



NEVER HAVE I EVER:

SUBMITTED

to my Enemy

BOOK TWO

WILLOW DIXON

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SUBMITTED TO MY ENEMY**

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AUTHOR NOTE

Please note that his book contains scenes some readers may be sensitive to, including:

- A described CNC/forced pleasure fantasy
- A scene where the MCs engage in CNC/forced pleasure role play
- A somnophilia, or sleep sex scene
- Discussions of a past emotionally abusive relationship
- Undiagnosed ADHD
- Please note that all role play and fantasy exploration is done after in-depth discussions, and with the use of safe words. Explicit consent is obtained prior to, and again during scenes containing any sort of power exchange.
- This book contains kink. For a detailed content list, as well as an in-depth kink list, please visit my website [here](#).

ALEX

T *hump thump thump thump.*

I glanced at the ceiling as my best friend and his boyfriend went to town on each other, their bed hitting the wall in a frantic pattern.

“Come on,” I muttered and snapped my textbook closed.

This was round two in an hour.

Normally, I would put in my earbuds and crank some tunes on my phone, but I was in a foul mood and wanted to be able to study in silence.

Beck, whose room was right above mine in the shared house we lived in off campus, might be my best friend, but my goodwill toward him was precarious at the moment.

He and Finn, one of our other roommates, had been hooking up since the beginning of the year.

Beck having a boyfriend was perfectly fine, but he’d lied to me for weeks about everything. That shit wasn’t okay. He might not have been ready to come out, but the constant lies had taken a toll on our friendship.

We were better now, but things would never be the same, and I was having a hard time coming to terms with that.

For three years, ever since freshman year, we’d been partners in crime. The perpetually single guys, always up for a party or some extracurricular fun.

Then Beck had fallen in love, and now he only had time for me when we happened to be in the same room in our shared house or in the one class we had together this semester.

I got it. Finn was his boyfriend and his priority, and it was obvious to

anyone with eyes they were made for each other.

But that didn't mean I didn't wish Beck still had time for me. He'd even cut our gym time, switching his daily workouts to when Finn had class.

We used to hit the gym at least three times a week together, but now he went when I was in class, and I'd lost not only my spotter but also my motivator.

Beck was a former elite hockey player, and I'd played varsity soccer. We were evenly matched strength and stamina-wise, even though he was bulkier and broader than me, and having him to compete against as we hit the cardio machines and weights had helped make the gym fun.

Beck enjoyed working out, but I didn't. I only did it because it was a habit from my soccer days, and it kept my body toned and tight. Competing with others brought out my inner fire, which was why I loved team sports. Going to the gym by myself? Boring. Without a buddy, I'd been slacking, and I was having a hell of a time getting back into the routine of it.

I grit my teeth in frustration as a strangled cry filtered through the ceiling, followed by the murmur of voices as the thumping picked up.

Now that they'd gone public with their relationship, they fucked like crazed bunnies and seemed to forget the three other people in the house.

A loud shout, followed by a string of curse words, rang out from above. Finn was done. Hopefully, Beck would hurry the fuck up and come too.

With my phone in my hand and my headphones securely over my ears, I flopped onto my bed. Spotify was a lifesaver, and I went straight for my "Tunes to Drown Out My Roommates' Banging" playlist. Yes, I liked to give my lists weird names. Artists could see the names of the playlists their songs were added to, and I liked imagining their reactions to my more creative names. The music started, the low bass and heavy beat replacing the sex symphony above, and I sank against my pillow. Finally, some mental peace.

After scrolling through Insta and TikTok, I still didn't feel any better.

Listening to my roommates bone was annoying, but it also left me with a stiffy.

It wasn't that I was attracted to either of them, not anymore at least. I'd had a bit of a thing for Beck when we'd first met, but I wasn't into pretty boy jocks with big hearts and easy smiles.

Not that I had any desire to act on it, but my taste in men was incredibly specific. I liked them rough around the edges. The classic bad-boy vibe.

No one in my house fit that bill. Beck was a jock, and Finn had that shy,

adorkable nerd thing going on.

Nope, my roommates didn't turn me on. It was the live porn show they'd treated me to that reminded me of how amazing having my prostate pounded could be.

"Ugh." I shook that thought out of my head and glared at my phone.

Nope, not going there.

Not ever again.

Trrrr trrrrr trrrrr.

The vibrations of my burner phone against the wood of my bedside table rang out in the lull between songs.

I tossed my main phone onto the bed, grabbed the burner, and swiped up to check my notifications.

Sara: hi! I had a great time the other week

Sara: up for a repeat?

Snorting, I quickly typed out my answer.

Ben: can't. really busy for the next while

The three dots appeared, but I blocked her number and put the phone on the bed.

I'd met her on Kinksters, an app I used when I wanted to indulge in my more extreme interests. We'd messaged for a few days, set some rules and boundaries, then met up. Five minutes into our meeting, I'd known she was a liar and had zero experience with the things on our list. She was the typical FinDomme, or financial Domme, who'd decided to try her hand at in-person encounters.

I didn't get the whole FinDomme thing, but to each their own. Letting some random chick have complete control over my money and lavishing her with gifts and cash in exchange was about the least sexy thing I could think of.

Sara had gone on a rant, demeaning me and saying all sorts of filthy things, which was usually my jam. Then she'd tossed in the caveat that she wouldn't be doing anything unless I dug out my wallet and gave her my debit card and PIN.

Nope. Not happening.

It didn't matter that her tits were perfect or how much I'd wanted to feel her long curtain of dark hair falling over me. Money was off the table, and I'd faked an emergency and walked away.

Maybe it was the fact that I knew how it felt to both be well off and poor

that made me clutch my purse strings extra tight.

Had I unmatched her? Shit. I couldn't remember.

I went to the hidden folder on my phone and opened the app. I needed to stop giving the chicks I met on Kinksters my phone number, even if it was a burner one.

The one downside of Kinksters was that it didn't support high-res photos or videos longer than ten seconds. Sexting was easier off the app, but my list of blocked numbers was getting ridiculous.

Without opening our message thread, I deleted the conversation, then blocked her profile. She could still show up in my matches if I didn't. I was all about the clean break. Burning bridges and all that jazz.

Thudthudthudthud.

"Jesus *Christ*." I tossed my burner phone aside and sat up. The light fixture shook, sending shimmers of light over the walls.

I stood, stomped over to the door, and threw it open, prepared to storm upstairs and remind them they weren't the only ones in the house.

"They're enthusiastic tonight," Matt said as he paused at his door, his keys in one hand and a bunch of textbooks in the other.

"That's one way to put it." I reeled in my anger. "This has been going on for an hour."

"At least someone in the house is getting some." He shot me a commiserating smile and unlocked his door. "Want to play some Fortnite on the big TV?"

"Make it COD, and I'm in."

"Got some shit to work out?" Matt leaned against the door jamb and studied me.

He must have picked up on how I preferred to play COD when I was angry about something.

"You could say that."

"Give me forty to shower and make a quick call?"

I nodded, gritting my teeth as the banging in my ceiling seemed to hit a crescendo.

Another shout rang out, then a string of the dirty talk Finn loved to spew. Matt laughed and headed into his room. I turned on my heel and stomped back into mine, gently closing my door and not slamming it like I wanted.

The ceiling was blessedly still, and muffled voices came through the vent. They were speaking low enough I couldn't hear the words, which was

perfect.

Rather than pick up my textbook, I flopped back down onto my bed and grabbed my burner phone.

I was still hard under my jeans, and I didn't want to go play video games with Matt with a stiffy. I could do a quick jerk, but I was worked up, and the only way to get out of my head was to let someone else take control.

I tapped the app and went to the search options. Scanning the list, I clicked on my go-to choice: JOI, or jerk-off instructions.

Kinksters really did have something for everyone, and the lists and sub-lists you could search to find matches was impressive. My favorites were the sexting ones, especially finding someone who wanted to take control and get me off in real time.

You have matches!

The message, which dissolved into a cheesy flame GIF, flashed across my screen.

When the flames subsided, a list of profiles was left in its wake.

My mouth went dry as I stared at the profile pic of the first one.

I'd forgotten to click *female* in the search options, and my first match was a guy.

His pic was the typical headless, shirtless one, but his body was ridiculous. Bulging muscles, a trim waist with a defined Adonis belt, and an honest-to-goodness eight-pack stared back at me. Add in two full sleeves, side and chest pieces, and gray sweatpants slung so low a hint of trimmed black pubes stuck out from the top of them, and this guy was hot.

And the bulge.

God damn, he was packing. The sweats were thin enough that the ridge of his flared head showed as it hung against his thigh. Without a point of reference for size, it was hard to tell how big he was, but my guess was at least seven inches.

I glanced at the rest of his info out of habit. MrWrong was twenty-four, a Scorpio, and his mini bio was only a single line.

"The right guy when you want some no-strings-attached fun."

Not particularly original, but it told me all I needed to know. He wasn't looking for anything serious, which meant he wouldn't want to exchange any personal details.

My finger hovered over his profile, ready to swipe left. I wasn't on here to hook up with guys. I'd sworn that shit off years ago.

But had I forgotten to check *female*, or had I done it subconsciously?

Things had shifted for me in the past few weeks. Maybe it was being exposed to the constant background noise of my male roommates getting it on, or seeing them snuggled up together and making moon eyes at each other in the common areas that had caused it.

Before, I'd made sure I only watched porn with women in it. Didn't matter how many dicks, as long as at least one woman was involved. That left gangbangs, orgies, and MFM threesomes.

Occasionally, I'd watch MMF threesomes, usually while drunk and when my inhibitions were low, and I'd recently discovered the world of animated gay porn. In my fucked-up brain, that didn't count as gay because they weren't actual people. Drawings were drawings, no matter how many dicks were involved or where they went.

Most of what I'd watched the past few weeks was either bi, where I conveniently ignored the girl and skipped to the parts where the guys fucked each other, or animated.

Maybe I needed to get off with a guy in real time to get over my sudden obsession with dick. Then I could go back to my regular porn and maybe pick up a chick.

A wave of anger washed over me as Elissa's image flashed in my mind. The one girl I had thought could be the real deal, the only girl I'd considered dating in four years had played me like a fiddle.

I slammed my finger onto my phone screen and swiped right. "Fuck it."

MrWrong was online, and I wanted to get off.

The screen shimmered as it connected our profiles, allowing me access to more than his avatar and mini bio. Bypassing the longer bio, I clicked on his photos folder.

Nudes weren't allowed as avatars, but were allowed in folders.

Holy shit. I widened my eyes and swiped through his pics. Whoever this guy was, he was gorgeous. His tats were incredible, mostly black and white with hints of pastel colors. The sleeves seemed to be single pieces, abstract and mesmerizing, and his side and chest art was a mishmash of images.

My mouth watered as I trailed my eyes down his eight-pack and over that sexy-as-fuck Adonis belt. He had the geolocation off, the same as I did, so I had no idea where he was, only that he was within the town's boundaries.

MrWrong: hey

FunTimes: hey

MrWrong: like what you see?

FunTimes: what do you mean?

MrWrong: my pics

FunTimes: someone is full of themselves

MrWrong: you saying you *weren't* looking at my pics?

FunTimes: I didn't say *that*

He sent a smirking emoji

MrWrong: you want to chat, or do you want to get right to it?

I hesitated. Usually, I got right to it, but this was new territory for me. I had to make sure I didn't know the guy. The last thing I needed was for MrWrong and all his tattooed glory to turn up in one of my classes. Although I would've remembered if I'd seen someone walking around campus with that kind of ink.

Maybe he was a townie? That would be the best-case scenario. Close enough to sext with, but zero chance of ever seeing him in real life.

My pics were all the same, nudes and seminudes with no faces. The issue was that I had two tattoos on my stomach, right in front of my left hip. Those made me identifiable. I'd edited them out of my folder pics, but if he wanted to do live pictures or vids, he'd see them.

FunTimes: basic chat

MrWrong: you got it

MrWrong: me = 24, student, scorpio, bossy as fuck

Student? Fuck. My stomach clenched. I'd hoped he had no connection to the school, but at his age, he was most likely a grad student. Whatever. It wasn't like I was going to show him my face.

FunTimes: me = 21, student, gemini, likes 'em bossy as fuck

MrWrong: anything else you need to know, or are you gonna let me get you off?

FunTimes: someone's anxious

MrWrong: let's just say you weren't the only one perusing pics

FunTimes: yeah?

MrWrong: yeah

MrWrong: I like the one of you on the beach

That was the one photo in my folder that didn't contain any nudity. Beck had taken that snap for me when we'd gone to the beach last summer.

FunTimes: I like the pic of you in the woods

It was his tamest pic, him in hiking shorts, boots, and no shirt on some

trail.

MrWrong: you hike?

FunTimes: not really. You like the beach?

MrWrong: not really

He didn't say anything more. I bit my lip. With under thirty minutes until I had to meet Matt downstairs, I should get this show on the road.

FunTimes: how do you want to do this?

MrWrong: If you're asking me that, should you really be on here?

I sent an eye roll emoji

FunTimes: I meant text or voice?

One thing about Kinksters was that it allowed voice calls. The connection was crap, and the voices sounded tinny and a bit distorted. I wasn't sure if that was because of the platform's limitations or by design because it made identifying people by their voices difficult.

MrWrong: I prefer voice, but text works

FunTimes: let's switch to voice

My headphones connected to my burner phone, and the little phone icon at the bottom of the chat lit up, replacing the text box.

I tapped it, fighting back a wave of nerves as the reality of the situation hit. I was about to sext with a guy, over voice.

"Hello."

The low purr sent a rush of warmth through me. How he managed to sound not only sexy but also normal on the system was beyond me, but I wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth. Jerking off to a human voice was infinitely easier than to a robot one.

"Hi."

"Where are you?" he asked, his voice sliding into my ear like warm honey.

"My room." I cleared my throat. "Where are you?"

"My room." He chuckled, the sound low and rich. "I'm lying on my bed. Are you?"

"Yeah." Shit, why was my voice husky? We'd barely started.

"Are you wearing a shirt?"

"Yeah."

"Take it off."

The tone of his voice changed, going dark, primal even, and a ripple of desire shot through me. I sat up and tugged off my shirt.

“It’s off.”

“What about pants?”

“Jeans.”

“Undo them for me, but don’t take them off.”

“Done,” I said when I’d pulled them open.

“Boxers or briefs?”

“Boxer briefs.”

“Cut or uncut?”

“Cut.”

“Long hair or buzzed?”

“Longish.”

“Any trigger words?”

I blinked in surprise. I’d only been asked that a few times. He knew what he was doing. “No. Just don’t use female words for my junk. I’m not into that.”

“Noted.”

