold day but all I felt was Abaddon’s grip as he wrapped his hands around my body.

“Foolish boy!” Abaddon squeezed.

“Stupid demon,” I forced out as he began cutting of my air.

I could see Senon pulling out his weapon. I hoped if I didn’t succeed, he would be able to so he could be free, so he could be as amazing as I knew he was.

I pressed as hard as I could against the ax, pushing it in. Darkness crept around the edges of my vision and just as Senon took flight, weapon raised to strike, Abaddon smiled at me and pulled me to his chest.

Pain radiated against my stomach, I looked down and saw the other side of the ax was buried in my abdomen.

“Somehow, I always win, pet,” Abaddon growled, just as Senon’s sword impaled Abaddon’s skull.

I was thrown, my body crashing against something hard and I slid to the ground.

I could see Senon on the shoulders of Abaddon, battling... winning. Abaddon collapsed and a light brighter than the sun washed over the area but I couldn’t appreciate its warmth as darkness won.



“Ezra,” a woman’s voice called to me softly.

Warmth engulfed me and where I thought there would be pain was numbness.

“Sweet boy, open your eyes.”

Slowly, I did what was asked of me. Dim lights shone above me, and a woman with raven hair and amber eyes smiled down on me.

“You’re so brave, so selfless.” Her fingers caressed my cheek.

“Who...where am I?”

“You know who I am, you called to me.”

Without thought, I gripped her hand and sat up. No pain, huh. I wanted to wonder about that a little longer but I was looking at the face of my mother.

“You’re alive?”

Her head tilted to the side, her smile never wavering. “No, sweetheart. I’m not living nor dead.”

“I don’t understand.”

When she ran her fingers through my hair, I relished the moment. Oh, how many times I wished for my mother’s touch to calm me when I was upset.

“You called to me, to the Great Divine. You woke the light that rests in your soul, my son. Whether the Great Divine wishes for your destruction or not, your plea can’t go unanswered. Your sacrifice was the most selfless of any they’d seen in hundreds of years.”

“I didn’t...I just—”

“You gave your life for strangers. You wouldn’t let another live a life of servitude that would surely be riddled with torture, you gave up the love of a lifetime. For that not even the Great Divine could interfere with your plea.”

Senon. “Is he?”

“He lives.”

“Am I?”

She chuckled and it reminded me of windchimes in a soft breeze. “You have a choice. One you will never get to make again.”

“What is it?”

“You can stay in the Great Divine, unharmed, untouched. Peace and warmth for all eternity, never feeling alone, never in pain.”

That sounded amazing. “Or?”

“Or you can return to your world and to Senon. I cannot promise others won’t seek you both out at some point, but with the awakening of your light, it would be foolish to harm either of you.”

“I—”

“Ezra.” She held one of my hands in both of hers. “If you choose love, if you choose Senon, you exist while he does. If he dies, so shall you, and vice versa.”

My eyes widened. “Oh, I can’t do that. I’m human. I don’t have the lifespan of an angel demon man...whatever he is.”

She chuckled. “No, sweet boy, his immortality becomes your own.”

Wow. I looked into her honey eyes, her smile, the face of the only woman I ever wanted to know.

“But I won’t ever see you again.”

She pressed her hand to my chest. “I will be with you always, Ezra, no matter where you are.”

“How do I know Senon would want to be tied to me forever?”

She held up her hand, a soft light appeared, and I could see Senon huddled over my crumpled, bleeding body. He was pleading.

“Take me, please take me. I forfeit my life for this man, I choose death if he cannot return.”

“Does that sound like someone unwilling to be tied to you forever, Son?”

“Oh, Senon.” I reached for the scene in front of me but as soon as my fingers touched it, it blew away.

“What do I do?”

“Do you want to be with him, Ezra?”

“I’ve never wanted anything more.”

She cupped my face in her hands. “Then that is what your choice should be.”

I smiled, the moment so bittersweet. “I wish I had more time with you.”

“Ezra, I’ve watched you your whole life. Seen how Senon protected and loved you. A mother could never be as proud of her child as I am you.”

“I love you, Mom.”

She beamed at my words. “I love you too, Ezra.”

“How...how do I get back to him?”

“Close your eyes and wish it...it’s Christmas after all, the time of miracles.”

“But I’m Jewish.”

She laughed. “Don’t argue with your mother.”

I looked at her face one last time, then closed my eyes and wished to be back in Senon’s arms.



Pain...yeah, this part she didn’t warn me about. I was freezing, hurting, and being crushed?

“Ezra, come back, please. Great Divine take me!” Senon roared to the skies.

“Shhh...you’re yelling, and I have a headache.”

Senon gasped, his red-rimmed eyes widening as he stared at me in shock.

“Ezra!”

“I really hope you love me, Senon, because you’re stuck with me forever.”

“How? I mean you were—” He pulled away and while my clothes were covered in blood, the wound was healed. “The Great Divine.”

I nodded. “I saw my mother.”

He smiled and even though I was having a little trouble breathing with him crushing me, when he kissed my lips, I didn't mind even in the slightest.

“Merry Christmas, Senon.”

He chuckled. I could hear people surrounding us and had no idea what we were going to tell them or how any of this would work. But I didn't care. This was the best Christmas of my life, and I had an eternity with the man I loved.

The End

ABOUT DAVIDSON KING

Davidson King, always had a hope that someday her daydreams would become real-life stories. As a child, you would often find her in her own world, thinking up the most insane situations. It may have taken her awhile, but she made her dream come true with her first published work, *Snow Falling*.

She managed to wrangle herself a husband who matched her crazy and they hatched three wonderful children.

If you were to ask her what gave her the courage to finally publish, she'd tell you it was her amazing family and friends. Support is vital in all things and when you're afraid of your dreams, it will be your cheering section that will lift you up.

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HAWK

Erebus Assassins novella



Reese Knightley

An assassin and his mark

A runaway who shouldn't be underestimated

And a holiday neither of them expected

It's Christmas time, but Hawk can't be worried about that. He has one last job to do and then he can retire. Being an assassin isn't as glamorous as one might think. Now he's faced with a choice and a pair of crystal blue eyes. Can he snuff out this last hit and move on? Or will this young beautiful blond be his downfall?

Skylar Thomas never thought he'd spend the holidays living on the streets, but he's on the run and he'll do anything he can to stay alive. When he meets a man known only as Hawk, he doesn't realize he's on a collision course that will change his life forever.

Triggers

Please be advised that this book is intended for adult readers aged eighteen and older due to sexually explicit content, language, violence, and off the page mention of rape.

This story ends with an HEA.

ONE

The job was supposed to be simple.

But it turned out to be a fuckin' nightmare.

Hawk sat in the dark with his back against the concrete wall and studied the line of homeless tents that stretched as far as the eye could see. His focus was on a row that sat deep within the homeless community of San Diego. It was almost rhythmic watching the people mill about, sorting through findings or huddled around burning canisters. The fire sent smoke up into the air in slow curling tendrils, and the smell of charred paper and melted plastic mixed with singed clothing drifted on the slight southern breeze.

Normally, Hawk would have done the hit at night, but it had proven fuckin' impossible, because his mark had sat so far tucked inside the homeless community that he couldn't get a bead on the guy, so here he was back in the daytime.

This one last job had turned into a month-long recon.

The coined phrase, "I'm too old for this shit," came to mind and he snorted under his breath and situated his ass against the hard concrete of the retaining wall. Thankful for the heavy jeans protecting his ass and the worn boots and a black hoodie all designed so he fit in.

Fitting in around there wasn't a problem for him even with his height and size. In fact, he'd seen several other men with the same bulk. And his mark also fit into the filth and stench, Hawk should have been able to get close. Only, he hadn't been able to, and finding the guy became a game of cat and mouse in the stench-filled area.

Not that he had a problem with the homeless. Each person had to find their own way and he of all people knew that sometimes life handed you a pile of shit and the only way out

was starting from the bottom up. Some people actually preferred to live on the margins of society.

Not him, though, and he thought of the shabby, rundown apartment he lived in with its bare walls and faded carpet.

One last job and he was out of there with enough money to last a lifetime living in the sun on a remote beach some-fuckin'-where.

They'd tried to decorate for the season with smatterings of garland and rummaged decorations that seemed to fit more for Christmas than the upcoming turkey day. The tattered arrangements looked worse for the wear, but it did give the area a bit of a cheery glow. What a fucked up way to spend any holiday. Oh, not for him, but for the people below. The ones who wouldn't sit down at a table filled with food and gaze across at loved ones.

He grimaced and rubbed at the ache in his shoulder. He hadn't had a holiday like that since he'd been a boy. With Halloween just last week, people would be preparing for Thanksgiving, then Christmas, all followed up with a happy fucking New Year.

"There he is."

The old man sitting nearby hissed, yanking him from his thoughts, and pointed a gnarled finger in the direction of the cluster of bigger tents. A twenty-dollar bill and what was left of a fifth of whiskey had bought the old man's help sorting through the mass of people.

Hawk zeroed in on his mark and gave the grizzled old guy a slow nod before he shoved to his feet.

"Bring me back some!" the man hissed, thinking Hawk was after drugs.

He'd never indulged in the shit himself. Not after his younger brother had overdosed and died at the age of twelve. If Rick had lived, he'd be forty by now.

Shaking off thoughts of his past—because fuck if that was productive—he picked his way through the trash and people and moved closer to the figure in the distance.

His mark was tall, but on the thinner side like a good wind would blow him over. He was stooped over a canister tossing trash into the flickering flames.

The guy was oblivious to his surroundings and had no idea Hawk was walking toward him.

The slender man had no idea that death had come calling.

Hawk was so focused on the guy that his foot kicked a can, bringing the man's head up and around to him.

Hawk froze.

Eyes the color of a summer sky caught and held his and blond hair fell out from beneath the gray beanie cap, curling softly.

Like a fuckin' halo.

And for the life of him, Hawk couldn't look away. He tightened his hand around the garrote in his pocket, but he couldn't pull it and he wouldn't pull it. He never killed with an audience when he could help it.

Sometimes, the client wanted a spectacle. Usually, Hawk never took those jobs.

This job had been no different and he got to choose his own method of dispatching his mark and that was a plus. Of course, the one million dollars to end a life any way he preferred was a bonus. Hawk took pride in cleaning up the scum of the earth one soul at a time and if that sent him to fuckin' hell, then so be it—he'd always wanted to meet the devil.

“Hey.”

That softly spoken greeting had his throat growing tight.

What the ever-loving fuck?

Skylar Thomas' voice was soft and throaty, and that was when Hawk got a good look at his face. Christ, he was late to the party because he'd been so fucking focused on the guy's eyes.

The picture he'd earlier memorized of his mark didn't do the young man justice. In person, this twenty-seven-year-old mark could have stepped out of one of those prime-time television series on TV, the ones with the sexy-as-fuck young actors.

Shuffling forward, Hawk gave a slow nod and edged closer to the canister, searching for the source of the warmth.

It was then that he realized the heat came not from the fire, but from his own response to the young man standing a few feet away.

Well, shit.

Hawk didn't want to kill this kid.



Maybe the guy was lost, Sky thought. Although, he didn't look like it. He looked like a cop. Well, kinda... except for his boots. The black leather was scuffed and his beard wasn't as clean cut as the local PD, but rather thick and it made Sky want to touch it. He had always had an attraction to big, rough-looking men and this guy punched all of his buttons or bells. Maybe both, if he was honest.

He waited, though, not wanting to be the one to initiate conversation past the first greeting. It was a game, really. He would wait for whoever came to talk and then he'd mimic their speech and mannerisms. It was a technique he'd learned early in life. Act like the crowd that surrounded you and maybe, just maybe, one day he'd find he fit in. Out here, though, he did it for a completely different reason. Out here, if

he stood out too much, he could get dead. Roaming his eyes over the drifter's face, he found himself again focused on the man's unshaven face and lips.



“You live out here?” Hawk asked gruffly, anything to take the kid's focus off his mouth. “Or just come for the nightlife?”

Sky laughed.

The husky sound sent Hawk's stomach jumping. Ah, hell. He shoved his hands deeper into his pockets and rocked a bit in his boots.

“No. Well, kinda?” Sky didn't seem too sure. “I just needed a place to disappear.”

Hawk looked around and then nodded. “Seems like a good place for that.” He scratched at the hair growing on his jaw. “Although, not too safe.” The weariness that suddenly grew in the kid's eyes had Hawk silently cursing.

“Not me.” Hawk added a light snort to his words and then pulled a hand from his pocket to wave slightly around.

“Ah.” Sky gave a brief chuckle but edged away just in case. “Yeah, I have to sleep with one eye open.” Sky waited another moment and then pressed a hand to his own chest. “I'm Sky.”

I know—almost came out of Hawk's mouth, but he bit it back in time. “Hawk.”

“Cool name.”

“Yours too.”

“Could almost be code names,” Sky mumbled.

“Almost.” Hawk agreed with a slight smile. “Mine is short for Hawkeye.”

“Skylar, but just call me Sky.”

“Well, Sky, are there any open spots around here?” Hawk made a pass over the area and took in the array of faded and torn tents plus erected hole-riddled tarps and whatever they could find to keep the structures together on the dusty area that he was sure at one time had grown grass.

“Not really,” Sky murmured, waving toward a space not too far from them. “There’s a piece of vacant cardboard by me. I keep it there so others think someone is with me.”

“What happens when nobody shows up?”

“The locals know I’m alone. The cardboard is so that strangers think I have a partner and don’t get any ideas.”

“Ah. Well, then I’ll leave you to it.” Hawk held out his hands to the dying flames in the large rusted barrel.

“Nah, it’s okay. You can crash out there.”

“I’m a stranger.”

“I know your name.”

Sky was too fucking trusting for Hawk and he clenched his teeth. The thought of this slender young thing sleeping out there unprotected made him want to... to fucking what?

His life was complicated enough as it was without trying to help a broken baby bird. Besides, he knew for a fact that Sky had a set of self-protection skills, so the young man wasn’t all that vulnerable. But Sky certainly wasn’t up to his caliber when it came to combat abilities.

“You don’t know me, though,” he said, putting a warning growl in his tone.

Sky didn’t seem as fazed as he’d been earlier in their conversation and flashed him a quick smile, showing even, white teeth.

“I sleep with one eye open, remember?”

Hawk wasn't happy with the reminder.

But he swallowed back his response.

TWO

Just an hour before dark, Sky noticed the gun Hawk carried.

It wasn't that he hadn't seen a gun before, of course he had, and he could use one but he hadn't been expecting the stranger to be carrying. Hawk's weapon was black and had a silencer twisted on the end. He'd seen the piece of hardware when Hawk had tried to discreetly adjust the gun beneath his leather jacket.

Was Hawk there to kill him?

What a fucking fool he'd been to trust the guy, remembering how he'd rummaged up something for them to eat and they'd passed the rest of the afternoon and into evening playing cards from an old deck he'd brought with him.

The light in Hawk's green eyes when they'd landed on the backpack had Sky feeling a moment of hesitation. It was the only thing he owned that screamed expensive. He'd covered up his mistake by telling Hawk that he'd found the pack. He wasn't sure Hawk had believed him, but the guy had turned away and made a bed out of old blankets on the cardboard.

That was where Hawk had settled down and removed his leather jacket to bunch beneath his head. Sky didn't see the gun anywhere and figured Hawk had slipped it into the blankets. The man's movements were controlled and precise and Sky began looking him over with a critical eye.

No freaking way was this guy homeless.

But Hawk hadn't killed him...so there was that.

Hadn't killed him yet, he reminded himself.

"You okay?"

"Sure." Sky gave a quick, practiced smile, the type he'd been giving his whole life, and lay prone on his piece of cardboard. From there, he could see the sky and it was a clear

night, pitch black with millions of stars shining. The breeze had picked up and the stench of the area lessened and he could almost pretend he was on an island far away, safe, and the man resting a few feet from him was not there to kill him in his sleep.

Almost pretend.



Hawk shifted slightly, increasing his snoring a bit. He wanted Sky to think he'd fallen asleep and it worked. A few moments later, Sky slipped from the old ratty blanket, pulled on his hole-riddled sneakers, and crept away from the cardboard. When he was sure Sky was far enough away to not notice or hear him, Hawk slipped from his own rank blankets, tucked his gun away, slid on his leather jacket, and followed on the younger man's tail.

Keeping track of Sky's bright head of hair wasn't hard for Hawk to do since the young man had removed the beanie to sleep.

Following Sky was easy enough since the man's direction seemed to be chaotic, first going one way and then the other. At no time did Sky try to hide and Hawk grew irritated at the risk the young man was taking.

Although, he shouldn't be worried about whether or not the younger man could protect himself because he knew in detail the training Sky had received. He'd read the inch-thick file on the man before accepting the job.

Sky was an expert marksman and currently held a brown belt in Tae Kwon Do. He should have reached red level status but he'd up and disappeared.

The interesting part was that the client who took out the hit was Jack Franklin, Sky's stepfather.

According to Jack Franklin, Sky may look innocent, but the man was a murderer and embezzler. When Franklin had confronted Sky about the money, Sky had beat the crap out of the guy and killed the maid who'd been a witness to the whole thing. Franklin cautioned Erebus that Sky was not to be underestimated at any cost and killed on sight.

Underestimated? Killed on sight?

Fuck that. Hawk could blow the younger man over with a good breath of air. Sky had been slender in the photo that had come from the file and he may have had training, but that was a far cry from the young man's current rail-thin frame. The long, lean, and lithe frame he figured was a result of being on the run for the past eleven months and not having enough to eat.

He grimaced remembering the leftover food he'd endured when Sky had dug through what looked to be selected garbage. All Hawk could manage was a few bites of things that were remotely edible and then passed on anything else and he silently vowed to feed Sky and himself some fucking decent food in the morning.

Only, Sky wasn't sticking around until morning, was he?

No, and Hawk thought that maybe the guy had seen his weapon when he'd tucked the standard Glock G19 beneath the blanket.

He felt a little off his game right then. Usually, around this time after he found his mark, he was on his way to dispose of a body or finished completely and on his way to knock back a few beers. Typically, he would have shot his mark in the head, slit his throat, or strangled him quietly and been on his way.

But he'd done none of those things and it was a bit concerning, if he was being honest. He should have been back to his nondescript apartment in a busy part of town and

planning how he was going to invest his new funds, not chasing after his blue-eyed, blond-haired mark.

The alley narrowed, with buildings rising on both sides. Trash cans and boxes littered the area, but it was lit up with a few lights positioned over the back doors of the closed-up shops. Someone had decorated early. Stretching across the top of the buildings were sparkling Christmas lights.

Movement from behind brought Hawk around and he lifted his arm to deflect the piece of pipe coming at him.

Sky landed a blow on his forearm and Hawk grunted beneath the impact. He snatched at the pipe, but Sky leaped nimbly away, swinging the pipe back and forth in a figure eight.

Experience oozed from the younger man and Hawk reassessed his opponent.

A thrill of excitement shot through him when Sky balanced lightly on bare feet—shoes discarded somewhere.

It was clear Sky was pulling on his martial arts training.

Hawk smirked.

Okay, kid. Let's see what you've got.



Sky returned the smug bastard's smirk.

He couldn't help it. He could tell by the smug expression on Hawk's face that he thought he was going to come out the winner of this one. Sky didn't bother to tell him that he'd taken down much bigger men than this one. He wasn't fully developed at his craft yet, but he'd surprised his Grandmaster by fighting some of the red belts, which was a level above

him, and won. He'd been set to test for the next belt, but had had to run.

Right then, he was a bit underfed, but sometimes going without food for a while gave him a razor-sharp focus. He may not have the stamina for a long fight, but this was going to be short and sweet.

Spinning, Sky kicked and sent his foot into Hawk's chest. The hit landed, the man grunted and fell back, but stayed on his feet. Sky didn't wait, he swung his arm out and the pipe cracked against the side of Hawk's thigh. Not low enough to take out the man's knee, but he'd smacked the muscle hard enough to send pain shooting through the leg.

Growling, Hawk moved in and Sky whipped the pipe again, this time toward the man's head. Hawk deflected with enough force that he had almost dislodged the pipe.

Gripping the metal tube harder, Sky stepped back, swung the pipe in a figure eight, and circled Hawk. He blew his hair from his eyes and moved in. He swung high, anticipating when Hawk lifted an arm upward to block again. Taking advantage, Sky whipped the pipe and swung it low, aiming for the man's ribs.

Hawk moved so fast, his arms seemed to blur and they traded blow after blow. Sky grew winded trying to keep up and just when he thought he'd drop the pipe, Hawk wrenched it from his grip and tossed it away.

The tube clattered on the pavement and rolled away.

Smiling through his teeth, Sky fell back on what he knew and used his arms and legs to attack. Hawk defended every blow and returned a few that caught Sky by surprise.

Their exchange had them both winded and left Sky panting and lightheaded. The hard surface of the building came up behind him as the bigger man moved in, leaving Sky with no other choice but to back up. When the hard surface met his back, he was caged and he realized two very important things.

One, that Hawk had martial arts combat skills that were some of the best he'd ever come up against, and two, that if he didn't move, he was going to be trapped. He rushed forward and would come to regret the move. Hawk gripped him by the front of his shirt in one hand and shoved him hard.

Sky was slammed into the wall and pain splintered up his spine before he was caught by the throat in a powerful fist.

Shit! His feet left the ground and his air cut off and he clawed at Hawk's hand, digging at the fingers that were choking the life from him.

Panicking, every bit of training left his mind as instinct kicked in and he clawed and lashed out with his feet as the world turned gray.

The last thing he saw was a pair of furious green eyes before the world faded.

THREE

Little fucking punk.

Hawk let out the growl he'd been holding in and released Sky. The man's body crumpled to the ground in a heap.

Taking a step back, Hawk turned sideways and placed his hands on his knees and panted, sucking in several deep, ragged breaths. He rubbed at his burning thigh and then at his arms where blow after blow had sent them aching.

There had been a couple of times he thought for sure Sky was going to take him down or hell, take him out, but he'd managed to get the upper hand.

Skilled didn't really describe Sky's ability. The guy was fucking top-notch, and it was a good thing that he himself was a master or he would have never gotten the upper hand. Maybe that was one of the reasons Solomon had offered him this particular job—just in case Sky tried to kill him.

Hawk thought about the garrote in his pocket and knew without a doubt he wouldn't have been able to use it on Sky, the man was way too quick to get caught in that trap. The only way to kill the young man at his feet was by a bullet to the head. Which was kind of comforting when Hawk thought about it and he wasn't sure why.

Maybe it had to do with the other assassins that would surely come for the man. Knowing that it would take a gun to kill Skylar Thomas did thin out the killers who would take the contract.

Because rest assured, when he called Solomon and refused to do the job, someone else would.

With a heavy sigh, he reached down and hefted Sky over one shoulder and walked down the alley.

A short Uber ride later dumped them out at the hotel in a rundown part of town where yesterday he'd rented a room.

Other than a surprised look, the driver took his explanation that Sky was passed out drunk. Hawk lifted Sky into a fireman's hold over one shoulder and turned to the faded lime green two-story motel and walked down the narrow walkway to his room.

Dumping Sky on the king-sized bed, Hawk dug into his bag on the ground. Ah yes...there they were. He tugged out a pair of handcuffs he kept in his supplies because sometimes marks needed to be moved to other locations before a hit could go down. He didn't need to use them often, but he felt better snapping one end on Sky's wrist and the other end to the bed frame. He yanked at the wood frame that was bolted to the wall, just to test its hold, and smirked. It looked like the owners didn't want shit walking off.

He frowned and placed his fingers at Sky's throat and zeroed in on the red marks on the man's neck where his hand had bit into the skin. Running his fingers over the blemishes that he knew for a fact would become bruises, he felt for a pulse. Beneath the warm skin, Sky's pulse beat strong.

The man should have been awake by now. Walking to the bathroom, he wet a cold washcloth and went back to the bed. Sitting next to Sky, he ran the cool cloth over the man's forehead and then neck.

“Wake up, Sky.”

Hawk frowned and ran the cloth over the skin near the man's gaping neckline. The t-shirt Sky wore was miles too big and the collar hung down, exposing the unmarked skin at the top of his chest. With a tired sigh, Hawk tossed the rag to the nightstand and sat back.

“Sky, wake—”

The young man moved so fucking quick, Hawk found his neck wrapped in Sky's free arm and the man's thighs clenched around his waist. Using all of his strength, Hawk pushed his boots to the floor and stood. Sky came off the bed with him,

legs squeezing him like a vice and that arm trying to strangle him. Hawk found his face pressed into Sky's chest and he used one hand to push at a pressure point between the man's neck and shoulder.

"Aaah!" Sky cried out and the arm around his neck loosened. Hawk thumped on Sky's thigh and the man's legs suddenly released him but both bare feet kicked out. One landed in his solar plexus and Hawk stumbled back, hitting the end of the bed before falling onto the edge of the mattress. Sky's feet were a fucking weapon and they kept coming, kicking out blow after blow until Hawk scrambled out of range.

"Fuck!" he snarled after he'd rolled off and lunged to his feet.

"Fuck you! You motherfucker! I'll kill you!"

Hawk gaped at the spew of rage coming from Sky's mouth, although, he certainly couldn't blame him.

"Yeah, well, from where I stand, that would be something, wouldn't it," Hawk responded dryly.

Sky bit at the air, making his teeth snap. "I'll bite your fucking face off if you come near me." After the rage and fear-filled words, the man proceeded to twist and jerk at the cuff, turning the skin on his wrist bright red while he clawed at the cuff and the headboard at the same time.

"Help! Help." Sky started yelling at the top of his lungs.

"If you don't keep your voice down, I will gag you," Hawk snapped when Sky took another deep breath.

If he hadn't been so pissed off, he might have laughed at the puffing sound that left Sky's mouth instead of another high-pitched yell. The man deflated like a balloon and sank back on the bed with an arm draped over his eyes.

Running a tired hand over his face, he stalked across the room and disappeared into the bathroom before closing the

door none too gently.

“Damn it all to hell,” he muttered, leaning both hands on the cracked counter and gazing at his hairy face in the mirror. He tried not to notice how haggard he looked, but it was apparent in the lines at the corners of his mouth. When he shaved, more lines would be revealed to match the crow’s feet near his eyes.

Fuck, he was pushing fifty in two years. This was to be the last job he took and then he was going to say goodbye to Erebus, the former SecDef, and Solomon. They’d treated him well through the years, but he’d had enough.

“This is the thanks I get for saying bon voyage,” he muttered at his reflection.

It’s karma for all those easy jobs you did.



“Bastard!” Sky hissed, making sure the sound wouldn’t drift outside of the room.

He didn’t want to be gagged. It was bad enough losing that fight in the alley to find himself handcuffed to a bed in a seedy hotel room with a fucking stranger.

A hot stranger.

Weren’t guys named Hawk supposed to be saviors? He was sure that Hawk stood for something like a champion or some shit like that, he’d have to look it up. He frowned at that. No, he wasn’t looking up anything on the guy and as soon as he could get the fuck out of there, he was putting Hawk and this town in his rearview mirror.

He rubbed at his throat where the guy had almost choked him to death. And damn if he hadn’t used all his strength to

get that hand to release him before the dark closed in, but he'd been too weak.

Just wait until I get my strength back, he glared at the closed bathroom door and then clenched his teeth when the sound of the shower started.

He'd give anything for a nice shower and some soap right now. A picture of Hawk sliding beneath the shower with his big body bare slipped into his mind and he wondered if the guy had hair all over.

"Stop it!" he hissed and rolled from the bed. He could stand, but he was cuffed so he couldn't go far. Maybe he could get that pack closer. He stared at the unzipped black bag that sat on the floor near the end of the bed.

After several attempts to stretch his body out and hook his foot or hell, even a toe around the handle, he failed. Breathing hard, he gazed around and landed on the lamp cord. Tugging the plug from the grimy wall, he began tossing the cord at the bag. It hooked over the handle on the sixth try and he tugged, but the fucking bag was too heavy.

What the hell was in there? Rocks? No, more like a machine gun or something equally diabolical because there was no doubt in his mind that Hawk was a killer.

A killer for hire. A guy who took people's lives for fucking money.

How sick was that?

"That won't work," Hawk drawled.

Sky had been so focused on his task and thoughts, he hadn't heard the shower go off nor the door open. He clenched the lamp in his free hand and jerked so that the cord came closer to him. Putting the lamp in his cuffed hand, he slid the cord into his free hand and aimed a squinty-eyed look at Hawk.

"I'll fucking strangle you if you come near me." He kept his eyes on the water that dampened Hawk's beard and not the

drops running down the man's chest. Yep, the fucker had chest hair that ran down his stomach and dipped low beneath the white towel in a disappearing treasure trail.

"Don't worry," Hawk's sneer brought his eyes snapping up. "You're not my type."

"What type is that? The breathing type?" he said from between clenched teeth.

Hawk smirked, the corner of his mouth tipped up, and he walked over to pick up the bag and put it on the desk all the way across the room. Sky's hand clenched the lamp, he so wanted to hurl the thing at the man's stupid smirking head.

"I wouldn't if I were you."

He sniffed. "What?"

"Throw that lamp. You'll have to pay for it and since you don't have any money, I'll have to take payment in other ways."

The saliva dried in Sky's mouth and he gaped. "You wouldn't."

"That ass looks like it hasn't been spanked in a while."

"Fuck you! You have no idea of what my ass looks like!"

Hawk grinned, lifted a shaving kit from his pack, and walked back into the bathroom, leaving the door open.

A spanking? For a minute there, he thought Hawk was talking about giving him something else.

Gripping his makeshift weapon, he sank to the edge of the bed.

Maybe he should change tactics?

FOUR

Sky's mind raced while Hawk was in the bathroom and he completely missed the man returning to the room until the sound of rustling through the bag reached him.

His eyes flew to Hawk and the man's face held that damned smirk, and when Hawk dropped the towel, Sky yanked his eyes away.

The rustle of clothing did nothing to calm his pulse and when the bed bounced, he fucking squeaked.

Hawk chuckled and Sky swung around with a hot glare, only to find the man sprawled on the other side of the bed—wearing only a pair of boxers. He'd trimmed his beard into a short, sexy frame of jaw and lips.

Sexy? Shit.

“Might as well stretch out.”

He clenched his teeth at the low, rumbling words and tried to get his mind off the man's fresh smell from the soap in the shower and the sleepy look—and why the hell was he suddenly fighting the urge to crawl into the big man's arms and cry?

“Asshole,” Sky muttered instead.

“What'd I do?”

He glared. “Ever occur to you that I might like a shower?”

Hawk studied him for so long, Sky looked away.

“Give me your word that you won't attack me again and I'll let you have the bathroom.”

Sky snapped around with a frown. “What if I escape?” Great. Just tell the guy your plans. Ugh.

Hawk nodded to the door. “Out there? You don't know who is waiting for you.”

“What’s that mean?” He plucked at the bedspread.

“It means since I didn’t kill you, then he’ll send someone else.”

Sky shivered at the banked anger in Hawk’s deep, rasping voice and sighed. *Better the devil you know than the ones you don’t*, he thought, pulling at his bottom lip with his fingers.

“Okay, I won’t attack you.”

He might as well play along, right? Although, when he got the chance, he was going to get away from Hawk and disappear.

It took another minute or so for Hawk to respond and he almost thought the guy had changed his mind, so when Hawk launched off the bed, Sky jumped. Hawk sauntered around to his side, opened the bedside table, and took out a key.

Sky’s mouth dropped open. His freedom had been there the whole time?

“What?” Humor laced Hawk’s green gaze.

“Like I said—asshole.” Sky pressed his lips into a flat line.

“If it were me, I would have checked the drawer first thing,” Hawk said, leaning closer.

Sky’s mouth went dry when the man’s head dropped, their faces only an inch apart. Green eyes locked with his, but then Hawk’s gaze dropped to his lips. Was Hawk going to kiss him? Sky’s stomach lurched and lips parted, but the man reached out and lifted his cuffed wrist and released it.

Sky vaulted away and over the side of the bed and stood there clenching his fist, heart pounding, before he spun away and huffed into the bathroom. He gave the door a good hard swing and it closed with a resounding bang.



Hawk grinned. Damn, the man had a temper. He reached down and adjusted his dick before placing the lamp back on the nightstand and the plug into the wall. Striding over to his duffle, he took out a black long-sleeved t-shirt, socks, and his dark gray sweatpants with the drawstring. Reaching the bathroom door, he knocked.

“What?”

“I have a change of clothes for you.”

It didn't take but a few seconds for the door to yank open and Sky to snatch the clothes, then he slammed the door. Hawk was faced once again with the wood.

“Don't forget to wash behind your ears.”

“Fuck off!” came the snarl and Hawk laughed loudly.

He was still smiling when Sky left the bathroom in a cloud of steam and soap. As he'd suspected, the clothes swallowed Sky, but at least the young man was clean. Tired lines etched on Sky's face and when he turned toward the bed, Hawk faked sleeping with his eyes closed.



Sky began ruffling through Hawk's backpack, but he couldn't find the man's weapon in there. With a sigh, he glanced back at the bed. Hawk was awfully brave sleeping right now. What if he was a killer? He could lift the chair and bring it down on Hawk's head.

Some assassin this guy turned out to be!

His lips pressed flat and he gazed longingly at the empty side of the wide king-sized bed. Tip-toeing to the far side, he eased onto the bedspread cover and pulled the end hanging over the bed to cover him. The least the guy could do was let him get some sleep.

What if he kills me in my sleep?

He blinked his eyes open.

Don't be stupid. If he wanted you dead, he would have done it already.

True.

Which posed the question...why hadn't Hawk killed him?

It also reminded him of his fucking stepfather. What comes around goes around, fucker. If one thing Hawk showing up had shown him, Sky was done hiding and running. Perhaps it was time to face the monster in the closet and confront his stepfather.

With that thought, he let the softness of the mattress suck him down into a deep sleep.



Sometime during the night, Hawk came awake to find Sky's body stretched half on top of his with the blond's head tucked beneath his chin. Somehow, the man had moved closer to him without him knowing. The killer instinct that had kept him alive all these years hadn't been alerted when Sky had curled himself around him.

Gently lifting his arm, Hawk tried to move the slender man over, but Sky whimpered and dug in closer.

Fuck.

Hawk dropped back onto the bed and stared up at the ceiling.

When Sky continued to whimper, Hawk wrapped the man up and held him tight. The whimpers turned to animal sounds of panic and Hawk cupped the back of the man's bright head. Panic turned to soft sobs and Hawk ran his hands soothingly down the younger man's back.

His eyes burned in the darkness as the rage built and he lay there with murder on his mind. A few hours later, Hawk dropped into a light sleep when Sky finally settled down and grew quiet.

FIVE

Sky jerked upright and away from the big body sprawled next to him. Looking at Hawk's face, he found the man awake and watching him.

"Still here, then. Why didn't you just leave me?" Sky asked, and for good measure, he aimed a glare at the man's smug face.

"Why?" One of Hawk's eyebrows lifted all sexy. "You cuddle up to me all night and now you're chasing me away?"

Sky felt his face go hot and he rubbed at his sore wrists. Hawk's eyes dropped to the bruises and something dark flashed in the killer's eyes.

Throwing back the blankets, Hawk sat up and walked over to pull on a pair of jeans before he yanked a t-shirt over his head.

"What are you doing?" Sky chewed on his lip. Was Hawk really going to leave him?

"Getting dressed so we can talk."

"Talk?" Sky frowned. "About what?"

"About the fact that your stepfather put out a very convincing hit request." Erebus didn't just take any old hit, they had rules they lived by. Granted, they were gray sometimes, but rules nonetheless. And Dave was a stickler for rules.

"Convincing, how?"

"Yeah, supposedly you stole all the money and when your stepfather confronted you, you shot and killed the maid in your escape."

"What?" The younger man's voice wobbled.

“Instead of the FBI’s most wanted, your father made some calls. Apparently, he’s friends with some pretty powerful people.”

“Stepfather,” Sky corrected him. “I’m not related to him.” Then it dawned on him what Hawk was telling him.

Melissa was dead.

His hands slammed to his mouth to hold back the harsh sound, but the cry emerged and then another and the room blurred. Hawk was there, holding him tight and even though he struggled, the man refused to release him—so Sky stood there and cried in Hawk’s strong arms for the woman who’d been like a mother to him.

Hawk’s big hand cupped the back of his head and he was pulled close. Sky wrapped his arms around the solid strength of the assassin and held on for dear life.

“I’m sorry. I had no idea you didn’t know,” Hawk whispered the soothing words.

“She was... I loved her.” The words came out clogged and stuffy and Sky pulled back to wipe his nose.

“Tell me.”

“Tell you what?”

“Why did you steal the money?”

“What money?” Sky’s mouth hung open but for the life of him, he couldn’t grasp what Hawk was saying.

“The money from the estate?”

“Who told you that?”

“Your stepfather.” Hawk didn’t like how pale Sky’s face went and he hurried to continue. “He said you cleaned out one of the accounts.”

“So, he hired you to what? Get the money back or kill me?”

“Kill you.”

“Yeah, I bet,” Sky choked the words out. The world went gray and then red all at once and he knew Hawk was calling his name, but he couldn’t answer because he was once again chained and trapped in a room beneath his stepfather.

“Sky!” Hawk’s fingers were brutal on his arms and the man was shaking him.

Sky gasped, sucked in huge gulps of air, and shuddered. “I...I...I...I’m okay.” He bent over and Hawk’s rough, comforting palm rubbed over the back of his neck and down his back. Finally, he was able to sit up, keeping his eyes glued to the window.



Hawk wanted to fix everything and kill anyone who made Sky cry. It was such a strong reaction to someone he’d only met a day ago and he chalked it up to the fact that he’d always wanted kids and had never had any. If he’d had a son, he would have hoped someone would have helped like he was now helping Sky.

Bullshit. That snarky voice in his head said, *You do not think of Sky as a son or anything close to that.*

Hawk gritted his teeth. And even though there was a twenty-one-year age difference, the irritating voice was correct. No matter how much he wanted to stifle his attraction to Sky, he couldn’t do it. Just remembering the feel of the soft blond hair beneath his hands and the fragile, too-thin body clinging to him in the night made his heart race.

“What?”

Sky’s trembling voice brought him out of his fantasy.

“What?” he echoed.

“You were staring.”

“Was I?” He turned away because he had indeed been staring, but it really wasn’t his fault.

Skylar Thomas was a vision.

“What now?” Sky chewed on his bottom lip.

“What?” he asked because he was having trouble focusing on anything other than Sky’s plump bottom lip where it was swollen from his teeth and slick from his tongue.

“How do I get this resolved?” Sky’s hands waved about a bit frantically before perching on his slim hips.

“You mean how do you cancel the hit?”

“Yeah,” Sky whispered.

“We could cancel it,” Hawk said, and Erebus could end it with one phone call from him. However, that would not keep Jack Franklin from hiring someone else to snuff out Sky.

“Will that work?” Sky looked doubtful.

“No,” Hawk admitted with a sigh.

“So, that means the only thing left to do is to kill him.”

The thought of Sky killing someone, even the scum of his stepfather, sent a sour feeling in his stomach. When someone’s life was ended, the person doing the ending had to live with it for the rest of their life.

No way in hell did he want that weighing on Sky’s conscience. There was no coming back from that, no matter how skilled at martial arts or marksmanship Sky was, killing someone left marks on one’s soul.

Hawk held up a finger to stay the flow of words and logged into a secure server from his phone. He sent the email and a moment later, his phone rang.

“Delete the hit on Skylar Thomas,” Hawk said.

“You mean, close the file?” the former SecDef responded, and the puzzle in the man’s words was hard to miss.

“No, we have a hit on our books that isn’t above board.” And then he went on to explain the situation about Sky.

“And you’re sure this kid is innocent?”

“As sure as I know myself.”

Dave was silent for a moment. “And this is not your dick thinking for you, is it?”

Hawk snorted. “No. There’s a fuck up in your organization. That request should have never made it through the double check.”

“Apparently,” Dave growled, and Hawk heard the silent promise that someone would pay.

“I’m giving my notice.”

Dave gave a soft laugh. “I expected it a few years ago.”

“Yeah, well...” Hawk’s eyes moved over Sky’s face and then their gazes locked together.

“How about one last job?” Dave’s voice brought him back to his boss waiting on the phone.

“No,” Hawk said without one ounce of remorse. Dave would take care of whoever had taken the payoff from Franklin, and Hawk would kill the man he suspected to be the one haunting Skylar’s nightmares.

“Well, at least get word to me so I know you’re okay,” Dave grumbled and Hawk smirked.

“I will,” he said, and when Dave ended the call, Hawk tucked his phone away.

The list of things to do and complete before he went about disappearing went through his head. He’d planned out every single thing.

Except for the beautiful blond man in front of him.

“So, what are we going to do?” Sky asked softly.

Fuck.

Sky said the word “we” as if there was no doubt in his mind that it would be the two of them taking on Franklin.

And as much as the “we” aroused him, he couldn’t let Sky touch that part of his life.

“No,” he said flatly and the fire flared in Sky’s blue eyes.

“Screw you. You don’t get to tell me what to do.”

Oh, the defiance in the young man heated his blood and he wanted to jerk Sky over his knee and spank his ass just like he’d threatened the night before and then kiss him.



Sky didn’t trust the look that suddenly darkened Hawk’s eyes and he took several steps away. *To hell with this*, he thought, and yanked open the hotel door before darting outside. He heard Hawk’s bellow from behind him and sprinted down the sidewalk toward the ice machine and stopped just around the corner.

Running in bare feet was a pain in the ass and he really needed to retrieve his shoes from where he’d left them last night, but first, he had to plan.

A hand closed over his bicep, keeping him in place.

“What?” he snapped and tipped his head back to glare up at Hawk.

“It’s not safe out here.”

“I’m not safe anywhere,” he said mulishly.

“Perhaps not, but you’re...” The man’s jaw suddenly clenched hard. “Safe with me.”

His heart pounded at the guttural words and if he hadn't been so flabbergasted, he might have thought about being scared. As it was, he wasn't, scared that is, and he placed a hand on Hawk's chest.

The bigger man froze beneath his touch and Sky had a moment to question his sudden bravery just before Hawk lowered his head and kissed his mouth.

The possessive crush of his lips brought a moan from his throat and he fisted his hands into the front of Hawk's shirt and clung.

SIX

Hawk was stretched out on his back, booted ankles crossed, the leather jacket bunched beneath the man's head, and his arms were crossed. Sky was sitting at the table, leaning back in a chair, and for a moment, he thought the younger man was asleep.

As if sensing his gaze, Sky turned his head and met his eyes in the faint light of the hotel room.

"You hungry?" Sky suddenly asked.

"I could eat. How about we hit that diner down the road? I'll treat."

Sky jumped up and wiped his hands on his dirty jeans. The man had pulled on the clothes he'd fought in last night.

"But I don't think they'll serve me." Sky pulled at his bottom lip.

"Why not?" Hawk frowned, noting the nervous tug. They fucking would serve Sky and he'd make damned sure of it. "Trust me, they'll serve us, but you can wear my sweats if you want."

Sky grinned and shook his head. Hawk's breath caught and his stomach jumped, and he stepped up to place his heavy leather jacket around the smaller man's shoulders. Hawk pulled his gun from his holster and tucked it in the waistband of his pants before untucking his shirt to cover it. Sky's breath hitched and the smile that was aimed at him made him feel like he'd won the lottery.

"After you." Hawk winked and opened the door with a flourish and Sky laughed softly.

The sound brought a smile to Hawk's lips.



Sky was still a bit breathless from the sexiness of his assassin-turned-savior, but by the time they reached the diner, stepped inside, and were seated with only a brief passing glance from the waitress, his nervousness faded.

Diner music piped in through the speakers and they hadn't removed the Halloween decorations near the entrance.

"Order whatever you want."

Trying to hide his shaking hands, Sky couldn't stop his mouth from watering as he looked over the menu. He hadn't had a decent meal in he couldn't remember how long, days maybe? Or wait, it was a week ago when he'd found that tossed-out Styrofoam box half filled with spaghetti behind Tanya's Pizza place. Sometimes, he thought Tanya did that on purpose after she'd caught him going through her trash at least twice a week. Okay, maybe it was three times a week, but damn, she had the best food around.

"Sky?"

"Oh yeah, um...I'll have pancakes."

Hawk frowned. "Just pancakes?"

"Yep." No way was he going to take too much of Hawk's money. Did assassins make much money? He thought they did, but he'd never presume without the facts.

"What can I get you?" the waitress asked. She was in her mid-fifties with a weathered face and dark hair pulled into a tight bun. She tapped a pencil on a small white pad and her smile crinkled the corners of her pale green eyes.

"We'll both have coffee with cream and sugar. The deluxe pancakes, sausage, bacon, hash browns, and egg plate times

two.” Hawk smirked when the young man’s eyes went wide, but before Sky could argue, he plucked the menu from the man’s hands and gave it to the waitress.

“That’s too much,” Sky hissed.

“It’s okay, you’ll have leftovers if you can’t eat it all.”

“No, I mean too much money.”

“Sky…” Hawk let the man’s name trail off. “It’s cool.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah,” Hawk smiled. “I make a mint.”

“So, like a gazillionaire?” Sky smiled.

Hawk snorted a laugh and shook his head. “Close.”

Sky gave up and honestly, he was grateful to be in a warm place and have hot food.

“Thank you,” he blurted as the waitress came back with the coffee, and Sky was left with his mouth gaping when Hawk dumped cream and sugar into a cup and handed it to him.

The mug was hot between his cold hands and he drank deeply from the brew, almost moaning but holding it back at the last minute. He’d almost forgotten how good coffee tasted. The cappuccino machine, when he’d lived at home, had been heaven.

“Good?”

Sky glanced up and felt his face go red when he realized his last moan had been out loud and Hawk was smirking at him.

“Yeah.”

“Here you go,” the waitress said and she placed down plates of food that covered the table. “Anything else?”

“Yes please, can you bring us another round of coffee,” Hawk said.

“Sure,” she said, and left them.

“Talk to me, Sky.”

“Why?” He knew his voice sounded surprised and he looked up with the bite of pancakes on his fork posed at his mouth.

“Because I need to know. I can help you.”

Sky’s eyes burned and he took a hasty bite. “I don’t think you can.”



The breath caught in Hawk’s throat at the unshed torment in Sky’s brilliant blue eyes and he had the sudden urge to fuck up the whole world if it would get those blue eyes to grow light again.

And he asked because he really needed to know. “What did you do with the money?”

“I didn’t steal any money.” Indignation filled Sky’s face, eyes, and voice.

He wasn’t really surprised and he grimaced. The whole job had been a lie. It was rare, but it wasn’t impossible that they missed things, but Hawk was going to call the head of Erebus and find out how the fuck this could have happened.

That wasn’t what bothered him. What did was the look of such utter torment in Sky’s eyes. He knew being blamed for a murder and stealing money that you didn’t could take a toll on a person, but the level of despair told him that something else was going on.

“Then who stole it?”

“There is no money.” Sky’s voice sounded robotic when he answered. “There never has been.”

Hawk drew a breath, but in the next instance, the front glass of the diner shattered beneath a hail of bullets. Whipping a

hand out, he yanked Sky off the cracked and faded booth's seat and onto the floor. Taking cover beneath the table gave them some protection from the gunfire, but it wasn't enough to make him comfortable.

The waitress screamed.

SEVEN

“Get down and stay down!” He barked out the order and pulled Sky along behind him.

Other than a gasp, Sky didn't make a sound, and Hawk ran low, gripping Sky's hand. They ran through the kitchen and out the back door, ending up in an alley. Hawk turned east, away from the diner and into the dark night. Other than a whimper or two, Sky never uttered a word and it was at least forty-five more minutes before Hawk felt safe enough to stop.

“Who was that?”

“That? Probably a second hitman to kill you.” Hawk suddenly glanced down and even in the dark, he saw the trail of blood on the sidewalk behind them. “Fuck.”

Sky was barefoot and the glass from the diner window had gouged his feet, but the younger man hadn't made more than a few sounds since they'd left the place.

What Sky had done, though, was leave a trail of blood that any trained killer could follow. Spotting an all-night gas station with a convenience store, Hawk pulled Sky across the asphalt. He tucked the man against the building, put his gun in Sky's hands, and left him there to go inside and get supplies.

He returned to find Sky gripping the gun like a fucking expert and almost hidden from view in the darkness.

“Come on.” He pulled the man around the corner and into the filthy bathroom.

After tending to Sky's feet and wrapping them tightly, he shoved on a pair of sandals he'd spotted hanging on a display in the back of the store.

“Thanks,” Sky whispered and held out his gun.

“You're welcome.” Hawk tucked the gun away beneath his shirt and then bent down to take out his ankle pistol. He held

the smaller gun out to Sky, who slowly took it from him.

“Why?”

“Just in case.”

Sky nodded, but that shy smile was missing and Hawk hadn't felt this fucking helpless in a long time. The first thing he needed to do was hide Sky's hair. The blond strands were like a fucking halo around his head, screaming, *look at me... see how beautiful I am?*

The crazy thing was that no way in fucking hell was Hawk going to dye that hair.

“Wait here.” He left Sky and reentered the gas station, found a beanie, and was back in minutes.

He pulled the dark blue stretchy cap down over that bright hair and tucked in the strands that escaped while Sky tipped his face up and went very still. There was no way of them walking away from each other until Hawk got to the bottom of whatever the fuck was going on.

First, he needed to get Sky to trust him completely by sharing everything and second, he needed to know how Erebus had made such a grievous oversight.

He took the man's hand and pulled him over to an older model truck. It had been some years since he'd stolen a vehicle, but back in his youth, he'd been a reckless hellion. He'd run with one gang after the other until he'd ended up working for the mob for a while. It was during one of those jobs that his mob boss had introduced him to the Secretary of Defense.

A few months later, Hawk was working for a secret society of assassins call Erebus, who reported to the SecDef. When Dave retired, the President had tasked the man with control of the specialty teams that protected America.

“You're stealing a truck,” Sky hissed at him and Hawk smirked.

“It can’t be helped. Plus, this one doesn’t have the GPS crap that the newer models do.”

“But...” Sky sputtered. “Stealing?”

The door popped open and rather than stand there arguing why he needed to do this, Hawk shoved Sky through the opening and climbed inside. Reaching beneath the dash, he got the truck started and was out of the parking lot in moments.

“Buckle up.” He tossed Sky a glance and received a cheeky grin.

It was something he was growing quite fond of.

They ended up in another motel for the night and then Hawk decided to find something a bit more permanent and contacted an old friend. The next day, he closed the door to the penthouse on the top floor of a well-known hotel. Hopefully, it would only take a few days to take care of Sky’s issue.

He would come to realize later that it would take more time than he’d anticipated to get the job done.

EIGHT

The week before Christmas

“Are you coming?”

“What?” Hawk glanced up from his laptop, over the rim of his glasses.

Sky waved the towel he had slung over his shoulder. It was getting damned hard to ignore how sexy Hawk was in those freaking glasses. He cleared his throat. “Swimming?”

“No, you go. I need to finish this,” the man rasped and gazed back at the laptop.

Sky bit back his sigh of annoyance and let himself out of the room. He walked down the hall and took the elevator from the twentieth floor, where their room was, to the fourth where the pool was.

Every day since the day after they had been shot at had been the same. Hawk working on his laptop, trying to find a way to get into the house Sky had lived in before running for his life. Franklin had turned the pleasant estate into a fucking fortress. Not that it mattered to him. It was Franklin’s place, it had never been his. He sighed and stepped out when the elevator doors pinged open. While Hawk stayed focused, he had tried everything imaginable to get the assassin’s attention.

It hadn’t worked.

Well, that wasn’t necessarily true. Just two days ago, he’d come out of the bathroom wearing a towel and crashed into Hawk. He shivered remembering how the man’s big hands had closed at his hips, their naked chests smashed together because Hawk hadn’t been wearing a shirt at the time. Sky had taken that moment to run his hands up the man’s chest and slip them behind Hawk’s neck to clutch him tight.

“Sorry,” Hawk had said gruffly, but his hands hadn’t moved away. Instead, they had slid firmly and roughly up his back.

Sky had let his head tip back on his neck, gazing up into the green of Hawk's eyes. When his tongue had darted out to wet his lips, Hawk's gaze had darkened and then his head lowered and their lips were together, with Hawk's tongue pushing inside.

"Hawk," Sky had moaned into the man's mouth and the kiss had grown deeper until they were both hard and gyrating.

But then, Hawk had pushed him away and bolted for the bathroom, closing the door between them.

Sky sighed and dropped his towel on a chair next to the pool and pulled off his t-shirt. Wearing a pair of board shorts, he entered the warm water and swam laps until he forgot about everything.



Hawk let the laptop fall onto the bed and groaned when the door to their room shut behind Sky.

"Fuck." The muttered word did nothing to stop the flood of memories nor the feel of Sky in his arms. He wanted the younger man with an obsession that bordered on manic. The thing was that Sky had no idea that if they'd gone beyond the point of kissing, he'd never let him go. It was one of the reasons he'd only fucked faceless men and women through the years.

His motto was: don't get attached, don't get names, never fucking kiss them, and always leave right after. None of that would apply to Sky, he knew that down into the pit of his soul, so he kept his distance. Yet, every day it became harder and harder to resist the sleek, beautiful man flitting around his room. He gazed at the rumpled bedding in the other bed and steeled himself to keep from grabbing the pillow and inhaling.

Forcing himself back to the laptop, he squinted at the screen. Finally, he'd gotten a breakthrough. After nearly a year of staying locked away in his fortress—and Hawk was pretty sure Franklin had done that to avoid any repercussions if the truth about Sky came out—the fucker was coming out of his hole for a day.

That meant he had one whole day to plan the perfect execution and by the day after tomorrow, Sky would be free of his stepfather.

Hawk had already taken care of the numerous killers Franklin had sent after Sky. Not that he'd done it all personally, but with the help of Erebus, it had taken them two weeks to kill the fuckers who had taken the assignment and put fear into anyone who even thought of taking Franklin up on his offer.

Bottom line was that nobody wanted to fuck with Erebus or get on their bad side. His boss had gone one step further and put the word out that Skylar Thomas was Hawk's and anyone who fucked with one of their own got fucked themselves.

The day after tomorrow when Sky was free, Hawk would leave. And while he thought it was the best thing to do, he couldn't stop the sour taste on his tongue at the thought of never seeing Sky again.

Life was a royal bitch sometimes.

He shook off the vision of those blue eyes and got his gear together. Sliding his HK 45 with the suppressor already twisted on into the specially made arm holster, he shrugged on his leather jacket. Black tactical pants, an equally dark long-sleeved t-shirt, and black combat boots completed his attire. He tucked the hoodie into the small backpack that he slung over one shoulder.



Sky left the pool about an hour later and made his way back up to their room. He flipped the card at the reader and entered to find Hawk sitting on the edge of the bed. The man was fully dressed in black with that smoking hot leather jacket. When Hawk looked up, Sky let the door fall closed as his heart sank. The look in Hawk's eyes told him without words that the man was able to find a way to get close to Franklin.

“Will you be back?” Sky asked around the lump growing in his throat.

“It's better if I don't.”

NINE

“Hawk!”

Sky crying his name spun him from the door and he couldn't have stopped his stalk back to the slender blond man to save his fucking life. Sky met him halfway, launching into his arms, and Hawk dipped his head to take the man's delectable lips. Instead of the brief kiss he'd been planning, Sky latched onto him, wrapping his arms around his neck, fingers slipping into his hair, and then Hawk cupped Sky's ass and lifted. The man wrapped those long legs around his waist and Hawk was a fucking goner.

He tossed Sky onto the bed and tore off his clothes, all except his briefs, and his weapon was placed on the table next to the bed because that was ingrained in him. Then slowly and methodically, he peeled off the shirt and swim trunks that covered Sky. The man's wet hair fell in waves on the pillow, his lips swollen from his kisses.

God help him, he wanted a taste of Sky's body. With his hands braced on either side of the man's head, Hawk lowered himself down, settling their groins together—Sky's bare and his still covered by briefs.

Hawk paused like that, drinking in the vision beneath him before he dipped down to take that waiting mouth. Grinding his hips, he ground his dick against Sky, wringing a gasp from lush lips. The blue faded to small rings in those incredible colored eyes when Sky's pupils blew and expanded. Hawk wasn't still, but rather, he slipped back, curling his fingers into his briefs and tugging them over his cock, down his hips, and off his legs before crawling back over him.

“Get the lube.”

“You got lube?” Sky's eyes went wide and Hawk gave the man a sheepish smirk.

“And condoms.” Hawk jerked his head toward the duffle by the door and Sky was leaping off and back in a matter of moments with both in hand.

“Thought you’d get lucky?”

“I was hopeful.”

“When did you buy them?”

“A month ago,” Hawk grumbled and settled his hands on Sky’s hips.

The wicked smile sent his cock pulsing and then Hawk hissed when Sky rolled a condom down his dick—the touch of the man’s fingers teasing. Dumping lube into his palm, Sky slathered up his cock, teasing the head before reaching between his own legs and greasing himself.

“Wait,” Hawk groaned when Sky lifted up to place the tip of his cock at between his ass cheeks.

“No,” Sky moaned, rocking back and forth, taking the tip of his covered cock into his body, and fuck if Hawk wasn’t on board with that.

Gripping those slim hips, he guided Sky’s gyrating body down.

The breath left Sky’s mouth with a whoosh and then he leaned over and touched their lips in a move so god damned sexy, Hawk thought his head was going to explode. Sky’s mouth teased his lips, eluding him, then came back and sucked at his lips, biting at them before swirling his tongue into his mouth. Hawk growled and sucked on the Sky’s tongue just as his ass closed tightly around his dick. Every tight, hot inch of his cock was engulfed.

Rolling them, Hawk placed Sky beneath him and dislodged his cock. Sky whined, pretty pink lips pouted, and Hawk slipped his hand beneath the man’s thighs and lifted those long legs to wrap around his hips. He repositioned his cock and slid inside in one long, slow push.

Sky's back arched and a long moaning sound left the slender man's throat. Hawk reached between them and closed his hand around Sky's cock, stroking him from base to tip and back again. All the while, he eased his dick in and out of Sky's body.

"Oh fuck," Sky groaned, curling forward to slip his hands down Hawk's chest, toying at his nipples before raking his short nails through the smattering of hair on Hawk's chest.

Sky's channel gripped him hard like a hot fist. Hawk tossed his head back and clenched his teeth, but it was no good. Sky undulated beneath him and Hawk growled out his orgasm, pumping the condom full. Sky made a high-pitched wailing sound in the back of his throat and hot come spilled over Hawk's fingers and onto the younger man's stomach.

He squeezed and twisted his hand down Sky's cock until he was spent and collapsed on the bed. Leaning over, he caught himself on his hands on either side of the blond's head and leaned down to take ownership of Sky's mouth even though he shouldn't.

Sky matched him in heat and pressure in the kiss and after long moments, Hawk snapped his head back, panting. He dropped down on top of Sky with every intention of moving, but the man's arms wrapped around him and held him tight.

When Sky's embrace went lax, Hawk rolled and dropped to his back on the bed. He lay looking up at the ceiling for several long minutes before he rolled his head to the side to gaze at Sky's stunning profile. Long lashes swept down and then up—Sky wasn't sleeping and Hawk had an insane thought of asking him what he was thinking.

Shit like that opened up a whole can of worms and Hawk wasn't positive he wanted to hear the thoughts going through Sky's head at the moment.

Without looking over, Sky reached down and placed a hand over the back of his and slipped his fingers over his. Ignoring

the blistering sense of caution going on inside, Hawk turned his hand over, relinked their fingers, and squeezed. In another moment, Sky rolled toward him. Hawk did the same, pulling his slender body against his. They fit perfectly together and when Sky slipped one sleek thigh over his, Hawk pushed one thick thigh between Sky's. He tucked the blond head of curls beneath his chin and he held him like that, surrounded by sunshine.



It wasn't until several hours later that Sky woke up to find Hawk sitting on the edge of the bed. The assassin was wearing his gear again, including shoes, with that damned holster with the gun inside. He fought to stem any signs of tears, but wasn't sure he managed it when Hawk, sensing him awake, turned his head and met his eyes.

“Take me with you.”

“No.”

Sky huffed out a breath, then plucked at the bedspread as bitterness curled into his stomach.

“Yeah, I imagine you've been running your whole life from commitment,” Sky said stiffly.

Hawk frowned and stood, although he didn't approach. “People who meet under extreme circumstances don't—”

“Save it.” He cut Hawk off. They stared at each other for several long moments before Hawk stood and slowly made his way to the door. Once there, the man stopped and turned once more. After a long, fiery once-over, Hawk turned back to the door.

There was no way in hell he could stop Hawk from leaving and he really didn't want to stop someone who didn't want to

be with him.

“How will I know it’s done?” he asked quietly when Hawk’s hand landed on the door handle. The man was facing the door and Sky heard a heavy sigh and then saw Hawk’s shoulders square.

“I’ll send word.”

And with that, Hawk was gone and Sky was left feeling as if his life would never be the same.

Where did he go from here?

TEN

It was done.

Hawk got rid of the evidence by fire and as he walked away, he felt a great deal of satisfaction that the man who'd tormented Sky was dead.

Of course, Sky hadn't told him the real story, but from the nightmares and the twisted sheets with the young man crying out "no, no!" it didn't take a fucking scientist to figure out that Sky had been abused.

Hawk hadn't found out that Sky had been raped until Franklin blubbered an apology. It had taken Hawk seconds to decide that he'd prolong the fucker's agony and as a last hurrah, he had used every trick of torture in his arsenal, drawing a sinister delight from Franklin's screams of terror.

Smoke and flames billowed behind him as he left the area on a stolen crotch rocket.



"What's this?" Jaxon West frowned at the long white envelope Hawk held out.

"I need a favor."

"Dave said you quit."

"I did. This isn't for Dave. I need you to deliver it to that address."

"It's a hotel." The former Erebus assassin squinted and smacked the envelope against his palm. "What if the person is not there?"

"Sky."

Jaxon smirked and quirked one eyebrow at him. “Sky...”

“Skylar Thomas,” Hawk said with a small nod. “If he’s checked out, I need you to find him and deliver that. You owe me that much at least.”

“I will,” Jaxon said. He owed Hawk a hell of a lot more than an envelope delivered, so that was the least he could do. “You don’t need to worry.”

Hawk clamped a hand on Jaxon’s shoulder for one moment and then turned and walked away.



Sky saw the fire on the evening news.

One part of him was fiercely glad that the fucker, Franklin, was gone, the other part was devastated. He sure the hell didn’t care about Franklin, but he knew the charred remains of the house he’d once lived in meant Hawk had completed his promise.

It also meant Hawk was gone.

That thought alone left Sky feeling bereft and he flung his small items into the backpack Hawk had bought him and slung it over his shoulder. He picked up a white envelope he hadn’t seen until now and opened it. Inside was several thousand dollars and his eyes stung. Hawk would have known how much he needed this to have a fresh start. With his mom dead and the money gone, he had to make some hard decisions. However, one thing he didn’t need to do was run.

He could take the money Hawk gave him and get a place and a job.

Pausing at the hotel door, he glanced back at the two queen beds. Should he hang around?

No.

He knew in his heart that Hawk wasn't coming back.

Closing the door, he turned to find a tall, good-looking biker dude with dark blond hair walking toward him.

“Skylar Thomas? I'm Jaxon, a friend of Hawk's.

EPILOGUE

Two weeks later - New Year's Eve

Snatching up and placing his sunglasses on, Hawk left by way of the patio door and stepped out onto the hot sand beneath the Caribbean sun. He only bothered with a button-down shirt to help with the sunburn that had occurred on his shoulders a week ago. The wind caught the unbuttoned shirt in the breeze as he walked across the sand toward the water.

It was beautiful here, more gorgeous than he remembered, and he didn't regret renting the place for a few months.

Mostly, though, he didn't regret what waited for him at the water's edge.

The tall, slender blond turned and the mouthwatering skintight dark blue swim trunks turned Hawk's throat dry. He wouldn't have thought it possible to want Sky more with each passing day, but he did. He could still remember the fear he'd had waiting for word that Sky would actually leave the States and join him. All he had riding on it was the connection and their last hours together. When Jaxon had sent the text with Sky's flight itinerary, Hawk had stared at it for hours.

The wind picked up Sky's hair and blew it around his head like a halo, and Hawk found it suddenly hard to swallow. Sky smiled at him and turned to walk slowly through the sand toward him. Where he tended to burn, Sky tanned all over. The darkened skin made the man's eyes even more startling.

Hawk stopped walking and Sky drew closer until they were chest to chest, and then the man slipped his arms up around his neck.

"Yes," Sky whispered and the air left Hawk's lungs in a huge gulp.

That was the answer to the question Hawk had asked Sky when he took him to dinner that very first night here. *Would*

you stick around and see if this works? I'm years older than you.

“Are you sure?” he now asked roughly.

Sky drew back and held his gaze. “I needed you to know that I'm serious about us, so instead of blurting it out like I wanted to that first night, I took the time to give it some serious thought.”

Hawk let out an amused huff, trying not to choke. He couldn't remember the last time he'd had someone to call his own.

“And you know what?” Sky said with a cheeky grin.

“What?”

“My decision wasn't hard.”

“Why's that?”

“Because my Hawk needs his sky.”

Hawk laughed at the cheesiness of that and clutched Sky in his arms. Dipping his head, he kissed the man soundly, feeling a freedom he'd never felt before.

Whatever time they had left, Hawk wanted to spend it with Sky by his side.

The End

If you'd like to read about Jaxon West, you can find him in my Cobalt Security books and he makes several appearances in Stealth and Haven in my Operation Justice Force series.

ABOUT REESE KNIGHTLEY

Reese spends her time creating stories from the characters rattling around in her head. Her love of reading mystery, action and adventure, and fantasy books led to her love of writing. Reese works as a full-time writer. She loves to hear from her readers.

[Reese Knightley on Amazon](#)

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HE SEES YOU WHEN YOU'RE
SLEEPING



Duckie Mack

Chase moves back home after a loss. It's the last place he wants to be after working hard to leave his hometown behind. Now he's taking care of his mom and takes a job at the mall through the holidays to make ends meet.

It's bad enough that Chase has had to take a big step backward, but something has been off since he returned home. He keeps feeling like he's being watched. At home, at work, even the mall Santa gives him the creeps.

A former classmate runs into Chase at the mall. Archie had been small and bullied a lot back in school. But he's grown into a strong, confident man that gives Chase the attention he craves.

When the paranoia becomes real, Archie is there to protect him. For the first time, Chase feels wanted and safe. Is this man from his past everything he could want or is there something darker lurking beneath the surface?

Content Warning

He Sees You When You're Sleeping contains stalking, obsession, un-aliving, dubcon, and non consensual voyeurism. It also depicts characters with untreated depression and processing past trauma.

He'd been home for two months. At first, I thought it would be temporary and was trying not to get my hopes up, but then he started sending out applications. Perhaps I'd finally found the right string to pull.

The void of his absence was a weight on my chest that made me feel hollow and wrong every day of these past five years that he'd been gone. He had come home for holidays, a brief light breaking through the darkness, but it had never been enough. And each time he left again, the dark hollowness only grew.

But he was back. To stay. I couldn't go back to that void again. And I would do whatever it took to keep his light in my life.

Chase

Getting a minimum wage job at a mall kiosk wasn't where I thought I'd be at this point in my life. But helping my mom piece things together after her husband died hadn't been in the plans either.

He came into my life when I was eighteen. Not long enough to really know him or miss him now. But enough that he made me feel like I didn't belong in my home. That I was a nuisance, in the way of what he wanted. I could never figure out what my mom saw in him. Though her taste in men had always been rotten. Each time she had been left with a broken heart, swearing off men forever, I'd gotten my hopes up that it would finally be the two of us. After a few weeks of having her to myself, long enough to think that things would be different, then having it all yanked out from under me when she brought a new *friend* home.

This time, she had lost a husband, and she wasn't good at being alone. I couldn't leave her and go back to my life while she was grieving and trying to figure out how to pay the mortgage.

Here I was, using my IT skills at *Cellphone Emporium* in the same mall I grew up in. It was my first day on the job and, after a brief introduction, I was left on my own. Which was probably for the best. Roger, the kiosk owner, acted like he was the king of the kiosk and I was the lowly servant. I didn't want to be here, but that didn't mean I couldn't do the job.

I was bent over, rifling through the cabinets at the bottom of the kiosk, when someone bumped into me. A hand caught my arm, keeping me from falling.

"What the hell?" I stood up to see who accosted me.

"Oh my gosh, I am so sorry. I wasn't looking."

It was an honest accident, could have happened to anyone. My feeling sorry for myself and starting the day in a bad mood weren't his fault.

"It's fine. Sorry for snapping. It's been a rough morning."

Something dark flashed in his blue eyes, almost like anger or concern. He ran into *me*, so I didn't understand the weird mix of emotions across his face. The longer I looked at him, the more something niggled in my brain.

"Do I know you? You look familiar." I stared at his nearly white hair and the faint blond stubble. There was a scar on his cheek that caught my attention. A memory that tried to break free. But a lot of my past was trapped in a fog, happy to leave everything behind as I left to live on my own. Only now I was back.

"Oh, wait! Maybe, yeah. Did you go to school around here?" The man asked. Whatever darkness in his expression was gone now.

"Yeah. I graduated from Valley High a few years ago."

"Me too!"

I stared at him. The scar was so distinctive, about an inch long, high on his right cheek. But the firm chin and tall form weren't matching what I dug out of the fog. "Right. I think we had Econ together. I'm a little out of it today. Can you remind me of your name?"

"I'm Archie. And, yeah...Econ. Wow, so wild running into you here. Literally. Again, sorry."

I waved it off. "It's fine. I'm Chase, by the way, in case you forgot. Well, good to see you again, Archie."

A smile pulled at one side of his lips. "Yeah. You too, Chase. I actually might see you around more with Christmas coming up. I tend to find myself at the mall more often than I would like."

“Yeah, I get that. If you’re in the neighborhood, stop by. I’ll be here.”

“Sure, sounds great. See you later.”

I gave a half wave. “Later.”

As I returned to checking the inventory, I felt conflicted over the run-in with Archie. On the one hand, I dreaded being seen by people I barely tolerated in high school. But Archie had seemed genuinely happy to see me. And that...well, that was kind of nice. He intrigued me, too. I tried to reconcile the built man with the name. It was there, faintly, somewhere in the back of my mind. Before I could dig any deeper into my memories, a customer came up and asked me a hundred questions.

Two years, I’d worked my way up in IT. Two years and I was listening to Christmas music on repeat while selling an occasional phone case. Though I had a few customers who brought their ‘broken’ phones to me in a panic. After turning them off and on again—surprise, surprise—they worked. But then that wasn’t too much different from IT.

Roger stopped by after a couple hours to check in. He was rather...disappointed at my single item sales.

“It’s all about the upsell. If they need a phone case, then they probably need a screen protector, a car-mount phone stand, a charger; the options are endless.”

I fought hard to keep from rolling my eyes. If a customer needed those things, they would ask. Who was I to make them spend money they didn’t intend to?

“I need an answer. Tell me you understand.” Roger crossed his arms, waiting impatiently.

“Sure. I’ll do what I can.” *Asshole.*

“I know it’s your first day, but remember, it’s the Christmas season. Can you try to look at least a little happy?”

I plastered on a fake smile which seemed to appease him. He left again, promising to be back to help me close. When he walked away, I held my hands in the air and mimicked choking him. Maybe it was childish, but it made me feel better.

After the longest of first days, I got home, ready to collapse. But when I saw my mom hadn't moved from bed since I left, I knew she hadn't eaten anything either. Not up for making a big meal, I opted for scrambled eggs and toast. I carried two plates into her room, setting them down on her nightstand.

"Mom. I made you dinner. Can you sit up?"

She sniffled deeply, wiping her nose with a tissue, before sitting against the headboard.

"Have you been in bed all day?" I knew the answer already, but I wanted her to be aware of it.

"Don't look at me like that. My husband is gone. This is one of the few things that still smells like him."

I repressed a shudder at the thought of them in bed together. "I know, Mom. I'm sorry. But you have to take care of yourself too. You gotta eat. Here, I made you dinner."

Another loud sniffle. "Thank you. I'm trying. Everything reminds me of him and it's hard. But at least I have you here to take care of me. What would I do without you, Chase?"

She patted my hand. It was why I couldn't leave. Not when she always told me how much she needed me. And she clearly needed *someone*. At least if it was me, it wasn't another man she brought into her life. I sighed internally.

"How was your first day?"

Horrible. "It was fine. Still learning the ropes."

"That's good, dear. Thank you. They are still investigating your father's death."

"Not my father," I mumbled under my breath.

“They won’t release any of his funds until the insurance closes their case.”

“It’ll be fine. I should get my first check next week.”

The only good thing about it being the holidays was that employers were desperate to hire quickly. The mall kiosk was temporary. It would buy me time to find a better job. *I can do this.*

After eating and cleaning up, I laid in bed, needing to work off the frustration of the day. I got my laptop and opened *Pornhub*. I hit play and began to stroke myself lazily, as the muscled daddy pressed his face between the ass cheeks of his fun-size boy.

As things progressed for the couple on screen, I pushed my boxers out of the way and pumped faster. The grunts and groans on-screen barely loud enough to hear over my own frantic movement.

Clink. I froze. What was that? I paused the video mid-thrust, my hand still gripped around my dick, and listened. A shuffling sound had my head snap toward my window. The vertical blinds were closed with the exception of the one that broke off years ago, leaving a four-inch gap.

Pulling my shorts back up, I tucked my scared-soft cock back in and listened, watching the gap intently. I couldn’t see outside, it was too dark. Though with how fast my heart raced, I expected to see a pair of glowing eyes peering in through the window.

The thought had me reaching quickly for a light. My teeth clenched from the paranoia.

There wasn’t anyone there. There couldn’t be. The window in my room faced the backyard. It wasn’t like someone could walk right up to it. I blew out a deep breath. It was probably just a cat. But then...it wasn’t the first time I’d felt this unease.

Staying in the shadows, I watched him. Each time he looked around, my heart raced. He was here. And he was vulnerable. Alone at the kiosk. I didn't like that he was so exposed.

I scanned the area, looking for an optimal place to watch. Somewhere that would let me keep him in sight. I moved around the main hub of the mall, looking like I was examining storefront windows, though I really used them for their reflection. Allowing me to see without looking directly at him.

Standing in front of a toy store, my lip tugged up as I discovered the best option. It was perfect—unassuming, disguised, centrally located. All I had to do was wait.

I didn't mind waiting. It was something I'd spent a lot of time doing. You learned a lot in the waiting. Observed what the rest of the world couldn't slow down to see. Everyone was so damn busy all the time, it was no wonder they missed what was right in front of them.

With my laptop in front of me, I sat and watched. I had the perfect view. Despite the long line, the man in red was getting agitated. His visits grew shorter, the patience of the families decreased. A few children were sent away looking pouty. He rubbed his fingers as if they itched to hold something. He wouldn't last much longer.

Ten minutes later, he whispered in the ear of one of his helpers. I could practically hear her sigh of frustration as they had to turn to the line of waiting families and announce a short break. This was it.

Snapping my laptop shut, I pulled my ball cap down on my head and slunk my way around the perimeter of the hub. The red outfit turned a corner, and I quickly went the opposite way.

Picking up the pace, I hurried down a hallway that had an exit. Once outside, I hopped over the handrail and ducked into

the alley. Lifting my eyes for a quick scan, I noticed two cameras aimed toward the doors, but there was a single table set up just past the dumpsters that was clear. He was there. Alone.

He lit a cigarette and took a long drag. While his eyes were closed and he exhaled slowly, I ran behind him swiftly. The blade of my knife pressed against his cheek as I hooked one arm around his neck.

He yelled and fumbled his cigarette, dropping it on the ground.

“Smoking is bad for your health,” I rasped in his ear.

“What do you want, man? All I got is my phone. You can take it.”

“I don’t want your fucking phone. I have one.”

The man trembled. I didn’t want him pissing himself, not in the suit, at least.

“Take your clothes off.”

He went ramrod still. “I...no...please, I can’t.”

I released my grip on his neck and turned him toward me. He stared with wide eyes, eyes that darted to the still smoldering cigarette on the ground, like that would save him.

“Listen, I don’t want you getting anything on that nice suit. Can’t scare the kiddies, right? Take everything off, the beard and wig too.”

He shook his head, pupils blown. “Please, you don’t have to do this.”

I stepped closer to him, blade pointed at his chest. “Oh, but I really do.”

With shaky hands, he ripped off the fluffy fake hair, tossing it aside.

I picked up the beard and wig, brushing the dirt off them. "Have some fucking respect."

He nodded as he unbuttoned the red jacket with white cuffs. Instead of dropping it, he folded it and put it on the table.

"That's better."

His hands shook even more as he took the pants off, leaving him standing in his boxers. They were added to the pile.

"Good. Now tell me your name."

"It's Walter. Listen, I have a family. Please, just let me go. I swear I won't say anything."

"I'm sure you're a big disappointment to them. They'll get over it. Who do you work with?"

Snot and tears ran down his face. "What? Nobody. This is just part-time."

I adjusted my hat and blew out a breath in exasperation. I needed this over with.

"I know!" I growled. "What are the names of your helpers?"

"You're not going to hurt them, are you?"

"No. They seem competent, unlike your sorry ass. They really should screen their employees better."

"Uh...the tall one is Darla. The short one is Christy."

"That's all I need."

"So...I can go?" He sniffled deeply.

I let out a laugh. "Sure, Walter. You can go."

His eyes rounded, and he wiped his face with his arm. He stepped to the side, testing for my reaction. I didn't move. He took another cautious step. Still, I stayed, pocketing my knife. Hope bloomed behind the terror in his eyes. I loved hope. 'Tis the season anyway.

His next step was more confident. Too bad it was his last. Moving fast, I closed the distance before he had time to move. Good ol' hope, slowing the fight-or-flight reaction. Grabbing his jaw in both hands, I jerked quickly, snapping his neck. He crumpled to the ground in a lifeless heap. I might not have killed him if I wasn't so pressed for time, but what kid wanted a Santa that smelled like smoke, anyway?

Working fast, I managed to get his body in the dumpster, change, and head back in before anyone came looking. As I hurried inside, I straightened the front of the red coat and checked my reflection in a window to ensure my beard was on right.

The taller of the two elves glared at me, not seeming to care that I now had my laptop with me, and whispered, "What took you so long? The parents are getting restless."

Lowering the tone of my voice, I said, "Sorry, Darla, wardrobe malfunction."

She rolled her eyes. "Whatever, just get up there. The next kid is Ashley."

I waved to the crowd as I approached my seat at the top of the steps. My eyes slid across the hub. With the elevation of the throne and the angle, I had a clear view of him. Perfect.

A mom walked up with a little girl of about four. I patted my knee, and she hopped up, staring at me with wonder.

"Hello, Ashley. Have you been a good girl this year?"

4

Chase

I tried to listen to Roger, I really did. But after the panic of hearing someone outside my window last night, it had been hard to settle down. Even when I managed to nod off, my overactive imagination kept producing glowing eyes that had me waking up throughout the night and checking the gap in my blinds.

Roger snapped his fingers in front of my face. “Chase, did you hear anything I said?”

I schooled my expression, trying not to let my irritation show. “I’m sorry. I didn’t really sleep much.”

“I don’t care if you were partying all night long. You have a job to do. And if you don’t want it, I have a stack of applications ready to go.”

The man got under my skin, but I needed the job. I needed the paycheck. I’d used up all my savings to move back home and get us through the last couple of months.

“I want the job. I do. I’m sorry.”

He gave a smug grin. “Good. Here’s your quota for the day. And if the customers don’t come to you on their own, then you have to bring them to you. It’s all about the hustle.”

Now I’d have to be one of those obnoxious people trying to wrangle passersby that were clearly not interested. *Fuck me!*

Roger left, *thank God*, to do whatever the hell he did when he wasn’t harassing me. I looked at the list he gave me, my quota. It seemed nearly impossible. How quickly would he replace me if I couldn’t sell the right number of items?

As the mall opened, I tried to catch a few people walking by, but they were all hurrying to get somewhere. This early on a weekday, it seemed most of the crowd was made up of parents

taking their kids to see Santa. They didn't want to talk about cell phone accessories or repairs.

The day crawled by, each minute lasting several. I'd made a few sales, but nothing spectacular. My head throbbed from lack of sleep and my stomach growled. I'd packed a peanut butter and jelly sandwich that didn't sound appetizing in the least, but it was something.

As I was securing the kiosk so I could take my lunch break, I felt a presence behind me. Maybe it was the long night, or the fear that Roger was back, but I felt a chill skate across my skin and I shivered.

“Chase?”

I turned around quickly, startling both of us, and let out a sigh of relief.

“Oh! Archie. Sorry, I guess I was in my own zone over here.”

He let out a laugh. “No worries. It's good to see you again. Are you done for the day?”

“No. Just getting ready to take my lunch break.”

“Perfect timing, then. Care if I join you?”

As exhausted as I was, it was nice to have someone who seemed happy to see me. Maybe a little distraction might be a good thing.

“Sure, that sounds nice. I just need to grab my lunch.”

I frowned as I took out the baggie with my sad looking sandwich in it. Embarrassed, I quickly shoved it into my jacket pocket. With the kiosk secure, I walked with Archie toward the food court.