“What about you?” I asked breathlessly.

“Sweats, commando, longish, and cut. No trigger words for me. You want to stick to jerking, or are you willing to touch other parts of yourself for me?”

“Um, other parts. No ass play.”

“Noted.” His dark, honey-rich voice soothed the last of my nerves. “Stoplight method work for you?”

“Yeah.”

Wow. This guy was good. Usually, I was the one who had to bring up safe words, and only one other person, an experienced Dominatrix who had a thing for college guys, had asked about my physical boundaries. What was this guy’s story?

“Anything else you want me to know before we start?”

“No.”

“Then buckle up and prepare for the ride of your life.”

A rush of anticipation shot through me. This was what I’d needed. To let someone else take control so I could get out of my head for a bit.

“I’m ready.”

KAI

I *'m ready.*

A ripple of excitement moved through me as I settled back against my pillows.

I'd had a shit-tastic day and had hopped on Kinksters to find someone who wanted me to get my bossy on.

FunTimes' profile was just like every other pretty boy on the app. Headless, shirtless bro snap at the beach, a few dick pics that showed he was packing, and lots of ab shots.

The guy had great definition, not ripped, but nice and cut.

He was exactly what I went for when I was looking to have some fun with a guy. The preppy, pretty boy who took a walk on the wild side and let another guy get them off. Maybe he was closeted or simply curious. Or maybe he was out and proud. That was the beauty of Kinksters. He could be whomever I wanted him to be.

"Are you listening through headphones?" I asked, keeping my voice low and the cadence even.

"Yeah," came his breathless answer.

We hadn't even started yet, and this guy was getting flustered.

Perfect.

"Put your phone on the bed beside you. Are you alone, or do you need to watch how much noise you make?"

"I have to be careful. Roommates are home."

"How much time do you have?"

"Um, like, twenty minutes."

“I want you to tell me a fantasy you’ve never told anyone.”

Silence.

“I thought this was a JOI call...”

“It is, but we’re doing this my way.”

“What if I don’t wanna?” His voice took on a defiant quality that sent the blood rushing to my dick.

I liked it when people were submissive, but I loved when they had a little sass and fought back. It was cute how they thought they could win against me.

“Then you can go ahead and swipe right on the next profile you get matched with. You want to do this my way or find someone else?”

He huffed as if he was annoyed. “Your way.”

“Good boy.”

“I’m not into that shit.”

“You sure?”

“Yes?”

“You asking or telling?”

“Telling.”

“Okay. I won’t say that again.”

I switched tactics. This guy wasn’t a sub. Was he a brat? “Now, are you gonna tell me a fantasy you’ve had, or are you finding someone else to get you off?”

He made another annoyed sound. Then his breathy voice slid into my ear. “I’ll tell you, but only if you tell me one.”

“Negotiating, I can dig it. Okay, Fun, tell me yours, and I’ll tell you mine.”

“I... I’ve always wanted to fuck a stranger.”

“That’s not exactly juicy.”

“Let me finish.” He grumbled. “I mean an actual stranger. Like I have no idea who they are, what they look like, nothing.”

“I’m intrigued. And as a reward for listening, you can cup your dick. No stroking, no pressure. Just hold it over your briefs for me.”

He let out a little sigh.

“Now tell me what this fantasy looks like. Describe it the best you can, and you’ll get another reward.”

“I’m in a room, blindfolded and on my hands and knees on a bed.”

“More.” I resisted the temptation to stroke myself.

“A guy comes in, and he doesn’t say anything. I don’t even know he’s there until he touches me.”

His voice was breathy and soft, his tone already wrecked. Goddamn, this guy was responsive.

“That’s good. Now you may squeeze your dick, but only three times.”

He huffed, then moaned softly.

“You like that?”

“Yeah.”

“Tell me what happens next.”

“He grabs my hips and slams into me. I’m nothing more than a fucktoy for him. He’s not nice or gentle, and I don’t want him to be.”

“Did you prep, or are you taking him dry?”

“I’m prepped. I... don’t like it dry.” His voice broke on the last word, fear creeping into his tone.

“That’s okay.” I made sure to change mine so it was soothing. “So you’re nice and prepped, all stretched and wet for your mystery stranger?”

“Yeah.”

“Pull your cock out but only hold it by the base. You may squeeze, but no stroking.”

Another breathy moan filled my ear.

“You with me?” I asked, unable to keep the teasing lilt out of my voice.

“Yeah.”

“Then what happens?”

“He fucks me hard. He’s quiet, doesn’t say a word, only makes grunting sounds. Then he comes in me, but before I can come, he’s gone.”

My breathing hitched. That fantasy told me a lot about Fun. He was into edging, sensory deprivation, probably humiliation, and being used. Those were also high on my list of favorite kinks.

“You may stroke yourself now.”

He made a strangled sound. Then his breathing picked up. I counted to ten. “Stop.”

He whined.

“Did you stop?”

“Yes,” he bit out.

“You want to hear my fantasy?”

“Yes!”

“Let go of your dick and play with your balls while I talk. If you’re into

nipple play, you may use your other hand to play with one. If not, put it on the bed.”

He grumbled softly, then moaned. He liked being contrary. Excellent.

“My fantasy is watching my friends take turns with my toy.”

I’d brought out the big guns and gone for a good old group scene. It was one of my top fantasies, but it also would give me a baseline for how kinky Fun was.

His breathing hitched.

“I’d let them fuck his mouth, play with his hole, and suck his dick. But they wouldn’t get to fuck him. Not yet. They’d get him nice and warmed up for me, and you know what the best part is, Fun?”

“What?” His tone was breathy and strained.

“I wouldn’t let him see anything that’s going on. He’d have no idea who was touching him. If it was me or my friends or all of us.”

He let out a little moan. “You have some kinky-ass friends.”

“I do.” I chuckled. “You may run your finger up and down your shaft.”

He whined, then huffed.

“Are you doing what I said?”

“Yes,” he ground out.

“Do you want more?”

“Yes.”

“You want to hear the rest of my fantasy?”

A pause. “Yes.”

“Once I’m done watching my friends prep my toy, I fuck him while they watch me and jerk off over him.”

He let out a sexy groan. “Please let me stroke myself.”

“Not yet.”

His answering grunt was angry. I smiled and slowly rubbed my hand up and down my aching cock. “When I’m about to come, I pull out. Then my friends have a turn with him while I edge myself.”

Fun let out a strangled cry, his breaths coming out in loud pants.

“Want to know what happens next?”

“I want to get off,” he snapped.

“Let go of your dick and put your hands behind your head.”

He whined. “You’re an asshole.”

“Yes, I am.” I let go of my dick and stared at the popcorn ceiling. “Don’t pretend you hate it. I can hear how much you’re enjoying this.”

He didn't answer, but his breathing slowed.

"Now, are you ready to let me finish?"

"Yes."

"They take turns, using whichever hole they want. When they're close, they pull out and come all over his back while I fuck him. Then it's my turn to come. But I don't pull out. I make sure to come as deep in him as I can."

Fun whined again, the sound almost pained. "Please let me touch myself."

"Soon." I added some softness to my voice. "You're doing good."

The hitch in his breathing was telling. Did he like praise too?

"When I'm done coming, I put a plug in him, and we all sign our names on his back with a marker. That way he has to spend the rest of the day with my load in him and our brands on him. And he's not allowed to wash his back or take out the plug until I tell him."

Fun's breathing was loud and labored in my ear.

"Do you like the sound of that?"

"Yes." His answer was soft, hesitant.

"You may stroke yourself."

I counted to twenty as his breathing picked up, little moans and bitten-off sighs sliding through my headphones.

"Stop."

"Ugh!"

"On your hands and knees."

"And what if I don't?" he asked petulantly.

"That's your choice. But if you don't, then you might as well hang up now because it's my way or nothing."

The muffled sounds of material shifting came over my headphones. "I'm on my hands and knees."

"I want you to find one of my pictures and stare at it as you stroke yourself. Tell me when you find the one you want to look at."

I waited, squeezing the base of my dick to stave off my arousal. Fun was aptly named because this was the best session I'd had on here in... ever. Most people turned into needy, pleading messes when I got my bossy on. That was hot, but I much preferred the push and pull of someone fighting back. So far, Fun was the perfect balance between contrary and obedient, and it was a struggle not to jerk off with him.

"I found it," he whispered.

“Picture me standing in front of you. Do you like what you see?”

“Obviously,” he snapped.

I chuckled, not bothering to scold him.

“And what would you say if I told you to get on your knees for me?”

“Um, yes?”

He didn’t add Sir or any type of honorific to his answer. So he wasn’t a brat.

“I tell you to open your mouth and put your hands behind your back. Do you do it?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me how you’d suck me.”

“I’d... I’d start slow.” His voice was hesitant. “Maybe lick around your head a bit. Get used to your taste.”

“What else?”

“I’d probably lick your shaft, maybe your balls too.”

“Mmmmm, I like having my balls sucked on.”

“I’d do that,” he said quickly. “I’d suck on them for you.”

“I’d moan for you. Would you like that? To hear me enjoying your mouth?”

“Yes.” He cleared his throat. “I like it when my partners are loud.”

“So do I. Are you loud when you don’t have to worry about roommates?”

“Yeah, I am.”

“You may stroke yourself, but only ten times.”

He huffed but didn’t protest.

“What would you do next?” I asked after I’d counted to ten.

“I’d suck your dick.”

“Tell me how you’d do it.”

“I’d... I’d suck on your head for a bit. Then I’d try to take you farther.”

“Can you deep throat?”

“No.”

“Then what would you do?”

“I’d look up at you and hold still.”

“Why?” I squeezed my dick.

Fuck. I was so hard I ached. Fun’s hesitation was hot as fuck. It told me he wasn’t experienced, and that pushed all my buttons. Corrupting “straight” boys was one of my favorite pastimes. And being one of the first, if not the first, to get my dick in someone satisfied a baser part of myself I usually

didn't let out. That bastard was dark and possessive and way too intense for most people.

"Because I'd want you to fuck my mouth."

"Mmmmmmm."

He moaned. "Please let me stroke myself."

"You may. But stare at my picture as you do. Imagine I have my hands in your hair, holding you still as I fuck your face. I'm not being rough or going deep. It's not about that. It's about me using you and watching as you get off on it."

His moan was loud, so loud I almost reminded him he had people to worry about.

"Are you getting close?"

"So close."

"Stop stroking."

His frustrated grunt made me smile.

"Now I want you to picture me on my knees for you."

"Really?" The surprise in his voice was also telling.

"Yes. I like to suck off my toys. Get them so close they're begging, then pull back and watch them squirm."

"Shit, Wrong. I'm so close. Please let me come."

"No. Not until I tell you."

He huffed again.

"Are you stroking?"

"No. Too close." His voice was clipped, angry even.

"You know what I like to do after I suck my toys off?"

"What?" he asked, his voice full of anticipation and dripping with need.

"I like to bend them over."

He gasped.

"They think I'm going to fuck them, but not yet. I like to get them nice and ready."

His breathing was fast, too fast.

"Stroke yourself while I tell you this. But no coming until I say so."

He moaned again, softer this time.

"First, I'd use my tongue. Get you nice and wet, lick your hole and eat you out until you were begging me. You like being rimmed?"

"I... I don't know."

The primal, dark part of me reveled in the knowledge that he'd never

been rimmed before. I wanted to be that person. The one to introduce him to the wonders of having a tongue in his ass.

I shook off that thought. This was a one-off sexting session. I needed to keep my head on the present and forget about any foolish notions of ever talking to him again.

“Then I’d take my time with you. Go soft and slow. Tease you and get you so close you’re begging me to let you come. But I don’t. I’m not done playing with my toy.”

“Please,” he whispered.

“When you’re at your limit, I’d stretch you. Use one finger, then two. I’d go slow, of course. I want you begging me for my cock.”

“Please give me your cock,” he whispered through his heavy breaths. “I want it.”

“I know you do,” I purred. “Soon, my pet. Soon.”

He grumbled.

“Are you still stroking?”

“Barely. I’m too close. I wanna come.”

“You will. But not until I’m done.”

He huffed but kept quiet.

“After I’ve got two fingers in you, I’d add a third. I’m not a small guy, and I want to make sure you’re nice and ready for me.”

“Fuck, I can’t.”

“You can.”

“I’m... I need to come.”

“You will. But first I need to get my dick in you.”

He was panting so loud I had to turn the volume down on my phone. My cock was rock hard and leaking, screaming at me for some friction. I stroked myself slowly to take the edge off.

“You take my cock so beautifully, Fun. I slide right into you, and you’re moaning for me. Begging me for more. You know what I do?”

“What?” he asked quickly, his voice a little clearer. He was still with me.

“I’d give it to you. I’d fuck you hard, making sure to nail your sweet spot. I’d jack you off as you took everything I gave you. Would you like that? You want me to fuck your ass as I get you off?”

“Yes!”

“I’m stroking now. I want you to listen to me come as you picture me behind you. I’m gripping your hips hard, letting you take over so you can

jack yourself the way you want. Can you do that for me, Fun? Can you wait for me to come?”

“Yes! Need it. Want your cum so bad.”

Fuck, this guy was so into it, so fucking desperate.

I sped up my hand, picturing exactly what I’d described. I could almost feel his heat around my dick as I imagined it sliding in and out of a perfect bubble butt.

We were panting in unison, little moans coming over the line as we got off together. Normally, I’d edge myself until my partner came, then punish them for disobeying. But Fun was just too hot, too into it, and I couldn’t hold back.

I didn’t bother keeping my voice down as I moaned and grunted, putting on a show for him. He was babbling, a steady stream of random words as he panted and groaned for me. Pleasure swirled inside me, coiling out from deep in my body as I fucked my fist, my precum creating a tight, slick channel.

“You ready for it?” I gritted out, my balls drawing up as my orgasm hovered right under the surface.

“Yes! Give me your load. I want it.”

“Fuck!”

My back bowed as my orgasm tore through me, ropes of cum landing on my chest and stomach as I stroked myself through it.

A strangled cry rang out, then what sounded like a sob.

“Fun?” I asked, the haze of my orgasm fading.

“I... I came. I tried to wait but—”

“Shhhh. It’s okay,” I said softly, hoping to soothe him. “Did it feel good?”

“Yes,” he whispered.

“Then that’s all that matters. It’s hot you came at the same time as me. Now, I want you to lie back down.”

“I... I thought this was it?”

“Not yet. Lie back and get nice and comfortable for me. Tell me when you are.”

“I’m on my back.”

“Put your dick away and pull your blanket over you.”

“Why?” His voice sounded far away.

“Because. Can you do that for me?”

“Yeah.”

Rustling came over the line, then a deep, satisfied sigh.