At his side, I realized how much bigger he was. Not overly tall, maybe a couple inches taller than my five nine, but he had a broad chest and strong shoulders. That fair white hair was so

distinct. I couldn't picture him as a jock in school and that scar kept tugging at my memory. But his build threw me off.

When we got to the food court, I was hit with all the tantalizing smells, making my stomach growl. Sizzling beef, french fries, Chinese food.

"What are you feeling like?" Archie asked.

All of it. Any of it. I grimaced as I reached into my pocket for my sandwich. Maybe I could pretend it was something better.

"Ah. I brought a sandwich, actually."

Archie's bright blue eyes assessed me. "Can I buy you lunch?"

I shook my head. "No, you don't have to do that. I'm fine."

"Please. I'd like to. Consider it an apology."

I felt my brows pinch. "An apology for what?"

Archie played with the edge of his shirt. "Well, it wasn't exactly accidental that I ran into you yesterday."

Confusion swept through me. "What? What does that mean?"

He chuckled nervously. "I saw you and couldn't believe you were there and tried to work up the nerve to come talk to you."

"Me?" How was someone with such an intimidating presence nervous about talking to me?

"Yes, you. I've thought about you a lot. Please, let me buy you lunch and I'll explain. Unless I've blown my chances already."

He took a step back, but I grabbed his arm to stop him. I might not have known why he wanted to see me, but I couldn't help but be flattered. I was just an average guy, nothing special about me. People didn't seek me out. And hearing he did? That felt pretty good.

“You can buy me lunch.”

Archie smiled broadly, as if I had just given him the best gift. *Fuck*, it felt amazing having him react like that. And if he was willing to treat me to something besides the warm pb & j in my pocket, even better.

We got Philly cheesesteaks and fries and sat down. That first bite had me moaning. Archie’s gaze locked onto my lips, heat blooming in his eyes. And, yeah, that kind of attention was nice, too.

I wiped my mouth with a napkin and cleared my throat. “Tell me, Archie. Why did you want to see me so badly?”

Archie straightened and took a quick drink before offering me a sheepish smile. It was strange to see on someone built like him, but it gave me a flutter in my belly.

He traced a finger over the scar on his cheek. “Do you remember this?”

I shook my head. “Vaguely, sort of. Like it’s there in my head, somewhere. But my memory is crap. I think I blocked out a lot of high school.”

“That’s fair. I didn’t have the best time, either. I was a lot smaller back then. Got picked on. *A lot*. But you were always kind to me.”

“It’s nice to be seen that way.” I had spent a lot of time simply trying to make it through the day. I didn’t think I’d made an impression on anyone.

“I did. I do. Anyway, there was one time it was particularly bad. The football players decided to gang up on me. One of them pushed me so hard into the locker, it sliced my cheek open.” He traced the scar again.

Oh! I remembered. God, he’d had a *major* glow-up. I’d been taller than him back then and he’d been a string bean.

“Right. Those guys were asshats. Thought they were all that.”

Archie nodded. “Yeah. And the whole school looked the other way because they were the football stars. Except you. You came to my side and told them off.”

He had been standing there bleeding, and it had been a rather shit day for me and I had had it. I stood between Archie and the team, expecting I would get pummeled and not really caring. The only thing that stopped them was the fact that Archie was dripping blood, and it had started drawing attention. A whispered promise of making me regret it in my ear and then they were gone.

“You took care of me at a time I needed it the most. Taking me to the nurse and staying by my side. That really meant a lot to me. I’ve never forgotten that moment.”

“It was awful. I’m sorry that happened. But damn! Look at you now. You look completely different. I feel bad I didn’t recognize you right away.”

That sheepish smile turned into a smirk. “Understandable. Tell me, is it bad different or good different?”

I let my gaze roam over him slowly, taking in that broad chest and strong shoulders. My eyes slipped down to see the muscles in his thighs stretching the material of his slacks. Did I take too long on my perusal? Maybe. But it was a body worth appreciating. Archie coughed, drawing my attention.

Caught ogling, I felt my cheeks warm. My brain was completely unhelpful as I started thinking about the porn I’d been watching last night before I got interrupted. Thinking about what it would feel like to have this muscled guy take hold of me and use my body. I shifted in my seat, making room for my hardening cock.

“Well?” Archie asked with an amused look.

I cleared my throat. “Yeah. Good. You look good.”

“Thanks, Chase. You look really good, too.” Heat blazed in his eyes.

I couldn’t imagine what he saw in me that he liked. My brown hair was shaggy, in need of a trim. I hadn’t shaved recently, so I had some long scruff, and I had nearly the same body type as I did in school. I’d added thirty pounds maybe, but nothing like the transformation he’d had.

“Um. Thanks. So what happened? How did you...?” I waved my hand over his body.

“That day with the locker. I’d reached my limit. I was tired of being a victim. I refused to be pushed around anymore. So I pushed myself. *Hard.*”

“Wow. That’s impressive. To be honest, I kept waiting for the jocks to come after me. But then it was so weird. The team had this string of bad luck. Accidents, injuries, illnesses, and they were all too worried about each other to worry about me. I couldn’t believe my luck. I mean, not that I wished bad things upon them, but for once it felt like some kind of cosmic interference that actually worked in my favor.”

I didn’t know if it was a trick of the lighting from the flashing signs in the food court, but Archie’s blue eyes went dark for a second.

“Yeah. That was bizarre. I guess Karma stepped in and gave them a taste of their own medicine. Whatever it was, I’m just glad they left you alone after that.”

I had to agree. It made the rest of my year slightly more bearable.

Archie sipped from his drink. “You moved away, didn’t you? What brings you back?”

I shrugged. “My mom’s husband was killed. Car accident.”

He reached across the table, placing his hand on mine. “I’m sorry to hear about your stepfather.”

Shaking my head, I said, “Thanks, but I never considered him my stepfather. I don’t know if this makes me a jerk for saying so, him being dead, but we’re better off with him gone. My mom can’t see it yet, but we are. The guy was a real asshole. He’s a big reason why I left in the first place.”

“But now you’re back. How long are you planning on staying?”

“I’m not really sure. Probably the foreseeable future. I gotta help my mom with the bills until she can get back on her feet.”

“That’s admirable. And whatever the reason, I’m glad you’re back. I’ve thought about you a lot since school.”

The butterflies in my stomach took flight. I’d had so few times in my life where I actually felt wanted. Archie saying he had thought of me and was glad to see me? Yeah, that felt pretty damn good. I turned my hand over until we were palm to palm and offered him a smile. “This has been really nice. Thank you for lunch.”

His fingers curled around my hand. “It’s been my absolute pleasure.”

When we finished, he walked me back to my kiosk, our hands brushing against each other, sending lightning bolts through my skin.

A big yawn swept through me. I pulled my hand away from his to cover it. Archie stopped me, turning me to face him. He studied me for a moment, no doubt taking in the dark bags beneath my eyes.

His brows pinched with concern. “Are you okay?”

I ran a hand over my hair. “Yeah, mostly. I haven’t been sleeping much. To be honest, I’ve had a feeling like someone’s been watching me. I don’t know. Maybe being back home is making me antsy.”

His eyes darkened once more. Strange how such a light blue color could turn so deep. “Do you feel safe?”

“It’s probably nothing. Just paranoia, jumping at shadows. Last night...I don’t know, I think I was too in my head.”

“If you ever start to feel like you’re not safe, don’t try to be a hero. Call someone. Call me.”

“Call you? Do you want to be my hero, Archie?” I asked with a tease, trying to deflect the chill that crept over me from thinking about the night before.

When he hesitated to answer, I worried I’d pushed it too far. “You saved me once. I’d like to think I could do the same for you, if you needed it.”

Archie’s gaze was so intense, I nearly melted under it. His words gripped around my heart. I didn’t have people I could count on to be there for me, but I knew without a doubt that Archie would. Strange to have so much trust in a person I hadn’t seen in years and hardly knew before today. But I felt like he knew me, like he saw straight into me.

I gulped. “Can I, um...get your number? Just in case.”

There was no more hint of sheepishness in him. The look he gave me was all wolf—and it heated me all over.

“Sure thing, sweetness.”

Archie put his number in my phone and texted himself so he had my number too. I liked that he seized the opportunity. It was nice to have the decision taken out of my hands.

He took a step closer, eyes roamed over me. He looked hungry, like he would grow fangs and claim me right there in the mall. *Fuck!* Why did that affect me so much?

With a finger under my chin, tilting my head to meet his gaze, he leaned in close. His mouth was mere centimeters from mine. “You don’t have to wait for an emergency to call me, Chase.”

I swallowed audibly as I stared, paralyzed by him and the ferocity in his blue eyes. “Okay.”

Before I could think or process, I felt his lips brush against mine. A feather, a whisper, a ghost. Had my eyes not been wide open, I might not have believed it happened. And then he was feet away, looking over his shoulder. "I'll see you around, Chase."

He was back. And he fucking touched him! If I hadn't been in the middle of listening to Johnny tell me about the dollhouse he seemed nervous to ask for, I might have lost it and stomped over there to rip off the offending finger. As it was, Johnny's mom watched me carefully to see how I would react. She didn't seem embarrassed by her son's request, more like searching for affirmation.

"Dollhouses are my favorite, Johnny. You can do so many things with them."

His big eyes shone bright, and he bobbed his head. The mom looked like she would cry as she smiled.

"I've been really good, Santa."

"I know you have." I patted his hair. The mom mouthed thank you as she pulled him away.

My gaze moved across the lobby to see that he was alone once more. Back to work. But he looked tense, even from here. That asshole got lucky I'd been distracted.

I didn't mind kids. They still had that innocence and hope before they got older and adopted the hate they'd been taught. And little Johnny, I could imagine the response he might have gotten from that creep that had been wearing the suit days ago.

I couldn't wait much longer. I'd have to make a move. Walter was bound to be reported missing soon and the first place they would look would be the mall. And when they found that someone had been showing up in his place, wearing his Santa suit, it wouldn't be good.



Chase

I had been in a daze after Archie left me. Alternating between the giddiness of his need to see me, and the horniness from the way he made me feel like prey and I was his next meal.

Unfortunately, with the daze, I fell short of the quota that Roger had set for me. Roger, who stood before me and poked his finger into my shoulder a third time, emphasizing his disappointment in me.

I nearly walked out, but I stayed and apologized, while I cringed internally. Roger was a power-hungry dick. With his lecture over and the register closed, I clocked out. Trying hard to get Roger out of my head, I focused on the lunch with Archie instead. I felt the phantom kiss on my lips even now.

If there were awards for ‘best glow-up’, he would be in the running for sure. It was hard to believe he was that same small guy who’d been bullied. His image came to mind, his build, and the strength he exuded. I couldn’t imagine anyone pushing him around now. And that was extremely appealing. He probably didn’t have Rogers berating him and poking him.

I wasn’t small necessarily, but I felt it. Often overlooked, unseen, or forgotten. If I had someone like Archie with me, it would be impossible not to be noticed. And feel safe. *Sigh*.

After fixing grilled cheese and tomato soup for my mom and myself, I retired to my room. Only this time, when I lay in bed, I didn’t need porn for inspiration. I thought back to the way Archie filled those slacks and how broad his chest was. I palmed my cock through my gym shorts.

My eyes flicked to the hole in my blinds, and a shiver rolled through my whole body. It wasn’t enough to make me soften. I’d been turned on all day. But it made me think twice about taking my shorts off.

The unease I felt even as I gripped myself through the material grew. I was desperate to get off, achy with it, and I

didn't want to let the growing fear steal that from me. Archie came to the front of my mind. Him, a breath away. The hunger in his eyes. *Damn!* Thinking of it had me leaking in my shorts.

Grabbing my phone, I stared at the text he'd sent himself earlier. Did he mean it? Would he really want me to call him? I couldn't do that. Not so soon. A text though? Yeah, that could come off as slightly less desperate...even if I was.

Me: Are you up?

Archie: Yeah. I'm up. Everything okay? Are you in trouble?

Me: I don't know. Still feeling paranoid, I guess.

Archie: Do you want me to come over?

His complete lack of hesitation in wanting to make sure I was alright went straight to my heart. *And* my dick, as I imagined him rushing over.

Me: No, you don't have to come. It's probably fine. I think I'm just overtired and my mind is creating monsters in the dark.

Archie: Ok. How can I help? Tell me what you need.

You pinning me down and fucking me into my bed.

Me: I don't know. Something to get my mind off it. Maybe a distraction.

Archie: A distraction, huh? What kind of distraction... exactly?

It was always hard to read meaning or emotion in text. I wondered if his eyes heated as they had earlier. That look alone had me thrusting into my hand. There was no way I was imagining the interest I had seen in him. Would he freak out if I asked for what I actually wanted? I wasn't normally bold enough for that. If I messed things up, it would go back to how it was the day before. Just me, on my own, jumping at shadows. *Fuck!*

Me: I could use a little...release.

Maybe that was vague enough that I could play it off if he wasn't on board. The dots popped up and stayed there long enough to make me panic. But when his text came, it was the two hottest words of my life.

Archie: Show me.

Holy shit! Did he want me to...?

All thoughts of the gap in my blinds were forgotten. I read the text again. My dick throbbed and sweat trickled down my forehead. When did it get so hot in here?

I sucked in a deep breath before lowering my shorts. I'd never taken a photo like this before. I stroked myself once before holding my cock upright. With my phone angled over my groin and the backlight on, I snapped a photo. Before I could overthink it, I sent it.



Did he even know how fucking beautiful he was? I watched through the dark, an angle that I had become familiar with. It wasn't a big gap, but it was enough. Especially now, with his phone illuminating his beautiful body. It was enough light that it let me see through the darkness outside to the view I'd been waiting for.

There wasn't a part of him I hadn't seen. But this was different. With each message he sent and received, and the quickening of his fist pumping his cock, he had never looked more radiant, even in the dark.

He had no idea what he was doing to me. I unzipped my pants and pulled my raging dick out. From the tall bush I hid in, no one would see. Not even him. I wanted him to, though. I wanted him to know what he did to me. As he sped up, so did I.

One-handed, both of us. The glow of his phone highlighted his expression. The almost pained look he had as he worked himself harder.

I met him, thrust for thrust, and when he came all over himself, I spilled onto the wood chips beneath my feet, careful to swallow a moan of satisfaction. If he had looked out the window, he might have seen the bush shaking with my furious movement. Instead, he was fully focused on his phone, his chest moving rapidly.

He stared at the screen, waiting for the final instructions. I could see his eyes widen as he looked over the beautiful mess he'd made with uncertainty before finding resolve. He swiped a finger through his cum and held it up to his lips, snapping a photo as he licked it clean.

Fuck! That image would be embedded in my brain forever. I watched as his head fell back on the pillow and he let his phone drop on the bed; the light smothered by the blanket. With the view gone, I tucked myself back in and left.

He was mine. He didn't know it yet, but that mouth, that cock, that cum, it was all mine. The next one to taste him would be me.

6

Chase

Sexting with Archie was the hottest thing I'd ever done. To have him direct my every move, even tasting myself, which felt scandalous, but *fuck*, it was sexy. Especially when he said he was keeping that photo. *Damn*, it made me hard just thinking about it.

I wished he had sent pics too, all I got were words. But those words played on repeat in my head. I ended up deleting the photos I'd taken, but knowing he had them was enough.

And I slept. The release and euphoria wiped out any paranoia of a shadow outside my window. In the morning, I felt refreshed for the first time since I'd moved back home.

As I headed to the mall, I was practically whistling. Nothing was going to get me down after the night I'd had. I wondered if I would see Archie again today. Would it be awkward? Would we attack each other in a dark hallway? We hadn't even kissed, not really, and yet he commanded every stroke as I lay in bed.

Going through the opening routine, I hoped that being rested and satisfied would help me battle whatever shit Roger would throw at me today. I kept expecting him to show up, but he didn't.

The kiosk was open and ready to go. I even sold a phone case and my good mood must have rubbed off on the customer, because they added a couple of accessories to their order. *Take that, Roger.* You *don't* have to be a dick to move product.

My phone buzzed and while I wasn't supposed to be on it during work hours, I checked it anyway, hopeful it was Archie. It wasn't. I had a message that said Roger was in the hospital

from severe food poisoning, and if I had any questions, who I should contact.

And my day just got even better. It was too bad for Roger, but the guy had it coming. It was weird timing though. He had me so pissed yesterday I almost quit and now this. Maybe he was poisoned by that vile heart of his.

After reminiscing with Archie yesterday, it reminded me of high school. I had been certain the football team would come after me for standing up to them. But then several of them had fallen ill, some claimed food poisoning. The lead jock had been in a car accident. I couldn't help but think about the accident that had killed my mom's husband.

It was a strange coincidence. But if you looked at anything long enough for patterns, you would find them. I chalked it up to another bit of Karma working her magic. So often it felt like life kept kicking me in the balls. If it managed to work out in my favor on occasion, I wouldn't look too hard at it.

The day went fine, though admittedly, I missed seeing Archie for lunch. Did he regret what we did last night? Did it scare him off? He didn't have anything to be scared of. He also never indicated that I would see him today. I was the one that built up that idea in my head.

An unease began to creep back in. That same feeling I had when looking at the gap in my blinds. A chill crawled up my spine and goosebumps rose on my arms. An intense sensation that I was being watched.

Scanning the area carefully, I tried to look for anyone that seemed out of place. I wished Archie was here. He had a way of making that feeling disappear. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary, except a shudder swept through me as I caught the mall Santa looking my way, but he quickly turned his attention to the kid on his lap.

Mall Santa? Really, Chase? Why would he care about me? I was merely in his line of sight, that was all. One of those

awkward moments where you happened to look at the same time as another person.

I shook it off, not wanting the weirdness I felt to rob me of my good day. *Think back to Archie, back to last night. Okay, maybe not that much. I don't need to be sporting a tent pole at work.*

I couldn't seem to shake that unsettled feeling the rest of the day, though. That itch, that biological message that screamed danger. I'd almost texted Archie a few times to see if he could hang out with me until I was done. But I was a grown man and I didn't need a babysitter while I worked. After closing up, my paranoia grew as I walked out to my car, which sat by itself in the empty parking lot.



I stayed in a shadow of the building, a blind spot that he wouldn't be able to see, and watched. He kept looking over his shoulder, his awareness of me made my body heat up and my heart rate accelerate. Knowing he could feel me nearby, that he looked for me, was invigorating. A taste of how I felt. So aware of everything he did. There was no denying this connection between us, a metaphysical bond, a pull toward each other.

When our eyes locked across the mall earlier, I knew he felt that zing. That electrical current that flowed between us. It wouldn't be long now. I had him right where I wanted him.

I watched as he approached his car, wishing I were close enough to see his expression. I didn't want to hurt him. The furthest thing from it, but I needed him to realize how much he needed me.



My senses were in overdrive, something wasn't right. Every cell in my body was on alert. I looked behind me once more. Nothing. There was no one in this section of the parking lot.

My car wasn't right. It tilted to one side. Nervously, I walked around to examine it. My hands flew to my mouth when I saw the front left tire completely flat. There was a gash in it that was too big to be accidental. Something had cut my tire. *Someone*. The goosebumps that had accompanied me throughout the day were now back in full force. I whipped my head around, looking for anyone nearby.

Panic crept up and squeezed at my throat. What did I do? Call the cops? Probably, but I didn't want my mom to worry. Get a tow? *Fuck!* I didn't have money for that.

I thought of Archie. How quickly he had responded, how safe I felt when I was messaging him. Before I could think about it, I pulled up our messages and hit 'call' with shaky hands.

He answered right away. "Hey, sweetness. I was hoping I'd hear from you." His sultry voice gave me butterflies despite the terror I felt.

"I...um...Archie?" My voice broke as fear clawed at my throat.

His voice turned serious. "What is it? What's wrong? Where are you?"

I looked around again, still feeling like I wasn't alone in the empty lot. "I'm at the mall. I've been feeling weird all day and now...someone slashed my tire. I don't know what to do."

"Shit! Okay. I'm coming to get you. Can you wait inside until I get there?"

I sniffled, overcome with fear and anxiety. “I think so. The security guards are still here.”

“I’ll be there soon. Stay safe.”

“Please hurry. I’m...scared.”

Hot tears blurred my eyes as I darted back to the mall doors. A guard was pulling the metal grate to block the row of glass doors. She froze when I approached.

I wiped my eyes and tried to speak as calmly as I could. Holding my work badge up, I said, “Hi, I’m Chase Werth. I work at the *Cellphone Emporium* booth. I’m having some car trouble and a friend is coming to pick me up, but I don’t feel safe waiting outside. Is it okay if I stay in here until he comes? I know you’re trying to close up. It shouldn’t be too long.”

She studied me and must have seen the fear I tried to hide. Her stance relaxed. “Sure thing, hun. I’d rather have you safe. Do you want me to stay with you while you wait?”

I bobbed my head, worried that if I spoke, I would fall apart. She sat on the edge of a planter that faced the doors and patted the spot beside her. The woman exuded that protective mama bear vibe. I loved my mom, but that was something I had never experienced with her. It was usually me taking care of her instead of the other way around.

The guard stayed with me until a silver *BMW* convertible rolled up to the curb much sooner than I expected. A text came a moment later.

Archie: I’m here

I stared for a moment, shocked to see him in such a nice car. Although, besides the reminiscing and the phone sex, I didn’t know much about Archie.

Standing, I faced the woman beside me. “Thank you for staying with me. I really appreciate it. That’s my friend. I’ll be fine now.”

She flicked her gaze to Archie, then back to me. “You be careful, okay?”

“I will. Um...is it going to be okay for me to leave my car overnight?”

“I’ll make sure the rest of the team knows that it belongs to an employee and you’ll be back for it tomorrow.”

“Thanks again. Have a good night.”

“You too.”

Once I was through the door, I hurried to the car, but stopped before touching it. This was vastly different from my old, beat up *Toyota*.

Archie reached across the car and opened the door. “Hop in, Chase. Let’s get you out of here.”

Right. Out of here and away from the unease that clung to me. I climbed in, staring at my knees, suddenly feeling vulnerable. More exposed than I was when I took pictures for him last night.

Archie pressed a finger under my chin, tilting my head up to meet his gaze. “You’re okay. I’ve got you.”

My eyes stung again. Despite feeling out of my league in his fancy car, I felt safer with him than I had all day. “Thank you.”

“Of course, sweetness. I told you I was here for you. Do you want me to take you home?”

Shaking my head, I said, “No. Not really. I don’t know where to go, but I...am not in the right headspace to go home.”

“Alright. No problem.”

He started driving, leaving the mall and the eerie feeling behind. With one last glance at my abandoned car in the lot, the hair on my neck stood up. What would have happened if I stayed? Was someone waiting to attack me?

Archie squeezed my leg, bringing my focus back to the present. I folded my fingers over his and simply existed as he drove. I didn't care where he took me as long as I wouldn't be alone.

The last thing I expected was to pull into the garage of a two-story house in the nicest neighborhood in town. After the garage door closed behind us, we got out, and he entered a code to the door that led into the kitchen. I followed quietly as I took in the beautiful open-concept room. It was decorated in a classy, minimalistic way. Shades of gray tones. Lighter gray in the furniture and accents with dark gray curtains.

“Wow. This is beautiful. Is this your family's home?”

Archie grinned as he put his keys on a hook. “No. This is my place. I live here alone.”

My mouth gaped as I turned to look at him. He was my age, and he had all of this to himself? All I had to my name was that piece of crap car I'd left behind at the mall.

“What? How?”

Archie closed the distance between us and pressed a finger to my lips. “That doesn't matter right now. You're here with me and you're safe. I have a security system and blackout curtains, so you won't have to worry about anyone being able to see in. Nothing is going to happen to you, okay?”

I had so many questions, eager to know more about this mysterious man that had grown and changed so much since we were in school. But even more, I felt relieved. That I could let my guard down for the first time in months. Last night, texting with Archie had been a small reprieve, but now...this was huge.

Stepping into him, I let my head fall on his shoulder. “Thank you.”

Archie's arms wrapped around me and pulled me in tight. The strength that rippled through his body was both

comforting and exciting. “What do you need right now?”

I’d been on edge for so long, even before the mall and the weirdness with my bedroom window. Ever since I came home after my mom called me, sobbing on the phone. I hadn’t had a moment of peace, besides Archie instructing me through text. Too much in my head; worry, fear, paranoia, regret, anger, feeling sorry for myself. It was...too much. What I needed more than anything was to get out of my head. “To not think.”

Chase

Before I could process, Archie turned me around until my back was pressed against the kitchen island. His eyes were dark and heated with desire, my body warmed under the intensity of his gaze. He hesitated long enough to allow me to stop, but I couldn't. Not with him looking at me like that. I gave him a slight nod.

His lips were on mine in an instant, kissing me hard. Nothing like that feather-like touch he left me with at the mall. His tongue swept over my bottom lip until I opened and he deepened the kiss. A growl rumbled up from his throat. It was the sexiest, hungriest sound I'd ever heard.

Archie played with the hem of my polo work shirt. He swallowed my gasp when his fingers grazed against my skin. The way he touched me and devoured my mouth filled my every thought.

When he pulled back, I chased him with a whimper. Archie smirked and lowered to his knees. He looked up, eyes locked on mine, watching me watch him as he deftly undid my pants and pulled my boxer briefs down to reveal my hard cock.

His gaze dropped to take in the sight he had unveiled and he licked his lips. "Mmm, so much prettier in person."

Archie's tongue swiped across the tip, making me moan. How long had it been since I'd had this kind of attention? I wasn't sure if I'd ever had the kind of intense attention Archie gave me. As if he'd spent years imagining this moment and it was finally here.

I gripped the edge of the counter behind me as my dick disappeared into his mouth. He didn't stop until his nose was nuzzled against me and I was hitting the back of his throat.

"Oh, fuck!"

And then he started moving. He was a man possessed, bobbing aggressively, licking and swirling his tongue. The slightest graze of his teeth had me up on my tiptoes, trying to chase the feeling. My fingers ached from how tightly I clutched the counter.

Archie hollowed his cheeks, and my vision blurred with the intense pull. “Oh, God, Archie. I’m gonna...”

I couldn’t even finish before I came hard. He hummed in appreciation around my cock. The sensation nearly too much on the oversensitive flesh.

He popped off, kissed my head, and tucked me back into my underwear. A moment later, he was standing before me once more. His arms tightened around my back and I released my death grip on the counter.

Archie held me, keeping me upright. My body limp and mind numb. He kissed the side of my cheek. “Do you want to lie down?”

“Mmhmm.” It was all I could manage. My brain was effectively offline.

An arm swept under my legs and lifted me off the ground, bridal style. I never imagined being carried like this, but he did it with ease. I tightened my grip around his neck as he took me up the stairs to a large master bedroom with a four-poster king bed that was unexpectedly elegant and darkly sexy.

Archie carefully placed me on the bed. “Do you want your clothes off?”

I nodded, and he started with my shoes and socks. Archie slid my pants down my legs and left them in a ball on the floor. I leaned up enough for him to pull my shirt off of me, happy to let him do all the work. His eyes lingered over the underwear that remained.

“And those?”

Another nod. He was smiling as he freed me from the boxer briefs and added them to the collection on the floor. Archie looked as hungry for me as he had downstairs, but he didn't touch me. He walked around the bed, kicked off his shoes, and climbed in beside me, fully clothed.

Scooting across the bed, he tucked my naked frame against his. It was strange, me nude, him clothed, in a room that was too big and bright. A bizarre mixture of comfort and uncertainty.

“What about you?”

“What about me?” His arms tightened around me, my head resting on the silky soft dress shirt.

“Can I do something for you?”

“You are.”

“That's not what I meant.”

His thumb swept the hair out of my face and he pressed his lips to my forehead. “I know. But today is about you, Chase. Taking care of you and making you feel safe. Do you?”

I let out a deep sigh and pushed my body closer to his, throwing my leg over his khakis. “Yeah. I do.”

“Rest up. I'm right here. I swear I won't let anything happen to you.”

And I believed him. I relaxed completely; the only thought in my head was the peace his presence gave me. I didn't know how long I slept, but it was dark when I awoke in a cocoon, surrounded by warmth.

Breath against my ear startled me until I remembered where I was and who was holding me. I turned around until we were almost nose to nose. Even in the darkness, I could see the outline of his fair hair and the blue in his eyes.

“Are you feeling better?” Archie brushed his finger through my hair.

“Yeah. Much better.” I didn’t realize how drained I’d been. Not just physically, but mentally and emotionally as well. From trying to pick up the pieces after the death of a man I loathed to helping my mom with daily tasks she couldn’t seem to bring herself to do.

“Shit! My mom.” I started to pull away from Archie, realizing I hadn’t been home to fix her dinner.

“She’ll be fine, Chase.”

I sat up and put my head in my hands. “No, you don’t understand. She won’t cook anything, not even for herself. I can’t do much about it while I’m at work besides making a sandwich and hope she eats, but I make her dinner. Fuck! I just want one *fucking* night off.”

Archie sat beside me, rubbing circles on my back. “So take it. Take the night off. You deserve it, Chase. And you can’t keep doing this forever.”

Forever. How many times had I thought that this would be the rest of my life? Taking care of the woman who was supposed to do that for me. Every single fucking day until one of us died. *Surely I could take one night off, right?*

Before I could answer, Archie added, “We could order pizza or food delivery for her.”

It sounded nice but... “I can’t pay for that.”

“Don’t worry about that.” Archie swept his hand around the oversized shadowed room. “I can handle it.”

I swiveled toward him, embarrassment and hope swirling through me. “You’d do that? Why?”

Fingers brushed through my hair. “It’s purely selfish. I’m not ready for you to leave yet.”

Leaning into his hand, I let out a sigh. It felt so nice to be touched and cared for. And the thought of spending more time with him made his offer too appealing to turn down.

“Yeah, okay.”

Archie’s lips brushed against mine before he got up and headed toward the bedroom door.

“What do you think she would want?”

“Um...Chinese maybe.”

“Alright, I’ll order it and see what I can fix up for us. Take your time, sweetness. You’re welcome to shower or take a bath or snoop through my drawers. Come down when you’re ready.”

“Thank you!” I shouted after him.

While all of those options were tempting, I mostly wanted to be with him. Besides, snooping wasn’t as exciting when you were given permission to do it. I dressed in my discarded underwear and pants and walked downstairs barefoot and bare-chested.

Archie was on the phone while he pulled things out of his fridge. It sounded like he was ordering a whole family-sized meal before giving my address. Funny...I didn’t remember telling him where I lived. But it didn’t matter as I thought about how much food my mom would have. Enough leftovers for days. Easy food that she could heat up or eat cold.

Digging out my phone, I sent her a text.

Me: I’m staying with a friend tonight and we’ve ordered delivery for you. Please eat and put the food away when you’re done so it will be good for tomorrow. Love you.

Archie busied himself at the stove. When he pulled out a big steak, my mouth watered. The last time I had steak was before I quit my job and used my savings to move back home. I sat at the island and watched. My face flushed as I recalled what happened here earlier, remembering the feel of the tile beneath my palms.

Looking around, I took in the large room and thought of the *BMW* convertible in the garage. “Is this really all yours or do you have a sugar daddy or something?”

Sometimes, I wished I had one. It would solve so many problems and I wouldn’t have to work for that dickhead Roger anymore. But I was no one special. Who would pay to keep *me*?

He kept his back turned to me as he focused on what he was doing.

“Yes. It’s all mine. And no, no sugar daddy for me. I like being in control too much.”

When he texted me and instructed every move I made... yeah, he took control. And I liked it.

“How? What do you do? Or are you a trust fund kid? I don’t recall you being rich in school.”

He plopped the meat in a hot pan with an enticing sizzle, and he faced me. “No, I didn’t have much back then. Neither did my family.”

“Okay. Are you like a tech mogul or something?”

He smirked even as his eyes darkened. “I’ll just say that I don’t have a traditional job.”

“What? Are you serious? That’s all you’re going to tell me?!”

That smirk grew into something devilish. “It’s better if you don’t know, sweetness.”

“Now, I’m really intrigued.” How could he say something like that and expect me to let it go?

I walked around the island until I stood before him. “If I suck you off, will you tell me then?”

Heat flared in his eyes. It was impossible to hide how much he wanted that. And I did too. Had been thinking about it since

he had me taste my own cum and I wished it were his I'd licked off my finger.

His knuckles brushed against my cheek. "And if my answer doesn't change, what then?"

He asked the question as if he knew the answer already. Even if he wouldn't tell me, I wouldn't refuse him. I couldn't. I wanted him too badly. The thought of my mouth on him had me salivating as much as the steak.

Archie kissed me and returned his attention to the stove. "Yup, that's what I thought."

"Asshole," I muttered, Archie chuckling at my response.

Before long, we were sitting at his dining table, enjoying a delicious meal. It was nice, eating dinner with another person. Most nights my mom stayed in her room and I took my food to mine. Two people who existed in the same house, but that was about it. I didn't realize how much I'd been starving for attention...and steak.

As we neared the end of our meal, Archie's expression turned serious. "I think you should call off tomorrow. Whoever this person is that's been stalking you might show up again."

Stalking? A chill rolled through me. I supposed that was the only term for it, but hearing the word made it really sink in.

"Who would do such a thing? Why? I don't have any money. I haven't done anything to anyone. I'm no one special."

"I disagree. You are very special, Chase. But until we find out, I want you safe."

With how creeped out I felt all day, work was the last place I wanted to be. Except...I needed the money.

My head fell with the weight of my obligations. "I have to go."

Archie slammed his hand on the table, making me jump. “That’s bullshit, Chase.”

With wide eyes, I stared at him in shock. The anger on his face softened.

“I’m sorry. I just care about you and don’t want to see you hurt. I don’t want another phone call with you scared and me not there at your side. And if it’s about the money, I can help you. I *want* to help you.”

“Why? Why are you doing all this for me?”

Pushing his chair back, Archie got up and walked around the table. He knelt at my side.

“Chase, you have pushed yourself to exhaustion taking care of others. Now, it’s your turn to be taken care of. To make sure your needs are met, to see you safe and healthy and happy. And I want to be the one to do that. Please, let me.”

Overcome by all the emotions welling up in me, I threw my arms around his neck and clung to him. I needed so badly to have someone in my corner after a lifetime of fighting on my own. Would it really be so bad to rely on him and let him be that for me?

“Okay.”

Archie held my face in his hands and grinned before smashing his mouth into mine. His kiss felt like a claim. Like he owned me, and *fuck*, I really liked it. I would do just about anything to keep feeling the way I did when I was with him—wanted, desired, cared for. And I hadn’t even gotten to touch him or see him naked yet.

“Archie. I want you,” I whispered breathily.

“You have me, Chase. I’m yours. I have been for years.”

I didn’t fully grasp what he meant, except that he was mine. “Take me to bed.”

He rose and grabbed my hand, leading me up the stairs. My heart raced and my cock pulsed with each step that took us closer to his room. Once inside, he sat me on the edge of the bed and stood before me, his dick at face level. I reached for his pants, but he held my wrist and stopped me.

“I’m not a good man, Chase.”

“You’re good to *me*. That’s all that matters. None of us are really good, anyway.”

“I mean it. I can be...possessive. If we do this, if we cross this line, I don’t think I’ll be able to let you go.”

His words were so intense that goosebumps prickled my skin. It should be worrisome, a red flag, my brain trying to signal me. At the same time, my dick hardened and pressed against my fly. The idea of being owned by someone, by *him*, was sexy as hell. I’d been doing everything by myself for so long, to have someone with me for it? *Fuck!* I needed that.

I reached for his pants again. His hand went to my throat, squeezing lightly. Enough to keep my attention, but not enough to hurt. With my head forced up to look at him, his eyes had grown darker than I’d ever seen them.

“I belong to you, Chase. I always have and always will. I won’t hurt you. You’ve always been safe with me. But if we continue that means you belong to me too. And I don’t fucking let go of what is mine. Understood?”

With rounded eyes, I saw the darkness in him, saw it all. It reached out and crawled into me, and I opened myself up to it. I wanted to be enveloped by it, to let it sweep over me and take me out of my head and out of my pathetic life.

Gulping, my Adam’s apple bobbed against his hand. “Understood. Make me yours, Archie.”

An animalistic growl sounded in his throat, and it made my cock throb. His hand released my neck, and I finally was able to reach him. The sound of his zipper echoed in my ears and

made me salivate. I pushed his pants down and saw his hard bulge testing the limits of the elastic band of his underwear. Leaning forward, I mouthed him through the cotton.

He moaned and grabbed the back of my head, pushing me against him. I loved how he bucked into me as I grazed my teeth over the material. My fingers dug under the waistband and slid it down, freeing his cock at last. I needed him so badly. I didn't waste any time before I took him in, plunging myself onto his shaft. I went so deep it made me gag, pulling off for a moment to readjust. Relaxing my jaw, I went back down.

Archie's hand stayed in my hair as I found my rhythm, sucking him in a frenzy like it was my first time. It wasn't, but it had been a while, and he made me hungry and reckless.

"That's right, sweetness, get me nice and wet for you."

A bobbed a few more times, stroking his cock with my throat, before his grip tightened in my hair and pulled me back. "Stand up."

Archie's command made my dick jump, as much as it could while it was confined in my pants. I did as he said and he turned me around until my back was against his chest. He still had his shirt on, I didn't. The feel of fabric against my bare back was tantalizing.

His fingers worked the fly of my pants and my boxer briefs soon joined them at my feet. Archie's arms tightened around my chest, holding me in place, his cock nudged against my crack. Hot breath tickled the back of my neck.

"I know I said I wouldn't hurt you and I won't. Except this one time. I'm not going to prep you, Chase. I want you to feel me. I want you to wake up tomorrow and your body to remind you who it belongs to. Tell me to stop, and I will. But I promise I will make you feel so, so good."

His whispered words had me practically ready to come without even being touched. I nodded, unsure if my voice

would work.

“I need to hear you say it, sweetness.”

“Please, Archie. I need you to fuck me. I don’t want to feel anything else but you.” My voice was dripping with desperation and need. If I thought about it too hard, I might have been embarrassed for how I sounded. But with Archie, I couldn’t think, so it didn’t matter.

A hand pushed my back until I was bent over the side of the bed and my legs spread apart. I was exposed and vulnerable, but felt strangely safe at his command. His finger brushed against my hole, making me jolt.

“I’ve been tested, Chase, and I know you have too. But I’ll give you this choice. Do you want me to use protection?”

I pushed my ass back, trying to urge him. My brain wasn’t even processing how he could know my sexual health. “Nothing but you, Archie.”

I had no more warning before his cock pushed against my hole. My hands clenched the blanket as I braced myself against the biting sting. Archie pushed slowly but consistently, not easing up. It had been a long time since I’d been with someone and had never done it without lube or foreplay. The burn continued, but I wanted it, wanted to be stretched by his cock, unable to feel anything but him. I was breathing hard until he bottomed out and rested. I was so full, my body still trying to adjust.

Archie’s hands rubbed over my back. “You’re doing so good.”

His praise infused me, making my eyes well with tears. I wanted to be good for him. *Needed* it. When he slid back out, I bit my lip to swallow the gasp that wanted to break free. It was too much, but I didn’t want it to stop.

In one thrust, he drove all the way back in, and I inhaled sharply with the bite of it. But then he started moving.

Pumping into me. My channel was so tender that I felt everything in a blissful mix of pain and pleasure that shut my brain off. Archie filled my entire being. Heart, mind, soul, ass—everything was full of him. His hands gripped my shoulders as he began to pound into me. Tears rolled free; I no longer tried to hold them back. I was grunting, whimpering, shouting. I lost all control of my reactions. It was pure, raw, instinctive.

“That’s right, Chase. Give me your body, give me your cries. They are mine alone. You feel so fucking good. You were made for me.”

I gave him everything, and he took it. The slapping sounds of his hips against my ass mixed with our cries of passion. And yet, it was peaceful. Like finally finding a place in the world. Like feeling I belonged somewhere for the first time. Like I belonged *to* someone.

My dick rubbed against the bed with each thrust from Archie. When he buried himself deep, hot bursts of cum pulsing within, I exploded so hard I screamed.

Archie rubbed soothing circles over my back as I felt my whole body sink into the bed. My legs had no strength left in them and I was quickly slipping into blissed-out euphoria.

Before I disappeared into a cloud, Archie slid slowly and carefully out of me and I sucked in a sharp breath as my body released him. And I was so empty, emptier than I had ever been, and yet the sting remained. It was comforting in a way I didn’t expect. A reminder of him inside me.

I heard shuffling behind me before the bed dipped. Archie’s strong hands hooked under my armpits and pulled me toward him. He leaned against the headboard and pulled me into his side. My head tucked on his chest and he continued those soothing motions on my back, lulling me back into that cloud that welcomed me with open arms.

A kiss brushed across my head. “Chase?”

“Mmm?”

The soothing motion stopped, and his hand slid down my back to grip my ass firmly. “Whose ass is this?”

“It’s yours.”

“Good.”

That same hand traveled up my body until it fisted the back of my hair, tugging slightly until I looked up at him. “And Chase?”

“Yeah?”

“Who do *you* belong to?”

“Only you, Archie.”

He bent over me and kissed me. “That’s right.”

Chase

The next morning came, and I wanted nothing more than to stay in bed with Archie all day. I slept hard in his embrace; my body used so well, it was all I could think about.

But he'd pulled away from me before the sun had broken through the curtains. I heard the shower run while I was in the twilight between sleeping and waking. Sadly, he was dressed before I was fully conscious. I may have frowned at the sight.

Archie came around the bed and sat between my legs. He stroked my cheek with the tenderest of touches, so opposite from the forceful way he drove into me last night. It felt even more intense in contrast.

"I have some things I have to do today. You can do whatever you want, but don't leave. I have cameras and I'll set my alarm. No one can get in unless I let them. Please, sweetness, don't fight me on this. I just want to make sure you're safe when I'm not here."

Somewhere in the back of my mind, a protest to being trapped in his house tried to break through. But I had felt more peace and security within these walls than I had the entire time at home. And spending the day in a fancy house without any responsibilities sounded pretty damn perfect.

"I'm not going anywhere. But I might take you up on the offer to snoop."

Archie smirked. "Snoop away. Don't open the door to anyone and if you need anything, call me."

After he left one more searing kiss on my lips, I snuggled back into the soft, cozy bed, enjoying the scent of him on the pillow and the pleasant ache in my body.



He was there alone. He had no idea I was watching him still. That I saw him soaking in the bathtub. That I saw him opening every drawer. That he put music on and danced around the house.

He looked so wild and free and so fucking perfect it hurt. Did he know he was right where I wanted him? Did he feel me still? Every now and then, I saw him whip his head around or peek through the curtains. That's right. Even now, the connection burned between us. The electricity that slid along the wire that tied him to me. I smiled broadly, knowing he was affected by me, whether I was in the room with him or not. He was mine!



I felt like the kid in Home Alone, doing whatever I wanted. Dancing, eating ice cream. No, not just ice cream, *gelato*, a luscious treat. I hoped he wouldn't mind. I would pay him back if I had to. But for today, I was enjoying myself like I was on vacation. And I was. Vacation from life, from *everything*.

When I heard the garage door open, I lowered the volume of the sound system and righted the pillows on his couch, suddenly unsure what I should do with myself. But when Archie met me with a devilish smile, butterflies stirred inside me. I could get used to him looking at me like that. To welcoming him home after he did whatever work he did. I wanted to know more about it, but the mystery was kind of thrilling too.

I threw my arms around his neck and kissed him. He pressed his nose into my hair and breathed me in. “Did you have a good day?”

“Yes, it was really nice. I feel like I actually got to relax for the first time in forever.”

“Good, I’m glad. Let me change and we’ll go get your car taken care of.”

“Oh, right.” My car. Having spent the last day and a half tucked inside of the luxurious home and with the man in front of me, I almost forgot about my tire being slashed. The thought of someone watching and waiting for me made me shudder.

“You’re okay, I’ve got you.”

I leaned my head against his shoulder. “Sorry, I’m just realizing how close a call it was and that anything could have happened.”

“But it didn’t. And it won’t. I’m here now.”

I breathed deeply, trying to focus on the way his strong arms held me. On how safe I felt with him, and how free I’d been in his home. “Do you think we can stop by my place? I haven’t been able to bring myself to look around my house. But I need to know if it’s all been in my head, or if there’s any sign of anyone having been there.”

“Sure thing, sweetness.”

The temperature had dropped since yesterday and having come with him after work, I only had my work polo. Archie gave me a sleek army green bomber jacket to wear. In his silver convertible, I pulled the jacket over my ears to keep warm.

“What do you do when it gets really cold?”

“I have another vehicle in storage. I’ll probably swap them out soon.”

“What kind?”

“A *Cadillac Escalade*.”

“Figures,” I laughed. For how timid he seemed when he first bumped into me, it turned out Archie was the type that liked to make a statement. And he did. Though he managed to blend in easily too. He was a chameleon. Archie had told me that after that incident in school, he would never be bullied again. And I believed it. He was a man who took instead of was taken from, who pushed instead of got pushed. *Wait...an Escalade?* Something about that tried to wiggle free in my head.

“What color?”

“It’s gray.”

Gray like his house, his silver convertible, all neutral tones. It fit him. That he could stand out or blend in, that he could be anyone. A car, while expensive, but a common enough color, it didn’t draw any extra attention. Just like the gray Escalade that ran down my mom’s husband. The chances of tracking down the exact vehicle were nearly impossible. A brief thought flicked into my head. What if it was him? If the man at my side was the one who killed him? A smile formed at imagining Archie saving me from that douche canoe. But I shook the thought away. *Ridiculous!*

After a tow truck hauled my car away, Archie drove me to my house. I didn’t have to direct him, he knew where to go. But it was a small town, and we still lived in the same house I had in school. I had never invited him over because I hadn’t really known him. I hadn’t really known anyone, too focused on getting out.

He parked, and I led him to the side of the house where we went through a gate that was hidden by overgrown hedges. We crunched through wood chips until we got to the small backyard. I could see the gap in my blinds that haunted me and my blood went cold.

Archie bent down and examined the area. When he looked up at me, the expression on his face confirmed every fear. He brushed himself off and stood before me, holding my arms.

“Chase. I want you to take a deep breath.”

I focused on him, even as my knees wobbled. Breathing in, the air lodged in my throat.

“There are clearly footprints and broken twigs in the bushes there. And I hate to tell you this, I really do, but from that position, it looks like they would be able to see into your room.”

“Oh, God!” The air whooshed out of me and I would have collapsed if Archie hadn’t been holding me up. It was one thing to chase shadows and chalk it up to a vivid imagination, but to have proof? My body started shaking despite the warmth of the bomber jacket.

“My mom! What about her?” I choked the words out.

“Show me where her room is.”

I shook with each step as we followed the narrow path around the perimeter that led to a walkway where the trash cans were stored. Her window was on the opposite side of the house from mine. Archie propped me up against the wall as he carefully checked the entire area.

I couldn’t think, couldn’t see. Everything was closing in around me. Until he was there, in front of my eyes, holding my focus.

His soft half-smile had me relaxing slightly. “There’s nothing. I don’t see any indication of anyone having been over here. They weren’t after your mom. She’s safe.”

“But they were after me?”

Archie brushed his knuckles along my cheek before pulling me against him and holding me tight. I sniffled, trying not to

fall apart completely. Tucked under his arm, he guided me back to my side of the house.

“What do I do?”

“You should call the cops.”

I stiffened. “No. No cops. My mom is barely able to get out of bed already. She wouldn’t be able to handle it if she knew this was happening. I can’t do that to her.”

“Alright. Come, stay with me. Move in with me. My house is safe and I will protect you.”

My jaw fell at his offer. It was too much to ask him to do that. But being able to sleep through the night and not have to worry about eyes peering through my window was quite tempting. “I don’t know.”

A hand gripped my chin. “Chase, I promise you, nothing will happen if you stay with me. I told you I’m not a good man. I’m really not. But everything I do, I do for you. I will end anyone who harms a hair on your head, and I don’t mean that figuratively. You’re mine and no one touches what’s mine.”

It should terrify me, especially knowing that he meant every word he said. But it wasn’t *him* I was afraid of. I didn’t want to live in fear and look over my shoulder constantly. I felt safe with Archie, more than I ever had. Was it so wrong to want someone who would go to any length to take care of me? I’d never in my life had someone who put me first, who made me feel like I mattered more than anything else. And with Archie, I felt that to my core, to the ache in my ass that left a mark on my body and on my soul. To anyone else, I was a nuisance, a thing in the way. To Archie, I was the target, the prize worth protecting.

“Let’s go inside. I need to talk to my mom and pack. Then... you can take me home.”

He grinned broadly, looking as if he'd won the biggest prize at the fair. It made me feel like the most special person in the world.

As we walked out to the gate, I noticed he swept his foot through the wood chips, covering up any evidence that someone had been there so I wouldn't have to see it. He was so thoughtful.

EPILOGUE

Chase

When we got back to his house, the weight I'd been carrying for so long was off my shoulders. Archie would help me carry it now. He promised that my mom would be taken care of, that food would be delivered, and we could check in on her whenever I wanted. But I couldn't stay there anymore. Not physically or mentally.

Sitting in the garage, he leaned across and kissed me. "Welcome home, Chase."

Home. That word sounded like an enchantment. Something powerful and wonderful. Maybe it was all ridiculously fast, but I didn't care. I wanted it, the enchantment, the promise, the...everything that Archie offered me, and I was selfish enough to take it.

I sent in my resignation while he drove us. With his help, I no longer had to go back to the mall, dying a little each time Roger yelled at me. Archie reassured me I could take as long as I needed to find something better. He was happy to take care of me in the meantime.

When we got out of the car, I walked to the trunk with him. We crammed as much of my stuff as we could into the tiny trunk of the convertible. With our arms loaded, Archie was about to close it, but something red caught my eye.

"Wait."

Archie pushed the hood back up. I reached down and felt the soft red fabric. The hair on the back of my neck stood up, and a chill swept over me. I pulled it out enough to see the white fur trim. "Is this a...Santa suit? Why do you have that?"

"Maybe someday I'll tell you."

"Is it a kink thing? Like role play? Are you going to be my Santa and I can sit on your knee?"

Archie's eyes darkened in that way that made him look dangerous and sexy all at once. "Maybe. Is that something you want?"

I shrugged innocently, though I couldn't hide the tent pole in my pants. It wasn't the suit, necessarily. It was the way he looked at me. That insatiable need that made my noisy head quiet. I loved the way he made me feel. The way I could stop thinking with him and just be. I was falling for the man. He was a drug, and I was addicted. No rehab would cure me of him.

Could one fall in love in the course of a few days? It sounded ridiculous. But it had been intense in a short amount of time. Besides, we belonged to each other. Our bodies knew it, our hearts did too. Every part of me knew I was safe with him and I wasn't going anywhere. I was home.

He stepped in close to me, leaving no space between us, and lowered his voice. "Tell me, Chase, have you been a good boy this year? What do you want for Christmas?"

The dark hunger in his eyes made every fear I'd had slip away. I threw my arms over his shoulders. "Only you, Archie."

"That's all I've *ever* wanted."

ABOUT DUCKIE MACK

Duckie Mack normally writes sweet with heat MM romance in both contemporary and PNR. She lives in Southern California with her family, two dogs, and three cats. Duckie is a sappy romantic who also loves musicals, theater, superheroes, and fairytales. She also loves to go to pride events and give out free hugs, or talk books, usually both.

Stay up to date with Duckie's book news or check out her other work here- <https://linktr.ee/authorduckiemack>

EXPECTATIONS

a Submit (Christmas) prequel



R. Phoenix & Adara Wolf

I have a secret.

Even though I'm a big bruiser of a man, my fantasies include me being tied up, beaten, and forced to submit. If anybody in my family knew, they'd kill me—because my family is the head of the Winters Mob, and there's no place for gay men here.

I get desperate though. One night at a BDSM club will be enough to sustain me... or it would have been, if I hadn't met Silvano. He's elegant, handsome, and completely in charge. I can't get him out of my mind. Too bad his father is the head of the Cresci Family, one of our bitterest rivals.

I thought it was just one night of disaster, but a chance encounter at a bank, and a bank heist, has us thrown together again. He radiates domination that makes my knees buckle and has me wanting to obey every word.

I don't know how I'll ever go back to my old life ever again.

HFN. This story is set approximately 10 years before [Surrender](#) and [Submit](#).

Content Warnings

Bdsm, D/s, dubcon, CNC, unsafe sex, bondage, facefucking, dub/noncon gunplay, violence, first time submission, rivals to lovers, chance meeting, small top/big bottom, light humiliation, high heat, instalust

ONE

Kyran

If anyone in my line of business finds out I'm visiting a BDSM club as a *submissive*, they'll laugh me out of the mafia entirely. If they find out I'm curious about submitting to a man? They'd probably laugh, then kill me.

It's a dangerous game to play, but I've heard that Club Alpha is the picture of discretion. I'd had to sign all sorts of non-disclosure agreements about what goes on here and consent to as many background checks as I assume a CIA agent would have to go through.

But that's all fine, because on the surface, *Kyran Winters* is a fine, upstanding member of society.

Perfectly normal.

Perfectly boring.

Perfectly *forgettable*.

For the most part, I look like every other muscled man who spends an hour a day at the gym — a young man in the prime of his life, wearing button-down shirts and nice trousers.

Most days.

Other days, I have to worry about bloodstains, and, well... The dress code then is entirely different.

It takes my eyes a moment to adjust to the dark light of the building, which is punctuated here and there by Christmas lights that shine low but steady. I touch the green wristband I'm wearing, the symbol of my intention to play this evening. The plastic band makes me feel like I'm at an amusement park, but what's going on around me is anything but.

People walk around with leashes attached to their wrists, their pets crawling behind them while they chat with others who are allowed to keep their eyes up. Some of them are

wearing tacky Santa hats or fake reindeer antlers, even though Christmas is still over a week away. There are rooms around the main bar area, and some of the doors are open, indicating either open scenes or empty rooms.

I sit down at the garland-strung bar, but I only order a glass of seltzer water. I need to stay clear-headed. Even though I'm officially off-call — and my phone has been confiscated anyway — there's always the chance that I'll have to deal with an emergency once I leave here.

There are two men whispering to each other at one end of the bar, and a man with a woman at his feet at the other, chatting with another woman who has a crop in hand.

I feel so fucking out of place.

I'm starting to regret coming.

Anyone who sees me will instantly assume I'm a dom — and a straight one at that — and I don't relish the idea of having to repeat myself multiple times.

It does mean I'm not surprised when a woman in a provocative outfit approaches me with a sultry smile. "Hey there, Daddy. Can I get you something?"

I glance at her, briefly taking in her appearance and committing it to memory like I do with everyone I come across. I hold up the glass of water. "Not a Daddy," I say tersely, and while I don't really want to telegraph my predilections to the entire club, I almost wish I had a separate band for *submissive* instead of just *open to playing*.

She pouts a little at me. "Oh. A *Master*? Or a *Sir*?" She leans against the bar, but she's lost some of the flirtiness. "Or are you looking for a pretty boy? My friend, he's—well, he's not into men, but he likes the way big tough guys like you hit."

I try not to sigh. "Thanks, but I'm not interested." Why did I come here? What the fuck was I thinking? I don't know how to tell her that not every muscle man likes to be the one in

charge, especially since I've never fucking done this before. Admitting it would make it seem more *real*, and I'm not sure I'm ready for that.

The woman pouts at me. "Let me help you find somebody," she insists. "What are you looking for? Bigger? There's Deborah—everybody loves her because she's so good at taking it. Even the guys who are assholes about looks will play with her. Or..."

I'm about to say something to try to get rid of her when I sense somebody stepping up behind me. I tense instantly, trying not to spin around and get into a defensive position.

"I think it's an entirely different problem, Jenny," a smooth male voice says. "I'll give him the welcome tour."

I slowly look at him, not sure what I'm expecting.

It's not this elegant, refined man who is even more out of place at the club than I am. He's wearing a light-pink dress shirt with a perfectly tailored pair of slacks. Even though the shirt sleeves are rolled up, he still looks like he just came from an office job at a financial firm. His arms aren't large and muscular the way most of my compatriots' are, the way my own are.

His face is almost delicate, too, with a thin, pointed nose and plush lips. His blond hair reaches just past his ears and is styled in a way to complement his face.

The most striking part of him is those bright blue eyes though.

I can't help but feel a part of me respond to him, because within those blue eyes lies something I recognize on a visceral level. He seems innocuous enough, but there's no way anyone would ever mistake him for a bottom despite the fact that he's smaller than I am. He just has this charismatic presence that I can't ignore, and I nod to him. "Thank you," I say with no small amount of relief.

Jenny sighs in disappointment. “I guess so. Well, if you change your mind, I’ll be around.” She waves to us and walks off, leaving me alone with this new stranger.

He stands next to me, *just* inside my personal space. I don’t know if he’s doing it on purpose, or if he simply doesn’t want to sit down.

His eyes do a very obvious once-over of me, and I struggle not to fidget under that gaze.

“As you can see, we like newcomers here,” he says with a slight smile. “Jenny likes to think of herself as the unofficial welcome wagon. But maybe she should have started by asking for your name.”

“I might have given it to her, if she had,” I say. For some reason, I feel oddly protective of my identity. It’s not like I’m well known even in my own circles, contenting myself with keeping my set of soldiers in line, and I rather like it that way.

My brother has been hinting that I might be overdue for a promotion, but it would make outings like this even more difficult.

The man chuckles, even raising his hand to cover his mouth. “Then, let me formally ask. What should I call you? I wouldn’t want to make assumptions.”

I meet his eyes with a stubborn set to my jaw as I utter the words for the first time, already feeling the humiliation. “Boy. You can call me boy. What should I call you?”

“Do you want to call me something special? If not, you can call me Silvano.” He reaches out with a slender hand. I expect him to touch me, and instinctively I want to growl at him, but he holds it a few centimeters away from my jaw. “You’ll have to tell me if you want something, *boy*.”

It feels terrible and embarrassing and exhilarating, yet somehow so *right*. It’s the first time I’ve had the nerve to

demand someone use the word to describe me, the first time I'd admitted to my preferences.

The problem is that I don't know exactly what I want.

I stay silent, because I don't want to admit that.

Silvano withdraws his hand, and with another amused snort, sits down on the chair next to mine. "Very well. The welcoming tour." He signals to the bartender, who pours a drink for him without even being given an order. Once Silvano has it in hand and has taken a sip, he continues, "It's often recommended that newbies simply watch the first time, to get a proper sense of what they want and to maybe meet a potential partner without the pressure of performing immediately. Some people show up with grand fantasies, and discover the idea of getting spanked is quite different from the reality of watching somebody take a spanking, or getting spanked themselves."

"I don't know if I'll be back," I surprise myself by admitting. "Everyone has... expectations. Exploring different things seems impossible when that's the case. I doubt other men would appreciate me introducing myself as, essentially, a..."

A submissive.

Those are truly difficult words to say.

"Ah. *Expectations*." Silvano says the word with a heavy dose of bitterness that has me looking at him with a little more interest. "I do know about that." He takes another sip of his drink. "Would you like to take this to a private room? ...That is, if I'm not misunderstanding your interest. I could always find a forceful woman for you."

"I'm not..." I take a deep breath, trying to gather the words. "I'm not interested in women." If I'm not safe admitting that here, where will I be safe uttering that statement? It's not like the family would execute me for being gay, but it would cause

problems. It's easier to keep plausible deniability. But here? Here, I find myself wanting to be honest.

Especially if it means going to a private room with Silvano, which has my heart beginning to race.

Silvano sets his drink down and stands. "Good. In that case, follow me." He starts walking toward one of the open doors, not even looking over his shoulder to make sure I'm following.

I let out a shuddering breath, grabbing my glass of water mostly to have something to toy with as I let him lead the way to an empty room. It would be relatively plain if it wasn't for the impact toys hanging from the wall, the bowl of condoms and the industrial sized bottle of lube — but I can't focus on the room.

I can only focus on *him*.

Will he tell me to kneel, like people had been doing out in the main room?

Will I do it?

"Close the door," he orders, going over to the single arm chair and sitting down.

I do, and I'm not sure if it's because he's told me to do it or for my own reasons. Either way, it's intoxicating to listen to him, to *obey*.

When I turn around, I find him considering me.

"Now, obviously, I can't force you to do anything you don't want to do," Silvano says. "You've got... quite a few pounds on me. This only works if you actually want it." His eyes meet mine. "So. Do you want this? Do you want to submit to me?"

I don't know the answer to that question either. So much of this is unknown to me, and I feel like I'm walking a tightrope.

I take in a deep breath, letting it out slowly. Can I bring myself to do this? There's a part of me that wishes he *could*

take me by force, that resents the fact that I was built this way when it would be so obvious and easy if I was some twink. Hell, even if I looked like Silvano, it would be easier for people to accept.

“I don’t know,” I finally rasp, but that’s a lie because... *Yes*. Yes, I want to submit to him more than I’ve ever wanted to do anything in my life. The fantasies have been with me for as long as I can remember, and my furtive porn searches—searches I always delete, videos I’m not brave enough to save—always include submission.

Silvano watches me silently, and I start to grow uncomfortable under his intense gaze. It feels like he’s trying to pierce right through me.

“We can start small. Take your shirt off, then kneel in front of me.” Silvano spreads his legs to make space for me on the floor between them.

I take another of those deep breaths, staring at him before letting my gaze trail down his body. I’ve been with men before, in fumbling encounters that are always too quick to be satisfying, and I wonder how different this might feel.

I slowly unbutton my shirt and toss it onto the floor.

I stare at him, meeting his gaze again for a long moment before I bow my head and kneel for him.

It’s like a weight has been lifted off of my shoulders, like a tension in me I hadn’t even realized was there has been uncoiled. I can’t even explain to myself how it feels so wonderful to kneel in front of a man with such casual dominance.

Yet I keep wondering if the tide will turn, if he’ll laugh at me and mock me for it like it always happens in my nightmares.

“Mm. Those are very nice shoulders.” Silvano reaches out to run his delicate hands over my shoulders. I shudder at the

touch, the way he didn't ask permission, but it doesn't make me want to protest. No, it makes me want to give in even more. "But that posture is abysmal. Hands on your knees, back straight. Chin up. It's not the floor you're submitting to."

I've never knelt before.

The words are on the tip of my tongue, but I suspect that a, he already knows, and b, excuses aren't welcome here. I just have to fix the problem.

So I sit up straighter, rest my hands on my knees, and lift my chin to gaze at those ice blue eyes. I don't speak, though it's more because I don't know what to call him than anything else. *Yes, Silvano* doesn't have the same ring to it as I imagine *Yes, sir* would, but it's not something I can do without being told to.

"I'm sure everybody expects you to be big and strong," Silvano says, his hands going lower and squeezing my pecs. "They look at you and think, '*Here's a man who wrecks pussy.*'"

I can't help but sneer at that, even though I try to school my expression back to something impassive.

He quirks his lips, indicating that he noticed my reaction. "Well, I don't expect your cock to wreck anything tonight."

It feels like a jab, almost, even though I know that's ridiculous. I'm the one who came here expecting to be dominated; why would my cock be forcing its way into anyone? Even so, the dismissive words are strange and unfamiliar.

Silvano sits back on the chair and pats his thigh. "Rest your head here, boy. Let's get to know each other."

My breath catches as he says *boy*, which feels every bit as intense and humiliating as I'd expected it to be. He says it with such utter certainty, such casual confidence, that I know this is

far from the first time he's dominated others. I can feel my cheeks burning, and I hesitate for a moment.

Even kneeling, I'm still large, and I crowd his space. Maybe that's why he wants my head on his knee, or maybe he just wants my face close to his cock. A jolt of arousal runs through me, even as part of my mind screams that I should just get up and walk away.

I'm not going to come out of this unchanged.

Slowly, I lean in, resting my cheek against his thigh and looking up at him. I don't think I could speak if I tried, not around the lump in my throat.

Silvano puts his hand on my head and strokes surprisingly gently. "Was that hard? Or does submission come easily? You love digging your nose against cock like a dog?"

I glare at him, but I don't lift my head. "Do you know anything about submitting?" I retort, unable to keep the faint bitterness out of my voice.

Fuck.

I sure as hell don't.

I feel like I'm an actor who's been suddenly thrust into an unfamiliar role, and I don't know what to do with it.

Silvano laughs. I bristle again, but he tightens his hold on my hair. I could break free easily despite that, except...

I like that hint of pain.

"I've practiced, yes," Silvano admits. "I found it utterly unarousing, and my partner kept getting annoyed at my backseat domming. *It would be hotter if you tied me down, or You sound straight out of a porno.* Not in a good way, of course." He winks at me, but I can't bring myself to offer more than a strained smile in response. "Of course, I did learn that I shouldn't simply assume what my partner wants. We're here to make sure everybody gets off, right? So why don't you tell me

your deepest, most shameful desire, and I'll see about making it come true."

I let out a bark of laughter. "Just like that? The simplest thing I've ever done?" I don't even know how to say the words, to spell out what I want from an encounter like this. There are reasons it's taken me so long to come to a club like this. "Why don't you tell me yours first?" I ask, feeling oddly contrary in the moment.

Silvano shrugs. "Sure. I dream of having a dangerous guy who obeys my every order. Everybody else would fear him, but for me, he'd get on his knees and beg to suck me off. I'd probably mark him—tattoos, scars, rings—in places only I would see. The only thing he'd really care about is me and my pleasure. His own would be second to mine."

I inhale sharply, unable to stop myself from reacting to words that send heat right down to my groin. It sounds... It sounds *perfect* and *terrible*, like something I would only think about in the dead of night when I wake up from a wet dream that will never come to fruition.

Then Silvano smiles. "It's just a fantasy, of course."

"You're just saying that," I say, but my voice is unsteady. I curse myself for being so easy to read, for knowing he'll be able to see right through my bravado and know just how much those words get to me.

I've never even dreamed about someone marking me like that, though, like they really do control me. Now that he's mentioned it, though, I can't think of anything else.

"Well, I did approach you because you are exactly my type." Silvano loosens his hold on my hair and starts petting my head. "I'd probably make my fantasy man hold my cock in his mouth while I worked or watched TV."

I have to fight not to groan.

“Ah, and in my fantasy world,” he continues, “I would even entertain company while he knelt between my legs, mouth wide, and his humiliation would mean nothing to him because this is what I asked for.”

Every word seems to send a sharp thrum of arousal through me, and by the time he’s finished speaking, my cock is pressing insistently against my zipper.

My breathing is starting to quicken just a little as I reply, “I guess a man like that has to exist somewhere.”

Like right in front of you; do you recognize it? Do you recognize me?

I can’t utter the words even though they’re on the tip of my tongue. Christ, how it feels good having him pet my short hair like that, something condescending yet soothing all at once as he tells me about this fantasy that sounds so real but that I’m sure is just mocking me.

But how can he be mocking me if he doesn’t know what I yearn for? Hell, when *I* don’t know what I yearn for, only to find it put into words by a total stranger with blue eyes met at the strangest of times.

“I am sure there’s a man who would be willing to pretend with me for a short while,” Silvano says, and he sounds a little resigned. “However, lest I give you the impression that I am one of those doms who is only focused on pure submission, I am also very happy to whip or flog my boy. Or tie him up and watch him squirm for hours, stuffed full from all directions, lost in a haze of pleasure...”

He groans, and I dare look at his crotch. We’ve only been talking, but he’s got a semi under his slacks, too.

I take in a deep breath, letting it out slowly so I don’t give away just how much this is affecting me — but hell, am I even hiding it? He can probably see right through me, to see just how much I crave the things spilling out of his lips even though I’ve never given voice to them.

I'd never fucking *dare*.

But here I am, kneeling in front of this man whose fantasies are so perfectly aligned with needs I hadn't even known existed an hour ago. I'm torn between the urge to get up and leave and to admit that I want all of those things too.

I settle for something in the middle, something more neutral, in the end.

"I could pretend," I say as casually as I can manage. "For a few hours. Give you a taste of what it might be like."

Give myself a taste, really, and maybe... Maybe I'll find that this is what I really wanted. Maybe fate has somehow given me a gift I really don't deserve.

"Oh? Could you? But you didn't even want to tell me any of *your* fantasies," Silvano says with a very smug smile. "I am very certain my fantasy pet wouldn't hide something so trivial as what turns him on from me."

I scowl at him, lifting my head. Cocky bastard.

Am I that transparent?

"I'm not really your fantasy pet," I retort, but I'm starting to run out of ways to stall.

Tell him.

Ugh, the voice in the back of my head isn't helpful at all.

"What happens here stays here, right?" I ask abruptly, interrupting whatever he'd been about to say. "No one knows what happened in this room but us."

"I promise," Silvano says earnestly. "You aren't the only person who has to deal with... *expectations*. I'm not keen on jeopardizing my own personal life over my fantasies."

I swallow hard, closing my eyes for a moment, then I offer in a strangled voice, "I want those things. The things you said. Just for tonight. I..."

I don't want to actually like them.

I don't want to start needing them.

“Yeah? Then unzip my pants and get my cock out.” Silvano lets go of me and spreads his legs a bit more.

My breath catches, and I freeze for a moment. This part isn't new to me. Usually I'd be cutting right to the chase and getting ready to suck or fuck — or be fucked, on the few occasions I could convince some drunk straight guy to give it a go — but this is... delicate. Fragile.

I meet his eyes as I slowly start to unfasten the button on his pants, then carefully unzip them. He's wearing a pair of boxer briefs that are easy to pull down, and I let out a low hiss when his cock springs free of the fabric.

It's all I can look at, all I'm aware of, and I want so badly to taste it. But this is a game, isn't it? Well. Not a game, really, but a *scene*. And in the scene, I'm a submissive, and I do what I'm told.

What kind of initiative am I supposed to take?

I shiver and look back up at him, wanting — needing — an order to continue.

Silvano smiles approvingly at me. “Good job.” He tugs on my hair again and gets my face right up against his cock. I inhale sharply, that heady scent of manliness that I'm embarrassed to enjoy.

I open my mouth and extend my tongue.

Silvano pulls sharply on my hair, denying me my first taste. He laughs at my disappointed sound. “Now, I wouldn't want to make things too easy for you, so clasp your hands behind your back and keep them there. If your hands move at all, I'm calling an end to things.”

My eyes instantly go to his, and I stare at him for a moment, scanning his expression. He's just as aroused as I am, and

this... This isn't just for my benefit. He hadn't been lying when he'd described his fantasies.

I take another deep breath then bow my head, slowly putting my hands behind my back and clasping them together. I want to touch, to feel, but all I can do is lower my head a little. It seems like it would be easy to just take his cock into my mouth, but it ends up brushing along my cheek. It leaves a trail of precum from there to my lips as I try to get to it with my mouth instead of painting my face with it.

Silvano chuckles and uses his free hand to thumb at my lips. He even goes so far as to stick two fingers into my mouth, pushing down on my tongue and almost gagging me with how deep he goes.

I have to fight not to cough, not wanting to be seen as inexperienced — not wanting to disappoint him by gagging before I've even begun.

It doesn't help that the touch is so... dehumanizing, and my entire body is flaming hot with humiliation.

“Nice and wide for me, boy. Let me see what I'm working with here.” He shifts his fingers to stroke my gums. “I hope you do know how to suck cock, at least.”

I nod the best I can, swallowing back the sullen ‘*when I can get it in my mouth*’ I want to utter — or worse, because I'm surprised by just how much this is affecting me. I want his cock, not his fingers, and I'm tempted to bite down on them to get them out of my mouth.

Instead, I start sucking on them, running my tongue along the pads of his fingers, as I give him a preview of just what I can do with my mouth.

“Oh, that's nice. I guess you're a natural born cocksucker,” Silvano says with amusement. The words send another shock of humiliation through me, and I try not to groan around his fingers. “Maybe you do deserve my cock.”

Yes. Yes, I want nothing more than to take his cock into my mouth, to try to take it into my throat even though I've never deep-throated anyone in my life. Why not try now, when I'm already embarrassed and feeling small and pathetic and *wanted*?

Silvano pulls his fingers out and smears the saliva across my lips and chin. "Open wide, boy. If you can hold still, I might even facefuck you."

The thought had never even occurred to me. It should repulse me, and on some level, it does horrify me to think of someone using me in a way that's certainly far from *manly*.

On another, though, it feels so right, like something I need and deserve and want.

I can't bring myself to reply to him or even look at him, instead searching for his cock with my mouth again as I wring my fingers together behind myself and try to stay still. My face is filthy with saliva and precum, but as humiliating as it is, I want more.

It takes me another few seconds to finally close my mouth around the head of his cock, and the salty tang of him is more than welcome. I push forward, not wanting him to pull back and deny me the progress I'd made.

"I was right. The moment I laid eyes on you, I knew I had to have you at my feet." Silvano twists his fingers in my hair. "Even if he doesn't want it, I thought. Maybe especially then. You'd look amazing tied up, too, and you'd have to beg for scraps of affection from me."

I shudder, the thought of it almost more than I can handle. For someone to desire me enough to say something like that — that they'd want me even if I didn't want them — is so *wrong*, but at the same time...

I can't deny that it sends a jolt through my cock.

I don't respond, though, instead focusing on sucking more of him into my mouth. I've never wanted to suck someone as much as I do now, never wanted someone to fuck me as much as I do now.

Suddenly Silvano's grip on my hair tightens and he thrusts forward, driving his cock deeper into my mouth. I choke and struggle, pulling off just a little—and Silvano releases immediately.

I look up at him, confused.

His lips are pursed with disappointment. "I told you. I can't force you to do anything."

It feels like someone just threw a bucket of ice water over me. Of course he can't force me, but I'd thought... I'd thought I could struggle just a little, and he'd insist. Didn't he just finish saying that he had to have me even if I didn't want it?

I pull back completely, averting my eyes. "You're right." I clear my throat then stumble to my feet. "This isn't... This isn't a good idea. I should go."

Silvano rests his chin on his hand and stares at me. "Your choice. It's a shame, but... as I said, I can't force anything."

All I'd done was react the way anyone might have when confronted with a cock being shoved down their throat, and anger starts to simmer within me. "Everything was consensual, if you're worried about that," I say, my voice bitter. "I didn't safeword out. I'm not going to go tell everyone you forced me into anything." I shake my head. "Never mind."

This was a terrible fucking idea anyway, and it isn't one I'm going to repeat.

I stride for the door, wishing for all the world that Silvano would pursue me, grab me by the hair and force me to the ground, shove his cock into my mouth and punish me for denying him.

He doesn't move, and nausea sweeps over me as I close the door behind me.

What the fuck had I been thinking?

TWO

Silvano

“Sign here, here, and here,” the bank clerk says. She’s an attractive woman with a delicate neck and very large earrings, which probably draw many eyes to said neck.

As I sign, I idly wonder if I should invite her to my family’s holiday party, just to get my father off my back about finally finding a woman.

I hand the paperwork back to her. “Large bills are fine,” I tell her. “I’m just buying a car.”

She laughs a little. “*Just*. I wish my cousin would buy me a car for Christmas.”

If it were up to me, I wouldn’t be buying any cars, but my parents had tasked me with this, and it isn’t worth asking why my uncle can’t buy cars for his kids himself.

The clerk takes the piece of paper back, setting it on her desk face down. “Just a moment,” she tells me with another pretty smile. She disappears into the back.

While I wait, I look around the bank. It’s fuller than I expected, but it’s probably due to the date: the afternoon of December 22nd, with the bank closing early on the 24th and fully closing on Christmas Day. There’s the usual Christmas decor, with a few menorahs here and there as a nod to Hannukah. I wonder which poor staffer is in charge of putting up and taking down the decorations.

My eyes catch on a familiar figure coming out of one of the office doors.

It’s my failed sub from a few nights ago.

He’s still as handsome as he was then. Tall, broad-shouldered, thick curly hair. He’s a head taller than me, and

that makes me want to order him to kneel in front of me all the more.

The bank manager is talking to him, and thankfully the building echoes just enough that I can hear a few snippets of their hushed whispers.

“... always happy to assist, Mr. Winters. Please tell your brother...”

Another man with family interests here. I tap my fingers on my lips and consider what information I have. *Winters* isn't an uncommon name, but a Winters with their money at *this* bank...

Then Mr. Winters looks up and spots me. His face blanches, and he nods at the manager. “...of course. I...” He trails off, and his eyes linger on me for a long moment before he gives a slight shake of his head.

I smile and wave at him, and he's quick to avert his eyes.

The bank teller returns with two bundles of cash, and she heads to a machine nearby. She pulls off the strap and runs the first one through the machine, where it quickly counts to a hundred hundred-dollar bills. She does the same with the other then returns to me, tucking the cash into one thick envelope and sliding it over to me. “There you go,” she says cheerfully. “Good luck with your gift buying, Mr. Cresci.”

“Thank you. I hope you have a wonderful holiday,” I say, taking the envelope.

“You too!” She smiles at me then puts up her little “closed” sign at her station, starting to type as her attention shifts back to the more mundane aspects of her job.

I start to walk toward Mr. Winters, formulating a plan of attack. Clearly he'd wanted something very similar to what I did, but I can't exactly act out any of my darkest fantasies at Club Alpha.

Mr. Winters freezes, and the bank manager waits patiently for a beat. “Mr. Winters?” he prompts.

Winters — *boy* — nods absently. “Yes, thank you. If you’ll excuse me, I need to—”

The metal detector by the door suddenly goes off, and the bank manager’s head whips up and around to stare at the entrance. My gaze follows his, and so does Winters’, as we take in the sight of four masked men carrying duffel bags.

“Are you fucking kidding me,” I ask, right when the guy at the front raises his arm, and the gun he’s holding, into the air.

The gunshot is louder than the metal detector.

A few people scream.

Winters barely flinches, looking just as annoyed as I am about the interruption — unlike the others, who have dropped to the floor in terror.

“Listen up, everybody,” the man says. “We hope you’re all having a wonderful holiday. We know you want to share the holiday cheer with us, and you definitely don’t want to make your loved ones mourn your corpses. So you’re all going to empty your pockets, hand over your cash, and pass them all to my colleagues here.”

A woman fumbles with her cell phone, but one of the robbers kicks it out of her hands.

“Your cellphones won’t work. We have jammed all signals going in and out of this building.”

Two of the men stalk toward the tellers’ windows, and frightened faces start scrambling to pull cash out of their drawers. “Don’t try to play hero,” one of them warns the teller who’d passed over my cash moments earlier. “I don’t want that bullshit decoy pack, either.”

She looks startled, but she quickly nods.

“Hey, you two,” the first man says, looking between me and Winters. “Get on the fucking ground and empty your pockets before we shoot you and take everything you have anyway.”

“I think there’s been a misunderstanding,” I tell the erstwhile leader of the robbers. “My name is Silvano Cresci. And my associate here is... well, Mr. Winters. Now, I’m happy to allow you to continue with your little robbery, but—”

“Shut the fuck up and get on the ground!” he shouts, pushing the gun against my chest. “I don’t give a flying fuck who you are.”

I sigh and start to get down to the floor. It was a long shot, I suppose, but if these robbers had been career criminals they probably would have recognized my name. They must be first timers.

From the look on his face that I glimpse on the way down, Winters *does* recognize my name, and he stares at me for long enough that one of the robbers levels his gun at him before Winters raises his hands in the air and lowers himself to the floor as well.

The fourth man is circulating between the other patrons in the crowded bank, taking wallets and purses and dumping them into his own duffel bag.

He stops in front of me and glares at me as I hand over my phone, wallet, cigarettes and lighter. “What’s that in your jacket?”

I pretend to consider, but it’s not worth getting shot over. I pull my envelope of cash out of my inside coat pocket. “The cash I’d come to withdraw. I’d appreciate it if you didn’t steal any of it. I’m buying my cousin a car, and my father will be very upset if he finds out it got stolen.”

The bank robber makes a disgruntled noise and grabs the envelope from me. He opens it up, and inhales sharply. “Jesus... how much is this?”

I glance over at Winters before turning my attention back to the robber. “Twenty grand. Like I said, I would rather you didn’t take it.”

Winters is watching stoically from where he’s kneeling on the ground, and he pulls out a pouch from his inner pocket, waiting for the robber to circle around to him.

“Yeah, and I’d rather you didn’t run your fucking mouth,” the robber says, shoving the cash into his own bag. “Tick tock,” he reminds the other men. “Get the vault and let’s get the fuck out of here.”

“Don’t forget the safety deposit boxes!” I shout after them very helpfully. “There’s usually lots of stuff there. Much of it off the books, because the owners don’t want to tell the government about it!”

The bank manager looks at me in alarm.

“Bullshit,” one of the other men says, the one who’d mentioned the decoy pack. “Not worth it, boss.”

The ring leader looks at him for a moment, then looks around the room. “Did we get any keys from this lot?”

The one who’d gone around collecting the contents of the emptied purses and pockets nods. “Yep. I have all the bank keys, and the big guy and the lady with the big hair both had lock box keys.”

The leader points his gun at the woman, who is cowering on the floor and crying. “What’s in your box, lady?”

She shakes her head. “J-just... some... family pictures, and...”

Another gunshot, and the woman screams. Blood gushes from her arm, and I cringe in disgust.

“Try again, without the lying,” the leader says.

“F-family... jewelry.... D-diamonds... g-gold...” she sobs.

“She’s going to bleed out,” Winters assesses calmly from where he’s still kneeling. “My safety deposit box is 112. There’s plenty of valuables in there as well. May I please help this woman before you end up on trial for murder as well as bank robbery?”