“Now, close your eyes and think about how much you liked that. How good it felt to come for me.”

He sighed again, snuffling happily.

“Did you like hearing me come?”

“I did. So hot.” His voice was dreamy and a little slurred.

“I liked hearing you. Thinking about fucking you made me come so hard. Knowing you were getting off thinking about me was so hot.”

“Hmmmmmm,” he mumbled. “I feel weird.”

“I know. It’s normal. Just relax and enjoy the afterglow.”

Fun probably didn’t realize it, but he’d fallen into subspace. I usually didn’t like to get people too deep over the phone because it was difficult to do any sort of meaningful aftercare with just my voice, but I’d lost myself with him and hadn’t held back.

“Kay.” He sighed, the sound happy and satisfied. “That was really fun.”

“It was.”

“I haven’t come that hard in a long time.”

His voice was still a bit slurred, but he was sounding more alert.

“Me either.”

“Wrong?”

“Yes?”

“I don’t normally do this.”

“Voice chat?”

“Not with guys.”

“No?” I didn’t push, even though I was dying to know more.

“No. But this was fun. I feel so relaxed.”

“That’s good. I’m glad you swiped my profile.”

“Me too.”

Silence stretched, and I took the opportunity to tuck myself away.

“Um...” His voice was hesitant and clear. He was back in reality. “I should go.”

“Okay.”

I hadn’t expected him to want to keep talking after he snapped out of his daze. That was exactly how I liked these sessions to go, but the primal part of me wasn’t ready for it to be over.

“Okay. Um. Bye.”

The connection went dead, and I sat up, looking down at the cum still

streaking my torso. Time to take another shower and get back to working on my assignment.

I pushed aside the flare of disappointment that my time with Fun was over. His profile said he only did one-offs, so the odds he'd contact me again were low. Whatever. I didn't have time to worry about some faceless guy I'd gotten off. I had enough real-life shit to deal with. I'd gone online to get my rocks off, and I'd done it.

Time to focus on reality.

ALEX

Thank fuck Matt was distracted as we played COD. I couldn't get the session with Wrong out of my head. That had been the most intense and surreal experience of my life.

Most of my sessions on Kinksters were good in the sense that I got off, but I'd never lost touch with reality before. Wrong's voice, his commands, and the way he'd made me participate had taken me to a place where only pleasure existed. I'd truly gotten out of my head, and that was freaking me the fuck out.

I was bi; I knew that. I'd figured that out as a teenager, but I'd always preferred women. I found tons of different types of girls attractive, but my taste in guys was extremely specific. Plus, I'd only hooked up with girls for the past three years and hadn't felt like I was missing anything.

Well, that wasn't entirely true. I was no stranger to being around same-sex couples, but none of them had ever sent pangs of longing through me. Not until Beck had started hooking up with Finn.

Maybe it was because I'd had a brief thing for Beck when we'd first met? He wasn't my type, but the pull I'd felt toward him had been intense. I'd known he was meant to be a part of my life, and we'd clicked instantly.

That didn't usually happen to me. I was... a lot. I also wasn't an idiot. I knew I was emotionally stunted, too rash and impulsive, and could be obsessive when I was interested in something.

My brain liked to hyperfocus on things, whether they were a hobby, a new friend, or someone I wanted to fuck. The object of my desire became my entire world, and I learned everything I could about it, or, in the case of

people, I tended to smother them with attention and freak them out.

Beck was one of the few people who'd never cared. He'd gone along with my weird plans, encouraged my obsessions, and actually listened as I compulsively shared my newfound knowledge with him. He'd been there to rein me in when I'd gotten a little too into something or someone, and he'd helped me focus in a world full of distractions.

He was my best friend and the closest thing I had to a sibling, and watching him devote the attention he used to have for me to Finn fucking sucked. And it hurt.

I understood Finn was his boyfriend and they were planning a life together, but I'd spent hours listening to him complain about how his BFF from high school had stopped having time for him when he'd hooked up with his current wife. Now Beck was doing the same thing to me, and I missed him.

"Fuck yeah!"

I jerked back to reality as my character was wasted by Matt's. He shot me a big grin, his stupidly handsome face bright and his blue eyes sparkling.

Matt was hot, and I didn't have to be bi to see that. With his blond hair, blue eyes, and ridiculously ripped body, he looked like he should be on the cover of a fitness magazine and not in our living room playing video games. Jocks didn't do it for me, but I appreciated the view as his arm muscles bunched and flexed as he worked the controller.

"What's up?" he asked.

"What do you mean?" I tried for casual, but my voice came out a bit tight.

"You've just been... different lately."

"Stressed."

He nodded, his eyes still on the screen. "Yeah, I feel that. You're on scholarship, right?"

"Yeah." I didn't bother telling him my grades weren't stressing me out. My single-minded hyperfocus extended to my schoolwork and getting the fuck away from my past. That made it easy to maintain my GPA, even though the rest of my life was a mess. "You are too, right?"

"Yup. But not for my brain like you." He sighed.

"You okay?" I stopped playing and turned my attention to him.

Matt was one of the most easygoing and happy-go-lucky guys I'd ever met. Nothing fazed him. But by the tight set of his jaw and the way his eyes were fixed on a point over the TV, something was wrong.

He opened his mouth, then closed it and shook his head. “Fine.”

Matt and I weren’t close, but we’d hung out a lot in the past few months, especially after Beck had ditched me for Finn. We didn’t talk about real shit, but he was my friend, and he was obviously struggling with something.

“Just so you know, when I ask someone if they’re okay, I’m actually asking. I know a lot of people toss it out to be polite and don’t want to hear the truth, but that’s not me.”

He swallowed hard. His indigo eyes were bright, his expression grim. “I’m not okay.”

I put my controller down. “What’s going on?”

He tossed his controller onto the couch next to him and raked his hand through his hair, tugging on the strands as he grunted in what sounded like frustration.

“I’m just so fucking stressed.” He kept his eyes on the coffee table in front of him. “Every time I turn around, someone is demanding shit from me. I have to be perfect at everything I do. Mistakes are failure, and failure is unacceptable.”

“That sounds like a lot of pressure. You want to talk about it?” I asked softly.

“I can’t do it anymore.” He ripped his hands out of his hair. Several blond strands remained trapped between his fingers.

Instinctively, I put my hand on his arm. “Breathe, Matt. It’s okay. Just breathe.”

He drew in several shaky breaths and pressed his white knuckles into his thighs.

“Good. Now focus on your shoulders and slowly let the muscles relax.”

He was still staring at the coffee table, but lowered his shoulders until they were in a more natural pose.

“That’s good. Now your arms. Just let the tension go.”

He did. His breathing slowed down and returned to normal, and his arm muscles relaxed.

“Now your hands,” I said softly.

He stared at them and slowly uncurled his fingers, the hair he’d pulled out fluttering to the floor.

His cheeks were pink, but his jaw was relaxed. “Sorry,” he mumbled. “I sometimes get panic attacks.”

“Nothing to be sorry for. We all have our breaking points. Do you want to

talk about it?”

“No, but yes.” He shook his head and finally looked at me. “It’s just a lot. School, the team, the frat, my family, even my friends. Everyone expects me to be perfect, but I’m not perfect. It’s like no one actually *knows* me. They know the version of me they want to see, the one I’ve let them see.”

He sighed, the sound frustrated. “It’s like *I* don’t even know who I am anymore. I’ve spent so long being what everyone wants me to be, but it doesn’t feel real. Like it’s not me they’re seeing, but I have no clue how to be anything else.”

“I get that.” Hopefully my tendency to try and empathize with people when they were hurting didn’t make the situation worse. “It sucks when you have to hide your true self from the people you care about. Who are supposed to care about you.”

“It does.” He rubbed his hands over his face. “Some days, it’s fine, but others, it’s too fucking much.”

A subtle cough near the stairs rang out. We whirled around. Eli, our fifth roommate, was standing at the bottom of the stairs, looking uncharacteristically shy and a bit uncomfortable. “I didn’t mean to eavesdrop. I was just coming downstairs and...” He bit his lip. “I’m sorry.”

“We were talking in a shared space.” Matt shrugged, even though a blush painted his cheekbones. “Nothing to be sorry about.”

“I guess. Look, I know we barely know each other, and that’s my fault.” He hesitated, his features tight. “But I’m observant, and from what I’ve seen, you’re a strong guy. And I don’t mean your body. I don’t know your circumstances, but eventually, you have to stop living for other people. I know that’s easy for me to say, and feel free to tell me to fuck off for sticking my nose where it doesn’t belong. But the people who matter, the ones who truly care about you, will still be around when you show them your true self. The people who only like you because of what they think you are will only continue to drag you down.”

Eli blushed, which was fucking weird. The few times I’d spoken to him, he’d had an air of aloofness that screamed “stay away.” He wasn’t unfriendly, but he hadn’t made an effort to get to know any of us.

“Thanks. That helps.” Matt gave him a small smile. “You want to play with us for a bit?”

Eli glanced at the kitchen, then at us, indecision written all over his face. While Matt was hot in a rugged and all-American way, Eli was beautiful,

almost ethereal.

His features were delicate, his big green eyes bright, and his full lips had a natural pout that was hard to look away from. Add in his slender body that wouldn't be out of place on a runway and his thick and perpetually disheveled dark blond locks that framed his too-pretty face, and he was breathtakingly attractive.

Of course I'd end up in a house full of hot guys. Thank fuck none of them were my type.

"I have to get something to eat, but maybe when I'm done?" he asked, his voice small, almost seeking.

"Sure." Matt grinned. "I could use a snack. Gotta keep the beast fed." He patted his washboard stomach. "You want anything from the kitchen?" He flicked his gaze to me.

"Nah, I'm good."

Matt stood and patted me on the shoulder as he passed. "Thanks for earlier."

"Anytime." I smiled.

I liked Matt, and hopefully, he would still like me the more of my true self I revealed. What he'd said had hit home, way harder than I'd ever admit.

I was a chameleon, always had been. I craved acceptance, and I didn't need therapy to tell me why. Molding myself to match what others wanted me to be was second nature and a way to shield myself from rejection. If someone didn't like the version of me I'd shown them, then it wasn't me they were rejecting; it was a persona.

It still hurt, but my fucked-up brain was able to compartmentalize the pain and move on. The fact that Beck had rejected me after I'd shown so much of myself to him triggered all the crap I'd spent years repressing and brought it all back to the surface.

Shaking my head, I leaned back against the couch and stared unseeingly at the wall above the paused game still on the TV.

The twenty minutes I'd spent on the phone with Wrong were the calmest my brain had felt in months. He'd been... perfect. He'd pushed my boundaries but had been cognizant enough to know when it had been too much. He'd guided me, teased me, but had also listened to me.

Most days I felt like I was screaming into the void. Like everyone around me was too busy or inwardly focused to actually hear what I was saying.

Wrong might just be a dude on an app, but he'd been fully focused on me.

He'd put all his attention on me. He'd made my pleasure his priority. I'd never had that. Usually, the chicks I sexted with told me all the things they'd make me do to them. How my purpose would be to please them, and that my needs were secondary.

I could get off that way, but I'd never been able to let go like I had with Wrong. I usually struggled to orgasm, both online and in person. It wasn't that I didn't enjoy sex—I did—I just had a hard time focusing.

Sounds distracted me. Sensations like the way my clothes rubbed against my skin or even a slight breeze hitting my body brought me out of the moment.

Dozens of thoughts raced through my head, most having nothing to do with the act I was currently engaged in. Homework assignments, grocery lists, even song lyrics and movie quotes were on a constant loop in my mind and dragged my focus away from my partner.

Most of the girls I'd had sex with had appreciated how I could go for a long time, but not all of them had accepted that I couldn't always come. I made sure they got off, multiple times if possible, but they saw my inability to orgasm as a slight against them. I wasn't attracted to them. I didn't like them. I'd been thinking of someone else.

None of that was true, but how the fuck could I explain I was too distracted to be in the moment? That it had nothing to do with them and everything to do with how fucked up I was?

Laughter from the kitchen knocked me back to reality. I clenched my fists and forced myself to stop ruminating. The signs were there. I was in danger of falling into a spiral of self-deprecation and loathing that would eventually lead to me doing something stupid and reckless. I had to stop now before I hit that point of no return.

Needing to move, I jumped up and paced the perimeter of the room, hoping like hell Matt and Eli stayed in the kitchen for a few more minutes and didn't find me doing laps like a weirdo.

I caught movement out of the corner of my eye, and panic flashed through me. I hurried to the dining room table and grabbed the pen I'd left there last night after a study session. Matt and Eli came out of the kitchen with plates and glasses in their hands, talking quietly and smiling.

Hopefully no one noticed my randomness, or that I was spiraling. I pasted on a cocky smile, or at least one I hoped didn't look like a grimace, and sauntered back to the couch. Matt switched out of COD and loaded up Mario

Kart.

I plopped down on the cushion, my mind racing, and picked up my controller. Thank fuck I could multitask.

KAI

I was late.

Glancing at my watch, I raced down the empty hallway toward my communications class.

Monday mornings were the worst. I worked vampire hours all weekend at the club and had only gotten about three hours of sleep before my alarm had gone off.

I'd struggled to get out of bed, and by the time I'd gotten to school, all the spaces in the student lot were filled. That meant I'd spent the last fifteen minutes circling the side streets around campus, trying to find a place I could park without getting towed.

Professor Meyers wasn't an asshole, but he was strict. Until now, I'd managed to stay off his radar, but my good luck was about to end.

I shoved the classroom door open and stumbled inside.

"Mr....?" Professor Meyers raised an eyebrow at me from where he stood at the podium in the front of the class.

"Alexander." I kept my eyes on him and not on the students gawking at me.

"I was asking for your last name," he said dryly.

"Alexander is my last name. Sir." I added the last part hastily.

He looked at the papers in front of him. "Well, Mr. Alexander, since you can't be bothered to come to my class on time—"

The door swung open, and a solid body smashed into my back.

"Oof," I grunted as I stumbled forward.

I caught myself before I went sprawling. Pulling in a deep breath, I

adjusted my bag and straightened, desperately trying to tamp down my anger. Laughter tittered through the room.

“Sorry. Sorry,” a flustered, nearly hysterical voice said behind me.

I turned around, and my eyes collided with a pair of dark brown ones. I vaguely recognized the guy from this class. He narrowed his eyes and glared at me. What the fuck? He’d smashed into me.

“Mr....?” Professor Meyers asked the other guy.

“Ellis, Sir.” The guy swung his gaze to our teacher.

“Well, Mr. Alexander and Mr. Ellis, since you can’t be bothered to come to class on time, you’re our first pair for the new assignment.”

Our TA jumped up from his seat at the end of the first row and rushed over, a packet of papers in his hand. He shoved one at me, then handed another to the guy behind me.

I glanced down at the pages. The professor cleared his throat and motioned to the desks right in front of the podium. “Your new seats.”

The guy behind me brushed past me, hitting my shoulder hard enough it wasn’t an accident. Gritting my teeth, I followed him and slid into the chair the professor was pointing at.

My cheeks burned, but not from embarrassment. I hated being called out, especially in front of an audience, and I was pissed at not only Professor Meyers and the asshole who’d hit me but also myself for being late.

I’d known taking an eight a.m. class on Monday morning would be a hassle, but it was the only time this particular class fit into my schedule, so my hands had been tied.

Professor Meyers droned on in his usual monotone, explaining the assignment described in the handout. “Now, pair up. You have exactly twenty minutes to exchange information and tell Mr. Bates your pairs.”

The din of students speaking quietly and moving around echoed in the room, and I turned my attention to my new partner. He was glaring at me, his dark eyes narrowed and his jaw tight.

I tilted my head as I studied him. His glare was about as effective as a petulant kid throwing a tantrum after not getting their way. He was a big guy, nearly my size, but leaner. I’d put him about six feet and about one eighty, while I was six one and came in at just over two hundred pounds.

He was hot, even with the glare. His dark brown hair and clear skin accentuated his big eyes and full lips, not to mention a jawline that could cut glass. He had that pretty boy vibe going on, and I deliberately swept my gaze

down his body to judge how he'd react.

His jaw ticked, his glare deepened.

"Someone's grumpy this morning," I drawled and lazily stretched out in my chair.

He tore his eyes from mine and looked down at the papers in his hand, his knuckles white from holding them so tight. What crawled up this guy's butt and died?

I read the papers more carefully. We'd been assigned a combined project. Half of it was a presentation, which we'd be doing in front of the class in a month, and the other was a written component where we had to show our research and the steps we used to create the presentation.

Easy enough.

I skimmed the topics.

My new partner had yet to say a word.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Alex," he ground out.

"I'm—"

"Kai."

I blinked. He knew who I was? "Um. Yeah." I shook off my surprise. "So, which one do you want to do?"

He glowered at me like I'd kicked his puppy. "You really don't remember me?"

"Sorry." I racked my brain to place him. "Where do I know you from?"

He rolled his eyes and slumped back in his seat. "Forget it."

"Okaaaay."

What was this guy's problem? I wasn't the nicest guy, but the vitriol he was exuding was extreme. What had I done to him?

"Let's just pick one, then divvy up the work. You prepare the presentation, and I'll do the written. We'll send each other our work a week before, then put something together."

"That's a nice idea." I pointed to the first paragraph of the assignment.

"But it says we have to log our hours and keep a record of our meetings."

He squinted at the paper. "Fuck," he muttered.

"And I expect the records to be accurate," a voice said from the front of the class.

Shit. Professor Meyers had overheard our conversation. *Way to put yourself even more on his radar, Kai.*

Alex nodded to the professor, then turned to me. “What’s the best way to get hold of you?”

“Text.” I rifled through my bag and grabbed a pen.

“Not Insta? Or Snapchat?” he asked.

“I don’t use those. Text is easiest.” I wrote my number on the bottom of his paper.

It wasn’t my real number. I used a cheap prepaid phone for talking with randoms and group project members. My real number was something I kept close to my chest.

“What’s yours?” I handed him the pen.

He took it, grumbling, and scribbled a number on my page.

“Ten minutes!” Professor Meyers called out, finally moving away from his podium.

The lineup to talk to the TA stretched all the way to the back of the room. I didn’t know anyone in the class, so I would have paired up with a random anyway. At least I could sit and chill while everyone else dealt with sign-ups.

Alex tossed my pen onto the table attached to my chair with enough force it bounced off the surface and fell to the floor. Rolling my eyes, I bent to retrieve it.

“So, which one do you want to do?” I asked as Alex stared straight ahead.

“Either number seven or eleven.”

Seven was about censorship, while eleven was about social media and its place in business. “Seven.”

Censorship was something I was interested in, and considering how much I despised social media, that topic would bore me to tears.

Alex gave me a look that clearly said he wanted to argue, but eventually, he gave me a clipped nod.

“What’s your schedule like?” I spun my pen over my fingers.

He followed the movement with his eyes. “I have classes.”

I smirked. This guy’s attitude was kind of adorable. I had no idea why he hated me, but he obviously didn’t know me. Otherwise, he’d know that stubbornness and being a dick about things didn’t piss me off. It amused me.

“And what about after classes?”

“Homework, stuff.”

“Do you work?”

“Why?” He shot me a glare. “What does that matter?”

“Because a job will affect your schedule.” I kept my tone light and

conversational, knowing it would piss him off even more.

“I don’t work right now.”

“I do—”

“Congratulations.”

“—so weekends are out.” I ignored his interruption.

“Five minutes!” Professor Meyers leaned against the desk tucked into the front corner of the room opposite the door.

“What’s easier for you, during the day or after class?”

“After class,” he mumbled.

“Now, was that so hard?”

He shot me a glare that intensified when I smirked. He crossed his arms and turned his attention to the front of the room.

“Glad we could work that out.” I stretched out farther, spreading my legs so my thigh nearly brushed his. He jerked it away from me and crossed his legs awkwardly.

Hmmm. He either hated me so much he thought touching me would give him asshole cooties, or he wasn’t comfortable touching strangers. Or men.

I pulled my leg away, not wanting to make him truly uncomfortable if he had some sort of trauma associated with being touched, and spun my pen absently.

Alex uncrossed his legs and instead stretched them out and crossed his ankles, ensuring he didn’t accidentally move into my space. He also shifted in his chair so he was as far from me as possible. Interesting.

“Everyone back in your seats!” our TA called.

Professor Meyers came to stand behind the podium again. “If you didn’t get a chance to tell Mr. Bates your pairs, you can do it after class.”

He waited as everyone returned to their seats and the class was quiet.

The only bonus to taking this class was that Professor Meyers was ridiculously hot. He looked to be in his early thirties, which was impressive for a tenured professor. His dark brown hair contrasted nicely against his silver blue eyes and lightly bronzed skin. Add in his broad shoulders, thick thighs and trim waist, and he was some serious eye candy.

“The first ten minutes of every class between now and your presentation date will be dedicated to this assignment. Be prepared to bring your notes and logs to class, as I and Mr. Bates will be randomly checking them. If you’ve read the syllabus, which I assume everyone has, you’ll know this presentation is worth thirty percent of your final grade. That includes all the preparations,

research, and presentation.”

He paused and looked around the room. “Now, today’s class will be focused on...”

I tuned him out, pulled my laptop out of my bag, and opened it. To my right, Alex snickered and smirked at my computer.

The thing wasn’t pretty. The outside looked like shit, but a buddy of mine had refurbished it for me, and it worked just as well as any fancy-ass one on the market now. Alex’s laptop was newer, but I’d stopped caring about what people thought of me and my stuff years ago.

I winked at him. He blanched. Holding back a grin, I brought up my notes for the class. Professor Meyers was a weird mix of old and new school. His assignments were all distributed in paper form with no digital options. I assumed it was so he could track who was in class when he handed them out. He didn’t take attendance but wrote a code on the board at the end of class that we needed to access the online slides for each lesson.

He also gave quizzes and short essays at random times, all on paper and not online. It was annoying because it meant skipping class wasn’t an option. It would be easier for him to just take attendance, but I guessed this was his way of punishing students who missed class without a valid reason.

The clicking of keys brought me back to reality, and I focused on Professor Meyers and the slides projected on the SMART board.

ALEX

By the time my last class on Monday ended, I was wound so tight I was liable to snap at the next person who looked at me funny. Of all the days to be late to class, I had to pick the day Professor Meyers assigned us our major presentation. Some asshole had blocked our driveway this morning, and I hadn't been able to get my car out. I'd had to walk to school, which put me way behind schedule.

And of course Kai Alexander would also be late. My pulse sped up as the image of him smirking at me flashed in my mind. The asshole hadn't even recognized me, which only added insult to injury.

My hands ached, and I slowly unfurled my grip. I needed to work some of this agitation out, but the gym wasn't an option. Working out when I was pissed was fine when I had a buddy to keep me in check and spot me, but going alone was dangerous when I was in this headspace.

The last time I'd gone to the gym mad, I'd nearly been crushed when I'd tried to bench out my anger. Thank fuck a guy working out nearby had seen me struggling and had grabbed the bar before it could fall on me. I was reckless, but I wasn't stupid. I'd learned my lesson.

I could go for a run, but again, that wasn't smart. I was too angry to pay attention to my surroundings, so I was liable to run into traffic or break my ankle on a treadmill.

On a whim, I pulled out my phone, pausing near the entrance to The Daily Grind so I didn't walk into anything while I was texting.

Alex: want to hit the gym?

Beck should be home now. I had no idea if Finn was in class. Maybe

Beck would be able to pry himself away from his boyfriend and hang out with me.

I slipped my phone into my jeans pocket and walked toward the house. I'd skipped lunch again and was feeling a bit shaky on top of being pissed, but didn't stop to get anything. Sugar and caffeine would only make things worse.

Zzzzzz. Zzzzzz. Zzzzzz. Pulling my phone out of my pocket, I hurried up the steps to the house.

Beck: went earlier

I gritted my teeth so hard my jaw cracked. Of course he had.

Beck: wanna study for macro tonight?

I nearly stumbled through the door. He usually studied with Finn. Was I pathetic for the little flutter of happiness that shot through me? Probably, but whatever.

Alex: yeah

Alex: I'm at the house now. Where u at?

Beck: library waiting for Finn

Alex: let me know when you're ready to study

Beck: will do

Closing the door behind me, I put my phone in my pocket and headed to the kitchen to get something to eat. The living room was empty. Maybe I could game for a bit? Work shit out that way.

Ignoring the TV, I walked into the kitchen, where Eli was standing over the sink with a plate of cut-up fruit in his hands. I'd noticed he was into clean eating. He didn't keep junk food on his shelves, and I'd never seen him eat anything that wasn't healthy. That explained his ridiculous body.

"Hey." I pulled the fridge open and grabbed a tub of leftover pasta from the night before. Carbs and cheese should help me feel better. Or worse. Who the fuck knew at this point?

"Hey. How's it going?"

"It's been a day," I sighed and shoved my container into the microwave.

"You might want to take the top off or at least crack it open so it doesn't explode."

I opened the microwave and pulled off the top. "I swear I'm not this much of a moron."

"We all have our days." He leaned against the counter.

He really was making an effort to be more social. The first few months,

he'd either been holed up in his room or out. I'd spoken more to him in the last week than I had in the last two months.

"How're you?" I pulled a container of milk out of the fridge and opened it.

"Can't complain." He grinned sardonically. "Well, that's not true. I can always complain. But I'm fine."

I chugged some of the milk, then put the container away and grabbed a Coke off my shelf.

"That's not going to mix well." He smirked and chewed on a few blueberries.

"Probably not." I popped the top. "Thank fuck for my iron gut. I swear I can eat anything, and it won't bother me."

"Lucky." Eli's voice was heavy, his eyes clouding over for a second. "Must come in handy when you're drinking."

I grinned. "It does."

My smile faltered. Did Eli drink? I'd never seen him at a party, but then again, we didn't exactly run in the same social circles. In fact, I had no idea what circles he ran in.

"So, what are you studying?" I asked just as the microwave beeped.

"Biochem."

"Wow. What do you want to do with that? Med school?"

He shook his head. "Medical research."

"Damn. That's cool."

He flushed. "What about you?"

"Business with a finance concentration."

"I guess that's pretty self-explanatory." He smiled.

Eli had a beautiful smile. It lit up his face, highlighting his delicate bone structure and impossibly green eyes.

"Kinda." I pulled my food out of the microwave.

Carefully I carried the hot container over to the counter and set it down. Eli opened the cutlery drawer next to him.

"Thanks." I grabbed a fork and stabbed some pasta.

We ate in silence, but it wasn't strained. Eli was an enigma. He could be so cold and aloof, but then he'd seem shy and so damn young.

"How old are you?" I asked.

He blinked. "Nineteen."

"Are you a sophomore?"

“Senior.” He put the last apple slice in his mouth.

“Really? Did you skip a grade?”

He nodded. “Third and sixth.”

“Shit. You must be smarter than Finn.”

He shrugged and dropped his gaze. “The guy is going to be an astrophysicist. That’s pretty smart.”

“A medical researcher isn’t exactly something to sneeze at.” I shoved a big bite of pasta into my mouth.

A blush painted his cheekbones. “Lots of intelligent people don’t skip grades, especially if they go to a good school. My school didn’t know what to do with me, and my teachers hated me. They pushed me ahead so I’d be someone else’s problem.” He got up and rinsed his plate, his posture stiff.

I didn’t know what to say to that.

“Where are you from?” I asked.

“Here.”

“You’re a townie?”

“We prefer the term *local*.” He shot me a small smile.

“Sorry. You’re right. That’s a rude term.” I stabbed some more pasta. “How come you don’t live at home? Or in the dorms?”

“Dorms are way more expensive than shared housing.” He busied himself with drying the plate. “And home isn’t an option.”

Shit. I’d upset him by being nosy.

“Where are you from?” He put the plate away and closed the cupboard door.

“Burlington.”

“Vermont?” He cocked his head to the side. “This must be quite the change.”

“It is.” I chuckled and stirred my pasta to try and distribute the heat. “I’m loving the no-snow winters.”

“Not into winter sports?”

“Hell no.” I snorted. “We used to go all the time in school, and my buddies were all about snowboarding. I’d do one, maybe two runs so no one could say I wasn’t participating. Then I’d be in the lodge with a hot chocolate and a book.”

He perked up. “You like to read?”

“I don’t do it as much anymore. Too much schoolwork. You read?”

“I like pretty much anything, but especially high fantasy.”

“I’m mostly into dystopian books now, but I read a lot of fantasy stuff in high school.”

He opened his mouth like he was going to say something, but the ringing of a phone cut him off. He pulled his phone out of his pocket and glanced at the screen. His face hardened. “Gotta get this.”

I nodded.

“What do you want?” he said, his voice eerily blank, and stalked out of the kitchen.

Who was that? Staring after Eli, I stuffed another bite of food in my mouth. Whoever it was, they clearly had some animosity between them. Whatever. I liked the guy, but I had enough of my own shit to deal with without wondering about his.

ALEX

I walked through an empty main floor to the stairs. I didn't feel like gaming. Not even blowing shit up would help lift my spirits.

I stomped upstairs, my bad mood returning. My conversation with Eli had been a nice reprieve from my anger, but it was back now that I was alone with my thoughts.