“Nah. Everybody sits right where they are.” The leader motions to one of the robbers. “Go check out the deposit boxes. I’m gonna meet Jim to empty the vault.”

That leaves only two men guarding all of us. I like those odds, even if it sounds like there’s an extra man somewhere inside the bank already.

We wait until the other two have cleared off. I scoot a little closer to Winters.

“Hi, *boy*,” I whisper to him.

“Fuck off, *Cresci*,” Winters mutters. His hands are twitching, and if my suspicions about him are correct, he’s probably aching to deck one of the robbers.

“You left before I could give you my card. I’d give you one now, but they took my card holder.” I grin at Winters’ glare. “I have a proposal... *boy*.”

“Winters,” he snaps, “but I’m listening.” His eyes are trained on the robbers circling the room.

I lean in close enough to whisper directly into his ear. “You, me, in the back room, with a bit of rope, some knives...”

Winters flushes, and I can tell he’s not thinking about this situation for a moment before he focuses back on the conversation. “Got any on you?”

“What the fuck are you whispering about?” one of the robbers shouts, storming over to us.

I raise up my hands in mock surrender. “I know where the bank keeps their spare deposit box keys. If I show you where they are, would you return my twenty grand? And let that poor

woman get medical attention, she really is going to bleed out and die.”

“Show me? You can just fucking tell me,” the robber says, waving his gun unprofessionally. I don’t think he’s as well-trained as his leader.

I shrug. “I guess. The bank manager’s office has a secret safe underneath the desk. You have to move the desk to find it, but my mother used to work here, and if things haven’t changed then you only need the bank manager’s thumbprint to open it.”

The bank manager looks at me with wide eyes, shaking his head. “What? No, that doesn’t exist! There’s nothing in my office!”

I give the bank manager a disappointed look. “Oh? Are you hiding something *else* in that safe? Something even more valuable?”

The robber seems torn, and he looks at his partner. “Do you think...?”

The other guy in the room has his gun aimed at the bank manager. “No harm in checking it out. Come on, buddy. Let’s see what you don’t want us to know about.”

The bank manager pales, but in the face of the gun, he gets up and leads the robber to the offices with trembling steps.

And now there’s only one person guarding us.

“Your turn,” I say to Winters.

He doesn’t acknowledge my words, but as soon as the remaining robber turns his back on us to do another circle of the room, Winters is up and on him, wrenching the gun from his hand. Somehow, he manages to do it without the gun going off, which I appreciate.

Winters levels the gun on him. “Not one word,” he hisses.

The people around us are gaping in astonishment, and even the woman with the bleeding arm is staring.

“Get down on the fucking floor,” Winters says, holding the gun to the robber’s head. “Time for you to empty *your* pockets.”

Much to my pleasure, the man’s trembling fingers come out with zip ties.

Winters makes short work out of securing the man’s hands. “One word, and you’re going to be dead instead of just serving time,” he says quietly, almost too quietly for me to hear.

The robber nods emphatically, no longer a tough guy now that he’s the one at a disadvantage.

Winters signals to me, gesturing toward the bank manager’s office with a querying arch of his brows.

“Can I borrow that shawl?” I ask an elderly woman. She gives me a confused look, but hands over the silky fabric. I twist it around until it’s thicker, then use it to gag the bank robber.

When I’m done, I look around the room. I find a businessman with balding hair staring at me wide-eyed.

“Go help that woman. *Quietly*. Don’t attempt to leave. We don’t know what’s outside. My friend and I are going to take care of the others. I’m going to look for a way to contact law enforcement.”

He nods at me and starts to crawl over to the injured woman. I very pointedly do not look in her direction.

Ugh. I hate gore.

Finally I go join Winters. “Lead the way, boy.”

“Don’t call me that,” Winters mutters savagely at me, but he starts to carefully make his way toward the manager’s office with surprisingly quiet steps given his size.

The guy is red-faced and yelling, and Winters gives me a questioning look — zip ties in one hand, gun in the other.

I can't help but like the fact that he's looking to me for direction, and it gives me an idea of where he stands in his own organization.

I knock on the manager's door, and duck out of the way just as a bullet goes through the glass window. Glass splinters at our feet.

"Did you find the safe?" I ask casually. Winters gets into position on the other side of the door.

"You fucking liar!" the robber shouts back. He storms over, yanking the door open.

Winters pistol whips him, and in the moment it takes the robber to blink and try to recover, he disarms him as well. "Oh look," he says, and his expression is a little ridiculous for the grin stretching across his lips. "Zip ties *and* two guns."

I take one of the guns and check the chamber. Three bullets left. "Did he bring extra bullets or was he expecting to shoot everybody with just the six bullets?"

The bank manager stares at us with a trembling lip. "M-Mr. Cresci. Mr. Winters. Th-thank you."

I smile at him. "Of course! Your bank has been great to my family. I am quite annoyed that they chose here, of all places, to rob."

Winters rolls his eyes at me. "There are zip ties in my pocket. Get him tied up." He pauses, then adds, glowering at me, "And don't get handsy."

The manager looks even more confused.

As if I'd do anything with the manager watching. "Mr. Peterson, is there some way for you to contact law enforcement?"

The bank manager nods. “Yeah, in... in one of the other offices.”

“All right. Go do that, and lay low. We’re going to see about ensuring nothing actually gets stolen.”

The bank manager runs off, and I turn my attention back to Winters. I smirk at him, and he tenses, but I fish the zip ties out without any groping.

“Zip ties really aren’t my favorite,” I say casually as I secure the robber. “Effective, but not very pretty. I prefer rope. Red, for maximum contrast.”

I reach into the robber’s pocket and pull out a small flip phone. It must be a burner.

“Fuck off,” Winters growls. “Find something to gag him with. Gag yourself while you’re at it.”

He stalks off in the direction of the lobby, his steps slowing even as he gets near it and disappears.

I sigh and fish around the office’s closet until I find the spare ties so I can gag the robber. He tries to bite me and curses at me.

“I should tell you,” I say as I gag him, “that you aren’t actually going to survive. You’ll get taken into custody, and you’ll hang yourself there. Either that or you’ll trip and fall on a shiv. City lockup is just so vicious these days.”

The man’s eyes widen. I smirk at him. “Oh, did your boss not tell you? This is where five different mob families do their banking.”

I pat him on the cheek before going to follow Winters. He’s scowling at one of the doors down a side hallway.

“Did somebody die?” I ask, peering into the room. It’s the safety deposit room, two of the boxes sitting empty on the central table. There’s no bank robber in sight.

“Is he with his friends? We can still catch them,” I say.

“They took off already,” Winters says grimly. “The back door was wide open.”

“Ah, perfect. We can take that same exit. Unless you want to take your anger out on the ones already tied up, but I suspect the police will be here soon.” I grip the back of his neck—and I have to reach up to do so—and squeeze. “Kyran. We can track them down and get your stuff back.”

Winters — Kyran — stops short and stares at me before scowling even harder. Even scowling like that, he looks... well, he looks dangerous, but I also can't help but remember the way he looked on his knees with my cock in his mouth, either.

“I don't need your help,” he snarls. “Just keep your mouth shut about who I am, and I'll keep my mouth shut about all of this.”

“They still have my twenty grand.” I let go of him and start down the hallway, snapping my fingers. “Come on, boy. Let's take care of this embarrassing little adventure. Nobody has to know we were involved.”

Except all the witnesses, I suppose, but the bank staff know better than to mention us by name, and none of the other hostages would know who we are.

“Stop *calling* me that,” Kyran says. “Especially now that you know my fucking name. How the fuck do you know my name?”

“I've met your brother Sean, and I heard your brother Neil got married recently. Which meant the only Winters brother left was... well, Kyran.”

Kyran glowers at me, but he doesn't reply.

He follows me down the hallway, and we depart.

We have bank robbers to track down.

THREE

Kyran

It's late afternoon by the time we catch up to the robbers, and it pains me to admit it, but Silvano Cresci has been useful.

More than useful.

In this section of the city, I'm not sure I'd have been able to find the escaped robbers quickly enough to get *anything* back. With Silvano's help, though, we've tracked them down to the shell of a house in the outskirts of New Bristol. The construction crew is long gone for the day, but the streets are bustling with activity even here.

We can't go in guns blazing, which means this is going to take a more delicate hand than I usually possess.

A delicate, clever hand that Silvano Cresci has.

Fuck.

I want to go in alone, but he's made it clear that this affects him as much as it does me. I personally don't see why he's so upset about twenty thousand dollars when he probably has millions, but I guess it's the principle of the thing.

Me? It's taken me years to build up those aliases, and I have no intention of having to burn every single one of those names to the ground.

I'll burn this fucking house down with them inside, though.

Silvano stares up at the front door and taps his delicate fingers against his lips. Fuck, those hands are gorgeous. I've never thought I had a thing for hands, but Silvano's...

"If we knock on the front door, we'll probably spook them," Silvano muses. "And with the neighbors so close, guns really are out." He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a phone. It's a beat-up flip-phone, very different from what I'd seen him hand over to the robbers earlier.

I watch as he taps on the keys. “What are you doing?”

“Telling the robbers that we’re here, of course.” He shows the screen to me.

Open the fucking door. Cops are tailing me.

I blink at him, unsure of what the hell he’s up to. “You know their number?” I ask, but somehow, I’m not really surprised.

Silvano smiles. “Pro tip: make sure to delete your message history when using burner phones to plan a bank heist.” He scrolls up on the screen, and I see another message from what must have been one of the other robbers—a group message, at that.

“For fuck’s sake,” I mutter, unable to believe the sheer stupidity of it all. Not that I’ve planned any bank heists of my own, but I have better sense than to bring phones with a detailed message history in with me. “All right. So we get to the door and hope they don’t shoot us on sight?”

Silvano tucks the phone away and reaches up to me... to wrap his scarf around my neck. It smells vaguely of cigarette smoke. I startle, half expecting him to try to garrote me with it. He pulls my beanie down so it almost covers my face. “Presumably you’re faster than they are.” Silvano gives me a considering look. “Hunch a little, and in the dark, it’ll be hard to tell you aren’t one of the two we tied up.”

I roll my eyes, but he’s not wrong. I pull out my favorite knife from its sheath and keep it closely hidden beneath my jacket.

Crossing the street, I take care to walk casually, trying to avoid drawing attention to myself. It’s cold outside, and I don’t look particularly out of place. I knock quietly on the door, but it’s enough to bring one of the guys to it. He flings it open, starting to hiss, “Get the fuck in—” Before he can finish speaking, I slash his throat with one hand and grab him with the other.

I glance back at Silvano, tipping my head for him to follow even though I don't know why. I guess it's just reflex to want to have someone at my back to make sure nothing goes wrong from that way, but... Silvano Cresci?

I have to be losing my mind to trust the son of another of New Bristol's many crime families.

Silvano comes up the stairs as I place the body on the floor off to the side. He closes the door, wrinkling his nose at the corpse. "I suppose it had to be done," he whispers.

"Does it matter?" I murmur with a shrug, shoving it with my foot to make sure it won't be a hazard to trip over if we have to make a run for it.

Silvano continues through the hall to where we hear voices.

"Bernie!" somebody hisses. "Did you fucking lead the cops here?" That sounds like the leader of the band.

Silvano steps aside and motions for me to go ahead of him.

"No!" I say, just loud enough to be heard as I take a few steps deeper into the house. Two more. There should only be two more — but there's always the chance that they came back to a hideout with more of their men.

The hall opens up into what's probably meant to be a living room, most of the walls in place. I only spot two people. They're sitting around their ill-gotten gains on folding chairs, fucking counting and stacking it all.

I don't see the contents of my lock box, but there are several closed bags and containers in the room.

One of the guys looks up to meet my eyes. He startles and lurches out of the chair, fumbling for something. "Who the fuck are you?"

"Please don't move," Silvano says, and I look over my shoulder to see he has a gun leveled at the robber. "We really

could have avoided this if you'd simply left my twenty grand behind like I'd asked."

I snort, pulling my own gun and training it on the other. I let Silvano take the lead; I prefer to go with the flow as it is, even though it's unfamiliar to follow one of the fucking Crescis.

The two guys pale and raise their hands. "You can have it back!" the leader says. "The twenty grand, and then some! Take all of Jim's share!"

The other guy makes a disgruntled noise. "My share? What about your share? You're the one who—"

Silvano sighs loudly. "This is embarrassing. And wholly unprofessional." He approaches Jim and motions with his gun. "Turn around and put your hands together behind your back."

Jim, scared stiff at having the gun waving directly in his face because he's apparently fucking weak as well as stupid, quickly obeys. Silvano fishes a zip tie out of his pocket and, a little awkwardly, fastens Jim's hands.

"There we go." He faces the leader now. "You too. My associate is going to cuff your hands. Murder's messy, and a pain to clean up, so if you cooperate you'll get away with your lives."

I cast a sidelong glance at him. I have no intention of letting these men go without creating a bigger mess, and since this isn't my part of town, I don't even have to worry about cleanup. But I shrug. "Sure," I say easily. "My buddy here is more reasonable than I am, but I have a twitchy trigger finger, so..."

I holster my gun despite my words, preferring to rely on the knife in such close quarters anyway, then head to the leader of the two. I snatch up one of his wrists and zip tie it painfully tightly before doing the same to the other wrist and linking them together behind his back.

Not my first rodeo, that's for sure, and I make quick work of it.

Silvano nods approvingly, and I hate the sudden jolt of desire I feel. Fuck, I don't need his approval.

"Of course, since my family keeps a decent amount of funds at that bank, it means all this money you stole was also my money," Silvano says. He lifts the leader's chin with his gun. "I hope your dreams of a nice payoff were worth it."

Then he looks at me and says, "Do what you want."

The two robbers cry out. "What the fuck?" "No!"

I laugh at that, and the sound is ugly despite my very real amusement. "Yeah? Do what I want? Anything I want?" I glance at Silvano, and again, I loathe myself for looking to him for any sort of direction at all. Does he really want these men alive?

Silvano backs away to lean casually against the back wall. "Well, as long as you don't let them go. Then I really would have to shoot them myself."

"I'd hate for someone like you to have to get your pretty little hands dirty," I snark at Silvano. "Hack and slash, slice and dice, a quick, merciful stab in the throat?" I pretend to consider, even though my bloodlust is slowly starting to awaken. Fuck, this never gets old.

Silvano wrinkles his nose, though, and I roll my eyes.

"Pretty princesses in their towers," I sing-song as I head for the second man. "You," I say, pointing to the leader with the tip of my knife. "Just watch. Then you can tell me how you want to die."

"Wait!" he says.

I tilt my head to the side, breathing in their fear, their desperation, their utter *helplessness*. "Hmm?"

“You don’t have to kill me, man. You really don’t. Just hand me over to the cops. I’ll do my time,” the leader says, suddenly trying to play the victim in all of this.

I laugh. “What do you think, *friend*?” I ask Silvano.

“I think, if he wanted to deal with the pigs, he shouldn’t have stolen from me.” Silvano makes an exasperated noise. “If you want my opinion, I say you slit their throats and be done with it. But you’re welcome to have fun with it if you prefer.”

Even though I’m relatively certain I should make this quick, I just can’t seem to reconcile that with my own desires. The idea of cutting them open and working over their insides... I have to suppress a moan. They’ll die sooner rather than later if I go exploring, and it might be too much gore for fucking Silvano, but...

I end the first man quickly enough. He was stupid, but he wasn’t the supposed mastermind behind the theft who should’ve understood that this was way too fucking risky for any mortal to embark upon.

Who even thinks it’s a good idea to rob a bank the mafia families in the area trust?

The leader shouts, scrambling back and falling right onto his ass. “Do you really need *all* of this money back?” I ask Silvano thoughtfully.

“Yes,” Silvano says curtly. “I didn’t even want to buy the car. I’m not losing more money over this.”

Well, there goes that idea. I file the idea away for next time.

I ignore the man’s whining as I crouch down in front of him. “Shh,” I tell him, enraptured by the quick inhalations of breath as he starts to panic. I’m sure he can smell the blood of his fallen comrade just as easily as I can, and I’m not even the one who’s hyperventilating.

“Fuck! I’ll give it all back!” he says, spittle flying from his lips.

I grimace, wiping my face. “Of course you’ll give it all back, dumbass,” I mutter. “Christ.”

I want to take my time with him, but there are too many houses nearby and I can’t guarantee that they won’t hear screams. He’s been pretty well-behaved, all things considered, but if I started to carve him up...

Sighing, I shake my head. Guess I’m just going to be disappointed, because I’m not going to come out of this saturated in blood.

“Open your eyes,” I order him.

He shakes his head, keeping them closed.

“Open your fucking eyes, or I’ll just carve them out,” I say.

His eyes fly open, and he locks gazes with me.

“Good.”

With that, I slice his throat, ignoring the blood splatter that sprays from the wound.

I sheathe my knife and head for the bags on the floor, searching for the one that has my passports and personal documents.

I breathe a sigh of relief when I finally find it.

Then I feel hard metal against the back of my head, and I freeze.

“How convenient. You’re already on your knees,” Silvano says, his voice laced with cruelty. “Now be a good boy and clasp your hands together behind your back. You remember how, don’t you?”

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing, Cresci?” I growl. “This isn’t some game we’re playing.”

“I know. So put your hands behind your back, or I take care of you right now. I think my father would be quite happy to

know one of the Winters gang tragically lost his life fending off some bank robbers.”

For some strange reason, I feel oddly... hurt.

I don't understand it, even as I put my hands behind my back and clasp them together. “It'll be war if you kill me, Cresci,” I say, ignoring the thrum of arousal running through me at the idea of being so fucking helpless before him, of having no choice but to submit.

It's real, too. I don't doubt for a second that he'd kill me and leave me for someone else to deal with.

But that's not what he really wants, and that's what really has my heart rate rising.

Silvano laughs, and he has to move the gun in order to get the zip tie around my wrists.

This is my chance. If I'm fast, I can disorient him, and get the gun out of his hands, and...

I sit still as he finishes binding my wrists.

“What a good boy you are,” Silvano says condescendingly, trailing the gun across my shoulders and making me shudder. “You played the hired muscle so well today. It's a shame you don't actually work for me.”

I shouldn't have gone along with him. I should've asserted myself, should've called in my own men and dealt with it myself.

But no. I'd gone along with Silvano fucking Cresci because he'd had the immediate means to handle this before anything could go public, and I'd somehow thought that since he'd been a frustratingly consummate gentleman the night we'd met, he'd stay that way.

The fact that he isn't makes my heart skip a beat... and not in a bad way.

Silvano unwinds the scarf from around my neck and pulls the beanie off my head, tossing both to the side, before unzipping my coat and pulling it down as far as it will go with my hands bound. Then he circles around behind me again.

“It was a shame you chickened out the other night. You were the only interesting person at the club.” Silvano leans down and nips the nape of my neck, while his arm comes across my front. He settles the gun against my throat. “You can’t chicken out this time.”

“I didn’t fucking chicken out,” I snap at him, but I find myself baring my throat to where he presses the gun. “It just wasn’t something I wanted to do.”

Silvano’s wearing his leather gloves again, I realize as he grips my chin. He forces my head to the side, and our eyes meet.

He smirks at me. “No? But I wanted to do it, and your feelings don’t really matter here, do they? *Boy.*”

I take in a deep breath, slowly letting it out. There’s something about his smirk that goes straight to my bones, straight to my *cock*. “I don’t give a fuck what you want,” I say, but my voice is shockingly breathy.

“Open your mouth,” Silvano orders, pushing the gun harder against my throat. “Open for me.”

I fight not to groan, but it’s a near thing. I slowly open my mouth for him, and I half-expect to feel the taste of metal and gunpowder there, for him to shove it past my lips and kill me like that.

Hell, it wouldn’t exactly be the worst way to go.

The Winters and Cresci families don’t have bad blood, exactly, but it’s not like we’re without our grudges and attempts to take over the same areas. Both of us do more than casual arms dealing, and while we’ve mostly been elbowed out of the drug trade by the Pavones, we still do our fair share.

But that's no reason to kill each other, which leads me to believe that this is just a sadistic fucking game for Silvano Cresci... and it's a sadistic fucking game I am all into: mind, body, and soul.

"Good boy," Silvano says condescendingly, and it sends a shudder through my entire body.

He undoes his belt one handed, then unzips his tailored slacks. His entire outfit looks expensive, the kind of clothes my brother tries to wear and never manages to pull off. Silvano makes it look easy, sheer elegance radiating from every angle of his body.

"Now, do I need to keep threatening you with the gun? Or will you suck my cock like the thirsty little cockslut I know you are?" Silvano asks, trailing the muzzle of the gun over my lips.

It's such a dangerous game, but it's one I've been aching to play for so long that I can't bring myself to hate him for backing me into a corner like this.

I sort of like him threatening me with the gun, but on a rational level, I know I need to get him to put it away so *accidents* don't happen.

But it will be more difficult not to fight against him for the sake of my pride without the reminder that he got the upper hand on me. For some reason, though, it only makes the flame of lust burn hotter within me.

"I'll suck your cock," I say hoarsely. Silvano smiles darkly at me and finally—disappointingly—sets the gun aside. I watch as he pushes his slacks and boxer briefs down enough to free his cock, which is already half-hard. He strokes himself once with his gloved hand, then grips my hair and pushes the tip of his cock against my lips.

"Better get me nice and wet," Silvano says, "because I'm fucking your hole tonight."

Jesus fucking Christ.

How can those words sound so incredible and terrible, all at the same time? My breath hitches, and I glower up at him. “You gonna hold a gun to my head while you try to fuck me? Sucking your cock’s one thing, Cresci, but letting you fuck me?” I scoff, even though internally, I am fucking *begging* for him to do just that.

“Maybe I should just hold a gun to your hole?” Silvano rubs his cock all over my lips and cheeks. I try to flinch away, but he grabs my head and forces me to hold still. “Nice and wet, or I’m going in dry.”

Fuck.

I swallow hard, but I open my mouth with the reluctance I want to show despite how hard I am at the prospect of being forced to suck Silvano’s dick so he can fuck me.

It’s been a long time since someone fucked me, and I just know it’s going to be an entirely different experience with him than it was before. He doesn’t expect me to top him.

He doesn’t *want* me to top him.

Silvano shoves his dick past my lips at last, robbing me of the choice I didn’t want to have in the first place, and I start to suck. I can’t help it. He smells so alluring, so intoxicating, and he tastes even better.

He groans and holds while I suck and lick. I should be fighting this. I should bite him. My brothers would be disgusted if they saw me just giving in.

I didn’t have a choice, I try to tell myself, but I know it’s a lie. When I look up at Silvano’s sly smile, I know *he* knows it’s a lie, too.

“Good boy,” Silvano murmurs. I shudder at those words, but a second later Silvano’s grip on my head tightens and he begins thrusting in and out of my mouth. I let out a cry and

have to loosen my jaw so I don't accidentally scrape my teeth against his cock.

I've only been face-fucked once before, with this man in an entirely different situation. Oh, I've thought about it, and I've watched so much porn where the top rails the other man's face, but it's nothing like what I could've imagined.

It's better.

I sputter and gag and fight to keep licking to make sure he's slick... because I really, really don't want him going in dry when I have a feeling preparation is going to be minimal at best. I don't know what to think about that, either.

I haven't fucked that many men, but I can tell he's close when his thrusts start getting more erratic. I make a sound, unsure if I should be glad or disappointed that he might come in my mouth instead of my ass.

Silvano chuckles and stops moving, pulling his cock out. "You want my cum all over your face, boy? Want me to mark you, show the entire world who you really are?"

I let out a choked sound, giving a precursory shake of my head.

It's a lie, and I know he'll clock it as one. But I don't know what he'll do. My hole clenches at the idea of him driving that thick, hard shaft into it, but at the same time... my cock is throbbing at the mere thought of having him spray his cum all over my fucking face.

Silvano grins at me. I shudder when he starts *petting* my head, so different from the harsh hold.

"Maybe next time."

"There won't be a next time. You're not going to catch me off guard like that again," I tell him, trying to sound fierce, ominous. "Or maybe the next time, I'll be the one to breed your fucking ass instead."

Silvano squats down next to me and goes for my belt and fly. In this position, I could easily headbutt him. That I don't is a testament to the fact that I have no fucking idea what I'm doing.

Except submitting. I'm submitting to him, and I don't understand why because this could destroy my reputation.

He gets a delicate hand around my—already painfully hard—cock and squeezes. His eyes widen a little, but he masks his surprise with a smirk. “I'm not sure what you think you'll do with this thing. This is too big to be of any use. I wouldn't be surprised if women took one look at it and told you to pack up.”

That had happened in high school, back when I'd been exploring my sexuality — back when I'd been trying to prove to my brothers that I'm fucking straight, when I'd cared enough to put effort into pretending.

It should've been a point of pride, that my cock was big and intimidating, but... even when my partners praised it, I resented my cock for giving everybody the wrong impression about me.

Silvano continues to jerk my cock, making my body heat up. I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to stave off the pleasure. I don't want this to be over. Despite what he says, it's not going to happen again.

I'm on the brink of coming when he suddenly lets go. I let out a few unsteady breaths.

I open my eyes when I feel a light slap on my cheeks.

Silvano has his gloved hand in front of my face. “Lick it clean.”

Fuck. *Fuck*. I'm going to come just from this.

I obey, even though all I want to do is run away from this — but how can I run away from the one time I'll ever get to experience something on par with my wildest, darkest dreams?

I lave his hand with my tongue, cleaning it slowly while trying to leave plenty of spit behind. I wish it was his bare hand. I want to feel his reactions, I want to taste *him*, not leather.

Once I've licked my precum from the glove, Silvano pushes my head down toward the floor. I resist, straining against the pressure.

Silvano tsks. "Head down, boy, and ass up. We know your cock isn't good for anything, but your hole might make up for it."

I groan, finally letting him push my head down until my forehead is pressed against the floor. I hesitate for another moment until he slaps my ass before lifting it up in the air, as though he really has to force me every step of the way.

It's so much easier to pretend that he does.

Silvano slides my jeans and boxers down, exposing my ass to the chilly air.

I'm struck that we're doing this in a half-finished building, with three corpses cooling in our vicinity. There could be law enforcement searching for these corpses right this minute. There have to be, because they robbed a fucking bank.

Fuck. This is so fucking reckless.

I feel the soft leather of Silvano's gloves on my ass as he pulls my ass cheeks apart. "Hmm." He pushes his thumbs against the sensitive skin, not even waiting for me to ready myself before pushing in. "You're going to need training," Silvano says. "I'll send you a list of dildoes to buy. You'll stretch yourself every evening."

I sputter, unsure of what to say to that for a moment. "Fuck you," I finally settle on, though without the correct amount of vitriol that should go with those words. "This isn't happening again, Cresci, so enjoy it while it lasts."

Even if I wanted it to happen, it's too dangerous for me, for both of us. If we were to get caught together...

I flinch when he slaps my ass. The leather makes the impact sharper, somehow, than being hit with a bare hand would have, and even though I would've welcomed the warmth of his hand, it's strangely hot.

"Did I ask for your opinion?" Silvano says with open amusement. "You're in a very precarious situation here, boy." He spanks me again, like he's casually punishing my backtalk.

I love it.

I hate that I love it.

"I could turn this around in a heartbeat and snap your neck, and both of us know it," I growl, scrambling to try to assert some sort of control over the situation despite how futile that really is.

We both know I don't *want* to be in control.

"But are you going to fucking talk all day, or are you going to fuck me?" I add.

Silvano laughs, the sound echoing in the empty room. "Maybe I should leave you like this for the pigs to find instead."

I try to come up with a retort, but he roughly shoves a finger inside me and finds my prostate in seconds, making it impossible to even think—let alone speak. I moan and push into that sensation, on the verge of orgasm once more.

Silvano releases my ass, fingering me with just that one hand. This isn't enough. I want more. I want to feel him inside me.

I whine when he withdraws that finger, even though I know what must come next.

Silvano's cock presses against my hole.

"D-don't," I protest half-heartedly.

"You sure?" Silvano asks, sliding his cock past my hole and against my balls. "You sure you want me to stop? Maybe I

will, if you ask nicely now.”

“No, you won’t, you fucker,” I moan, and I’m grateful for the certainty I feel with those words. He’s not going to leave me unsatisfied. If he does...

I very well might try to break his fucking neck.

He gives me no further warning before he pushes his cock inside me.

I curse, my fingers curling as I press my forehead harder against the ground. There was no prep, but his cock is surprisingly slick. The asshole must’ve had lube on hand, despite his words, and I’m not sure if I’m grateful for it or a little annoyed. I’m not going to tell him about that particular dilemma though.

He doesn’t go gentle on me. His grip is firm on my ass as he slides in and out, pounding with practiced ease. He hones in on my prostate, his cock sliding across it almost every time. But it’s not just his expert fucking that’s pushing me closer and closer to the peak.

It’s the way he’s just casually using me.

It’s how he says, “What a good little boy you are.”

It’s his hand reaching for the nape of my neck, *squeezing*, before he withdraws again.

“I’m pulling out as soon as I’m done,” Silvano says. “I don’t care if you come too.”

Of course he doesn’t.

Of course that makes my cock throb even harder, making me even more desperate to come. I won’t last much longer. Just a few more derisive words, a few more erratic thrusts, and I spend all over the fucking floor.

Silvano’s movements speed up, and I feel his cum flood into me. He groans and presses his fingers into my hips hard enough that I’ll probably bruise.

We're both just sitting there, breathing hard.

I whine when Silvano pulls out though, the cold of the room suddenly stark against my bare ass.

Silvano slaps my ass and collapses onto the floor. "Fuck. That was good."

I grunt. I'm not going to agree with him — not aloud, despite the warmth coursing through my body and the humiliation that comes from feeling his cum start to drip out of my hole.

I should've told him to wear a fucking condom, but if I had...

I wouldn't be feeling this blissed out, this *used*.

"Untie me," I mutter, even though for once, I wouldn't mind staying a while and seeing the aftermath of a proper fuck.

"Mmm. One second." Silvano props himself up on his elbow and smiles at me. "Not bad for your first time."

"Only time," I say. "Now hurry the fuck up. Neither of us wants to be here when the cops track these assholes down."

Silvano sighs and sits up, grabbing my beanie from where he'd dropped it earlier. I don't know what he plans to do with it until he's wiping his cock and my thighs down — with my beanie.

"What the fuck?" I sputter. I'm going to have to put that back on, and I'm going to feel his spunk drying all over it and my fucking face if I put it on the wrong way.

He laughs and drops the beanie onto my back. I growl at him, but he reaches into his coat pocket and pulls out a pocket knife. "Easy. I'll cut the zip tie now."

I grit my teeth and wait for him to cut me free. Silvano steps back immediately, like he's afraid I'm going to attack him.

It's tempting, especially because I want to put the fear in *him* after what he's done. Just to make sure he knows I did this

because I wanted to and not because he *made* me. But I flex my wrists and get up to my knees first, then up to my feet as I yank my pants back up.

I watch Silvano walk over to the duffel bags the robbers had been sorting through. He opens one, nods, and takes a phone, a wallet, a... lighter? and a few stacks of bills from it. “Twenty grand. And...” My eyes widen in horror as he raises up a passport. “One passport. I wonder who it belongs to.” He smirks at me.

I close the distance between us and grab his wrist hard enough to leave bruises. I catch a whiff of his scent, a mixture of cologne and cigarette smoke. “Give me that,” I snap at him. I can’t believe I gave up my box number to try to save some woman I didn’t even know, and it had all led to *this*.

Silvano moves the passport to his other hand and slips it into his coat pocket. “Take care of clean-up here, and meet me at Cafe Ozeane next Saturday. I’ll return it then.” He smiles up at me the entire time, not an ounce of fear in his expression.

I glare at him. “I’m not letting you fuck me again,” I growl. I could take him down easily, grab the passport he stole, and I don’t know why I don’t do just that. Instead, I pull out my phone and send a curt text with the address for someone to take care of clean-up.

“Of course not,” Silvano agrees. “I’ll buy you a late Christmas present. And I have my eye on that new limited edition Dior cologne, if you need gift ideas for me.”

“I’m not getting you a gift,” I tell him before snatching up the rest of my passports and documents. Next time, I’ll just let a woman bleed out instead of having to deal with Silvano fucking Cresci. “Now get out of here before I decide to break your goddamn neck.”

I tense when Silvano gets closer to me—and leans up to kiss me.

I have no fucking clue how to respond, so I just stand completely still. His lips are warm against mine, and I can feel him smiling.

He pats my cheek when he pulls away. “All right. Next Saturday, 10 am. Don’t be late. I loathe tardiness.” Then he starts walking toward the front door, carefully avoiding all the blood.

I stare after him, not sure what to make of this whole encounter, not sure what to make of Silvano after this...

Incident.

I shake my head and glance over the bloody scene behind me before turning and following.

Maybe I’ll show up Saturday.

Maybe I’ll just send someone to kill him and get the passport back.

I have a few days to figure it out.

Impossibly, I smile.

Merry fucking Christmas to me.

Need more Silvano and Kyran? Check out [SUBMIT](#), a dark MM mafia romance coming out on 11/30/2023!

ABOUT R. PHOENIX AND ADARA WOLF

[R. Phoenix](#) and [Adara Wolf](#) write both solo and collaborative works, primarily across the dark spectrum, so make sure you always read the warnings! Lately, they've been focusing on MM Fantasy and MM Mafia works, though they have all sorts of things under their belts — including taboo works that can only be found on [Smashwords](#). Their favorite collaboration to date is probably the MM Fantasy [The Shade and His Thief](#), which can be read as a standalone because we love Callan and Myth.

From dark to light, R. Phoenix has the attention span of a goldfish and loves writing standalones, duos, and the occasional series. For dark works, she suggests starting out with the dark contemporary MMM [Gilded Cages](#). For something on the opposite end of the spectrum, try the slow burn, demi-awakening MM [It's Just You](#).

With a special taste for bisexual protagonists, Adara Wolf writes a full spectrum of dark, toxic romances with messy and broken characters. If you want a meaty toxic relationship, she suggests starting with [Under His Heel](#). If you want a slightly more consensual, but still bloody, relationship, you can try the fantasy work [Flesh & Blood](#).

Want to find out more R. Phoenix & Adara Wolf, get exclusive stories, works in progress, early copies of our books, and more? Check us out at our subscription not! Patreon website, [Wolf & Phoenix](#), or [Ream!](#)

SLAY BELLS RING



Jack L. Pyke

Rush mostly passes through life unnoticed, so the 8:00 p.m. curfew shutting down festive streets across the UK has no meaning in his displaced world. He sold his phone to drown the Christmas blues anyway. But when a fall off his mountain bike forces him into the path of ex-lover Carter, missed time never becomes more paramount. There's a twisted killer on the loose, one who has a kink for couples, and Rush and Carter are now the outstanding collectable: the exes.

Genre: Christmas M/M Mystery thriller.

Tags: HEA, enemy to lovers, forced proximity, German folklore.

Moonlight cut across the rise and gentle dips of the field as a tired twist of wind turned a light coat of snow across the darkened landscape. Panted breaths grunted out from behind a bush, crying too much self-indulgence, too much laughing and quiet shushes to be animals rutting.

In the cold of darkness, someone got laid tonight.

Sat at the base of the old oak, ear turned, eyes closed, Perch gave a snort as he listened. A couple in their early twenties fucked like animals under the stars, sharing body heat in order to keep warm. But that was the rising cost of living: even animals sought cheap heating any which way. Whether they were male, female... hell, even a couple in their twenties remained unknown. The darkness was too thick to really tell, so Perch let his imagination fill in the blanks. He'd had enough time alone to perfect that.

The silhouette of a farmhouse watched the show in the distance, the lack of drawn blind and the brief glint of moonlight on locked window showing it was as much forced to watch and keep its silence as it shivered in the snowy landscape like Perch and the rest of the wildlife.

From what he remembered, the farm owners had no sons, no daughters, so the young couple in the next field had no doubt escaped from the village a few miles down the road.

Made little difference to him; he'd be here longer, content to let the sounds play around him until well after they left. People in general were good at ignoring what was in front of them as headphones, smartphones, and sexting kept them company. Walk any high street and barely a friendly glance lifted to meet the eye, sidesteps and a "fuck you" the only greeting. And here he didn't need moonlight to know the woman straddled and fucked the man as she listened to music. Blouse torn open, the young woman's milk-white breasts took on an elven quality as

headphone wire draped between them, her writhe of body timed to an unheard beat keeping the man groaning beneath her. His hands moved from her hips, and the smile was there as headphone wire was crushed into a breast, forcing an out-of-tune hum out of the woman as wire scraped hard into a nipple.

Perch gave a smaller smile, a longer drag on his smoke. He really couldn't see, so he let the who, when, and animal grunts conduct his imagination.

A heavy scrape of feet in snow came, as if the young man fought to try and escape what rushed through his body, then he cried out. The woman followed soon after, her “fuck yeah, baby” driving their heat home. Breaths came out of rhythm, the headphones lost in the fight over who could take the most before the other gave out. It ended with the young woman's chuckle, then a slap of ass as the man was pulled to his feet. Boxers tugged up, jeans were left to hang as low as ever as a T-shirt was scooped down over the man's slim hips. Maybe? Imagination: it did wicked things to the mind, but Perch certainly favoured the male body more than the young woman's.

Conversation came out on fast breaths, and was a skirt pulled down? Whether a johnny found its way into the undergrowth wouldn't ever be known. Thank fuck.

A moment later, the fence creaked as someone climbed over, no doubt the man, although in today's society, it was most likely the young woman offering the man a hand down; Perch could never really tell. As they did, a cry went up—the shrill child-like scream of a fox, and it was sent hissing into the undergrowth, leaving the young man yelping.

The woman barked a laugh. “Fucking wuss.” The man got a hit to his chest, then a kiss at his hand as the woman threw her arm around his shoulders. The moonlight shifted from behind some clouds, haloing their bodies enough for Perch to see a little more, and he scowled, more than bored, more than ready

to walk on ahead as he stubbed out a cigarette on his leather glove and pocketed it. Youth... life came with enough attitude, and he didn't want the hassle tonight.

“What are your plans for Christmas next week?” The man was lost in the cuddle but still rubbed away the chill. “You and hubby going anywhere with the kids or are they too old for that?”

Oh. Perch eased back down, and a light shift of silver bells tethered to his jeans wind-chimed the night.

The cheaters.

Adult ones too, well, with the woman at least touching her early thirties with the kids being too old to sit on Santa's lap.

Interesting.

Perch moved slightly to get comfortable, and the shift of bell again jangled lightly. They didn't take the warning, so as they walked by the tree, he gave a sniff. “Not wise... you two being out after curfew.”

The woman jerked her head back, followed by the man tugging up his sleeve to get at his watch. “Fuck,” he mumbled.

Perch gave him a salute and looked the woman up and down. Yeah. Early thirties. She definitely wore the trousers too... literally. Dammit, he'd have preferred a skirt. “Best get home,” he said with a smile. The sun had closed its eyes come 4:00 p.m., catching most out with the early darkness. Now it touched 9:30 p.m., yet the good ol' news had advised a safe return by 8:00 to avoid how the streets belonged to a killer. But then this was the outskirts of a small town in Staffordshire, right in the middle of nowhere. He knew life usually passed on by without bothering them too much. Usually.

“You get an eyeful, perv?” The woman gave a quick look at her lover, then tugged at his arm, away from the oak. “Fuck... off,” she mouthed quietly back at Perch.

He didn't blame her for the attitude. Not really. Damn weird, meeting people in the dark like this. "You... you just both watch your step down the path there, okay?" Perch pointed the way. "High heels for you both really ain't the best treckin' shoes in snow, not at night."

The young man frowned down at him, and Perch bit back a smirk. Yeah, the dig had been intended about him being a bitch in heels—hers anyway. Another tug came at the man's shirt and.... Fuck, he'd really pictured him younger, wearing a T-shirt, not a suit. Boy, had he gotten that wrong too. The man wasn't wearing jeans either, just some black trousers that put him as an office junior, sorting coffee and paperwork. Yeah... Office Junior. At least he was good-looking. The woman definitely wasn't what his imagination had run wild with either. Her cut of trouser suit was expensive, her coat thicker, longer, more used to those last-minute fumbles away from family. Anytime, anywhere sort of action. That glance back over her shoulder called sharpness, experienced: older than the young man.

So Office Junior here had gone for a Friday night fuck with Boss Lady.

Of course Boss Lady wore no headphones either.

Shit. He really needed them *and* a damn phone for a Christmas gift.

Junior got another tug on his arm, back down to the path that led into the field and the BMW parked off in the distance. At least they showed imagination with preferring the thrill of sex in the open cold. Or maybe all that was just to avoid the scent of sex filling the car, along with those stains. Most probably the latter, although he doubted Junior would realise that.