When I was in my room, I dropped my bag on the floor and yanked off my hoodie. At least I didn't have to worry about hearing my roommates fucking for the next few hours. I flopped onto my bed and grabbed my burner phone.

I had a text from Kai. What did that asshole want? I put in my passcode and opened my texts.

Asshole: wed evening work for you?

I glared at my phone and contemplated not answering. The screen went dark, and I woke it back up, then typed out a quick answer.

Alex: yeah after 6 does

I tossed my phone aside, but the damn thing beeped less than five seconds later.

Asshole: library?

Alex: fine

At least he wanted to meet in public. Being among people would stop me from punching him. Hopefully.

Asshole: third floor, travis room. 630

I gripped my phone so hard my fingers cracked. Of course he'd be bossy. I nearly told him a different location just to be a dick, but it wasn't worth it.

Alex: fine

He sent back a smirking emoji.

Asshole: see you then

“Ugh.”

I went to toss my phone aside but paused. My muscles were so tight they felt like they were about to snap. Hell, *I* was about to snap, and I’d most likely take my anger out on someone who didn’t deserve it. Like one of my roommates.

With a defeated sigh, I opened Kinksters. Maybe an orgasm would help, get some endorphins and whatnot. I hesitated as I looked at the message icon. It wouldn’t hurt to check if Wrong was online, right?

His bio said he wasn’t looking for anything, but a second sexting session wasn’t serious. Especially if he hadn’t unmatched me.

“Fuck it.”

I tapped the icon. Not only had he not unmatched me, but he was online. Before I could talk myself out of it, I opened our message thread.

FunTimes: hey

His answer came only seconds later.

MrWrong: hey yourself

MrWrong: didn’t think I’d hear from you again

FunTimes: didn’t think I’d message again, but here we are

MrWrong: here we are

MrWrong: any reason you did?

FunTimes: why? Should I not have?

MrWrong: didn’t say that. Just wondered since you were pretty eager to bail when we were done last time

My face flushed hot. I’d been out of sorts and feeling vulnerable when I’d finally started thinking clearly again. I’d also been embarrassed as fuck, and I’d needed some space to get my balance back.

That hadn’t happened, and considering the crap I’d had to deal with today, I was beyond caring about how he could reduce me into a needy mess with only his voice and some dirty talk. I wanted to get back to that place where the only things I had to think about were obeying his commands and how good he made me feel.

FunTimes: had some shit I needed to deal with

MrWrong: want a repeat?

FunTimes: yeah

MrWrong: voice?

Instead of answering, I tapped the phone icon and started the call.

“Someone’s eager.”

His familiar voice came over my speaker. “Just let me get my headphones.”

I grabbed them off my bedside table, then connected them through Bluetooth. “There.”

“You alone?” he asked.

How he managed to sound like sex personified was beyond me, but I was grateful.

“Yeah. One of my roommates is home, but he’s two floors up.”

“Do you need to be quiet?”

“A little, but not like last time.”

“Mmmmm.” He let out a pleased rumble. “Good. I liked hearing you.”

“What about you? Do you need to be quiet?”

“I live alone. The old guy in the apartment next to me probably wouldn’t appreciate it if I started screaming, but he can deal.”

“You often scream?”

“Well, *I* don’t.”

I swallowed at the implication. “My roommates are like that.”

“Screamers?”

“Yeah.”

Why was I telling him this? I’d gone on the app to get off, but the words tumbled out of me like water out of a broken faucet. I needed to vent to someone, and he was safe, since he didn’t know me or my roommates.

“They forget other people live in the house.”

“Bet that can be annoying as fuck and also pretty fucking hot.”

I chuckled. “They do it in the room above me, and they’re... enthusiastic. I swear one of these days, the bed is going to come crashing through the ceiling and crush me.”

He laughed, the low sound sent shivers down my spine. “Death by fucking. Too bad it’s not you getting laid.”

“And they remind me of that every time they get their freak on.”

“Freak? How so?”

“One of them likes dirty talk, and the other is loud. Not a screamer, but it’s a bit awkward to hang out with him when I know exactly how he sounds when he comes.”

He laughed again, the sound way too sexy. “But it’s gotta be hot to hear them sometimes.”

“Sometimes,” I admitted. “I spend a lot of time with a stiffy.”

“You don’t take care of it while they’re having their fun?”

“No. One of the guys is like a brother to me. And his boyfriend isn’t my type. It’s more the sounds that get me hot, not picturing them.”

“And what is your type?”

“Tall, dark and handsome.”

He chuckled. “I fit that.”

“Yeah?”

“Yup.”

His confidence should have been a turn-off, but my fucked-up brain loved arrogance. Confidence got me off, and Wrong oozed confidence, even over the phone. “What’s your type?”

“Pretty boys who like to be corrupted.”

“Not sure I fit.”

“Not pretty, or don’t like to be corrupted?”

“Neither. I’m pretty as fuck, but I’ve already been corrupted, so...”

He laughed, the sound loud and genuine. Warmth filled my chest. I liked that I’d made him laugh and break his sexting persona.

“Even better. Corrupting is fun, but so is pushing a guy who’s already taken a few walks on the wild side.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.” He paused. “I might not answer but ask away.”

“You don’t have a sexuality on your profile.”

“No, I don’t.”

“Are you...?”

“I don’t like labels. I’m into people.”

“Like, you’re pan? Or bi?”

“By other people’s standards, yeah, probably. But to me it’s about connection, not body parts.”

“So you need to like the person to find them attractive?”

“More like I find lots of people attractive, and I don’t care what’s between their legs.”

“Huh.”

“What about you? Your profile says you’re straight, yet you swiped on me. I’m definitely not a chick.”

My cheeks heated as I bit my lip. It was only fair I tell him, since he'd told me. "I'm bi, but haven't had much interest in guys."

"Like, you just don't find a lot of them attractive, or don't want to get off with them?"

"Both. My type is pretty specific. I'd say I'm about ninety percent female, and ten percent male when it comes to attraction. And even then, just thinking a guy is hot isn't enough for me to want to hook up with them."

"How many guys have you met up with off this app?"

"None."

"How many have you spoken to?"

"You."

I could have lied, but what was the point? I didn't have to keep up pretenses with Wrong. It was fucking liberating to just be myself and not have to worry about what I said or how I reacted.

"Well, I'm honored you swiped on my profile. Can I ask why?"

"Your tats and your bio. You were exactly what I was looking for."

"Were? Past tense?"

"Were, are." I swallowed. "I guess I'm in a ten percent mood today."

He laughed, another genuine sounding one. "I'm glad. Because I've had a shit day and could use some fun."

"Really? Me too."

"Then how about we make our days better?" His tone slipped from conversational to that liquid gold one that made my pulse race.

"Yeah. Let's." I licked my dry lips.

"Are you on your bed?"

"Yeah."

"What are you wearing?"

"Jeans and a T-shirt."

"Take off your T-shirt. Are you wearing your shoes?"

"Yeah."

"Take those off too, and your socks."

I sat up and did as he said, tossing my clothes aside. "Done."

"Good."

"What are you wearing?" I asked, my voice already breathy with anticipation.

"Sweats and nothing else."

"Gray?"

“Black. Now lie back for me. Get nice and comfortable.”

I did, flutters of nerves exploded in my stomach.

“Now, I want you to tell me when you last jerked off.”

“This morning.”

“Where?”

“In the shower.”

“Did you come hard?”

“Not really. I was in a rush to get to school.”

“What did you think about?”

“Honestly, not much. It was to take care of my morning wood.”

“Hmmm. What about the time before that?”

“Last night.”

“Where?”

“In my bed.”

“Was it a good one?”

“Pretty good.”

“What were you thinking about?”

I’d thought about him. About our call.

“You still with me?” he asked, his voice taking on a soothing tone.

“Yeah. Um. I thought about you.”

“Really,” he purred. “What about me?”

“Our call.”

“You liked it?”

“Obviously.”

He chuckled. “I did too.”

“Yeah?”

A part of me had worried I’d been the only one who’d been into it. He’d come, but that didn’t mean anything.

“Oh yeah.” A pause. “Same limits? Or will you touch your hole for me?”

I swallowed. “I’ll touch it.”

“Nothing more?”

“No.”

“I can work with that. As a reward, you may undo your jeans.”

I pulled them open, a thrill of excitement shooting up my spine.

“Now, tell me about last night. What were you thinking about when you stroked yourself?”

“I thought about our call.”

“Yeah? And what about it?”

“How hot it made me. How much I liked listening to you.”

“Hmmm, I liked listening to you too. Did you picture me jerking off for you?”

“Yeah.”

“Did you think about me on my knees for you?”

“I-I thought about being on my knees for you.”

“You may pull your dick out, but no touching. Not yet.”

I reached into my underwear and freed my cock. I was hard and leaking, the head a dusky red, and precum slid down my shaft.

“You want to know what I thought about when I jerked off this morning?” he asked.

“What?”

“I thought about you bent over my desk. How I’d hold you down, fuck you hard and not let you jerk off.”

I gasped, my dick pulsing with want.

“You’d beg me, scream for me. But I wouldn’t let you come. You know why?”

“Why?” I asked breathlessly.

“Because I’d want to fuck you all over my room. On my bed. Against the wall. I’d even make you ride me while I was sitting in my chair.”

I swallowed hard, fisting the sheets so I didn’t grab my dick. I was aching and so fucking turned on just from his words.

“Would you like that? Would you like me to fuck you against the wall?”

“Yes,” I whispered.

“Would you ride me?”

“Yes.”

“Louder.”

I cleared my throat. “Yes.”

“Good. You may stroke yourself, but only ten times.”

A grumble escaped my throat as I grabbed my dick. I counted to ten, then paused. Nothing was stopping me from disobeying, but I didn’t want to. I liked listening to him. Something about letting go and giving myself over to someone else pushed all my buttons. It let me shut down my mind and just feel.

“Did you stop?”

“Yes.”

“Take off your jeans.”

I sat up, pushed them down my legs, and kicked them onto the floor. “They’re off.”

“Now your underwear. I want you naked for me.”

I shucked off my boxers, another thrill rushing through me. “They’re off.”

“Good. As a reward, you may play with your balls while you talk to me. Only your balls. Don’t touch your dick.”

“Okay.”

I cupped my balls. A low groan tore from my throat as I gave them a gentle squeeze, the soft skin warm against my palm.

“So hot,” he purred. “Now, I want you to tell me another fantasy you’ve had. Something you’ve never told anyone else. Something extreme and dirty.”

“Um...”

“You can be real with me, Fun. It’s only you and me here. And trust me, I’m the last person to judge.”

Could I tell him how fucked up I was? I’d never told anyone how depraved my fantasies could get. Mostly because I knew they’d judge me hard but also because they weren’t normal. People didn’t daydream about the kinds of things I did.

“It can be about a woman if you’d like,” he said.

My fantasies involving women weren’t exactly vanilla but were the kind of thing I could share without fear of being judged.

But I didn’t want to think about women right now. I’d been telling the truth when I’d said I was in a ten percent mood. Hell, I’d been in a loop of male-oriented thoughts and fantasies since our last convo.

“I’m in my room.” My voice cracked.

“Go on.”

“I’m asleep. I forgot to lock the door.”

“What else?” he prompted, his voice gentle.

“Someone comes in.”

“Do you know who?”

“No. He’s wearing a mask.”

“Then what?”

I swallowed, my eyes on the ceiling as warmth spread through my chest. “I wake up, and he’s standing over me. I don’t know who he is. He looks like

a burglar.”

“Is he there to rob you?”

“No.” My voice cracked again, and I cleared my throat. “He’s not there to rob me.”

“What happens next?”

“He... he starts talking to me.”

“And what is he saying?”

“All sorts of filthy stuff. About how he’s been watching me. How he’s been thinking about me. He... he wants to fuck me.”

“And do you want to fuck him?”

“No.”

“What happens next?”

“I try to escape, but he grabs me and pins me down. I’m in my boxers, and he’s fully clothed.”

“Do you like that? Feeling his clothes against your skin?”

“Yes, but I don’t want to.”

“Keep going.”

“He climbs onto my chest. He’s so strong I can’t get away. He opens his pants and pulls out his dick.”

“Is he hard?”

“Yeah.” I closed my eyes as my fantasy played in my mind.

“What happens next?”

“He forces me to suck him off.”

“Do you like it?”

“Yes,” I whispered.

“Do you fight him?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me what happens next.”

“He flips me over. He’s bigger than me. He pulls down my boxers.”

“What next?”

“He... he fingers me.”

“Do you like it?”

“Yes.”

“Are you fighting him?”

“Yes.”

“Is fighting part of what turns you on?”

I nodded.

“I need words, Fun,” he said gently.

“Yes. I like fighting back.”

“Tell me what he does to you. All of it. You can jerk off as long as you’re talking. If you stop, you have to let go of your dick.”

I circled my shaft and stroked, my grip tight. The shuddering sigh I let out made him groan.

“Talk to me, Fun. Tell me what happens next.”

“He’s fingering me. Saying all sorts of filthy things about how much I like it, how tight I am. He’s so strong. He forces me on my knees, but my chest is still on my bed. He puts his foot on my neck. Not hard, just enough that I can’t move.”

I sped up my hand, the memories of my fantasy flashing in my mind. My dick pulsed, and my body grew tight.

“He’s hitting my prostate, and I’m so hard. He’s talking. Telling me how he’s going to fuck me. How I’m going to like it.”

Pleasure coiled deep in my body, and I jerked, my muscles contracting. My breathing was harsh, my voice wrecked. I should’ve been mortified, but talking to Wrong, telling him the truth, was liberating in a way that wasn’t just sexual. It made me feel safe, and the thought that he might be jerking off as he listened to me sent a rush of need through me.

“He’s getting me close. I’m moaning. I don’t want it, but I do. He’s taunting me. Telling me how I’m going to come all over his cock. How he can’t wait to fuck me, but he won’t until I beg him.”

“Shit,” Wrong muttered. “That’s fucking hot.”

Confidence bloomed in my chest, and I licked my lips. “He won’t stop. I keep waiting for him to pull his fingers out. To fuck me, but he keeps going. It feels good. So fucking good. I want to come so bad, but he won’t let me.”

My shaft was slick with precum, and I stroked faster, twisting my hand at the head in that way that drove me crazy. In my mind, it wasn’t my hand. It was Wrong’s. He was jerking me off as he listened to me.

“I can’t take it anymore, and I tell him to fuck me. He laughs and flips me over. He pulls me off the bed and puts me on my knees. He shoves his cock down my throat. He wants me to get him wet.”

“Holy fuck.” Wrong groaned. “Can you hear it? I’m jerking off with you.”