Perch eased back against the base of the tree, grateful at least that the heavy branches overhead kept his ass dry from the light snow, and he pulled out his pack of smokes again as

the small bell at his side shifted into the wind. He lit up, then rested his head back and closed his eyes. The BMW had to be hers, and, yeah, there'd be headphones in there. Definitely a phone, because there was no way she'd risk being disturbed out here. So all he needed were the keys....

A snap of metal cut across the night, followed by a woman's cry. Then the break of twigs came as someone slumped to the floor, soon followed by someone else hitting the ground with another cry of grievous bodily harm.

Giving a sigh, Perch followed the wounded-animal cries, the frantic tugs, and clink of metal.

Junior sat next to Lady in the snow, grabbing at the metal jaws of the trap that chewed away flesh above his ankle. Lady was smarter, fumbling more with the pins to the metal trap's partner above her ankle that twisted her foot at an awkward angle.

"Heels, snow, and caught out fucking just a week away from Christmas, mate." Perch knelt by the young man, and the small bell tethered to his own belt jangled softly, forcing the younger man's gaze to it. "Did warn you both, didn't I?" He tilted his head as Junior jerked back from his touch along his jaw. "That was me being courteous and giving you the chance to opt out of my company." A smile. "You just remember now: it was your decision not to listen."

The man's eyes startled, and Perch patted his cheek before stubbing out his cigarette on his glove.

Then he plucked a potato peeling and a few empty packets of crisps from his pocket.

"Yeah. You get it now." Perch forced Junior's mouth open and slipped the peeling inside, followed by the rubbish. "Merry Christmas, dumbass."

Trying to ease the Christmas Eve morning chill biting into his fingers, Rush eased back on his mountain bike and stuffed his hands under his armpits, needing the warmth.

Fingerless gloves.

What sadist in their right mind invented bloody fingerless gloves for the winter?

Probably the same bastard who'd designed the V of the seat rubbing like sandpaper into his ass. He missed his motorbike, like hell he did. Car. He really needed a car.

"Fuck." His front wheel hit a patch of black ice, but a harder grip from his thighs controlled the skid, and after a shift of body to re-balance, he got life back under hands-free control.

He hated Staffordshire and its pothole hell. Scotland through to Wales, he'd spent a few years hiking most concrete cities in the UK, loving Edinburgh, but he still hated the living fuck out of anything to do with biking the roads, mostly because it meant acquiring a bike every now and again to do it as he dodged landmines masquerading as potholes. His thieving skills weren't the best, always too much guilt, so he made it a rule not to visit the same town twice.

At least the sun tried to melt the ice, giving a low-lying mist across the fields off to his left, offering a calm light and dark play with shadows as he passed under a row of trees that stood guard on the roadside. He had no set route to out-bike the Christmas Day blues tomorrow, but then that was his life in general: always running away from something with no plan in the making.

Evidence of a nearby landfill site drifted across the road: shredded Christmas paper frozen to concrete... bits and pieces of Lego bricks... a doll's head with a missing eye, and despite the chill, the breeze carried that rubbish-tip stench for miles,

forcing Rush to wipe at his nose at a sickly sweet scent. How the hell Stig from *Stig of the Dump* lived in one was beyond his reasoning, Although....

Rush gave a sniff at his armpit. Christ. Yeah, him and Stig, they had a lot in common. But then a camping backpack and guitar piled themselves high on the back of his bike, taking him from *Stig of the Dump* to Garbage Lady in *Labyrinth*, all worldly wear in the pack on his back.

Life really couldn't get much worse.

A pop of tyre hit the quiet, a skid of tyre on a larger patch of black ice, then—"Fuck." Rush went arse over tit over the handlebars, then hit the concrete hard, his lower back and ass jolting.

Kicking out at the bike, he groaned and rubbed at his ass as he sat there amongst the dirt and wet of the road.

The bike lay wounded close by, the wheel still spinning a *go on without me, bro* whine, but definitely masking its smirk over *that's for you tempting fate, dick*, and Rush scowled at it.

"Asshole," he mumbled as he shook damp from his hands. Then he caught sight of his guitar and.... "Fuck." He went to move, but pain hit his knee, ass, and outer thigh, and he grunted. The tear in his jeans didn't look good, and neither did the deep graze across his kneecap. He picked at it, getting rid of some of the grit.

Shit. He'd need to get it cleaned up, but his main concern was his guitar. He eased to his feet and limped a little over to his bike before managing to pick it up and get it off the road. His ass was wet, and he shivered against a gust of wind that made any butthurt over the fall worse. He'd learned early on to try and keep essentials in his backpack: toothbrush, toothpaste, a bar of soap, painkillers, a metal cup, a jar of coffee, a few pans, a small stock of canned beans, ravioli, and a lighter to fire them up, along with the absolute essential: antiseptic cream. But despite all that, a check over his guitar came first.

That was the most essential. It kept food in his stomach, at least when he could warm his hands up long enough to bloody play it.

The case had a patch of dirt and wetness, but a look inside saw no harm done. Rush breathed a sigh as the sound of a motorbike from back down the road stole his attention.

“Oh baby.” Now *that* was a bike.

All metallic carbon grey, the Vulcan S had a parallel twin engine, unique frame, kickass suspension, and it hugged the road better than he ever could with a bike when it came to claiming independence and the need to... skip it real fast out of Christmas tinsel towns.

Rush bit back a grin. No chance he'd be able to nick that and get too far without being chased down and given a beating or two.

The rider played it smart as well. He didn't slow an ounce, only added salt to the wounds with angling a little closer and throwing some dirt Rush's way.

Rush wiped himself down. “Merry fucking Christmas to you too, *cunt*.”

The brake lights to the Vulcan came on, and the sharp stop of tyre on road was enough to have Rush straightening, then backing up a few paces as a sleek turn of motorbike came back his way.

How the hell could the asshole have heard him?

The black visor to the helmet stayed down, and a rev of machine came now the Vulcan stopped by him.

Heart pounding hard, Rush didn't say anything for a moment, not liking the reflection of his sorry ass in the visor. “Either give a guy a hand or fuck off,” he said flatly, the mountain bike resting against his hip.

Black leathers, motorbike boots, huge warm, fuck-off gloves—the biker kept quiet a moment as if to make it sink in just how underdressed Rush was. Bastard.

Eventually the kickstand rested in place, and the rider got off and came over, undoing the clips to his black gun-matte helmet.

“Rush by name, still rush by *need to get the fuck out of here* nature, huh?”

Rush’s insides slipped down a notch, maybe a whole bunch as the helmet came off.

Carter.

It would be him, wouldn’t it?

Two years hadn’t changed him much: rich honey eyes, hair sculpted short to the back and sides, with artistic half-circle tram line designs to summon the wicked and still that vibrant blue *don’t give a fuck* colour at the top. He was usually more comfortable in steel toecap boots over trainers, dusty jeans over trousers, but oddly a shirt and waistcoat to shape his upper body. Casual sexy, with a look to his eyes that didn’t tolerate being fucked over.

Rush understood the roadside soaking now. But, fuck... Rawnsley. How damn close had he wandered to Rawnsley village?

As Carter crouched by the mountain bike, running a look over the front wheel and flat tyre, Rush kept his attention on the Vulcan as a BMW passed them, causing Carter to glance the car’s way.

“You got that promotion in the council Regulatory Services after all?” Rush frowned. Carter must have done to afford the Vulcan. Back then, he’d handled portfolios on climate change, sustainability, environmental health, and vital regulatory services for the local area, along with a focus on the resident experience and effective partnerships with businesses and

visitors. He'd been going for assistant head, and Rush bit back a grin at how Carter's bosses like to keep his look behind a laptop so as not to... intimidate the locals. Pretty much a family thing between him and his elder brother.

Rush lost any sense of humour.

Yeah. Carter and his brother.

Carter ran a touch over a bent spoke on the wheel. "I'm head of now." Giving a rough sigh, he eased to his feet and pointed at the bike. "Well, you've fucked that up. You're going nowhere on it."

Rush ran a hand through his hair, shifting its length out of his eyes. "I'll thumb a lift if a bus doesn't come along." He could keep moving on for Carter's sake at least. Fuck his brother.

Carter's grip onto the helmet at his side looked painful, ready to hit out. No, not much had changed. He had no real right to ask for anything different. Time didn't heal, just prolonged the skin-peeling slide along the road, and Rush let his look go back down the lane, first the way he'd come, then ahead with how he needed to be anywhere but here.

"Right," said Carter. "Just passing through, huh? You didn't know where you were."

Rush looked back at him. "It's a road," he said quietly. "One of many you told me to fuck off and take."

Carter went to bite back but seemed to stop himself, and Rush eased off as grief hit his look, the kind only found by gravesides. Carter always stood alone there. Rightly so too.

"Just get your stuff." A look went to Rush's leg. "You can't run away on that." Carter eased onto the Vulcan and clipped the kickstand with his heel. "I take it from how salty your mouth is, your head's okay, so prove it by running with sense and getting patched up back at mine."

Fuck... He couldn't do this. Not go back. Rush didn't go back to any town twice, certainly not *this* town.

Frowning Carter's way, Rush sniffed and looked down the road. "I'm okay. Really," he said back to Carter. "I'll thumb a lift." He tugged his backpack and guitar off the mountain bike, then made sure the bike was hidden in a bush for his own personal safety.

Carter started his engine. "You already have one. By the look and smell of you, it's the only one you'll be getting this side of Christmas Eve."

Bastard. Carter could pick a fight with the best, and Rush denied his shivering, how much tarmac hurt more when the cold ran bone-deep, making any knock to the body hurt so much more. But, yeah. Christmas Eve. No family in their right mind would offer him a Christmas beer let alone a lift.

"Now."

Head down, Rush made his way over. Making sure his backpack and guitar were tucked out of the way on his back, he straddled the motorbike, settling in behind Carter. Natural instinct came in to wrap a hold around his waist—they'd both grown into motocross racing across dusty tracks and spent many a time going two on one when either one pushed their motorbikes too hard—but he stopped himself now, instead opting for gripping onto the back of the seat. Balance and going hands-free he was used to... although it had taken too much time to get used to, well, not riding Carter.

A glance back came his way, then Carter slipped his helmet on and revved the engine. It felt good between Rush's thighs, but then so had Carter. The three almost came hand in hand: man, machine... hard and fast rides. But so much tenderness with them too, in the right moment, when Carter eased his asshole side and didn't want it hard and fast.

The pull back onto the road didn't threaten to topple Rush off as much as he thought it would have done, and his heart

settled a little more with how calm Carter kept his foot on the pedal.

Care was there. Tenderness too.

Rush hated every fucked-up reminder over how Carter could wrap a hold around him with both.

After taking off his pushbike helmet, Rush eased off the Vulcan, his look briefly resting on the old church set away from Carter's home. The church offered a walk back into medieval England: a Dom of an overlord to the small rural village it courted at the edge of a forest. Residents still happily helped pay for its upkeep, and for most of his childhood, Rush had too: mowing lawns of a weekend, delivering papers before school, helping his dad at the corner shop, all to have wages split to help fix the roof, supply bibles, and anything else the church had needed. Although playing *Zombie Hunter* amongst the gravestones with Carter had been a main drive, because with church also came... Carter.

Carter's detached home offered everything modern: warm lighting welcoming the weary on a winter's morning, a spare room when he'd needed to avoid arguments between his own dad and brother, and... and a wicked backyard that ran into the forest, giving them acres and acres of monster hunting and camping out.

If Rush looked just past the church, fourth house down with the broken picket fence, he'd see his own home, or an echo of it. A flashlight held at the window at the top of his own landing had reflected in Carter's bathroom, and Morse code became their way to talk when mobiles had been confiscated. Mostly Rush's for nearly causing pile-ups on the road with... flashing at Carter.

Carter didn't get it any easier. Being the vicar's son never had given him an easy ride. But then a vicar bringing up three lads without a mom...?

No. Herbert hadn't had it easy either, not with three lads, and he'd looked a little envious at Rush's dad with how he only had to cope with two.

Rush settled on the graveyard, to two gravestones that slept close together, and he frowned as Carter walked the Vulcan onto the driveway. “Your dad?” He looked away from the graveyard, but at the same time, he refused to look back down the road to home too. “He’s not here, right?”

Carter flicked him a look as he unclipped his helmet and took it off. He didn’t hold the look for long. “You wouldn’t be here if he was.”

Rush dug his hands into his pockets. Anger ran too deep, and it had killed them both back then. It did now, only he was too tired to cry it into the rain anymore, and Carter looked just too damn worn down to revisit it. So Rush dropped it.

Then as Carter rested the Vulcan next to a classic Ducati, Rush snorted seeing the older motorbike. “Christ... he still has it.” It had impressed the hell out of him as a kid: the only vicar who rode through a village on a motorbike, black leathers in tow. But then Herbert had been ahead of his time, loving how his three kids followed him into wearing leathers, owning motocross bikes, racing out on Hawthorn Moors, and traipsing mud through the kitchen... and when he’d caught two of his choir boys kissing, when he’d caught Rush kissing his second-eldest son after the first Christmas service since Carter had lost his mom....

“Don’t go there with the defence moves, son.” Herbert rested a hand on Rush’s neck, and Rush pulled Carter behind him, ready to hit back over at cries of sinners even though Carter was a year older and a damn sight more fit for fighting at fifteen. “We’re tested in many ways, but what you’re feeling?” A soft smile came off Herbert. “What you feel for my boy? It isn’t one of God’s tests. Those who add to the bible through the years and disrupt and divide us from what was originally spoken, they are.” His look rested on Carter, who stood shaking behind Rush. “Take it from someone who’s loved. Who’s lost. You find half an ounce of what I had with your mother, hold on to it for as long as you can. There’s room

enough for two fathers in there, and we both love the life out of both of you. Who couldn't, huh?"

Herbert had been... a father to his son first, a friend to Rush when he'd needed it most. But his views had cost him the right to perform mass after an unknown complaint was given to the Church of England. The Clergy Discipline Measure was initiated, a legal process of investigation, and it had torn Herbert to announce he was hanging up his robe, but he'd said a few misrepresented words from the original script wouldn't ever cost him his son.

With the building of a new home underway on the other side of the church, a project Herbert had been overseeing, he'd kept his house due to his long service, also his title, but he wasn't allowed to perform mass. Instead he worked maintaining the grounds as a new vicar stood in his place, taking the new home.

Repairing what needed to be done, maintaining the gardens, the pews, Herbert had found a peace Rush had never known.

Carter glanced back, but his gaze rested briefly on the two gravestones. He'd chased the same peace with helping out where he could, staying with his dad. Only he hadn't found it either from that look in his eyes, or maybe that was due to today's blood-and-bone reminder of why his younger brother's grave held hands with his mother's gravestone over there.

Rush looked down at his feet. Back then he'd wanted to take that heavy look of grief away, had tried so damn hard to hold Carter through losing his brother, but he'd gotten lost in the war.

In the end, walking away was the only way to find peace for either of them.

So why did it still feel as though none of them had? He'd walked right back into the day he'd left.

"Look." It came out so quietly from Rush. "I shouldn't be here. I don't—"

“Never your call. It wasn’t back then.” Carter’s anger settled on Rush. “We get that looked at, because there’s been too much blood spilled here in anyone’s lifetime, right?”

Rush shifted his backpack on his shoulder, wincing at how it disturbed his guitar, knocking it against his hips. He wouldn’t be walking far, not without making it hurt more. But the alternative? Of stepping back through that door?

Head down, giving a heavy frown, he still followed Carter up the pathway, caught in old routines, older bad habits....



As Rush pushed on through the hall to the living room, the old wood beams and soft sunset orange of the paintwork were the same, all warm... inviting. A black leather corner settee had replaced the old three-seater and two chairs. Gone too was the plush rug on laminate flooring, and Rush mourned its passing, how he’d lain there next to Carter, watching TV and snacking until they felt like throwing up. A glass coffee table took its place, and that looked more Carter’s taste, but then he always had the best kind of.

No family photos lined the wall anymore.

No Christmas tree hid presents underneath it.

No decorations.

Nothing.

Spiders crawling his neck, Rush made it out of there and into the kitchen, chasing the warmth from the radiator, needing some with how he saw he wasn’t the only one trying to deny Christmas, only it hit a lot more with this being the vicar’s home.

“Sit.” Carter pulled a chair out from the dining table before going over to a cupboard.

“I’ve got my own stuff.” Rush didn’t move after he rested his backpack and guitar down by his feet. He didn’t want to explain how he needed the heat off the radiator in his bones, but then the shivers raking his body didn’t exactly keep his secret.

“Save it.” Carter brought a med kit over to the table and sat down. “Get your arse down here before you bloody fall. Give your nickname a rest.”

“You gave it to me,” Rush mumbled, fighting and losing battles over how good it felt to be standing here in Herbert’s kitchen, alone with Carter. Memories of those first-time blushes over realising play fighting in the yard at fourteen had them staying on the ground together a little longer than needed. The blush that had come off Carter for pinning him down, how Rush had stilled, not wanting to fight his way out anymore. “I got that because you were shit at motocross and I always left your ass in the dust, mate.” He hadn’t; Carter could race the devil and still try and beat him despite the threat of losing his soul.

“Yeah.” Carter snorted. “You tried and failed so badly there.”

“Bullshit.” Rush meant that, loving the echo of that natural fight between them, and body stiff, knee aching, fingers stinging against the heat, Rush went over before he’d thought about it. His backpack went down on the floor, his guitar on the table.

Carter glanced the guitar’s way, shook his head, then put it on a spare seat, looking caught in old routines, older shared bad habits as well.

Cleansing pads came out first, and Rush buried a wince as Carter wiped across the deep graze on his knee, seeming to spend time fighting with some grit. Rush didn’t exactly push

him to take his touch away. Carter wiped the wound dry with a look up at him a moment later, then frowning, he got up and headed into the laundry room.

Two clean towels landed in Rush's lap next, along with jeans, boxers, and a T-shirt.

"There are socks in my bedroom drawer," said Carter, flicking the kettle on. "Get a pair, get a shower, then I'll get some antiseptic on your cuts. You hurting anywhere else?"

Just his head, an old ache in his heart he thought he could ride off, but...? "No." He lied. His ass and side hurt, but he was used to coming off a bike. Being older, out of practice riding one, and losing Carter's touch again... not so much. But one thing he'd learned over the past two years: he took a shower when it was offered.

Carter didn't offer without meaning it, so Rush picked up the towels and offer of fresh clothes and made his way to the stairs as the rattle of a kettle and a few mugs came from the kitchen.

"Leave your clothes on the landing. They'll need cleaning too. That includes that piss-poor offer of a winter coat."

Yeah, that was Carter's way of saying he *really* needed a shower.

4

Carter made it upstairs, only once spilling the mug of tea over his fingertips. No clothes were dumped on the landing, and he gave a bitter snort.

Rush *had* changed.

Go back a few years, boxers, jeans, shirt, they'd all lived in a permanent state of "I'm fucked if I care" on Carter's bedroom floor, tossed aside with any caution Rush should have had. But back then, Rush rode life like he'd ridden his motocross bike: hands-free, coming out of a 360-midair spin, taking Carter's life and breath every goddamn time he'd done his aerial displays. He'd earned his nickname the day he'd put motorbike wheel to dirt-road trail back when he was seven. That *and* he was always in a rush to get his ass covered in case the local vicar found him in Carter's bedroom when he did run headlong into his sexuality years later. Even afterwards, when his dad had found them together, Rush had that "I'm out of here" quickness to slipping his jeans over his slim ass.

Carter paused by the bathroom door, steam coming in light breaths between the gap, and he lost his thin smile and any thoughts on Rush's slim ass.

That piss-poor excuse for a ride Rush had between his legs today? That wasn't Rush, life without the rev of an engine he'd push to the extreme. Yet there he was, on his skinny ass in the road, bent wheel to a mountain bike left spinning.

It wasn't the running that pissed Carter off enough to give him a soaking. He'd just looked so goddamn resigned to falling and getting knocked off course.

Fuck. The worst of that had been Carter's fault, he knew that, but every time he looked at Rush, all he saw was....

Briefly closing his eyes, he pushed that image away of Rush's elder brother and went on through, avoiding glancing

at the shower. “Just grabbing the clothes you forgot to leave out. There’s a tea here too.” He’d looked like he’d needed the heat burning through to his bones.

“Thanks.” Rubbing at his shoulder-length hair, Rush caught him off guard as he stood over by the cabinet, a towel hung low and dirty around his waist, but Carter froze.

Skinny.

Too goddamn skinny.

A frown came his way, a drop of confidence as Rush turned away a little, blocking the full view of his body.

Despite the heavy sun-kissed offer, skin pulled tight over what used to be such a toned and supple offering. He didn’t just need food, he needed several years of Christmas roasts and six choices of puddings with each one to fill him back out. That and a decade of being held to wipe away how displaced in life he looked.

Where the hell had he been for the past two years? The pots and cans of food in his backpack called it out though, along with the burner. Yeah, he’d checked whilst Rush had been in the shower. “When was the last time you ate?” It slipped out before Carter realised as he handed Rush his tea. “And I mean really ate?” That he did mean, and Rush snorted.

“That what this offer is?” Rush pulled Carter’s T-shirt off the sink and tugged it on after putting his mug down. “A pity fest?” Boxers came on next, and a grazed ass cheek and shin exposed themselves under the towel as he slipped them on. His wince called out how the fall had been harder than it looked. But he was hiding his body, and he’d never done that in front of Carter. “Because you’re not looking too great yourself, mate.”

Yeah, maybe he wasn’t. “It’s an offer of clothes, a drink, and something to eat,” Carter said, picking the mug up and making sure Rush took it again after jeans came on. “Your bastard-ass attitude you can leave back in the gutter your brother belongs

in.” He didn’t mean it to come out so hard, but he needed to see something of the old Rush back in the bathroom, in look if not in body.

And there it was, just for a brief moment, with mention of his brother.

Mug stilling before he could take a sip, Rush glanced sideways at him, his look through long wet hair more him, his hard stare from forest-green eyes more ready to rough it on the racetrack and fight for the finish line. The bad side to Rush? He never had known when to walk away from the track. But whatever he went to bite back with, it faded, and that “Just leave me alone in the gutter” crept back into his look as he glanced away.

It pissed Carter off more, and in with wanting to give him another soaking for it, he went to turn away. Rush wasn’t his brother, Dan. Carter just wished he’d been able to see it back then. “I’ll be downstairs. Bring your own clothes down and put them in the washer. Dad’s over at my aunt’s until Boxing Day, and Gaz is at work over at the police station, so you can breathe easy, especially as he’s living with Brenda now.”

“Seriously?” A shove came at Carter’s shoulder as he turned away. “You couldn’t have told me that bastard had left here, you ass?”

Carter gave a rough sigh into the stumble, then turned back. Rush still looked ready for a fight, but he fought relief, and maybe the faint trace of a smile too. Carter eased off seeing it, needing that natural ease between them.

“Lead with that next time, okay?” Rush tossed his towel at him.

Carter caught it and still ended picking up his clothes, more resigned to it, and he looked Rush’s way. “Just wanted to give you an easy out if you needed it.”

Rush tilted his head a little. “That what you did back then? Give me an easy out before your brother got home by telling

me to fuck off?”

“No,” Carter said flatly. “I needed you to fuck off back then.” He left it at that, too tired to fight about it anymore. That same old tenseness still hung in the air.

“Hey—” Rush pulled him back.

“Leave it, okay?” Carter tugged out of the grip on his arm. “I know it wasn’t your fault over Jessie, that I hurt you for it anyway, but we got lost in it all, Rush. So telling you to fuck off?” He nodded. “We needed it.”

“*You* needed it.” Rush put his tea down. “I’ll take responsibility for taking the exit when I didn’t want to, but you remember who opened the door. And on that note....” Rush tugged his clothes from Carter’s hold and turned towards the stairs. “Gaz... your twat of a brother... he’ll catch on soon enough I’m here, so it was one huge bastard mistake coming back and—”

A thud came at the front door, loud, hard. Once... twice... the third time the pound of a hammer hitting a nail, or something similar. Carter jerked a look downstairs the same time Rush did.

With a frown, a hand on Rush’s arm to ease the haunting look of it being Gaz coming through the door, Carter eased past him, then headed downstairs and tugged the door open as Rush followed him down the hall.

Wind shifted Carter’s fringe over his eyes, but other than that, the doorway stood empty as snow brushed his cheeks. Too many footprints marked the light snow: his and Rush’s, maybe someone else’s, but the sleet made it hard to tell. There was always some kid out to play a prank, more so with anyone tied to the church, but most avoided trying it on, especially with Gaz being the local police inspector. Only those knocks? They didn’t come with the force of a kid behind it. In fact—

“Fuck.” A grip came at Carter’s arm.

Carter glanced over his shoulder at Rush, then switched quickly to the door when Rush's look stayed transfixed on it.

"Jesus...." He mirrored Rush's numbness.

Blood running in a single stream down the door, the tongue nailed just above the knocker was long, too inhuman to be anything but animal—maybe a cow's? A slit ran the middle of it, opening it up to allow the potato peeling and a torn part from a packet of crisps to sleep snugly inside.

Carter had seen the news.

Male, female, old, young, gay, straight, bi... made little difference beyond the victims coming in pairs.

Cut open whilst still alive, stomachs gutted, potato peelings and rubbish were always left inside to rot....

But him and Rush, they weren't a couple. They were....

Carter frowned.

Exes.

Jesus Christ.

But a tongue?

He knew nothing about a tongue being nailed to the door.

That was all Carter wanted to register as he sucked in a breath and knocked into Rush before he plucked his mobile phone from his pocket and punched in 999.

"Don't." Rush pulled the phone from him, and every reason as to why was caught in his eyes. Gaz would be on the end of the call. "Please."

Carter held his look, then took the phone off him. "You've got to know what this is," he said to him. "Fuck what it means for me. It doesn't matter how far you try and run: you're still a target, and I've lost enough."

Rush searched his look for a moment, then he eased off, digging his hands into his back pocket. That was all the

confirmation Carter needed as he made the call.

Carter sat at his kitchen table, nursing a coffee. Rush took the next seat by him, his look down at his hands as he seemed to try and find warmth from every available source. Occasionally he'd flick a glance to the door, his leg bouncing slightly under the table, and a mix of needing the door to stay closed to keep people out battled with needing it wide open in order to bolt. In many ways, it was why Carter had opened the door for him two years ago: it always brought him to his knees seeing Rush backed into a corner with no way out.

"Tea." Rush snorted as he looked down into his mug. "Rape, battery... world hunger... tea's the magical fix that dismisses the whole herd of white elephants running this town, huh?"

The cry of police sirens from down the street had him closing his eyes, and Carter slipped a hand to Rush's thigh, gripping it. Most sirens stopped out front, but a car carried on around the back, no doubt going for blocking a way out of the backyard.

Maybe overkill, maybe not, not with Gaz picking up the call and demanding they stay where they were. Carter had left the door open, and voices came from close to it, then footsteps headed their way from the lounge.

Carter couldn't breathe for a moment. A few years ago, he'd sat at this table with his dad, with Gaz being the one walking up the hall to tell them about Jessie, and he frowned his look away, hating the ghosts that walked in the shadow of his brother's footsteps.

A warm hand covered his the next moment, and Rush glanced at Carter, concern in his eyes, shared horrors for different reasons, for different sides of the vicious coin.

"Right." Gaz rested against the doorframe, his bulk and fold of arms almost blocking anyone else coming in, and the same

anger, hurt... concern stood there with his old look. “Why now, you bastard? Why get seen out with *my* brother, huh?”

“Not his fault,” Carter said flatly, but Rush didn’t move, didn’t even look up, again carrying the guilt regardless of whether it was his fault or not. “He’s here because I asked him to.” Carter levelled his look on Gaz. “That invitation stays. You start taking it out on him, you can piss off. You should have let someone else handle this when you found out he was here.”

Gaz cocked a brow, then came over and pulled out a chair before sitting down. “Small town, small roll call back at the station. You called knowing full well you’d get me.” He eased back, getting comfortable. “Chief Inspector’s also outside, and I’m here as Inspector at his request because of, well....” He looked at Rush. “*Him.*”

Carter snorted. “Other than being wrong place, wrong time, this is fuck all to do with either of us.”

“That right?” Gaz sniffed. “This really fuck all to do with you, Rush?”

Rush kept his head down and seemed to avoid focusing on the quiet coming from the living room at the mention of his name. He’d no doubt gotten used to ignoring the stares and whispers over the past few years, or tried to at least.

“Because it doesn’t look like it to me, and let me explain why.” Gaz was back to folding his arms. “That tongue nailed to the door...? That isn’t the Couple Killer’s MO. He likes his peelings and rubbish stuffed in the body, nothing more, nothing less, no warning given.”

Rush frowned up at him, and Carter was right there on the confusion.

Gaz kept his look on Rush. “So... do you know the historic tie to why tongues are nailed to doors?”

“*What?* Why the hell *would* he?” Carter screwed his face at him. “What sick bastard even searches it up?”

“My concern too.” Gaz held out his hand. “Your phone, Rush.”

Christ, he wanted to run a check on search history.

Rush shook his head. “Don’t own one.” He twisted his mug in his hands. “Don’t want the contact anymore.”

That explained the dead ends Carter had run into. It had taken him a few months to get his head and heart right, but he’d searched for Rush after he’d walked out, then spent many a night calling everyone they’d known growing up. No one had seen or heard from him. Carter knew why now.

Gaz cocked a brow. “Mind if I check?” He didn’t give Rush much choice as he got up and came around. A tug at his arm pulled Rush to his feet, and a little shove off Gaz forced him palm-flat on the table. The roughness had Carter up, shoving Gaz back to make it clear he kept his handling very... fucking... professional when it came to any body search on Rush.

“Clear.” Gaz glanced under the table. “That your backpack?”

Rush nodded as Gaz picked it up.

“You got anything else here other than your guitar and case?” He picked that up too.

“No.”

“You sure?” Gaz fixed a look back Rush’s way before calling someone through to take them. “No motorbike? Car?”

Rush shook his head as he straightened his T-shirt, looking like he needed another shower.

“So how’d you get here?”

“He—” Carter cut that off as Rush glanced his way. The mountain bike. If he couldn’t afford a phone.... Fuck. He’d

stolen the bike? “Hitching,” Carter added after a moment. “He’d been trying to hitch a ride but slipped on the ice, so I stopped to make sure he was okay.”

Gaz looked between them, his brow furrowed. “Sure, he hitched a lift, because he always opted for walking as a kid, right?” He took his seat and made a point of letting them both know they needed to take theirs too. “So, the history surrounding nailing a tongue to the door.” He tilted his head Rush’s way. “You got any idea at all yet on what I’m getting at here?”

Rush shrugged, so Gaz leaned on the table. Carter didn’t like how he tried to get in Rush’s personal space again.

“One option sees witchcraft use it to silence an enemy.” Gaz cocked a small smile. “But mostly, it’s used by London gangs to mark whistleblowers. They’d use the tongue of the whistleblower to do it.”

Oh fuck.... Carter saw where this was going, but it seemed to take Rush a moment later, and he looked like he needed to throw up.

Gaz nodded. “Jessie,” he said quietly, “you remember him, huh, our little brother? He’d just turned seventeen, and as a birthday gift, your brother stabbed him seventeen times for it.”

A tap of finger came at the tabletop, one, two... seventeen.

“And you—” Gaz’s smile was bitter. “—being the upstanding citizen that you are, you *were* the one to hand over the evidence that got your bastard of a brother sent down. Thank you for that, by the way. I know we didn’t really see eye to eye back then, but you *were* as close to Dan as me and Carter since losing Jessie, and it must have really hurt going up against him.”

Rush paled, so badly. “He died as well.” It came out as nothing more than a murmur, each answer just a few syllables and such a contrast to how he’d spoken to Carter. “Dan.”

“Yeah.” Gaz took out a tablet and scanned it over. “Six months ago. Best news I heard since all this shit started, although he got out really early on his life sentence.” He looked up. “The riot back at Featherstone Prison saw a good portion of it was burned to the ground, including over twenty-five inmates. Your brother being one of those bodies, well... burned to the—”

“Stop it.” A year separated Carter and Gaz, but it didn’t matter how hard Gaz came, Carter didn’t need a police badge to carry that *pack it in* threat. “Get to the point without dragging him through this anymore. He’s not Dan.”

Gaz held his look for a moment, then he was back with Rush. “Along with his cry of innocence all the way through the court, did your brother make a friend or two in the cells, and now they’re out for a little fun with you two, huh?”

“Fun?” Rush looked up at him. “Since when has any of this shit been... fun? Because I remember exactly what you didn’t do when you found out what Jessie’s friends had done to mine.”

That was more Rush and his fight, and Carter fell quiet. Jessie had had a lot of grieving school friends and, added to Gaz and the “pressure” from his colleagues with breathing down Rush’s neck to find evidence on his brother, Rush’s home had burned down with him and his father asleep inside. Fire alarms had saved their lives, but someone in the police department had “lost” the paperwork over the *who*, Gaz’s look only calling grief and extenuating circumstances.

Carter rested a touch on Rush’s thigh, wanting to pull him in close against any threat to come their way in their youth. Even if they fought between themselves, have someone else come in and threaten one of them, then they fought together....

Only Rush pulled away, and Carter frowned at how the isolation called him out on how it hadn’t ended that way, despite Rush standing up in court and testifying against his

brother. Rush had *still* lost everything, including his father, who never forgave him for turning Dan in.

“*Jessie’s* friends never nailed a tongue to the door,” said Gaz. “But Dan... he could have spoken to someone before he died in order to target you two and make it look like the Couple Killer.”

Right. Because the tongue *wasn’t* the Couple Killer’s usual MO... Christ. Carter didn’t know whether to feel relieved or sicker to the stomach.

“Hmm,” said Gaz, as if feeling Carter’s sickness. “A little too odd that on the day Rush turns up here, a tongue ends up nailed to our door, right?”

“A BMW...” Carter flicked a quick look at Rush. “It drove by us on the road,” he said back to Gaz. “Someone saw us together earlier, up by the tip, heading towards Rugeley.”

Gaz sat forward. “BMW?” That struck a chord, or seemed to. “You get a licence plate number?”

Carter shook his head, and Rush did too, but then he looked too tired and sore to think too deeply, and Carter kicked himself over not putting any antiseptic on his wounds.

“Okay.” Gaz got to his feet. “I’m on the CCTV. But along with surveillance outside, I’m here with you for the next few hours until we can sort a safe house in case this *is* the Couple Killer.” He didn’t look happy. “He does have an opportunistic side to his MO sometimes, where he’ll plan others out. So we need to play this safe. And before you start, Cart....” He frowned at him. “That means Rush stays here too whether he wants it or not. It’s suicidal to split you up until we know for sure. But either way, this Couple Killer waits until the couple are alone before attacking, so having us here with you both will keep you safe if it is him.”

Carter breathed a little easier, but Rush remained too still at his side.

Trust was non-existent in his silence, and it killed a part of Carter knowing some of that was directed at him.

6

“I should have done this sooner,” mumbled Carter. In his bedroom, Rush stood by his bed, a thumb inching down his jeans over his right ass cheek. Three grazes licked a little too lovingly at the slim offer, running up his side, and Carter winced for him as he finished up with the antiseptic cream. There’d be bruises on his shoulder too by morning. “Not the best of Christmas presents, huh?”

Rush glanced down at him, his quiet enough to warn Carter off talking normal times when they both felt anything but normal, but no cry out came against the injustice of it all.

He should be crying out against the injustice of it all, because he wasn’t Dan. He hadn’t killed Jessie. But he had paid the price for it all and lost everything.

Even towards the end, Rush had fallen into this goddamn quiet, as if he held on to the inevitable because it was all he had left to trust, how life dealt such a cruel hand to her witnesses caught with carrying the same blood as the killer.

Maybe Carter had shouted enough into the wind for both of them, because Dan crying innocence, dragging the court case on and on with that look over at Gaz....

It wore everyone down.

It wore Carter down until all he’d been left to do was cry *fuck off* to Rush when all he’d wanted to do was to get at Dan for it.

And Rush... he’d left, not even waiting for the final verdict. He’d just packed his backpack and... walked.

“I should have gone with you.” It came out before Carter realised it, and as he eased the jeans gently back over Rush’s ass cheek, he looked at him. “I should have *been* right there with you on the streets.”

Rush frowned, and for a moment, he went to say something. Then looking away, he shook his head. “We’d have torn into each other more. You were right calling fuck off.” He shivered, and Carter caught the flush in his cheeks.

“Hey.” He touched Rush’s forehead. “You’re burning up.” Of course he would be. He’d just walked in off the street, or from couch surfing wherever he could. Carter hadn’t even asked where he’d come from, how long he’d been biking the streets, who he’d found to call a friend over the past two years. *Would* he have trusted anyone to call them a friend after the damage he’d taken? Christ.... “Get your head down. Get some sleep.” Darkness started to hug the back garden. “You need it.”

Rush frowned down at the bed, but he didn’t make a move. Too much history seemed to walk a path in his head: the burn of being in Carter’s bed, of getting caught within it, of having his own reduced to ash. After a moment, he tugged the quilt off and turned away for the leather sofa Carter kept for watching movies.

The chasm that grew with each step away from him separated who’d they’d been together, and giving a slight nod, a turn away for the door, Carter headed in the opposite direction.

“I knew you came looking.”

It came so quietly, and Carter glanced over his shoulder. “What?”

“I knew but didn’t answer your call.” Rush pulled the quilt up under his chin, his eyes closing. “I knew you’d turn back if I didn’t. So I didn’t answer,” he said quietly. “Hate was too much.”

Carter nodded. The day he’d told him to fuck off, he’d seen it. “If it’s all you’ve got left for me, I’ll take the hate,” he said just as quietly. “I’ll try and say sorry through any cries you throw my way, but I need to hear those cries. I need you pissed off and angry, burning it off.”

Rush shook his head. "My anger's not yours to take. Neither of you two get to choose what to keep, what to throw away."

All the fight suddenly drained from Carter, and he turned back, heading out into the hall.

As he shut the door, Gaz came out of the bathroom, but his look over at him said he'd been listening. He gave a rough sigh and rested a hand on Carter's neck. "That fucking family," Gaz muttered quietly. "Even doing nothing, they fuck life up for us every goddamn time. Take the hint," he said tugging Carter in, "kick his ass back in the gutter when this is over and bloody done."

Carter pulled away, then glanced back over his shoulder as he headed for the stairs. "Ease off. He's not well, and he's had enough. He had nothing to do with Jessie's death. I'm..." He frowned. "Me? I'm pulling the Vulcan into the garage and giving her a wash down."

"Back to riding her anywhere but here, huh? You try and run as much as he does. Dad and me, we see the only reason you stay in town is to look after Dad. You need to focus on that, otherwise all this?" Gaz shrugged. "It'll drive you bad places like it does me. You're meant to be the sane one."

What he needed, what he really wanted out of life... he'd told to fuck off a long time ago, and rubbing at his head, Carter made it outside, needing to ease the suffocation. He sent a wave over to the parked police car, and a salute came back from one of the officers. Or maybe he imagined that as he couldn't see through the dark to confirm it. Then as he glanced around, Carter frowned as he scanned the driveway. Only his dad's motorbike sat there. When he'd gotten here with Rush, he'd walked the Vulcan up the pathway, but the front yard and drive stood empty except for his dad's motorbike, the garage roller doors up to keep out the night.

Gaz must have shifted it inside. Carter headed back in, going through the kitchen to get to the side door into it.

The darkness from outside settled too much like a lover in the kitchen, and as he opened the side door to the garage, for a moment he paused, his skin crawling with how a thicker blackness met him.

Fuck this shit. He rubbed at his head again. Today had rattled him, and even familiar shadows seemed unfriendly.

Shaking it off, Carter flicked on the light and breathed a sigh of relief at the sight of his motorbike.

He started to make his way over, but the pop of the light bulb and strange smell hitting his senses startled him. Then as someone shaped him too cosily from behind, the slight chime of a silver bell jolted him—and the razor pressing into his throat?

He stilled, so fucking quickly.

“Yeah, keep it docile.” A breath brushed his ear. “Or pick a fight with me.” A kiss came at his cheek. “We had a few over the years, right... Cart?”

Carter couldn't breathe, not for a moment, because he knew... he damn well *knew* that hard tone.



The heavy quiet playing in the darkness of the bedroom tugged Rush from his sleep, but for a moment, the heat ruling his head and body couldn't figure out why. The hand that smothered his mouth and nose a moment later called it out, and Rush tried to fight off the duvet and the suffocating feel of having his breathing cut off.

“Shush.” Gaz's breath came at his cheek, too bloody close, and Rush blinked against the stench of coffee dusting it. “Don't say a fucking word.” He dropped his touch and seemed to listen for something, but it was too dark in the bedroom to

see beyond his shadowed bulk to know for sure. The quiet just felt off. Carter always kept his hall light on for his dad, but no light crept under the rim of the door.