“Yeah. I can hear it.”

His breathing was unsteady. The little grunts coming over the line were

so damn sexy I wasn't sure I'd be able to hold out.

"Keep talking. Tell me what happens next. If you get too close, stop. It's not time to come yet."

"Okay." I gripped my cock by the base and pulled my balls away from my body. "Fuck, I'm close."

"Touch your taint for me. Just press on it."

I spread my legs and reached between them. "Oh." I sighed and pressed against the tender spot. A bolt of pleasure shot up my spine, and goosebumps erupted on my skin.

I hadn't done any sort of ass play in years, and knowing my finger was so close to my hole sent a ripple of awareness through me that made me gasp.

"Keep talking, Fun. Tell me what happens next." His voice was strained, his breathing harsh.

I loved that he was getting off on listening to me. "He makes me suck him. He's fucking my face. I love it, but I don't want to. All I can see through the mask are his eyes. He's staring at me. He's not even talking anymore. He's just holding my head and fucking my mouth.

"I think he's going to come, but he pulls out and bends me over the bed. I'm so hard, so ready for him. He pushes in. His cock is huge. It hurts but in the best way. He's talking again. Telling me how hot I look spread out for him. How tight my ass is. How he's going to come in me. How he's going to make me come on his cock."

"Touch your hole for me. Pretend it's me doing it. Massage it, tease it. Be gentle. I want it to feel good."

I bit back a cry as I circled my hole with the tip of my finger. Spreading my legs wider, I hitched my knees up, opening myself even further.

"He's fucking me," I continued without him prompting me.

I let go of my cock, giving myself a bit of a break, and focused on Wrong's breathing and the sexy-as-hell sounds he was making. "He's fucking me so good. I love it. I'm moaning for him and so fucking hard. I want to come, and I'm so close. But he won't let me jerk. My hands are trapped behind me. He's holding them so tight. I'm leaking and begging, but he just laughs and keeps going.

"I'm going crazy, desperate. He shifts and hits my spot exactly how I need him to." I pressed my finger against my hole, shuddering as the sensitive skin reacted. Nerves deep in my body crackled to life, and a low buzz, like a hum, filled me.

“I come hard. All over the floor. He’s still fucking me, telling me how much of a slut I am. How tight and how hot I feel. It’s so much, too much, but he won’t stop.”

Needing more, I lifted my finger and sucked it into my mouth, getting it wet. Before Wrong could tell me to keep going, I pulled it out of my mouth and returned it to my hole.

“It’s like I can’t stop coming. He’s laughing as I scream. It hurts so good. I don’t want it to stop.”

Groaning, I slipped the tip of my finger into my hole, breaching my outer ring of muscles. “It feels so good. I want him to come so I can feel it. I’m begging him to fill me up. Just when I think I’m going to lose it, he slams into me and comes. I feel it, and I love it. He’s marked me.”

“Fuck.” Wrong panted. “Is that it?”

“Yeah. That’s where I usually stop.” I groaned.

“Are you stroking?”

“No. Too close.”

“Are you playing with yourself?”

“I’m fingering my hole.”

A cry came over the line, followed by a loud grunt. Holy shit. Did he just come?

“Fuck your hole and stroke your dick,” he commanded, his voice gravelly and deep. “I want you to picture him. He’s standing over you. He reaches up and pulls off his mask. You look up, and you see that it’s me. *I* made you come. *I*’m the one who filled you up. Branded you from the inside and made you mine.”

A strangled scream tore from my lips as my orgasm slammed into me. My hole clenched around my finger, my dick pulsed, and I was shooting ropes of cum onto my chest. Wrong kept talking. Telling me how hot I’d been. How hard I’d made him come. How he didn’t want anyone else but me.

That last line was my undoing, and I let myself float away on a cloud of pleasure, wrapped in his voice and the knowledge he wanted me.

“Fun?”

“Hmmm?”

I blinked. The room was hazy. Why was I shivering?

“Listen to my voice, Fun,” he said, his voice coming from far away. “Pull your blankets over yourself. Get nice and comfortable for me.”

Dazedly, I rolled over and grabbed my comforter. My hands were too big,

my fingers clumsy.

“You’re okay, Fun. I’m here. Focus on my voice and know you’re safe. I’ve got you.”

“You do?” I whispered. I flopped around and tried to yank the comforter down.

“I do. I’m right here with you. Are you comfortable?”

“My hands aren’t working,” I said stupidly.

“Breathe in for me. Then hold it for a count of four. Can you do that?”

I nodded and sucked in a shallow breath.

“One, two, three, four. Now out.” His voice was calm and so tender it broke through some of my haze.

“Now one more time. Breathe in to a count of four. Ready?”

I pursed my lips and breathed in, filling my lungs as he counted for me.

“Hold it. Keep holding it. Don’t let it out until I tell you.”

I obeyed, my mind clearing a bit more.

“Now out to a count of six.”

He coached me through it, and when he finished counting, the feeling had come back to my hands.

“You okay?”

“Yeah.”

“Now get under your covers. You’ll feel better once you’re warm.”

Still not completely with it, I managed to slide under my comforter.

“Are you under them?”

“Yeah.”

“How do you feel?”

“Floaty and toasty.” I hummed softly as warmth enveloped me.

“Good. Now focus on my voice. I’m there with you. That warmth is me holding you.”

“I’m not a cuddler,” I mumbled.

“Neither am I, but I make an exception for aftercare.”

“Aftercare?” I closed my eyes and snuggled into my pillow.

“It’s something I do when a scene gets intense. Do you know what subspace is?”

“Kinda.” His voice was nice. I liked listening to him.

“After, there’s a crash called subdrop. It’s like an adrenaline crash. It’s temporary, but it can be disorienting.”

“Are you a Dom?”

“Not really. I’m bossy, and I like being in charge, but I’m not into everything a Dom does.”

“What kinds of things are you into?”

My head was clear, and my body felt like my own again. Last time we’d sexted, the urge to get as far away from him and his magic voice had been overwhelming, but today was different. I didn’t want to be alone, not after sharing something so personal, something no one else in the world knew. Hopefully he’d keep talking with me for a little bit.

“That’s a complicated question.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m into a lot of things on a theoretical level. I’ll fantasize about them, but I don’t think I’d do them in real life. Then there are things I enjoy and things I want to do.”

“What do you like doing?”

“I like edging my partners. Restraining them is always fun. Spanking and choking, but not flogging or whipping or anything like that. Sensory play, CNC—”

“CNC?”

“Consensual non-consent.”

I swallowed. “Like my fantasy?”

“Yes. I’d never assault someone. Even the thought turns my stomach. But if they’re into it and we set boundaries and limits, role-playing it would be fun.”

“Would be? You haven’t done it?”

“No. Never found a partner I wanted to do that kind of power exchange with.”

“Do you think it’s sick that I fantasize about being forced?”

I hated how small and vulnerable I sounded. One of my many coping skills was masking my emotions. People only saw what I wanted them to, but Wrong had busted through that wall during our first conversation. Maybe it was because I didn’t know him. The thought of telling this kind of stuff to someone I had to look in the eye was enough to send a rush of anxiety through me. But Wrong was just a guy on the line. Faceless and safe.

“No. It’s one of the most common kinks out there. Both men and women enjoy it.”

“Do you?”

“In the other role, yes. But being the *victim*”—he added an inflection to

the word that sounded like the verbal equivalent of air quotes—“does nothing for me.”

“Are you a top?”

“Yes.”

“Have you ever tried bottoming?”

“No. I don’t mind a little ass play for fun, but sticking things in my butt isn’t my thing.”

“Oh.”

“What about you? Are you vers?”

“I don’t think so.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve only ever bottomed.”

“Do you like the idea of topping?”

“No,” I said softly, pulling my comforter up so it was under my chin. “I don’t like being in charge.”

“There’s nothing wrong with having preferences.”

“I guess not.”

The conversation stilled. I was about to tell him I needed to go when he spoke up. “What kinds of things are you into? What would you like doing with someone?”

“CNC is right up there. And not just like a stranger forcing me. But fighting. I like pretending I don’t want it.”

“And do you want your partner to let you fight or fight back?”

“Fight back.”

“What else?”

“I like being taken care of. I’m not sure how to say it. But I guess I like it when they make me like it.”

“Like forced pleasure? You want them to make you feel good while you let yourself believe you don’t want it?”

“Yeah.” I couldn’t believe I was telling him this, but the words just tumbled out of me. “It’s the fantasy I like. I want them to be in charge. To make the decisions.”

“Do you like them to force you to pleasure them, or do you prefer the focus be on you?”

“On me.” I closed my eyes. I was such a selfish asshole for admitting this. “I’ve done JOIs with girls, and it’s always the same. They tell me what they’d want me to do to them. It’s always about them and their pleasure. I

don't hate that, but it's not what I truly want."

"Would you want a girl to do this kind of thing to you? Edge you, maybe fuck you while you're helpless?"

"Yeah." I drew in a shaky breath. "I've always wanted to be pegged."

"That would be hot. Watching a guy getting pegged."

"You're into watching?"

"I am. Sharing, watching, swapping, I'm open to all that."

"You've never done it?"

"Kind of. I have friends I've joined as a third, and they like it when I watch them. I know they'd be open to swapping or sharing, but I'd only do that with someone I had some sort of agreement with. That's not something you can do with strangers."

"I kinda had an experience like that."

"Yeah? Tell me about it."

"My friend, the one banging our roommate. He's pretty open-minded. I brought him to a few parties, hoping he'd want to share a girl with me, but he's more of a watch-and-enjoy type."

"Have you ever done a threesome?"

"No. I've wanted to, but like you said, that's not something you can do with strangers. And the few girls I've had a casual thing with would have slapped me if I'd asked to bring another girl into bed with us."

"What about a guy? A lot of chicks like the idea of being with two guys or just watching."

"I would have." I bit my lip. "I asked one girl, and she was into it. But it never happened."

"Cold feet?"

"No. She dumped me for some asshole who could give her what she needed. Her words."

I couldn't keep the bitterness out of my voice as Elissa's words echoed in my head.

"Then she wasn't the right girl for you."

Wrong's simple, calm answer broke through my spiraling thoughts before they could get ugly.

"What do you mean?"

"It sucks that she was such a bitch to you, but she did you a favor. Not being sexually compatible with someone isn't a reflection on you or your abilities. It just means you weren't a match. Attraction doesn't automatically

mean compatibility. We're pretty damn compatible. And there's a fuck ton of people like me out there."

"I never thought of it like that."

"Did you like her?"

"A lot."

"That sucks. And it'll take time to get over the hurt. But don't beat yourself up over something you have no control over."

"You're scarily insightful. You know that, right?"

He chuckled, the sound low and deep. Warmth rippled through me. "So I've been told."

My phone vibrated on my night table. I wanted to ignore it and keep chatting with Wrong, but I picked it up instead.

Beck: be home in 20

"I have to go. I'm meeting with a friend to study."

"Happy studying. And feel free to watch this later when you're relieving some tension."

What did he mean? The line went dead. Seconds later, a chime came over my headphones. He'd sent me something? I grabbed my burner phone off the bed, sat up, and checked our message thread.

A video was loading. Trying not to read into the thrill of excitement that shot through me, I waited for it to finish buffering. As soon as it loaded, I clicked on it.

A mouth-watering dick filled the screen. He'd taken it while standing, his camera angled down. He was fully clothed. Black dress pants and a light purple dress shirt covered his body, except for his cock, which was hard and jutting out.

I watched, transfixed, as he stroked it with a big hand. The video was only ten seconds long, which was about as big a file as the app could handle. Just before the video cut out, he pulled his cock down so it pressed against his leg. He let it go, and it bounced up, hard and proud and so damn sexy.

I wanted it. I wanted to suck it. Wanted it pushed down my throat.

But more than that, I wanted it inside me.

The video ended, and the rush of memories that hit nearly stole my breath. I closed my eyes and waited for the moment to pass. Fantasizing about it was one thing. Actually doing it? No. Never again.

The memory of Wrong's soft voice as he'd helped me through my fog after I'd come broke through the fear squeezing my chest. Maybe Wrong was

different.

Shaking my head, I pushed the comforter off myself and grimaced as I looked down at my cum-covered chest. I needed to take a shower before Beck got home. Pushing all thoughts of Wrong out of my head, I stood and grabbed a towel and my shower kit.

Now wasn't the time to get all introspective and reflect on my traumas. I needed to shove them to the back of my mind and forget about them. Maybe this time it would actually work.

KAI

I pushed the door open to the Travis Room of the library at exactly six thirty. Considering the late hour and the fact that I'd chosen a room in the archives, the section was empty except for a lone figure sitting at one of the tables.

Alex.

He glanced up from his phone, his eyes tight and his expression closed off. Guess he was still in a mood. Rather than let his obvious dislike bother me, I sauntered over to the table and slid into the seat across from him.

"You're late."

"I'm not late. I'm exactly on time."

He put his phone on the table next to him and crossed his arms.

"So, thoughts on the presentation topic?" I asked after a few beats of silence.

"Censorship is sometimes necessary."

"Interesting stance. Care to clarify?"

He rolled his eyes. "There are times when censorship should be allowed."

"You pretty much restated your original point. Let's try this another way. Book banning. Yes or no?"

"No."

"Explain your stance, and I'll explain mine."

"Books aren't something schools and governments or even businesses should be able to censor. Knowledge creates a more empathetic and educated society, which is something we should be striving for, not working against."

"Playing devil's advocate here, but what about certain content?"

“I don’t believe that any content should be banned as long as it’s not illegal. People should have the right to decide what they want to read.”

“Okay, but what about the slippery slope of what’s considered illegal? Erotic content, for example?”

“Unless it’s featuring minors, then all erotic content should be allowed. I agree with putting age restrictions on things. I don’t believe that, say, a twelve-year-old should be able to access hardcore erotica. But everyone has the right to publish and read what they want.” He cocked his head. “You don’t agree?”

“I fully agree.” I crossed my arms, matching his posture. “What about sex education and LGBT content in schools?”

This was my litmus test to see what kind of person he was. People didn’t realize how telling this question was. It exposed not only their views on sex-positive education but also on religion and queer rights.

“As long as it’s geared toward the appropriate age group, then it should be allowed. I don’t think that middle schoolers need graphic depictions of sex to be taught about it, but we should be arming kids with knowledge about their bodies and relationships, not shielding them from it.”

“What about LGBT content?”

“I don’t think it should even have its own classification. Sex education is sex education. All types of sexual relationships should be taught. What, you don’t agree?” he asked, his voice taunting.

“No. I agree with you.”

“What about religious content?” he asked.

“All religious texts should be allowed. You can’t censor one and not the others. I don’t agree with a lot that’s taught in most religions, but it’s not my or anyone else’s place to decide what others can or can’t learn about.”

“Huh.” He pursed his lips.

“What?”

“Nothing.” He uncrossed his arms. I did the same.

One of my go-to techniques for breaking down people’s walls was mirroring them. Alex was projecting hostility, but by reflecting his movements back at him, it subconsciously created a connection between us and made him see me as less of a threat. And who said psych was a useless degree?

“What about violent content?” he asked.

“Written or visual.”

“Both.”

“Written should be allowed. Again, with age restrictions. Ten-year-olds shouldn’t be reading about torture, but an adult should be able to choose what they read about. Visual is different. Comics or drawn depictions should be open to everyone, based on age appropriateness. Pictures and videos are a gray area for me.”

“What do you mean?”

“Media that show graphic depictions of torture and murder are one thing because it’s fake. Actual violence, like pictures of murders or victims, should be restricted.”

“Why?”

“One, for privacy. The victim’s families deserve to have control over what is or isn’t shown.”

“What about police departments?”

“That’s a tough one. What do you think about it?” I asked.

“When it comes to court cases, then I believe photos and videos should be shown without any form of censorship. With media releases or the news, then yes. I believe that the privacy of the victim and the sensibilities of the public should be respected.”

“Sensibilities of the public? Do you mean like people having the right to choose whether they see something graphic?”

He nodded. “Violence is a huge trigger for some people, and others don’t want to see that on the news or plastered all over their social media. In cases like that, then I believe censorship is warranted and should even be mandatory.”

“What about written violence?” I asked.

He shook his head. “Your turn.”

“I didn’t realize this was a debate, but okay.” I gave him a little half smirk, and he rolled his eyes. “In fiction, it should only be restricted based on age.”

“What about nonfiction?”

“History, true crime, those should have zero restrictions.”

“What about books that are literally how-to manuals to commit crimes?”

“Like *The Anarchist’s Cookbook*?”

He nodded.

“Outside of age restrictions, I agree that they’re protected under the First Amendment.”

“What about manifestos?”

“That’s a tricky one.” I leaned back in my seat.

A moment later, Alex did the same. Now he was mirroring me. Interesting.

“How so?”

“Manifestos, especially by people who’ve committed crimes, aren’t books. Publishing something on the internet for people to read isn’t the same as a physical book.”

“What about e-books? They’re not physical.”

“No, but they’re books. They need to be downloaded and are formatted to be a replica of a physical book. A manifesto on a blog isn’t a book. You don’t agree?”

“I’m not sure.” He bit his lip.

Now that Alex was too busy taking part in our discussion to be mad at me, I was struck by how handsome he was. I’d thought his eyes were plain brown, but they were actually a mix of several shades and had tiny gold flecks in them. His lips were full, and his sharp jawline and high cheekbones made his bone structure an incredible combination of delicate and strong. With his carefully styled hair that framed his face and the black Henley that clung to his toned frame, he was gorgeous.

“I do agree blogs aren’t books. But manifestos aren’t just something whack jobs write. It’s a blanket term for the written public declaration of someone’s or an organization’s intentions, motives, or views.”

“Did you swallow a dictionary?” I quirked my eyebrow. “Not many people know the definition of manifesto off the top of their head like that.”

“Some of us actually prepare for our assignments.” He gave me a sugary sweet smile.

I chuckled. Our entire meeting had been a discussion. Our views were matched, which would make this presentation easier, but we were putting the cart before the horse.

“We should probably talk about the actual presentation and not just the topics we’re going to cover.”

Alex’s smile faded, the coldness returning to his eyes. “Yeah. Sure.”

“I was thinking—”

“So we’re going to do it your way, huh?”

“Not what I was going to say.” I smirked, knowing it would piss him off.

He glowered at me. His anger was so predictable. “I was going to say I

was thinking we should decide on what kind of presentation we want to do.”

“I don’t understand what you mean. We go up, we present... what’s there to decide?”

“Are we doing a visual presentation?”

“You mean like PowerPoint? Obviously.”

“So you decided?”

“What other types are there?” He cocked his head to the side, confusion shining in his eyes.

“Verbal and written.”

“You want us to stand in front of a class full of bored students for twenty minutes and talk with no visual aids?” He gave me a look that clearly said he thought I was crazy.

“It’s an option.”

“And I don’t think Professor Meyers is going to be all that impressed with us handing out copies for the class to read instead of, you know, actually *presenting* the material.”

His attitude was hilarious. He switched between pissed off and petulant so seamlessly. I wanted to keep poking the bear and see how far I could push him.

“Again, it’s an option.”

“A stupid one,” he mumbled. “We’re doing the 10-20-30 rule.”

“We are?” I raised one eyebrow.

“It’s the accepted format.”

“Accepted where?”

He blinked at me. “Accepted everywhere.”

“What’s your major?” I asked.

Normally, that was something I asked people right away, but I’d forgotten while he’d been busy being mad at me for some unknown reason.

“Business.”

“Ah. That explains it.”

“Explains what?” He glowered at me.

“Why you think that’s the way to go.”

“And what’s your major?”

“Psychology.”

He snorted. “Like that’s going to be useful in the real world.”

“It will be when I get my doctorate.”

His cocky smile dropped. “*You* want to get your *doctorate*?”

“That’s a lot of inflection in one sentence.” I smirked. “What? You thought I was just another pretty face?”

“You’re not pretty,” he grumbled.

“You’re right. I’m not pretty. I’m hot.”

“And so humble.” He rolled his eyes. “I’m surprised you can fit through doorways with a head that big.”

“It’s not bragging if it’s the truth.” I stretched my arms over my head. His eyes followed the move. Interesting. Just for shits and giggles, I flexed, knowing my long-sleeved tee would cling to my muscles, and put my hands behind my head in a classic casual pose. He tore his gaze from my arms.

“Someone has a high opinion of himself.”

“You don’t think you’re hot?” I asked.

He opened his mouth, then closed it.

“Confidence isn’t arrogance when it’s warranted.” I dropped my arms. “Nothing wrong with liking what you see in the mirror. You go to the gym, right?”

He nodded curtly.

“So why not be proud of the work you put into your body? It’s true you can’t control your looks, but you can take the time to dress well, do your hair, groom yourself. We do those things to enhance our looks. Might as well own it.”

“But aren’t we supposed to be humble and not use our pretty privilege? I bet all you have to do is flash a little smirk and flex your muscles, and you get everything you want.”

“Awww, you think I’m pretty?”

“I didn’t say that. You did,” he said.

“No. I said I thought I was hot. You said that you did too.”

“I didn’t.” He glared at me. “Stop putting words in my mouth.”

“But you agree that you’re pretty.”

“I didn’t say that either.”

“No, you didn’t. So you think you’re not attractive?”

“Ugh.” He sat up, his eyes blazing. “Why are we talking about this? We’re supposed to be figuring out this stupid presentation.”

I chuckled. He was like a cartoon with steam coming out of his ears.

He was so easy to rile up.

“Fine. But we’re not doing the 10-20-30 method.”

“Yes, we are. It’s proven to be the most effective.”

“I think I’m a little more qualified to say what’s effective when it comes to communicating.”

“Oh really? So taking a bunch of psych courses suddenly makes you an expert?” He crossed his arms.

“No, but it does make me more of an expert than your business courses.”

He narrowed his eyes, and splotches of red appeared on his neck. “Are you actually trying to say that your degree is harder than mine?”

“Not at all.” I knew my calmness was setting him off even more. You couldn’t fight with someone who didn’t fight back. He obviously wanted to get a rise out of me, but I wasn’t going to give in.

“All I’m saying is that I’ve studied human behavior on a deeper level than you. I have science to back up my ideas.”

“Fine.” He bit out. “What do you suggest, then, Mr. Expert?”

“I agree that PowerPoint is the way to go, but we need to make our presentation stand out. Everyone is going to be doing the same thing, so we should try and be a little creative with this.”

“Why? Isn’t it better to do what’s expected? Safer?”

“Safer?”

“Yeah. Unlike you, I actually need to keep my grades up to get into grad school. I can’t just go rogue on a presentation for funsies.”

“Did you forget I *just* said I’m going for my PhD? Last time I checked, I needed grad school for that.” I grinned to keep the sting out of my words.

He rolled his eyes and heaved a huge, frustrated-sounding sigh. “You’re doing this on purpose.”

“Doing what?”

“Being difficult!”

“I’m not being difficult. I’m simply stating a different point of view.”

He grabbed his phone off the table and hit the power button to wake up the screen. “It’s been almost an hour, and we’ve accomplished nothing. I don’t know about you, but I have shit I need to do.”

“Same.” I cocked my head to the side.

“Good.” He stood so quickly his chair fell to the floor.

Grumbling, he righted the chair and stalked away from the table.

“Wait.”

“What?” He whirled around.

“We need to write up the minutes of our meeting.”

“Fuck.” He raked a hand through his perfect hair, messing it. “Fine. I’ll

do it when I get home.”

“We can alternate. I’ll do the next one.”

He gave me a clipped nod. “Anything else?”

“Yeah.”

He narrowed his eyes.

“Have a good night.” I smiled serenely at him.

“Ugh.”

He spun on his heel and stomped toward the exit. Chuckling, I waited until the door closed behind him, then stood. I had no idea what Alex’s problem was, but I was used to dealing with ornery people. I’d break him down eventually. And I’d have a hell of a good time doing it.

KAI

“Ten minutes!” Corey stuck his head into the dressing area. “You’re up next, Kai. Better get ready.”

I looked up from where I was rubbing body oil on Gray, one of my coworkers at the club.

“Sure thing,” I called back when Corey gave me a pointed look.

“Need me to do you next?” Gray asked as I slid my fingertips under the waistband of his tiny underwear to make sure he was fully covered with oil.

“If you could.”

“It’s crazy out there.” Zane, one of the other dancers, said as he came into the back room. “Two bachelorette parties and what looks like a twenty-first birthday one too.”

“Excellent.” Gray rubbed his hands together. “As long as it’s better than last night, yeah?”

I nodded grimly as I wiped off my hands. Friday nights were usually lucrative, but last night had been an anomaly. We’d been at half capacity for most of the night. The tips had been abysmal, and the crowd had been more subdued than usual.

That was the worst part of my job. Putting on a show was easier when the audience was into it. Feeding off their energy and tailoring my performance to what the crowd wanted was one of the reasons I was good at what I did.

Being a male stripper wasn’t as easy as it could be for our female counterparts. We were contractors, which meant we worked for tips. If people weren’t in generous moods, we didn’t get paid.

For the past three years, I’d worked as a bartender at a club downtown.

The hours were shit, and while the tips had been good, working four nights a week had made school nearly impossible to keep up with.

Now that I was a senior, I needed more flexibility in my schedule. On a whim, I'd checked out Crimson, an all-male strip club in the city. I'd taken a weekend off work at the club and had tried my hand at dancing. I'd made more in one night than I usually made in an entire week at the club after tip splitting.

Cutting my hours from four nights to two had done wonders for my sanity and sleep schedule, but some weekends were leaner than others. Working for tips over having set hours and a guaranteed wage was the reason most of my coworkers had side gigs. No one was getting rich from shaking their junk.

I had rent due next week, and my fridge was bare except for a carton of milk, some butter, and a jar of mayo. I needed tonight to make up for the shortfall from yesterday. Otherwise, I'd be surviving off cheese sandwiches next week.

"Has anyone seen my jock?" Liam emerged from the props closet in nothing but a towel.

"Which one?" Enzo looked up from where he was rooting through the box with different glitters and oils.

"The glow-in-the-dark one."

"I think I saw it in the laundry bag." I grabbed an undershirt out of another bin and tore the package open.

The club bought this particular brand in bulk because they were cheap and easy to rip. Nothing got the ladies screaming louder than literally tearing your clothes off for them.

Liam went back into the closet.

"What routine are you doing first?" Gray asked me.

I stripped down to my briefs. "Is Javier on the pole?" I asked River, who was leaning against the wall a few feet away. The backroom at Crimson was a tight fit when all hands were on deck.

He nodded. "And they're making it rain for him."

Javier was the only one of us who had any formal training. Most of the other guys had taken some sort of dance lessons, but Javi was a trained aerialist and contemporary dancer. His routines were not only beautiful but also breathtaking in their difficulty. Following him was a tough sell, so I'd have to break out the big guns.

"Looks like my doctor routine." I held out my arms so Gray could rub

body oil on me.

“Nice. That’s always a crowd-pleaser.”

I winked at him. Gray was the only guy at the club who knew me outside of work. We’d grown up together and had been friends since we were little. We’d never been especially close, but he’d hinted more than once that he’d be up for a little fun.

Everyone at the club knew I wasn’t straight, but I made it a rule that I didn’t mess around with my coworkers. Work was where I went to make money, and complicating things with a fling wasn’t worth the hassle.

I held still as Gray coated me in the thick oil with tiny flecks of gold glitter in it. The sheen reflected nicely off the lights, and they highlighted my tats, which were as much of a crowd-pleaser as my dancing. Nothing got the ladies hotter than watching a buttoned-up guy tearing off his clothes and revealing a body full of ink.

Gray slipped his fingertips under the legs of my briefs, and I bit back a laugh. My upper thighs were a ticklish spot. Gray took more time than necessary to work the oil around my briefs, but I let him have his fun.

One of the bonuses of working at an all-male strip club was the eye candy. All my coworkers were hot, and the view was a nice perk.

“All set.” He grabbed a towel and cleaned his hands.

Ignoring the sensation of wet oil on my skin, I slipped on the undershirt, then pulled on a light-blue button-up and a pair of black dress pants. A belt, lab coat, and stethoscope completed my outfit.

“Two minutes!” Corey poked his head into the back room, and the roar from the crowd filled the air.

“Let’s hope they stay thirsty.” Gray stepped into a pair of firemen’s pants. He was up after me, and the sexy fireman was his signature dance.

“Hey, Kai?”

Nick, one of the newest dancers, stood a few feet behind me. The kid just turned twenty-one and had that innocent, barely legal look going on.

“What’s up?”

“Do you want to do our chair routine with me later tonight? Stone was supposed to be my partner, but he’s a no-show.”

“Again? I don’t understand why Corey and Ray keep him on the roster.”

“He’s a crowd-pleaser.” Liam came out of the prop closet in a glow-in-the-dark jockstrap and nothing else.

“And he brings in the numbers when he does bother to show up.”

Bitterness tinged Gray's voice.

They weren't wrong. Stone was the only dancer who had a following outside of the club. As a porn model, he had a legion of fans who gladly opened their wallets on nights when he was the featured dancer. On regular nights, it was hit or miss if he showed up for his shift.