“Get up,” Gaz snarled under his breath. “Make it quick.”

If something had Gaz alone in here, in this bedroom, with him, then—

Carter.

Rush shoved the quilt off, bare feet quickly finding the floor as he crouched low next to Gaz. “What’s going on?”

“Garage. There was noise in there.” It came so quietly from by his side. “You stay behind me. Don’t bloody move from there.”

Carter would naturally find his way into the garage, and Rush had hated the fuck out of both with how Carter had always found his way in there to take a ride every time the arguing had cut in.

But Rush didn’t need telling twice to stay close to Gaz, and as he buried a cough, a sting of a headache, he shadowed his heel as Gaz headed for the door.

Not even the hum off the fridge met them at the top of the stairs. Gaz’s look went back over his shoulder to the bedroom before he plucked his radio off his belt.

“Paul, you seeing anything out there? The power’s cut across town. Noise came from the garage about five minutes ago.”

Nothing but static answered his whisper, and his look going back downstairs, Gaz started to make his way down. As they took to the kitchen, concern bit into Rush with how no call was being made to the station. It sometimes happened: power off across town, more so in the winter, but noise from the garage and Carter not coming out to meet them?

Gaz paused by the side of the garage door, a hand on the handle. A soft pull down was given—then Rush grunted and tried to stop the grip into the back of his hair as Gaz forced him in first, his stun gun pressed into the back of his skull.

“Out, you bastard. I know you’re in here.”

As a muffled cry came from over by where the motorbikes had sat in the past, Rush cried out as Gaz gripped harder into his hair, using him to shield against any hit that may come.

“*You fucking cunt—*” Rush snarled, trying to get free in the darkness, but from over by the workstation, a soft shift of bell came before a candle flickered on, followed by another.

As a breeze caught the candles and danced shadows over the walls, Rush registered nothing but Carter.

Hands cuffed behind his back, Carter was on the floor, ankle-tied to a Vulcan’s wheels, leg-spreading him wide. Movement would cause the motorbike to fall between his thighs, which he could have walked away from, but a petrol can sitting on the seat and the threat of the open flame off the candle...?

“No.” Rush cried out, trying to get over there, but Gaz pulled him back, an arm around his throat.

“Not wise.” Another soft call of bells came as a third candle was lit and took all shadows from the garage. A hooded figure glanced their way. “Let him go. I need a word in Rush’s ear.” A smile. “I’ll be with you in a minute, mate.” A wink. “Promise.”

Rush stopped struggling.

Dan.

He wore tight jeans across his muscled thighs, a sleeveless red hoodie showing off his upper arms despite the chill, the hood almost... almost hiding the look in his eyes.

But the old familiar element was the two Christmas silver bells attached to his belt. They tinkled lightly as he shifted stance, almost as if he wanted to warn someone that he was coming, give them time to get out of his path. But then hunting in his youth... Dan always had liked to make it a fair hunt to good, sharp listeners.

“You...” Rush battled a hundred and one emotions, but all he had left was—“You died. You died, Dan.”

“*Perch*. It’s a favourite nickname of mine nowadays. Don’t overuse it. And... no.” Dan took hold of a candle as he looked at Rush. “I got my buttons pushed, nothing more. So since seeing how stupid you were to run into Carter today when I did a drive by, here I am—” Gaz took all his attention. “—pushing someone else’s buttons. You gonna be the one to tell Rush why? Don’t worry about Carter. We’ve already had a chat.”

Gaz stiffened as Carter lay with his head back, his look up at the ceiling as an angry tear ran riot into the side of his gag. Rush hadn’t noticed it in the chaos, but just behind him, a pile of tattered rags, knickers, shorts, rings, and wallets lay upended in a small pile.

Gaz let out a snarl, and Rush was shoved to the side before he went for Dan, stun gun aimed at his head.

“*Don’t*.” Rush failed to drag him back. Carter lay between them, and a spark, any goddamn spark or drop of candle near that goddamn exposed petrol could burn him to bone....

A sharp twist of metal came from the tarpaulin he hadn’t noticed coating the floor, and Gaz cried out, instantly going down and gripping his foot. The hunting trap twisted the bone at an impossible angle, and Rush let out a shout, his first thought Carter, his second—the bike and the threat of spilled petrol.

He bolted for it, but Dan moved faster, wrapping an arm around his throat, pulling him back into a hold that had pulled

Jessie to the floor and seen him stabbed seventeen times.

“Off.” Rush struggled, so badly. “*Get th-fuck off me, cunt.*”

A rough snarl came, a shift of body that swamped every breath out of Rush, and the stun gun was kicked away from Gaz.

“Cunt?” Dan growled in Rush’s ear. “That all the fight you got for me?” His kick went at the tarpaulin just in front of them, and another trap was sent Gaz’s way as he sat snarling and trying to get free.

Rush had nearly stepped on it, and a shove off Dan made sure he landed down hard by Carter, jolting his ass. Another set of handcuffs had his wrists tethered to the wheel of the motorbike a moment later, forcing him deathly still at the smell of petrol that came from above.

Dan towered over him, then took something from his pocket and tossed it down.

“Next time I call, answer the goddamn phone.”

A mobile phone and a set of headphones landed in Rush’s lap, and he frowned down at them. Then Carter’s shake of head had him struggling to understand what the hell was going on as Dan went back over to Gaz.

“You prat. I’d have been content to sit in jail and have Christmas dinner there tomorrow, but—hey.” Dan patted at Gaz’s cheek. “Hey, hey.” Another tap. “You look at me.” The grip under Gaz’s chin ensured it. He was still trying to tear the jaws of the trap open, but Dan had lived a life of hunting in the woods, where Rush had just loved driving his motorbike across his path, sending out a warning to the wildlife with a huge grin. Dan leaned in close. “Why the fuck come and poke at me in there, huh?”

Gaz had found his radio, his touch on it slipping under bloody fingers, and Dan eased back, letting him pick it up and scramble to make a call.

When no message got through, Dan shook his head and pulled out another two radios of his own. “That was a sickly sweet police couple keeping watch outside.” He held the radios up. “And look, one came with a strong radio signal in the same frequency that could be used to block any call off yours.” He snorted. “Never were the hardest cock in the men’s room when it came to working out why you never managed to catch me hunting all those years back, were you?”

“I caught you when it mattered, you fuck.” Gaz gripped and tugged at his leg, the movement wild enough to risk pulling the skin off bone to get at Dan.

“No. I handed myself in. Huge difference. But then you had to come to the prison, didn’t you?” Dan said flatly. “And you... you made one hell of a stupid mistake threatening to go after my little bro for taking yours.”

Rush stilled as Carter groaned.

“Let’s go fill him in over why, shall we? Bastard’s too well known for ignoring talks when it could have saved someone’s sanity. Then you and me?” Dan patted Gaz’s cheek again, this time the harder bite forcing his leg to jerk in the trap. “We’ll spend a few hours together, talking Frau Perchta, and why it was really, really stupid to come poking the bear over why I’m owning my nickname Perch lately.”

As Gaz cried out, gripping his ankle again, Dan came over to the rubbish scattered on the floor, and leather gloves on, he picked some of it up and dropped it by Rush.

He crouched down a moment later.

“As much as I want to hit you for not picking up my calls over the years, little bro, the tongue on the door wasn’t for you.” Dan thumbed back to Gaz. “It was a call on the local... wildlife.” He offered such a hard smile. “He’s a creature of habit too, and I knew the tongue would get his attention, get him here, away from his home. You starting to wise up as to why yet? How there are a bunch of personal items going back

over two years here on the floor after my visit to his? Weird, considering I've been in jail for over a year and half, then dead for another six months, huh?"

Rush frowned, and Dan sorted through the items and pulled out a wallet.

"Harry Smith." He showed the ID to Rush. "The night I killed Jessie, I was out in the woods looking for some venison. Jessie was with me and learning the ropes." He tapped the wallet. "That's when we came across Harry and his lover, James, a couple I sometimes met on the trail. We all ate together for a while, then me and Jessie went on the trail before swinging back around. Jessie caught them naked in a tent when we got back to their camp, and the shift came so quickly." The look in his eyes flatlined. "Jessie cut off Harry's tongue and forced it down James's throat before I had time to register he'd pulled out his hunting knife."

Tongue.

Nailing the tongue to the door wasn't the Couple Killer's MO.... Gaz had said that.

"Harry bled out on the floor from a knifing to his groin and kidneys, and James...?" Dan shook his head. "He had his stomach cut open and filled with the rubbish they'd put in a bag for disposal."

Carter cried out into his gag, forcing a quick look off Rush, but he was too lost on what Dan was saying.

"Psychiatrists say the first kill is always the most personal, and Jessie's back then?" Dan fell quiet for a moment. "Everything about you shacking up with Carter, his brother, broke that night." He leaned in so close. "You got any idea how much wildlife he sent hiding under bush with how loud he cried your name as he slaughtered them both?"

As Rush found it hard to breathe, Dan eased back. "So kill the bastard?" Dan nodded. "I've knifed that little bastard time and time again in my cell to stop him walking away from that

clearing and getting his hands on you. And that was me, making my first kill personal.”

The wallet hit Rush’s feet.

“So in comes big bro Gaz after I make the call to him. I mean, we were all best friends then, right? He was a copper. Why wouldn’t I call him?” Dan sniffed, his arms rested across his knees. “I held my hands up to my part. I’d been too damn shocked to stop Harry and James hurting, but there was no way I was letting Jessie leave that clearing alive once I did get off my perch and react. But Gaz needed to see Jessie, and I mean really see what he’d done.”

Dan eased to his feet, and taking a pair of knickers from the pile of personal items, he went over to Gaz. “Only he already knew, or suspected at least, that Jessie was one sick fuck, or growing into one. So James and Harry, all that evidence... it disappeared, right?” He folded his arms as he looked down at him. “And you, in memory of how Jessie died, you made damn sure me and mine lost everything for it. Including Rush’s hold on Carter.”

Rush couldn’t process it all. Not the wallet, not the other personal items, why Dan had needed to get Gaz away from his home and used the tongue to do it. No... he understood the tongue now, just why Gaz had known the tongue wasn’t the Couple Killer’s MO, but....

But?

He threw up and couldn’t stop choking it out.

“So your next move was what, Gaz?” Dan crouched down by him again. “You took Harry and James, wiped all DNA traces of Jessie as easily as me over covering my hunting tracks, and you made sure not even Rush would pick up my call to hear my side. Because you were the one to carry on the couple killing after that. Maybe at first to distract and remove any tie to it possibly being Jessie, but somewhere along the way, you got a real bad taste for it, didn’t you?”

He grabbed Gaz by the throat. “I know you got a taste for it and grew some balls because that’s why you damn well came to taunt me in prison with a threat to find Rush and finish what was started back then.”

As Gaz snarled, Dan shoved him away. “All the rubbish and potato peelings stuffed into the guts with all those murders—*you* made it personal each and every goddamn time as well. Because when we first started out hunting and supplies would run low, I’d fry up potato peelings for crisps for both of us. It’s also where I told you and Jessie about Frau Perchta.”

Dan forced Gaz’s mouth open and started to feed him the pair of knickers.

“Always have loved a good folktale around the campfire, me, but I cut my own throat with it this time.” Dan made sure the last of the knickers were stuffed in Gaz’s mouth no matter how much Gaz struggled against it. “Frau Perchta... German folklore, a really old tale about a witch who loves to hand out both rewards and punishments during the twelve days of Christmas. She had a particular sick punishment for the sinful: ripping out internal organs and replacing them with garbage.” He gave a rough sigh. “So in a way, I damn well helped create you and Jessie, because sin and rubbish as payment was all you both thought when your religious angers over supposed sinners started to break free. I’ll hold up my hands to that too.”

Gaz started to choke, and Dan covered his mouth and nose to ensure it as he kept a grip on his hair.

“*Stop.*” Rush finally forced some words out. “For God’s sake, Dan. Just... just stop it all. *Please.*”

A look came his way, and Dan eased to his feet and came over. Rush could move a moment later as his hands were uncuffed, and a grip pulled him to his feet.

“I’m not right in the head, Rush. I don’t think I ever was, because the couples I’ve killed in the past six months compare to his two years? I loved how all it did was make a return call

to him, got under his skin.” A swipe of thumb came at Rush’s cheek, at the tears that spilled, but the touch was rough, wanting to break bone, then it softened as if to breathe life back into Rush, take away the grief. “There was only ever one way this was going to go between me and him. But you?”

A hand cupped Rush’s neck, and a rougher kiss came at his head. “Learn to pick up my fucking call when I send it your way. I may not be right in the head, but I am okay so long as I know you’re still out here, doing okay.”

“*Died...*” Unable to stop his shaking, how angry his tears came, Rush hid his head in Dan’s shoulder and cried out. “I thought you died, and I... I... after Jessie... I fucking hated every bastard ounce of how you made me miss you being here with me, Dan. I lost my brother too.”

“Yeah.” A hard grip came at the back of his hair, pulling him close. “I know.” Dan kissed at his head again. “Fucking hated you too for a while back there too.” The grip on Rush’s hair pulled him away a touch. “And that’s... that’s why you give me time alone with Gaz now. I need release from how he’s held us both hostage.”

He pushed a radio into Rush’s chest a moment later.

“Get Carter out of here and make the call to the police. I need to be stopped as much as he does.” Dan cocked his head. “So make it fast, because for these last few minutes, it’s just me and him.” A hard snort came. “Unnatural brotherly love... his and Jessie’s. The last in the ultimate collection of his.”

Rush stumbled away from the bike after Dan pushed him, then Carter was untied and pulled to his feet.

“A-ah. No.” Dan grabbed Carter by the collar as he tried to shove past and get to Gaz. Rush knew the feeling, had died a million times trying to battle the need to hit or hold the brother who sat hurt on the floor.

Dan shook his head as he grabbed Carter by the throat, holding him still. “You...” He pulled him nose-to-nose close.

“I hear you hurt my brother again by telling him to fuck off, I’ll break free from any prison you put me in and show you my version of brotherly love, we utterly... fucking... clear?”

Carter stilled, and the look he finally gave Dan was so goddamn calm. “He goes nowhere, not without me now.”

“Good.” Dan nodded after a moment. “Because no one in your fucked-up family had a right to fuck with who he loves.” He shoved Carter into Rush. “Take the walk. Get out, both of you,” he said quietly. “You give me these few minutes with your brother.” He lowered his look. “Just him... me, no one here to pull our leashes for a few precious moments.”

Rush already started to back away, and he gripped Carter’s arm. For Carter’s sake—his sanity—he made damn sure he pulled him back towards the kitchen with him, needing to make that call to the police in order to break this up. A small part of the Dan he’d grown up with was still there, but only enough to not want them to see what happened from here on in. But it was the other side, the one that tried to bury the flicker of how control was slipping, that had him backing away. Dan didn’t want Gaz’s death on their shoulders, but he *would* take his pound of sinner’s flesh and go through them to do it if they stayed around. Just for a moment, Rush needed to see it as he glanced back over his shoulder.

“So. Just you and me, huh? You got what you wanted. A poke at the bear.” Dan went and crouched back by Gaz, a smile touching his lips. “Merry Christmas, you *utter* fucking dumbass....”



Rush made it out into the kitchen, the blood on the radio hitting home over why the two cops outside hadn’t come in,

but he still brought the radio up close and started to make the call.

Carter came in, closing his eyes and resting his head against Rush's. But his touch slipped to the radio, taking it down to Rush's side.

Uneasy, Rush shifted slightly, his look going to the door, back to that serious frown creasing Carter's brow.

From inside the garage, a hit of fist came a moment later, followed by a cry, and a tear slipped down Carter's cheek.

Another hit off fist, another cry drew another tear, but still the call was held off.

“Carter....”

Eventually a small nod came, and Carter took his hold off the radio.

For all the grief caused, the hurt, the loss, the injustice of it all... this last silent cry belonged to Carter, to how he stood back and let Dan cry his anger at the world, if only for a few brief seconds.

Rush roughly tugged him in so close with an arm around his neck as he made the call.

“Yeah,” he mumbled into Carter's ear after he let the radio fall back to his side. “We go nowhere without each other now.” He kissed roughly at Carter's head. “Just you... me. Us. Fuck anything to do with the ghosts of Christmas past, present, or any fucked-up future that may come our way, right?”

ABOUT JACK L. PYKE

Jack's an author who specialises in BDSM M/M Psychological Thrillers. With a wicked love for portraying D/s relationships in particular, all added to a psychological thriller edge, kink and mind games go hand in hand here, but so too does help from some very special people: Vicki Howard, Reed, Elaine, Author Louisa Mae, and a highly recommended proofreader: Liz Gerrow over at <https://ashbornestardust.com>.

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IT'S A WONDERFUL DEATH



Remi Varlow

Sold to the Vampire sect as a child, Noel serves them and waits for the day they finally kill him. Then one Christmas night, he makes a wish for a Christmas angel to rescue him.

Tarek, the strongest and most powerful vampire he's ever encountered shows up and slays his abusers. Then he takes him home and offers to take care of him.

Is it greedy for Noel to make one more Christmas wish to stay with

Tarek forever.

Content Warnings

This book contains violence, bad parenting, abuse, cruelty, and a brief mention of an attempted sexual assault.

Noel

Merry Christmas, ya filthy animals!” says a voice from the television that one of the vampires left on in another room and has been playing Christmas movies all night.

I try to remember the movie those words are from, but the answer dances away.

All the vampires in the loft had fed on me and taken too much blood, leaving my mind loose and floaty and unable to grasp my thoughts. And even if I wasn't left lying out on their kitchen table, like a table of leftovers waiting to be consumed, It's been so long since I'd seen any television, let alone Christmas movies, I doubt I'd remember the movie's name.

Still, it's kinda nice to be able to listen to the movies even if I can't see them. They bring back a different time in my life. It was a time when I was safe, and though I was usually hungry and alone, there was usually a television —unless my dad hocked it—to keep me company.

Christmas movies were my favorite. Though I'd never believed in Santa Claus or had presents, a tree, or a big holiday meal, I loved watching the stories about it. I pretended that someday I might have a Christmas tree with a present under it with my name on it.

Sometimes, I think I imagined that life. The one I'd had before my dad gave me to the vampires. I'd been eight when he walked me through high wrought iron gates to a large brick mansion and handed me to a cold-eyed man wearing a butler's suit.

“He's all yours,” he told the man who grabbed me hard by the shoulders.

I struggled against the man's steely grip. My father knelt and shook me .“Don't fight Noel,” he hissed, glancing

nervously at the butler. “You can’t have them thinking you’ll cause trouble. They’ll think they can’t train you and send you home with me.”

All I heard was the word home. “ Good,” I cried, shaking against him. “I don’t want to stay here.”

“Shhh,” he hushed me. “You gotta go with him.” His washed-out blue eyes filled with tears. “I owe the... people in there money, and if you don’t go with them and do what they say, they’ll hurt me ... or worse.”

My eyes went big, and he ruffled my hair. “You won’t let your dad get hurt, will you son?”

I looked up at the large stone house, and a chill ran through me. I knew there was nothing good waiting for me behind those doors, but I couldn’t let my dad be hurt. Though he wasn’t like the fathers in any of the Christmas movies I loved to watch, he was the only family I’d ever[known.

“It’s only for a little while, Noel,” he promised. “Two or three months, I’ll raise the money to buy you back. And then it’s just you and me, kid, back together and better than ever.” He gave me a rare hug and leaned back to look at me. “Are you gonna help your old man out of a jam?”

I couldn’t say the words. I just nodded and let the butler lead me toward the door. Before walking through, I turned back for one last look at my father. He wasn’t there. He’d already hurried out the gate.

I’d been right. There’d been nothing good for me behind those doors. I quickly learned my father had sold me to Primitus Sanguis, a sect of ancient vampires, as a blood servant. Me and twenty or so others were their breakfast, lunch, and dinner on legs while also acting as the household staff.

Arwen, the butler who’d collected me from my father, ran the household and oversaw my training. He’d been serving the

vampires since he'd been a boy, and he was a cruel teacher enforcing the stringent rules of the sect with a vicious glee.

My father never came back in three months like he'd promised. Sometimes I told myself stories about why he didn't return for me —like he'd been killed in an accident or maybe, hit his head and developed a case of amnesia—but deep down, I knew the truth. I was worth less to him than the old television he used to pawn. At least with the tv he always managed to scrounge up the money to get it back.

I'd served the sect for the last twelve years until Marius, one of the founding members of Primitus Sanguis, came to inspect the order and began paying too much attention to me.

The sect believed humans were inferior to vampires and blood servants were to remain pure vessels of nourishment for the vampires they served. Despite the strict rules, in the time I'd served the order there'd been several incidences where a servant and vampire had been caught fucking. Each time, the servant was blamed for *seducing* the vampire even though we were forbidden to refuse any vampire's request. The servants were then strung up in the common hall, and the entire order of vampires, even the vampire caught fucking the servant, would take their turn torturing them as the rest of us were forced to watch. Sometimes, these punishments could last for days until the vampires grew bored and finally let the poor servant die.

When Marius began requesting me as his feeding vessel nightly and began touching me as he fed, I'd been terrified. I'd pretended to be sick to avoid him, but when I'd had no fever, Arwen had whipped me for neglecting my duties.

That night, when I returned to Marius' chambers for his evening meal, he was angry at me for avoiding him. He accused me of playing games with him and forced me to my knees. Grabbing my arm, he tore into me brutally. Long used to the intense pain of being bit, I was surprised at the jolt of pure agony that traveled through my veins at his bite. I

screamed, and my other arm shot out and hit a heavy lamp into the window, causing the glass pane to shatter.

Lost in blood lust, Marius didn't even notice the wreckage. He undid his pants and pulled out his cock, placing it against my lips. Repulsed and scared, I clamped my lips shut. His fangs dug deeper into my arm, and another bolt of pain ripped through me as his hand traveled to my jaw to force it open.

The door opened. "Sir Marius, Misha reported that your window was—" Arwen's words trailed off as he judged the picture before him. His beady eyes filled with a mean glee, already imagining my tortuous death.

Surprisingly, Arwen was left disappointed. Instead of being brought to the common hall that night, I was imprisoned in one of the mansion's basement cells, where I was whipped daily for my sin of *trying to seduce* a member of the order and left with no food and just enough water to live but so little I was ravaged with thirst.

Then yesterday, I was brought up from my cell to find I'd been sold to a group of vampires to be used for a ritual they were performing. From the conversation I'd overheard, it seems I am to be the virgin sacrifice in a ritual designed to steal another older, more powerful vampire of his powers.

They'd better hurry. Between the blood loss from the coven taking my blood as if I'm an all-you-can-eat buffet, and them ignoring my pleas for water, I can feel my body shutting down. There's a good chance I'll die before they can lure this vampire here for their ritual.

"Every time you hear a bell ring, it means that some angel's just got his wings."

Another line from a movie pierces my fading consciousness. I can't remember the name of this movie either, but flashes of black-and-white images from it fill my head. It was one of my favorite Christmas movies. The one about a man who had A Christmas Angel visit him and rescue him from despair.

My last thought as blood loss drives me to unconsciousness is a wish for my own Christmas angel to deliver me from pain and avenge my abusers.

Tarek

All week since I'd returned from The Wilds and resumed my life in the city, a strange restlessness is building in me. Quick to anger, my body is tense and straining as if readying for a fight. Blood races through my veins urging me to an action I have no clue of, while the wind carries to me the maddening hint of the smell of spiced oranges.

The scent haunts me and calls me to pursue it before vanishing and leaving me to wonder if I'm going mad.

Tonight, pure instinct finally drives me out into the night to search out the root of this strange mania.

Racing through the garish holiday-decorated streets at only a pace another supernatural could track, I search for the cause of my disrupted senses. To have my instincts pinging like this it must mean I'm sensing a danger to me and my family. One, I plan to hunt down and end tonight.

As my search takes me through the city, I sense I'm being followed. Impatient to confront the situation, I turn into an alleyway to lure my followers into making their stand.

The actions of my pursuers will tell me the level of threat they present. I hope for a worthy enemy. A vicious fight might help burn off the restlessness plaguing me all week.

I turn to find seven vampires and a witch blocking my exit. I sigh with an exasperation. Young vampires, not one of them more than a half-century old and unintelligent, if they are confronting an older vampire in an alleyway where I've cut off their escape. They may not know exactly who I am and or how old I am, but still, even as young as they are, they should sense the power emanating from me and know they're steeply outmatched.,

“State your business,” I demand.

A scruffy, long-haired redhead swaggers to the front of the group. With his red hair and freckles combined with his spiked mullet and red leather pants, he looks like a cross between Huckleberry Finn and the lead singer of an eighties metal band. “State your business,” he mimics in a sing-song voice. “Jeez.” He rolls his eyes. “You really are an ancient fanger, aren’t you?”

“Good one, Deacon,” one of his group calls out, as the rest laugh in obsequious support of their unimpressive leader.

I shudder at the term fanger. *Deacon deserves to die just from his choice of neuvo-vampire vocabulary.* I smile at him, showing my fangs. “Very ancient.”

“Just how ancient?” His eyes gleam with greed. “A hundred? Two hundred?”

Ahh, yet another young vampire not content with the dark gift my brother and I have given his line and seeking to steal more power.

“I doubt you can count that high.”

A few of his coven barks out a laugh. He bows up at being laughed at. “Shut the fuck up” Deacon screeches, and turns to the girl next to him. She’s clearly a witch from the basic ruins tattooed all over her skin. “Do it,” he orders. He gives me a malicious grin. “Make it hurt.”

The witch starts chanting an incantation, and I feel a faint buzz of her power hit me. It tickles. She should be charming spellbags for human tourists, not trying to spell vampires. I quickly shake it off as if removing a piece of lint from my jacket.

“Don’t kill him,” Deacon orders. *As if that were a possibility.* “Just daze him enough so we can take him back to the loft and perform the ritual.”

Idiot. Even if he could somehow take my power, he picked the wrong vampire. I’m full-blood demon. He is a human-

demon hybrid It would be like trying to put a nuclear powerhead into a pipe bomb.

It's time to kill these annoyances and continue my hunt. I rush Deacon with a speed he can't comprehend and have him by the neck, ready for the kill. He lets out an entirely too human squeal for a vampire as he tries to release my hold in a poor attempt to escape me.

Then it hits me. The scent of spiced oranges.

I can smell it on him. I direct my senses on the other vampires present and can detect it on them as well. Rage fires in me. For some reason, I hate the scent I'd been haunted by all week mixing with the scents of these imbeciles. It makes me want to make their deaths excruciatingly painful.

Deacon misinterprets my hesitation. "It's working," he cries out. "Keep chanting."

In a milliliter of a second, I make a decision. I could kill Deacon and his insipient band of followers easily and then be on my way to hunt the city for the scent. It would be far more efficient to let them think they have me spelled and let them bring me to the scent's origin.

I fall to my knees.

"Not so powerful now, are you?" Deacon sneers, kicking me in the mouth with his dirty biker boots. *I'm going to make him eat that boot once he's taken me to what I'm looking for.* "You crusty ass, old vampires are all alike. Bogarting the power. Keeping the new fangers down. I'm bringing equality to the undead and taking the power back."

He drops a dark pillowcase over my head, and I'm glad he can't see my eye roll as he continues his verbal manifesto.

"I'm picked up and slung over one of the female vampire's shoulders and then dumped into the back of a trunk and made to endure hearing their musical choices and the stop-and-go

traffic of the city. We finally stop, and from the smells around me, I believe we are somewhere in the manufacturing district.

I'm carried again, this time by two vamps who roughly carry me up two flights of stairs until we ride an elevator up to what must be the top floor of the building. . The scent of spiced oranges gets stronger, and it takes the learned patience of the many centuries of my existence to refrain from quickly killing the coven of vampires to find the intoxicating scent.

The scent could be a trap. A spell created by a more competent witch than the one I encountered in the alleyway. Though there are very few who can fell me, It's wise to continue to appear spelled and powerless.

I'm brought into a room and tied up in heavy, spelled chains meant to bind me. The magic in them is more potent than the witch's spell from earlier. They obviously were purchased from a more accomplished magical practitioner. It still should only take a minute or two to neutralize the chain's control over me.

The pillowcase is ripped from my head. The vampires from the alley surround me, and another dozen vampires appear like cockroaches from the stairs leading down to the living room.

"Bring him to the table and bind him to the boy," Deacon commands.

I'm shoved into the next room, which is a large dining area. The scent I've craved all week is coming from the table where a human body lays naked and spread eagle in chains.

I step closer to get a better look, forgetting to pretend I'm under my captor's command. It's a young man. He can't be older than his early twenties. Blonde riotous curls top a wide, innocent face and full lips. Their lushness contrasting with the fragility of his porcelain skin and his too thin but supple body. My blood warms at his beauty.

Numerous bites cover his neck, wrists, and thighs like he's been used as a feeding troft. At the sight, I let out a murderous

growl.

His eyes blink open, revealing crystal blue eyes, and at the sight, his faint but beating heart synchs with my own barren heart— creating a fierce tattooing that thunders through my veins.

I'd never thought this possible. As the co-originator of the vampires in this world, I have never possessed a beating heart. Hearts in my home realm, were considered similar to the way humans view their appendixes —useless.

What use could a demon have of a heart?

The answer comes to me instantly as if it were a secret buried deep within me. *To love this human—to love my mate.*

Now I understand my madness this week. Once back in this realm, I must have sensed my mate's distress. I'm furious with myself for fighting my instincts and not seeking him out immediately. I could have saved him the abuse these vermin visited upon him.

I'll spend an eternity making it up to him ,but first, I must punish those who hurt him.

The first sight of my mate distracted me from freeing myself from the chains binding me. I return my focus to negating the chain's magic It will only take a few minutes and then I'll deliver my mate's vengeance.

“Are you ready to perform the ritual?” Decan asks the witch who's holding up her phone and watching a video.

“Yeah,” she says, putting her phone back in her pocket. “I just wanted to watch the how-to video on Tik Tok one more time to make sure I didn't forget a step.”

Tik Tok? Zi would strike this witch if they were here.

“Make sure you don't fuck it up,” Deacon says.

The witch huffs. “You, just make sure you give me his liver and eyeballs when you're done with him.” She points to the

boy. "I need them for a money spell I'm doing. next week."

I growl again.

Deacon eyes me. "Looks like Grampa has a crush on Noel."

Noel. My mates name is Noel.

Deacon laughs. "Kinda funny since we'll be using his heart and blood to strip your powers and kill you. His eyes heat as they wander over the boy. "Guess I can't blame you, though. He is very pretty."

I give a push against my chain's magics. It weakens them, but they still hold tight. Just another minute.

"It's a shame he had to remain a virgin to perform the ritual. Deacon's hand caress Noel's neck and trails down his chest "I love to fuck my dinner."

Noel whimpers at his touch. My claws shoot out as I hammer against the magical bonds.

"Oh well," Deacon shrugs. "At least I'll get a good handful while I enjoy one last meal." He rips into Noel's neck as his hand trails downward.

The chains explode from me, turning into pieces of shrapnel as they hit the vampires. They scatter trying to avoid the barrage.

I grab Deacon's wrist and rip off the hand that dared to touch Noel. He screams until I drink him dry and let him drop to the ground. He'll regenerate in minutes, but by then I'll have taken care of the rest of his little coven. I want to have the time to give Deacon the excruciating death he deserves.

. The witch is next. Remembering her comment, I impale my claws through her eyes Enjoying her screams of agony, I then dig out her liver.

The remaining vampires circle me, and I take one of the wooden chairs from around the table and break of the legs to

make a convenient stake. As they rush me, my superior speed allows me to easily drive the stake into each of their hearts.

Once it becomes clear they're far outmatched, the remaining vampires retreat. I block their exit at the door and use the combination of my fangs and claws to behead them.

A moan from the floor reminds me I have one more kill. Deacon is awake once more. Dragging him up by the hair, I rip his mostly regenerated hand off once more.

"Please," he begs until his pleas are stopped by his boot I stuff down his throat. As he fights desperately to dislodge it. I help myself to a bottle of hundred-proof schnapps left on the bar and pour it all over him. Turning toward Noel, I toss a match behind me and hear the flames ignite, sending the vampire who dared to torture my mate to Hell.

Noel watches me with glazed eyes. I rush to him, anxious to free him. Up close, I take in twenty or so open and bleeding bite marks and bruises his captors inflicted and immediately wish I could kill them all over again. In addition to the bites, there are numerous faded bite marks and scars from what looks like lashings from a whip. My fangs sharpen, instinctively wanting to mangle anyone who ever caused Noel pain. At the sight, his body goes stiff with fear.

His fear pierces me deeper than any of my enemies' blows ever have.

Too late, I realize what I must look like to him. I'm covered in blood of the vampires he just watched me slaughter. Of course, he's scared of me.

"I will never hurt you," I promise him.

His blue eyes go huge as I inch toward the table and break the chains holding him. "Will you let me help you sit up?"

After staring at me for a long time, he slowly nods his head. I offer my arm to him. "Grab a hold of me with both your

hands, and I'll pull you up slowly. He does as I ask, his grip weak. The first touch of his skin on mine feels divinely sweet.

Reluctantly pulling away, I shrug off my jacket and drape it around him to cover him. "Can you stand? I need to take you away from here."

Flames have spread around the room. Though I could easily walk through them unscathed, I will not risk Noel by staying any longer.

Obviously used to following orders, he swings his legs around and slips off the table. As I hover over him, he looks up at me with his blue eyes. "Are you my Christmas angel?" he asks and then faints into my arms.

Tarek

After cleaning us both, I lay Noel in my bed. A wild restlessness that always had been part of my existence calms at seeing him lying there. It's as if my entire life I longed for him without knowing.

His heartbeat is faint, and he's far too pale. He needs healing immediately, but even if I fed him my blood and restored him to perfect health, he is far too fragile for my liking. I plan to fix his humanness immediately.

I've turned many a human into a vampire. After all, it was the task my brother Cyrus and I were sent by Nio into this realm to perform. Just as my other two brothers were sent here to populate this world with shifters and Zi brought here to bring magic into this realm. But never has turning a human meant so much as giving Noel my dark gift.

Noel stirs beside me, and I decide to turn him before he gains consciousness to avoid any fear at the concept of dying to be reborn.

The wounds on my mate's body and the scars that hint to a life full of pain make me want to ensure he never suffers another moment of fear or pain again.

After he's fully transitioned and awakes to his second life, Noel will find he's been gifted with ageless, eternal life and that he's mated to one of the most powerful creatures in multiple worlds who will keep him safe and fulfill his every wish.

I use a claw to slice at my wrist until a thin line of my blood appears and move to bring it to Noel's mouth, to begin the process. The sound of a drink being mixed in the downstairs living area alerts me to a presence in the house that I hadn't already accounted for.

I know immediately who is helping themselves to a very rare vintage of my wine.

Growling at the interruption, I breathe in Noel's scent once more and go to my living room, where I find my sibling, Zi reclining back on my couch in a jade-colored silk shift and work boots, sitting on the arm of my couch, drinking a glass of Chateau Laffite Rothschild, from a bottle I stole from Marat before he was killed by one of my line on my orders. A medium sized box wrapped in Christmas paper sits next to them.

"I should have known you already knew," I tell them, stealing the glass from their hand and taking a large sip.

They retrieve their glass and push me away. "I could hear your heart beating in Katmandu."

I glare at them. Did you know that this was a possibility? I'd thought in leaving our realm we were forfeiting our chance at finding eternal mates."

As is their habit, Zi answers my question indirectly. "I know you like to feel in control." Zi waves their hand dismissively at me. "But fate is never so easily denied."

"I'm glad I was wrong," I say, meaning it to my very core. Noel has only been a part of my life for a scant few hours, and already, I can't imagine existence without him.

"And because of that." Zi pins me with their eyes, which are a golden hue right now—the shade their eyes turn when they're determined. "I must request you to go against your every instinct and withhold changing Noel."

My body tenses as if readying for another slaughter. "You ask the impossible," I deny them. "Making Noel a vampire is my first priority. He is far too vulnerable to sickness and injury, not to mention my enemies, to hesitate changing him immediately."

“Tarek, think of the boy’s happiness,” they chide me. Their assuredness that they know better than I do how to make my mate happy infuriates me.

I bare my teeth. “You overstep. It’s his heartbeat that echoes in my heart. I will decide what is best for him.”

They stand. “If you try to turn him, I will stop you.”

At their words, my rage ratchets up to nuclear levels. I take a threatening step toward them. “I will end anyone who tries to get between me, keeping Noel safe.”

Zi’s eyes flicker from red to violet to black as is their habit when they’re angry. The power radiates off them in dangerous waves. Despite my threat, of all of us Zi is the most powerful. My brothers and I are equally matched, but our powers in this realm were originally rooted in Zi’s magics.

“I make this threat for your own good. If you don’t want your mate hating you for eternity, then you’ll listen to me.”

“Impossible,” I scoff. “He is my mate. We share heartbeats. He will not be able to hate me, nor could I ever hate him.”

“Humans don’t feel the mating bond like supernatural creatures do.”

Why in hell is they making this so difficult?

“Another reason to turn him,” I argue.” Our connection will be revealed to Noel, and then he’ll realize I was only doing what I must to protect him.”

They shake their head no. “Even if you turn him, he is so young it may take him years to feel the mating bond the way you do. Or the mate bond may not take because he resents you for turning him into a vampire — into the same creature as the ones who tortured him — without giving him any choice. He could hate you for all eternity.”

It’s been eons since I’ve experienced the emotion, but their words strike me ice-cold with genuine fear.

“The bond truly could not form correctly?”

“Fated mates are destiny’s gift to us, but it does not mean that the bond, especially a nascent bond, can withstand cruelty or one mate ignoring the other’s needs.”

“What do I have to do to ensure our bond forms strong?”

They lean their head to the side studying me “What do you know of your mate other than his heart is synched with yours?”

I hesitate. “He called me his Christmas angel, and then he passed out. I know little of him, but I’ll delight in finding out every small detail of his existence.”

Zi regards me carefully as if weighing their next words.

“You know his history?”

“They nod. “Some of it. Enough to know you must take your time with him.”

“Tell me,” I demand.

Zi recounts what they’ve visioned of Noel’s history and my rage climbs with every detail they share.

“Marius will rule the day I ever turned him.” I vow.

Marius had been an aggravation to me for many years. I had not ended him because he one the first humans I turned when I came to this realm. I’d held a foolish sentiment that he’d move beyond the foolishness of the sect he’d started “I’ll paint this town red with Marius and The Primitus Sanguis’ blood before Noel awakes.”

“Lay your weapons down for now, Tarek. It’s not yet time for your vengeance.”

I start to protest, but with a simple touch to a stone around their neck, Zi transports us into my bedroom, where Noel still sleeps. The sight of him once again stuns me.

He's rolled to his side, and is clutching his pillow like it's a long-lost stuffed animal. His hand is tucked under his cheek, his delicate neck exposed. In this position, I can see the Primitus Sanguis brand on the back of his neck.

I begin to make more promises of blood-soaked vengeance, but Zi stops me. "Noel is your priority before revenge. He needs your care."

As much as it pains me to admit my sibling is right. It leaves me directionless. "If I must wait to avenge him, and I cannot protect him by turning him, how do I care for him?"

"By helping him heal and reclaim what his father and the Primitus Sanguis stole from him— his freedom." "Their eyes flicker indigo in warning. "Including his freedom to choose to be your mate."

"And if he denies me?" I ask, for the first time in my existence feeling vulnerable and powerless. "How do I help him heal and then make him want to stay with me?"

"Get to know him. Let him get to know you before you begin talking of him being your mate."

I start to protest.

"Noel has been serving vampires most of his life. If you present him with this option, he will see it as just another order he's been made to follow. You'd have his obedience but not his love."

I growl at the frustration of everything I want lying enticingly in front of me and not being able to grasp him. But again, Zi is right. I will not settle for anything less than Noel's love.

It will torture me to leave Noel vulnerable and not immediately push to bond with him, but I will learn the skill of human courting for my mate and pursue him until he agrees to spend eternity with me.

4

Noel

My eyes open to see my Christmas angel. This time he's less fearsome looking. The blood that covered him after he performed the vengeance I'd wished for is gone, and his dark, memorizing eyes stare down at me.

"Thank you for killing them," I whisper.

His eyes fill with fire. "After seeing what they did to you," he breaks off and nods toward the ragged bite marks visible on my skin, currently not hidden by the unbelievably soft blanket that's covering me. "If I could I'd resurrect them and kill them again for you I would."

A rush of warmth fills me. No one in my life has ever protected me before. And now this stranger appeared from nowhere and defended me against his own kind.

"Who are you?" I whisper.

"My name is Tarek," he says formally, in a deep, rich voice. that seems to suggest an accent, but one I can't quite pin down. "I am at your service."

So memorized by the dark wave of his hair as it curves along his high cheek bone, it takes me a moment to realize I'm not in a room in the vampire's coven. It's much nicer than the warehouse loft or even the order's mansion. The bed and the rest of the room's furniture is hand crafted mahogany, simple and elegant . Burgundy paint covers the wall with accents of teal and gold. An eclectic collection of tapestries and art hang on the walls, and a dancing fire is lit in a fireplace that takes up most of the opposite wall. The room gives me the unusual feeling of warmth and comfort.

I stiffen. No matter how welcoming the room is and how beautiful the vampire who avenged me is to look at he is still a vampire — one far more fearsome and powerful than I 'd ever

encountered. Twelve years serving vampires tells me that the fact that he let me live when he slaughtered everyone else around me means that I must be of some value to him.

There is only one thing about me that has any value— my blood. He has taken me to be his blood servant.

I fight back tears I learned long ago not to shed. “Are you here to feed from me?” I ask presenting my neck to him in obedience.

He rears back from me as if in disgust. “You will never be my blood servant.”

Obviously, he considers me beneath him to feed from. *Arwen often told me. I was low bred and of very little worth.* “Then I am to serve another in your house?” I ask. I had hoped if I must serve anyone, I could at least serve the vampire who killed my tormentors.

His eyes fire and he stands up. “No other will ever feed from you.”

I flinch at this anger and he mutters something underneath his breath. He sits back down and in a tone that is obviously used to commanding those around him tries to speak softly. “I’m not explaining myself well. You are not here to serve anyone. Not me or any other vampire or any other being in this house.”

“Then why am I here?” I ask, not understanding any of this.

“To learn to be you, sweetling,” a beautiful... I believe man or possibly woman walks no glides in the room like a runway model. Billowy blonde hair falls to their back and their sharp, high cheekbones hint that they and Tarek are related. They pushes Tarek out of the way and sit down on the bed next to me, giving me a smile that stuns me with its warmth and acceptance.”

“I’m Zi.”

For a minute, I'm too stunned to speak. Zi is obviously a witch. Primitus Sanguis regularly paid witches and mages to perform rituals and spells for them. Witches always have energy sparking off them, but Zi almost vibrates with power.

"Noel." I manage to stutter out shyly.

"A lovely name." They wink at me. "And how holiday appropriate."

I feel myself blushing.

"I hope you don't mind me barging in, but I was eavesdropping and realized you're going to need me here to interpret what my brother is trying to clumsily explain." Zi arches a perfectly styled eyebrow at Tarek, who glowers back at them.

I look between the two of them as they battle silently.

Zi leans toward me with a sympathetic look. "I should tell you, that I've visioned your past and shared your experience with the Primitus Sanguis with my brother."

A flash of shame goes through me at what Zi must have visioned of my past, of the abuses and humiliation I'd withstood. *Did they share those visions with Tarek?* It's stupid really. The visions couldn't have told Zi or Tarek anything that wasn't etched in scars plainly on my skin.

"And that is what Tarek was trying to explain to you. That you're no longer anyone's servant." Zi's face takes on a serious expression. "You are here to recover and find out exactly what you want your future to be."

Future? The word had never held any real meaning to me. All I could ever hope for is the drudgery and pain of serving the vampires until they'd eventually kill me.

Now, the word future is one of the most beautiful but scary words I'd ever heard.

“I don’t think I know how to have one of those, “I answer honestly.

Zi laughs. “ My brother and I can help you with that.”

“But why?” I can’t help asking. I know far too well that vampires and witches are not benevolent creatures who go around rescuing humans. There must be some ulterior motive, but what could it possibly be? I’m a nobody. Even my own father didn’t want me. *What use could I be to these powerful creatures.*

“Why are you being so nice to me?”

Zi looks at Tarek like my question is his to answer. “You’re right,” he says, pinning his gaze on me. My breath catches to have his full attention. “I usually pay very little attention to humans other than to fulfill my duty in this realm and turn the ones I believe will make good vampires.

He gives me an apologetic look. “ I have killed my fair share of your kind thinking of them as no more than dinner.” His eyes flicker over me as if gauging my reaction. When I don’t give him one, he goes on. “I don’t usually hurt the innocent ones, though. I feed and kill the humans that hurt and abuse their own kind.” He nods his head gravely. “I have always tried to be a responsible hunter.”

“Why did you save me?”

“I want you to become part of my— our family.” He reaches out toward me but at the last minute, he changes his mind and pulls his hand back. I’m oddly disappointed, though usually, a vampire’s touch sends pure dread through me.

“From the first second I saw you, I knew you belonged with... us.”

“But being a part of our family is a choice totally up to you,” Zi interjects.

Tarek gives them a look that if I were them, it would send me running, but they calmly continues speaking. “If you

consent to stay with us, you will spend time here recovering and catching up on some of the normal human experiences the Primus Sanguis robbed you of.”

“Like what?”

We’ll arrange for tutors to catch you up on the education you missed. As well as help you acclimate socially while we —”

“While we obliterate every member of the Primus Sanguis, Tarek says, interrupting Zi, the same dark smile he wore as he killed the coven on his face.”

“ You’d kill your own kind for me?”

“It’s a necessity,” Zi responds. “To the Primus Sanguis you will always be considered their servant. Even though they sold you as no more than a ritual sacrifice, if they were to discover you’re alive, they would either kill you or try to force you back into their service.”

I shudder. Only a few hours out of captivity, the idea of returning to serve the order horrifies me. I whisper my thoughts before I realize I’ve given them a voice. “I’d choose death before going back to them.”

“I will never let that happen,” Tarek vows. He grabs my hand and places it on his beating heart. *Odd, I’d never known a vampire whose heartbeat before.* “I swear a blood oath to you that having to choose between life and servitude you’ll never happen to you again.”

I’m shaken by the passion of Tarek’s words when Zi begins speaking. “After the Primitus Sanguis has been eradicated, you can choose to rejoin the human world, or—”

“Or stay with us, “Tarek says, cutting them off.

“Yes, or stay with us,” Zi repeats their brother’s words while giving him a look of warning. Once again, a battle of wills seems to go on between the two. “But I promise you the choice will always be yours. As does my brother.”

He's silent a moment, his lips turned down. He growls, and a strange electricity runs through my veins at the sound.

"Yes. I give another blood oath that you may choose to leave once the threat of the Primitus Sanguis is dealt with." He says the words like they cause him pain. I immediately feel the need to comfort him in some way.

I instinctively sit up from the bed to be closer to him. The movement causes one of the deep bites on my rib cage to open. I whimper in pain and helplessly watch the soft, beautiful sheets stain with my blood.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry." I cringe back into the soft down-filled pillow expecting to be punished for the mess I've caused."

Tarek is at my side before I can register his movement. "There's no reason to be sorry, he says in a soft voice. His hand moves to gently run through my tangled curls.

It feels ... nice. How can a vampire's touch be so soothing?

"If I can't be the one to heal him, then you do it." He snarls at Zi, his tone contrasting with his calm, gentle touch.

Zi doesn't seem to mind his tone. "If you'd like I can heal you of your injuries. Or you can heal on your own. Your choice."

"Heal me, please. I ask. Tarek sighs in relief, almost as if Zi is healing his pain as well.

Zi lays their hand over me and says a few words in a strange tongue. Suddenly, I feel the sting of my wounds disappear. My hands travel over my body, searching for the savage feeding bites the coven gave me to find the wounds healed. Not only that, but the nagging aches from several broken bones healed improperly are gone and the dragging tiredness that comes from daily blood loss, no matter how many iron rich gruel they fed me or supplements I was given, is gone.

For the first time in more than a decade, I'm free of pain.

“What about the brand and the scars they gave him? Heal those.”

Zi ignores the clear order. “That’s up to Noel. He decides what happens to his body.”

“He doesn’t deserve to be reminded daily of what they did to him,” Tarek argues.

I look down at the scars that cover me head to toe. Some of the scars are barely noticeable. They’re tiny, white marks that are hard to see, but others are jagged angry red remembrances of pain.

I’ve never seen the brand that was burned on the back of my neck the day my father left me with the order, but I can always feel it there as if it were a collar and chain binding me to the Primitus Sanguis.

Arwen ordered the guards to hold me down while one of the order’s witches performed a ritual and sealed it with a hot brand to my skin. Arwen laughed at my screams as the blinding pain and the smell of my searing flesh caused me to vomit until I mercifully passed out.

“I’d like the brand gone, please.” I look up at Zi, and they nod. “I want the scars to stay.”

Tarek looks like he’s about to argue again, but in a moment of bravery I didn’t know I was capable of, I stop him. “I know they make me ugly. But it seems wrong to erase them somehow.”

“You could never be ugly.” Tarek says, outraged, like I’d insulted him instead of myself.

Zi places their hands on me once again this time closing their eyes. I feel a tingle on the back of my neck and then a release as if a chain has been broken.

For the first time since I was eight years old, I belong to no one.

“How do you feel?”

I don't think anyone has ever asked me that. I startle when I realize the answer is that I feel good. . Maybe even a little better than good.

I'm about to tell Tarek just that when the deep chimes of a Grandfather clock sound off.

It's officially Christmas,” Zi announces, their eyes shining with kindness. “That means it's time for you to open the present Tarek bought for you.”

There in Zi's hand, is a box wrapped in shiny blue paper with snowflakes on it.

It's a Christmas present.

And I think it's for me.

Tarek

Still caught in the wonder that is Noel, I barely notice the chiming of the clock signaling midnight.

“It’s officially Christmas,” Zi announces. “That means it’s time for you to open the present Tarek bought for you.” They hold the box that I remember seeing earlier at their side out toward Noel who just stares at it like he doesn’t know what to do with it.

Tears form in Noel’s eyes My gaze shifts to Zi who I’m about to rail into when they slightly shake their head and give me a look that clearly says *trust me*.

Noel’s eyes go wide as he continues to stare at the box as if he disbelieves its existence. His hand darts out to touch it but pulls away as if afraid to touch it.

“F-f -for, me?” he stutters out.

“Yes, Noel. It’s for you,” Zi gently assures him. “Tarek wants you to have it.”

Noel looks at me, hope building in his eyes giving me no choice but to back Zi. I nod. “Open it up, Noel?”

He finally takes the box from Zi with trembling hands and places it on his lap where he studies it from all sides. Tracing his fingers carefully over each of the snowflake designs on the bright blue and white wrapping paper. He then turns his attention to the red bow, the look of awe on his face as if it were a present on its own. He discovers the tag and sounds his name out on it slowly.

“My name is on it,” he says in wonder.

“Of course, it is, silly. It’s your present,” Zi tells him. “Now open it.”

He removes the bow and name tag and puts them reverently on the side table next to him. Ever so gently, he begins to peel back an edge on the corner of the box and then getting a glimpse of what's inside he madly starts tearing at the paper and shredding it into strips.

His frenzy stills when he catches sight of the contents.

He takes the globe out of the box and twists it. Suddenly, the globe starts turning, and snow begins falling on the idyllic town trapped within the glass as music plays. Noel lets out a gasp like it's the most amazing thing he's ever seen.

"It's a snow globe from the movie," he says in a hushed voice full of wonder. He looks up at me. "The movie that made me wish for you."

My newly beating hard beats double time at the way he's looking at me. I don't want to ruin the moment so I pretend I know what in the hell he's talking about and go along with the ruse. "Yes." I nod. "I hope you like it."

Clutching the globe tightly to his chest, he looks up at me shyly. "Thank you," he whispers.

Then slowly, almost as if he'd forgotten how to, Noel smiles.

It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. It sends a thrill through me that is better than any orgasm I ever had.

Since I'm full demon, unlike my progeny, have no difficulties with the sun, but even if I was suddenly banished to only live in the darkness, I could never miss the sun with Noel's smile rivaling it in its brightness.

I want to make him smile like that every minute —fuck that — every second of the day.

I give Zi a grateful look. I owe them any treasure they demand for this.

If a cheap snow globe makes him this excited, I should have no problem making make happy enough to decide to stay with me — first for the year that Zi asked of him — and then for eternity.



New Year's Eve

It's been a week since I found Noel. Under Zi's nagging, I've hovered in the background and let Noel adjust to his new home. Its nearly killed to distance myself from him, but Zi insisted he needed to acclimate to his new surroundings.

There is a disturbance in the Wilds that Koa, my shifter brother, needs their assistance with. Rid of Zi's interference, I plan to start finally courting Noel.

How hard could it be to make a human happy?

I'm good at everything I've ever wanted to be good at. And since I've never wanted anything more than Noel, I'm sure I'll excel at making him happy.

The first part of my plan is to give him a better gift than the one my sister picked out for him. Though he believes I'm the one who picked the tacky little snow globe he carries from room to room with him, I want to replace it with something far grander. Noel deserves the best.

If a snow globe made him that happy, I can't wait to see his reaction to the gift I'm about to give him.

I first look for him in my bedroom, which I've insisted he stay in while I relocated to the adjoining room next door, but he's not there. Unless bidden, he rarely leaves the room. I begin searching the house frantically, even though I know the extra wards Zi placed around the building would alert me if he'd tried to leave or if anyone breached the building.

I find him on his hands and knees scrubbing the marble floors of the hall that leads from the foyer to the formal living room.

“What in the hell are you doing?” I demand, irritated at the sight of him cleaning again. I’ve told him repeatedly that he is not responsible for household tasks. That we employ a host of servants- both humans and supernaturals—who work for us for generous compensation and of their own free will. Yet, I constantly find him dusting or mopping like it’s his duty. He spent his childhood serving the Primitus Sanguis under hellish conditions, and I want his life with me to have no resemblance to the one he lived before.

At the sound of my voice, he looks up. He pauses and then starts to panic. Jumping up from the floor, he accidentally hits the side table where he ‘d placed the snow globe. It goes careening off the table, hitting the floor and shattering into a thousand pieces.

“No,” he sobs, instantly following the broken globe to the floor. He desperately begins grabbing at the shards of glass, trying to put them back together heedless of the risk of glass shredding his hands.

“Noel, stop,” I order immediately, gripping his hands and making him drop the glass. “It’s broken. You can’t put it back together.”

It takes a minute for him to understand my words, and when he does, tears start streaming down his face. Each tear shed, stabbing me worse than any weapon I’ve ever been struck with.

“I’m sorry,” he sobs. “I’m sorry.”

“It doesn’t matter,” I insist, frantic to calm him down. “I’ll get you another one.”

He just sobs harder.

“Look,” I say desperately. “The snow globe doesn’t matter. I brought you another gift.” I reach back to grab the wooden box that I’d let drop to the ground when Noel broke down.

He continues to sob as if a damn of tears had broken loose.

I open the box up to reveal to him a priceless array of treasures and lay it at his lap.

This will stop his tears.

He looks down at the gold coins from civilizations long gone. Kubla Khan’s emerald. Madame Pompadour’s favorite diamond tiara. The lost gemstone icons of the czars and... nothing.

He stops his sobbing and looks politely at the box of priceless treasures. In a small voice, he tells me, “Thank you.” Then, losing interest, he starts picking up the broken pieces of glass and puts them carefully back on the side table.

“I can throw it away if you’d like.” I offer.

“I’ll keep it,” he says instantly. His lips tremble. “It’s all I have left of it.” .

My hand goes to the stone. I wear on a chain around my neck. Ripping it off, I lay it on the table and do something I’ve done only a handful of times in all these centuries and only in the direst of circumstances. I smash my fist hard down on the stone and pulverize it. A smell of something similar to ozone fills the air as the spell is released. In the next second Zi appears in a flash of light.

They look at me with a raised eyebrow. “The last time you summoned me, you were facing three legions of Krellins , on your own.”

“This is far worse,” I reply, pointing to the broken snow globe. “By all the Gods in all the universes, fix it and make sure a nuclear bomb can’t break it again.” I look again at Noel with his slumped shoulders and tear-stained cheeks. “I’m begging you.”

Their eyes immediately go to Noel and then to the discarded box of treasure lying on the floor. Shaking their head they regard me and sigh. “You’re a fool.” They haughtily turn away from me and rush to Noel.

“Sweetling,” they coo. “What happened?”

“I broke the present Tarek gave me,” he tells them, his eyes dropping to his lap. “Arwen was right I’m stupid and useless. I broke the first present anyone’s ever given me.”

I need to know exactly who this Arwen is.

“Nothing is ever really broken enough that you can’t fix it if you know how,” Zi says.

They swirl their fingers in a circular motion and the pieces of glass lift up and are caught up in a funnel of magic until the pieces rearrange themselves back into the snow globe and float until it rests in Zi’s hand.

“See,” they say, presenting the globe to Noel. “First rule of magic. Nothing is ever truly broken.”

Noel grabs the snow globe as if it were a teddy bear and hugs it to his chest. “Thank you,” he whispers to Zi and then turns to me. “I promise I’ll never let it get broken again.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” I hurry to assure him. “I startled you and made you bump into it.”

At my words a blush runs up Noel’s neck and to his cheeks. I fight to keep my hand from reaching out to trace it’s path.

“If that’s all settled, I have a coup to help put down,” Zi says and puts their hand on their choker to transport themselves away.”

“Do you and Koi have it under control?” I ask. There had been an attempt to overthrow the shifter pack that rule the territory bordering The Wilds. It’s important to my family that we keep a close eye on the situation and make sure the outcome is favorable to our long-term goals. If it weren’t for

Noel now being my first priority ,I would have accompanied Zi in helping Koi.

“More control than you seem to have here.” Zi gives the box of jewels a scathing look. Reaching down, they retrieve a jeweled scabbard that they’d always coveted. “That’s for my travel fee.” Zi steps away and then, after a pause, steps back and takes the diamond tiara. “And that’s because I’ll look better in this than that bitch, Madam Pompadour ever did.” Then with a wink Zi vanishes back to help my brother.

6

Noel

Freedom is harder than I thought it would be.

I don't know what to do with it. It's like being given a Porsche and not knowing how to drive. There's no one telling me when to wake up, or what tasks I'm expected to perform. The only constant in my days is my nightly scheduled dinners with Tarek

I spend all my days waiting to join him for dinner. I get so excited to see him, but once I sit across from him and stare at his beautiful face, I get nervous and can barely answer his questions with yes and no answers. He sits there, never eating anything, staring hungrily at me as I scarf down the food he chooses for me. I know older vampires can eat human food if they desire, but he never does. Last night, I asked him if he was hungry, why he never ordered something for himself as well.

"It's not the food I'm starving for," was all he said, his voice rough and low. The sound of it somehow causing me to grab my water to take a long, thirsty gulp of it.

When I asked him what he meant, he waved my question away as if I frustrated him somehow. I wish I were better company for him. He must be bored spending time with me. He's older than written history, and I only made it to third grade before I began serving the order. He must fight to stay awake in my company.

Zi tells me as of next week, she's arranged for tutors to come and teach me all the things I missed growing up. I'm going to work extra hard so I can start talking to Tarek about things that interest him.

I don't want Tarek to change his mind about taking me in as part of his family. I worry about that a lot and try to think of

ways to make myself valuable to Tarek so that in a year he won't send me away or, worse, keep me because he pities me.

The threat of it terrifies me. And I have no distractions. Tarek firmly told me that I'm to recover and enjoy my time in his home. But I have nothing to do. He bought me a fancy tv and computer, and gaming console to fill my time, but I don't know how to use any of them and I don't want to admit to him how stupid I am.

So I secretly clean. It's the only thing that keeps the panic from rising till it drowns me. It also makes me happy to take care of Tarek. He may never know that I contributed to his clean house, but it's my only way of caring for him the way he has for me.

Tonight, the household staff has retired for the night and after our almost silent dinner Tarek left on some business. I snuck out of my room and stole some cleaning supplies.

Then he came home and caught me scrubbing his floors.

"What in the hell are you doing?" he demanded.

I looked up and he was standing there staring down at me, his eyes drawn together and his full lips drawn into a frown.

Suddenly I flashed to the last time I was in this position when Marius had fed on me while trying to have me pleasure him. This time it's not revulsion that fills me as I look up at Tarek's brooding face. A shiver of dark heat runs through me as I wonder what it would be like if Tarek wanted my lips on him like that.

Suddenly panicked that he might somehow guess my thoughts I jump up and hit the side table where I'd earlier set my snow globe on and watched in horror as it fell to the ground.

Seeing the gift Tarek had given me—the only present anyone had ever given me—in pieces on the ground shattered me. That globe reminded me every time I looked at it at the one

wish I'd made that had come true. It reminded me of the feeling of being safe and protected , and it reminded me of the dark-eyed, dark-haired vampire who gave it to me.

And seeing it lying in pieces it reminded me of how fragile my new life here with Tarek was. How easily like the snow globe, it could be shattered.

I began crying.

I hadn't done that in years. I'd learned early on with the vampires of the Primitus Sanguis that tears just egged on their cruelty.

But then Tarek summoned Zi and with a simple wave of their hand the snow globe is one piece again.

"See," they say with a secret wink just for me as they offer me the globe. "First rule of magic. Nothing is ever truly broken."

I think Zi might be talking about more than just the globe. Maybe they mean me too.

But then when I promise Tarek I won't let the snow globe break again and he blames himself for startling me I remember the reason I jumped up so fast from the floor and hit the table.

The crazy moment when I looked up at Tarek and wanted to stay on my knees for him and have him use me for his pleasure.

I feel a blush cover my cheeks and once again feel that strange thrill go me at imagining what that might be like to have his cock in my mouth.

Up until I came here, I'd never had thoughts like this. As blood servants we were supposed to be *pure* Masturbation was strictly forbidden and anyone caught faced gruesome punishment.

It had never been much of a problem for me. Just enough food to survive, sixteen-hour days filled with hard work , as

well providing feedings to the vampires left me too tired for any desire. Other than morning erections that would easily go down when I thought of the consequences.

But now, just looking at the handsome vampire causes my dick to harden, and I panic again.

This time I clutch my snow globe safely against my chest as Zi makes snarky comments to their brother and then vanishes.

Tarek's gaze returns to me, studying me slow and steady like he's trying to sum out an answer to a question.

I can't have him guessing at my fantasies so I babble out an excuse about going to bed and make a run for my room.

"Wait," Tarek calls out to me, but I pretend I don't hear him. I'm almost to the stairs when suddenly Tarek is in front of me and I'm colliding with his chest. I stumble back and his arms go around me protectively.

"I need to know why you insist on scrubbing the floor and cleaning the kitchen when I've told you again and again that you are not a servant here?"

I try answering, but the words don't come. He's so close, and being this near to him is overwhelming. That, coupled with the feeling that I've disappointed him has me reeling. I start trembling under his touch.

"Noel," he says. When I don't respond, he sweeps me up in his arms and carries me to the leather couch, where our hearts beat rhythmically against each other as his arms cradle me tightly in their embrace.

I feel my pulse slow, and I know soon he'll move me off him and make me explain myself, but for now, I continue to burrow into his neck.

Despite my confusing emotions and physical response to Tarek I feel safe here— like I finally found somewhere I belong. It's here wrapped up in Tarek's arms.

Maybe if I let him know how sorry I am for breaking his rules. he'll agree to do this again sometime.

"I'm sorry," I say, in a small voice. "I won't clean again."

He sighs. "No, I'm sorry. I keep doing the wrong thing around you."

I look up at him in shock. "Vampires don't admit that they're wrong," I say without thinking.

A bitter smile crosses his lips. "Making a human happy is far harder than I could have ever anticipated."

Anxious to explain that he always makes me happy I shift to sit up. At my movement his grip on me tightens and lets out a low growl.

"But you do make me happy," I rush to tell him. "You've given me a place to stay and fed me and never asked for anything in return."

"Is that why you scrub and scour this place?" He looks at me sourly. "You're paying me back for your room and board."

"I shake my head. "Cleaning helps me calm down. Sometime I worry about things and scrubbing the floor or polishing your siler is the only thing that keeps me from driving myself crazy."

I don't tell him it's also because I like the feeling of taking care of him.

"What things are you worried about?"

"Everything," I answer honestly." I worry the Primitus Sanguis will find me and drag me back. Or worse, I'll do something wrong, and you'll decide you don't want me to stay here any more."

His hands wrap gently around my jaw and angle it up, so I'm met with his eyes that are sparking with emotions I can only guess at. "First of all," he grates out. "The Primitus Sanguis will never take you from me." His thumb darts out

and rubs my cheek. “And I told you the first night you came here I want you to be part of my family, and no mistake you think you make will ever change that.”

I rest my head back on his shoulder and let his words wrap around me and keep me warm. The fire I felt at his touch earlier settles and is replaced by the comfort of his arms around me.

I promise I’ll let myself have this moment and then get up and let him have his night. My eyes grow heavy I close my eyes for just one more minute.

I awake to sunlight streaming through my room. Tarek must have carried me to bed. On the top of the bureau across from my bed is a mop and a broom and basket of cleaning supplies and gloves, Next to the supplies is a folded note.

I open it to find one line written in bold block letters.

I slowly sound out the note.

Remember, this is your home. You can do what you like in it. Even clean if you must.

Under the note he has written the words *Always yours, Tarek.*

I look at his words until my eyes blur hoping he truly means them.

Five Months Later

Tarek

Even though the music pounding through the club, I hear Noel laugh. It's a beautiful, melodic sound that has the dual result of bringing me joy at hearing his happiness and pure, murderous envy that I'm not the one he's sharing it with.

No that honor goes to Cosmo, a young runaway Faye, whom Zi offered safe harbor in exchange for being Noel's companion. Cosmo, like many Fae, has a fascination with human culture and is easily catching Noel up on all that a twenty-year-old boy should know to fit into the human world.

He's taught Noel how to use all the electronics I bought him and I can hear them play video games late into the night.

I want to wrap my hands around Cosmo's slim little neck for gaining Noel's trust when my interactions with him are still so formal and fraught with tension.

I'd thought after the night he fell asleep in my arms that we had made important strides in becoming easier around each other, but since that night he seems to be even more afraid of me.

Every time I reach out to touch him he jumps and then finds some excuse to flee the room.

It makes me want to kill someone, or more precisely Cosmo, but the crafty and cynical Fae is a good friend to Noel and from their first meeting, treated him like a younger, much more innocent brother.

And Noel adores him.

Luckily for Cosmo's health, he has no romantic interest in Noel. He is too busy making failed attempts at seducing my brother, Cyrus.

One of those attempts will surely take place tonight. This morning Cosmo had insisted that Noel had been deprived of the human experience of a night of dancing at a club and insisted Cyrus and I take them out.

Since I hadn't yet been able to totally eradicate all the Primitus Sanguis, the idea of Noel in a crowded club where I couldn't completely control his surroundings didn't appeal to me. I'd been about to say no when I looked over at Noel, whose eyes were huge with hope and excitement. Unable to disappoint him, I'd called in extra security, and bribed Cyrus to accompany us. Now we're here at the city's hottest club sipping drinks in The VIP section.

The excitement dancing in Noel's eyes as he takes in his new environment has been more than worth the effort. There's also the bonus of seeing him dressed and made up in the club wear Cosmos dressed him in. Teal eyeliner makes his blue eyes impossibly large and luminescent, and the gloss on his full tempting lips is irresistible. His skin shimmers with a dusting of glitter through the black fishnet racerback tank he wears paired with sinfully tight skinny jeans and heeled boots.

My cock has been achingly hard all night.

And when Cosmos insists in an unsubtle play for Cyrus that we all dance, I go willingly, grabbing Noel's hand and leading him to the dance floor.

Once on the floor, his steps falter, and he pulls against my hand. "I've never done this before," he confesses, his eyes huge and full of fear and embarrassment.

I tip his chin up so his eyes meet mine. Then I place my hands on his hips. "Just listen to the music and move with me."

His first few movements are clumsy and faltering, but slowly he starts to move with me and soon our bodies are moving together under the flashing lights and to the hard beating rhythms of the music.

I lose track of Cyrus and Cosmo. Hell, they could be fucking on the dance floor and I wouldn't know or care. Noel is in my arms, his slim, supple body moving against me, and that's when I hear it. He brings his head back and laughs. A pure sound of freedom and joy that echoes through me. until I'm not satisfied just hearing it. I want to taste it. I zone in on his plump, glossy lips and bend down to finally claim them when he suddenly pulls back.

"I- I have to go to the bathroom," he says in a panicked voice, and then yanks Cosmo from my brother's arms and together they bolt toward the bathroom.

"Fuck," I growl, ready to burn this place down around me in frustration.

"Careful, brother," Cyrus says coming from behind to face me. "These humans don't deserve to die just because you have lost your talent at seduction."

Cyrus, my brother who shares the duty assigned to us by Neo of turning humans into vampires, is the sibling I'm closest to and who in turn drives me the maddest.

"And tell me, brother," I mimic his patronizing tone. "Why you're lips are covered in faerie dust since you told me just this morning that cavorting with a Fae was beneath you?"

He is saved having to answer me when a scream pierces the night club. It's coming from the bathrooms. I immediately speed to the where the scream sounded to find Cosmo on the floor unconscious and covered in blood.

Noel is nowhere around.

There is no way Noel would leave his hurt friend. He's been taken. I look to Cyrus who has already gathered Cosmo in his arms "Go find Noel, he says, as his hand gently traces over Cosmo's body looking for injuries. "I'll take care of him."

Before he finishes his sentence, I'm out and hunting for Noel's scent. It's still strong which means he hasn't been taken

far.

I find him in the building next door to the club. His back against a concrete wall as a newly turned vampire— couldn't be more than a few months turned— rants wildly at him.

“It's all your fault,” the vampire screeches at Noel. “Until you started feeding him, he was mine. He loved me.”

“I didn't want him, Arwen. I swear.”

Arwen, the once human who'd sadistically punished Noel and continually told him he was worthless.

“Shut up,” he shrieks. “He changed me just so I'd retrieve you for him. Said once I did, he'd come for us and we could all be happy together.” Tears stream from his eyes. “But I know he's lying. He only wants you now. If I bring you to him, he'll kill me so he can have you all to himself.”

Arwen bears his fangs at Noel. “So I'll kill you now and when he comes for you, I'll be covered in your blood and I'll tell him what I did.” His eyes blaze. “At least when he kills me, I'll know he'll never have you.”

I have Arwen by the throat before he can lunge. Noel looks up at me, his face bloodied and bruised. Cold rage infuses me.

Arwen has hurt Noel for the last time.

My claws extend ready to tear Arwen's heart out when I stop myself.

“What do you want me to do to him?”

Noel's eyes flutter. “Wh-what do you mean?”

I nod at Arwen. “He terrorized and tortured you for years. He just hurt your best friend and was ready to kill you. His fate should be yours to choose.”

Noel moves from the wall he'd been backed up against His body is trembling. *Perhaps he is not ready for the choice I'd just given him.*

I ready to rip Arwen's heart out when Noel speaks.

"He was just like me once." He moves in front of Arwen to make eye contact with him.

Arwen regards him coldly.

"How old were you when you were sold to the Primitus Sanguis?"

I loosen my grip around Arwen's throat so he can reply.

"Six," Arwen rasps.

"Two years younger than I was when I came to the order," Noel murmurs as he closes his eyes. When they open, his blue eyes shine with unshed tears.

"Two years longer of being scared and missing whatever place you came from—even if it wasn't that great. Two years longer of being beaten and abused and used."

I should have anticipated Noel was too soft-hearted to meet out the fate Arwen deserves. If Noel bids me to release Arwen, I will, but then once Noel goes to sleep, I'll hunt him down and end him.

"I'm sorry you went through that," Noel tells him, reaching for Arwen's hand.

I feel a delicate hands enter my jacket pocket and grasp the small wooden stake I usually carry there.

"I'm sorry you thought you had to become as evil as they were just to survive," Noel says, impaling the stake into Arwen's chest.

Arwen cries out in pain, but the stake doesn't pierce his heart. I place my hand over Noel's. "Again."

He puts all his force into thrusting the stake. I add the strength behind his and together, we watch his torturer turn to ash.

Noel collapses against me. My arms eagerly go around him. “Is Cosmo okay?” he asks in a faint voice.

His heart was beating when we found him. I’m sure Cyrus has healed him by now.”

“I need to go to him. The only reason he’s hurt was because he tried to keep Arwen from taking me.”

It seems I am in debt to a Fae. May the Gods save me.

“I’ll take you to him,” I offer, turning us in the direction I scent my brother and Cosmo.

“Wait,” he demands, a determined look settling over his face. “I need to do this first.” He stands on his tiptoes and brushes his lips over mine.

“Thank you,” he whispers against my lips, then turns and races toward the building’s exit.

Christmas Eve

Noel

I've been dreaming about it for months.

Even before Cosmo made a remark one day while we'd been sitting at the pool enjoying the afternoon sun. He'd been mooning over Cyrus while watching him longingly through the glass door separating the patio and the library, where Cyrus was reading a book and ignoring being stared at by the adoring Fae.

He's driving me crazy," he huffed. "Last night, I dreamt Cyrus bit me. I woke up moaning and keep looking in the mirror all day wishing I had his mark on me."

"It hurts like hell," I warned him. "Are you sure you really want that?"

He arched his artfully styled eyebrow at me. "If you think a full-body orgasm that feels like five all rolled up into one hurts, yeah, I guess you're right."

"You've been bitten before?" I asked him.

Cosmo's lips slid into a knowing smirk. "Oh yeah, I dated a few vamps. I definitely have a type," he says, sighing. "Though none of them were half as hot as Cyrus."

"Every time I've been bit and I've been bit a lot, it felt like my skin was being ripped apart, and then a burning fire raced through my veins until the vampire was done feeding."

Cosmo's expressive face flitted between horrified and sad. "I'm sorry, honey," he'd said, reaching out and covering my hand in his own. "I'm sorry that those monsters locked you up in that awful place and made you experience that, but you should know that being bitten doesn't have to hurt." His eyes

take on a faraway look as if he were picturing a pleasant memory “It can feel really, really good.”

My doubt must have shown on my face. “Fine if you don’t believe me,” Cosmo’s eyes suddenly filled with mischief. “Then ask Tarek. Maybe he’d even show you how good it could feel.”

I could feel the blush run up my body. I hadn’t told Cosmo that day, but he wasn’t the only one who’d dreamt about being bitten. I’d woken up several times from dreams about Tarek biting me.

“He- he doesn’t want that from me.”

Cosmo shook his head at me disbelievingly. “My innocent little friend. Why do you think he has you here, and why he has single-handedly slaughtered every member of the Primitus Sanguis he could find to keep you safe?”

“He said I’m part of his family,” I explained.

He let out a very unfae like snort. “Ha. When he told he wanted you as a family member, he wasn’t talking about another brother, honey. He wants you as his mate.”

I don’t think Cosmo was right about the whole mate thing that day, but I hadn’t been able to get what he told me about how pleasurable feeding a vampire could be out of my head. Not only am I curious about the pleasure, but there is some primal part of me that yearns to provide nourishment to Tarek. To know that it is my blood that warms his demon body.

At first, when I realized what I craved from him, I tried to avoid Tarek. I was worried he would guess that he was fast becoming my obsession. The night we all went dancing, I ran from him because dancing close to him, having his body grind against was too much too soon.

But it’s Almost Christmas. A year since I came to live with Tarek. A year since I wished for my own Christmas angel to

rescue me, and Tarek came and slew all those that had hurt me.

So tonight I'm going to make a new wish. I'm going to ask Tarek to give me A Christmas gift even better than my snow globe. I'm going to ask him to feed from me —just this once — so I can know what it's like to be connected to him.

I can only hope he'll say yes.

Tarek

A soft, tentative knock sounds at the adjoining door between Noel's and my room.

I rush to open it. "Are you okay?" I demand, my eyes quickly going over every visible inch of him to check for injuries.

"He blushes. "I'm good," he answers and then stares at me.

He's been doing that a lot lately. Like he wants to ask me a question, but at the last minute, he changes his mind. It's been wearing on me. I'm afraid he's gathering the courage to ask permission to leave me.

I won't let him go. Even if I have to fight Zi to keep him, I won't let him walk away from me.

But then I look at his beautiful face and know if leaving me is what he truly wants, I won't stop him. I'll tell him he can leave after I find and kill the few remaining members of the Primitus Sanguis so I know he'll be safe in the world without my protection.

Pain fills me as I ready to hear his words that will shred me.

"Um..." he falters.

"Get it over with," Noel, I say, my tone sharper than I ever use with him.

"If this isn't a good time," he says, looking down at his feet. "I could ask you another time."

"What do you need from me?"

"I was wondering if I could have a special Christmas present from you?" he says, his body trembling slightly.

I'd give him anything. The Christmas tree that Zi, Cosmo, and Noel insisted we have is surrounded by presents I'd

picked for him. Though if it's his freedom from me he wants, that's something I can't wrap up in the shiny paper and pretty bows he likes so much.

I'm about to tell him just that when he interrupts me.

"I want you to feed from me."

I freeze. "What did you say?" I ask carefully.

"Cosmo said it could feel good. It always hurt before." His blush deepens. "I wanted to know how —" he stops and takes a deep breath before continuing. "I wanted to know how it would be with you."

I stare at him, stunned. *This is what he'd been trying to gather the courage to ask from me.*

I wait too long to answer—his shoulders sag. "I'm sorry," he apologizes. "I shouldn't have asked." He starts to turn away.

"Noel." I stop him and tip his head up so he can see my eyes, which are blazing with blood lust and desire for him. "I've dreamed of drinking your blood since the first time I saw you." I drop a soft, worshipful kiss on his throat at the spot his pulse beats rapidly. "And I promise, you will feel no pain, only pleasure."

I feel his knees weaken, and I swoop him up into my arms and carry him to my former bed where I lay him down on the mattress.

The hunter in me thrills at seeing him lying there ready for my taking. The demon part of me rages for a taste of him. But it is my heart, the once dead, useless husk of an organ, that is strongest in its demand to take care of my mate and to make this an experience that will help heal the pain of what has been done to him by the Primitus Sanguis.

I run a finger down the curve of his neck and he gasps at my light touch. His responsive reaction making my already hard cock like steel. "You haven't been touched much, have you?" I

growl. Not in a way that gave you pleasure.” I drop light kisses along the same path my finger followed earlier.

“I’m going to change that,” I promise with a growl that makes Noel whimper. “I’ll touch your body till it knows it’s mine.”

He shivers. I laugh darkly. He is so damn responsive to my touch. I plan to have him addicted to it. I’ll condition his body so that at the mere sight of me, Noel will crave the pleasure I can give him.

Only me. No one else.

I deepen the kiss on his neck and begin to suck until the blood rushes up, causing a mark. I pull back, admiring my claim on him.

It’s not good enough, though. Soon, I will put a mark on him that is permanent. *A mate bond.*

He sees my sharpened fangs, and his body goes stiff with remembered trauma. I pull away from his neck and look into his eyes. “I don’t have to feed if you’ve changed your mind?”

“No, please, he says, reaching out to anchor me to him. “I want this.” His nails grip into my skin. “I need this.”

“Don’t be scared,” I murmur as I pierce his delicate, pale skin. The taste of him is intoxicating. So rich and heady, I could subsist on only his blood for all of eternity.

As I deepen my bite, his body vibrates under my touch, and he cries out in bliss. I smile against his skin as he makes small moans of pleasure.

I can feel his cock grow hard. I want to touch him to bring him even more pleasure, but he only asked for me to take his blood tonight.

Next time I take him like this, I’ll ask for permission for more.

The images of me feeding off him while my cock is buried deep in him as he calls my name almost make me spend, but I hold back. I want to feel every shock, every tremor of pleasure his body experiences as if it were my own so I can learn to heighten it exponentially.

“Please,” he cries. “Please.” I lovingly rub my hand over his face and chest, assuring him I’ll guide his body through these new sensations he’s experiencing.

His pupils are blown as he begins to rut against me. I feel his muscles bunching. Knowing he is close, I take one more sweet, deep pull of his blood, and his body jack knifes as he screams my name as he comes against me.

The smell of his cum ignites me. I clutch him closer as I ride out my own orgasm.

He collapses back into the bed, making small incoherent sounds. Arranging us so that he lays in my arms, I run my hands through his soft hair.

Soon, I’ll need to rouse him enough to shower before his cum hardens on his skin, but I’m not ready to let him escape from my arms.

If I ever will be.

I hadn’t realized before that Noel’s television was on. It’s broadcasting one of those black-and-white Christmas movies he’s so fond of.

Every time a bell rings, an angel gets its wings.

I chuckle at this sentimental and entirely inaccurate statement. Seraphim are actually quite vicious and are born with their wings. But then I remember Noel telling me about the movie that made him wish for an angel to deliver him.

He may have asked for an angel, but he got himself a demon, and by the time this movie plays again next Christmas, this demon will make sure Noel will wear my mating bite and will be mine for eternity.

The End

ABOUT REMI VARLOW

Remi Varlow is a MM romance writer from Austin Texas who likes to write about bad boys falling in love. So far, she's written books about bikers and thieves, but she's expanding to write about vampires, shifters, and witches as well.

If you'd like to know more about her or her books, you can find her in these places.

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