"Yeah, sure thing," I said to Nick.

He beamed. "Thanks!"

I didn't bother telling him he was doing me a favor. Nick was my polar opposite with his blond hair, lithe body, and untouched skin. Putting us on stage together only highlighted our differences, and we'd developed a devil/angel-type routine that involved a lot of grinding and me "seducing" him as he played hard to get. The club didn't allow full nudity or overt sexual touching, but the crowd loved it when we got a little handsy with each other.

The door to the backstage flew open, screams and cheers reverberating off the walls, and Javi rushed into the room, a huge grin on his flushed face. He banged the door closed, muffling the noise.

"Good night?" I asked.

"Fuck yeah." He ran a hand through his black hair. "I easily made a couple of C-notes."

"Fuckin A." I grinned. "Hope you saved some tips for the rest of us."

He smirked. "No promises."

The little light next to the door flicked on, which was my cue to get my ass ready. I drew in a deep breath to center myself. The light went off, and I stepped through the door as the opening bars to my solo song filled the club. It was go time.



"YOU LOOK LIKE DEATH."

Ash Summers, another student and resident of my apartment building, was leaning against the wall next to the front door.

"Thanks." I locked my jaw to cover a yawn. "Can you believe I ran out of coffee?"

"On a Monday morning?" Ash grimaced, his dark hair falling over one silver eye. "Rookie mistake."

"Yeah. Not my brightest moment." I dug my car keys out of my pocket.

“Where’s your better half?”

“He forgot his jacket.” Ash’s usual smirk melted into that soft smile he always wore when he talked about his boyfriend.

“I’m here! Oh, hey, Kai.”

Jules, Ash’s boyfriend, hurried over to Ash, and snuggled into his side.

“Hey.” I upnodded him.

“You okay?” Ash hugged Jules against his chest.

“Yup. Just wanted some cuddles before school.”

Ash chuckled and dropped a kiss on Jules’s blond head.

Feeling a bit uncomfortable, I shifted from foot to foot. Should I go or wait to say goodbye?

Ash and Jules were one of those couples who couldn’t seem to keep their hands off each other. It was cute, but I didn’t get the appeal of cuddling and felt like a third wheel when they got lost in their own little world.

I didn’t know Jules well, but Ash and I had shared a few classes over the years. We’d discovered we lived in the same building about a month ago when I’d dropped off a package for him that had been mistakenly left in front of my door.

Jules tilted his head, his eyes closed, and his cherubic face flushed. Ash eagerly covered Jules’s lips with his. Their kiss turned deep and messy and way too intimate for seven fifteen on a Monday morning.

“I’ll see you guys later,” I said loudly. It would be a while before they pried themselves away from each other.

Ash broke the kiss and gave Jules a stern look when the smaller man whined in protest.

“See ya. You hitting that party Christian is hosting?” Ash asked me.

“Can’t. Gotta work.”

“Where do you work again?” Jules pressed his cheek into Ash’s shoulder.

“In the city.”

I liked them, but I didn’t share my occupation with people. The last thing I needed was for it to get around school that I danced for a living.

Crimson catered to a female crowd, and one of my biggest fears was someone from school recognizing me. I wasn’t ashamed of my job, but it was infinitely easier to dance in front of a crowd of strangers than if people I knew were in the audience. And I didn’t need any videos of me on the internet, especially if they were connected to my real name.

“I’ll catch you guys later.”

I gave them a little wave. They both smiled at me, still wrapped up in each other. Chuckling, I walked to my car, twirling my keys in my hand.

For as long as I'd known him, Ash had been a broken record of complaints about his stepbrother and how much he despised him. The sheer depth of his hatred and rage had been staggering.

Now he and his stepbrother were the most coupley couple I'd ever known. I was ravenously curious about how that evolution had happened but wasn't exactly shocked.

Love and hate were two sides of the same coin, both fueled by passion. Most people knew that love could easily shift to hate, but the reverse was also true. Ash and Jules were living examples of it.

My thoughts drifted to Alex. We hadn't talked since our meeting in the library. He hadn't texted, and neither had I. We were in a strange sort of stalemate. I still hadn't figured out why he hated me. I wasn't an angel, so his dislike could be warranted.

I slid into my car and tossed my bag on the seat next to me. I needed caffeine.

The drive to school usually took twenty minutes. Rather than stop at one of the coffee shops along the way, I made a quick detour to a gas station on the outskirts of town. It was a local secret that they had the best coffee, and I knew everyone who worked there. Hell, I knew everyone who worked at most places around here.

"Kai." Nate grinned as I walked into the small storefront.

"Hey." I waved and made a beeline for the coffee bar at the back.

I filled a large cup with their dark brew, added some sweetener and milk, and strolled back to the counter.

"We just got a delivery from Welsh's," Nate said.

"Why must you do this to me?" I put my coffee down on the counter and pulled out my wallet. "I'll take my usual."

Grinning, he grabbed a bakery bag out of a large white box and placed it on the counter next to my coffee. The scent of sugar, cinnamon, and fresh bread tickled my nose. Welsh's Bakery made the most incredible pastries, and their cinnamon rolls were to die for. They were totally worth the extra time I'd have to spend working it off. Carbs were my weakness, but my abs and my livelihood weren't fans.

"How've you been?" I asked.

"Good. Still slugging away with all those rich kids?" He rang up my

order.

I handed him a ten. “Yup.”

Town-gown relations had always been strained but were worse now than ever before. The school brought in a lot of revenue for the town, and our population more than doubled during the school year. Unfortunately, that extra revenue was concentrated in the areas directly around the college, and not much of it trickled down to the rest of the locals. The people who worked at and around the college lived in the surrounding neighborhoods, which would be considered middle class or higher.

The school had expanded a lot in the hundred or so years since it was established. Student housing had taken over the last of the “nice” neighborhoods, and the only ones who benefited were the landlords who’d snapped up the properties when the locals were forced out thanks to gentrification.

Once upon a time, the area had been a hub for factory workers, miners, and loggers, but as manufacturing had moved overseas and the surrounding industry had shut down, the town had quickly become a story of two classes: the rich, who’d managed to keep hold of their wealth, and the rest of us, who were stuck fighting for scraps.

The entire west side catered to students and tourism, which was also closely connected to the college. The downtown was lively and had a decent art scene. But the abandoned buildings and ever-present “for lease” signs on the east side were the world I’d grown up in.

Not all the kids who went to Rutherford were rich, but they lived on the rich side, so pretty much everyone I knew hated them on principle.

“Are you going to Ted and Macy’s engagement party?” He handed me my change.

“Are you?” I gave him an appraising look.

Nate and Macy had dated all through high school and right up until a year ago. Then she’d dumped him for Ted after publicly cheating on him.

“Nope.” He grinned sardonically. “Not unless I want to catch a murder charge.”

“I’m skipping it too.”

I hadn’t been invited, but even if I had, I wouldn’t go. The entire engagement had “drama” written all over it, and I was allergic to drama. My only focus for the next year was studying my ass off so I could finish with a high GPA and get into a decent grad school.

One bonus of being local was that my tuition was free. I'd applied for a scholarship for locals after working for a few years, and no one had been more surprised than me when a fat acceptance envelope had been delivered to my apartment that spring. The scholarship covered my tuition but nothing else, which was why I was still working at the club.

I took the change and stuffed a few dollars into the tip jar. Saying a quick goodbye, I grabbed my coffee and hurried out to my car. The last thing I needed was to be late for class again.

ALEX

“Morning, sunshine.”

I gritted my teeth and focused on my phone. Kai settled in the seat next to me, his big body taking up way too much room. Warmth seeped into my arm where his shoulder brushed mine.

“Why are you here?” I blindly scrolled through Insta.

“Well, this is where class is held, isn’t it?”

“I mean here. Next to me. Don’t you usually sit in the back with the rest of the slackers?”

“Awww, you noticed where I sit?” he cooed. “And here I thought you didn’t like me.”

“I don’t,” I bit out. “I just notice shit. Don’t think you’re special or anything.”

“Figured I’d sit next to my PIC.”

“P.I.C?” I asked before I could stop myself.

“Partner in crime.”

I gripped my phone tight. The scent of coffee and cinnamon tickled my nose. I glanced over as he pulled a huge cinnamon roll out of a bakery bag.

My stomach clenched. I’d downed two cups of coffee already but hadn’t eaten anything. The cinnamon roll looked amazing with lots of thick icing.

“Where’s that from?” I asked despite myself.

“A local secret.” He grinned.

The pastry looked nice and fluffy inside. My mouth watered, and a pang of hunger hit me.

“You’re a local?” I made the mistake of looking at him. He sucked on his

finger, presumably to clean off some icing.

He nodded, his eyes smiling as he slowly pulled his finger out of his mouth.

“Born and raised.” He ripped off another piece of the roll. “What? No scathing remarks about being a townie?”

I tore my eyes from his mouth and looked back at my phone screen, which had gone dark. I shrugged. Hopefully he hadn’t noticed I’d been staring at his lips.

“Nothing wrong with being from here. You can’t control where you were born.”

Kai toyed with the paper sleeve on his takeaway cup. I’d always had a weakness for hands, and Kai’s long fingers, neatly trimmed nails, and the sexy-as-fuck vein on the back of his hand were mesmerizing. Blood rushed south.

Shifting as subtly as I could, I shoved my phone into my hoodie and went to grab my water bottle from the pocket on the side of my bag. My hand closed over nothing.

“Shit.” I looked down at my bag.

I’d forgotten my water. Fucking hell. For years, I’d tried to figure out ways to stop forgetting stupid, simple stuff. I had a whole system for assignments, tests, and homework, but for the life of me, I couldn’t stop forgetting shit like my water or sunglasses when I left the house.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” I slumped in my seat.

“Have you thought about what we talked about?”

“Class hasn’t even started yet. Someone’s eager,” I mumbled.

“We could just sit in silence for the next six minutes, or we can talk about our assignment like big boys.”

“What did you have in mind, exactly?” I looked at him.

Big mistake. His dark eyes gleamed with what looked like amusement, and that stupid half smirk tilted one side of his perfect mouth.

“Nothing crazy.” He took another bite of his cinnamon roll and chewed.

My eyes were glued to his lips as he sucked on his fingers. Biting back a moan, I tore my gaze from him and stared straight ahead. My dick was hard because of course it was. Thank fuck I’d put on skinny jeans this morning so he wouldn’t be able to tell.

“We should incorporate different elements for different learners. Written

slides but also some video clips and some audio ones as well. Have you heard of the law of three?”

I shook my head.

“Humans recognize and remember groups of three better than any other number. If we want to make our presentation memorable, we should incorporate that. Also, people tend to remember the first and last points the best, so we need to make sure we start strong and end strong.”

“Anything else?”

I would never admit it, but what he was saying made sense.

“Just basic stuff. Simple graphs with bold colors. And any points we want to emphasize should be visually highlighted to create an element of surprise. People pay attention when they’re curious, so asking questions and answering them is more effective than just stating point after point.”

I’d always hated the 10-20-30 rules. Using a maximum of ten slides in a twenty-minute presentation and sticking to a uniform thirty-point font was boring. I tended to zone out somewhere in the middle of those presentations. Kai’s idea would certainly keep me interested more than my suggested method.

“Fine. We’ll do it your way.”

“Now, was that so hard?”

“Was what so hard?”

I leveled a glare at him, but the fucker stared right back at me, his dark eyes smoldering as he slowly sucked his thumb into his mouth. The inside of my mouth tingled. He gently pulled his thumb free and used the tip of his tongue to tease it. Fuck.

My dick ached as it was squished in my jeans. I wanted to rearrange myself to get some of the pressure off it, but I’d be damned if I let Kai see how much he affected me.

“It’s definitely *hard*.” He dropped his eyes to my crotch.

Resisting the urge to cover my hard-on, I nodded at his noticeable bulge. “I could say the same for you,” I said sweetly.

“What can I say? This is a really good cinnamon roll.”

“Sure.” I scoffed. “If you get that excited over breakfast, then maybe you should be *in* therapy and not studying to be the therapist.”

“Here.” He held out a small piece to me. “See what I mean.”

The challenge in his eyes was clear. Before I could think twice, I grabbed the piece of pastry and shoved it into my mouth. Damn, it was amazing. I

chewed, trying and failing to keep my expression blank.

Kai smirked. “Good, isn’t it?” He licked his fingers, twining his tongue around the digits.

A vision of that tongue circling my cock popped into my head, and I whimpered. Fucking *whimpered*.

Kai gave me a lazy grin and turned his attention to the front of the room as Professor Meyers stepped up to his podium.

Fuck. Kai Alexander was dangerous. No other guy had ever had this kind of effect on me. Not even... Nope. Not going there.

Shoving those thoughts and memories aside, I focused on Professor Meyers. He called out pairs to line up to see our TA so he could check our notes and meeting minutes.

“Alexander and Ellis.”

I groaned. Of course he called our names. After getting on his bad side last class, I’d expected as much, but being ignored would have been nice. Kai and I had only had one meeting, and the presentation was due in three weeks.

Sighing, I opened my bag and reached in to grab the folio with the typed-up copy of our minutes.

“Oh shit.” Panic hit me so fast it took my breath away. I’d forgotten the folio. I frantically checked my bag, even though I knew it wouldn’t be in there.

“What?” Kai asked.

“I forgot the minutes.” I clenched my hands. “Fucking *idiot*,” I muttered, closing my eyes and waiting for Kai to say something scathing and completely warranted. That little voice in the back of my head taunted me.

Stupid. Moron. Lazy.

“Here.”

“Huh?” Some of the haze cleared at his calm tone, and I looked up.

“I wrote them up too.” He motioned to the folder in his hand. “We didn’t take notes, and I’m pretty sure I missed a bunch of points. I figured between the two of us we’d be able to cobble together a full recap of the meeting.”

“You’re not mad?” I blinked at him. Why wasn’t he angry?

“Shit happens.” He downed the rest of his coffee, then stood. “Let’s get in line. I don’t want to stay after class.”

I scrambled to my feet and followed him down the aisle, where we joined the line.



THE REST of my day passed about as well as my first class.

I hadn't forgotten any more assignments or papers, but I'd been a mess all day. I couldn't focus on my lectures, and I'd almost been late to my last class because I'd gotten distracted looking up shit online.

I couldn't even remember what had started my spiral, just that I'd been reading an article about axolotls when my warning alarm had gone off. I'd had to book it across campus and had managed to skitter into the room just before the professor closed the door.

"Hey."

Beck's voice startled me so much I nearly tripped.

"What?"

Beck sat on the loveseat, a textbook in his hands. "You okay?" He cocked his head to the side. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

A week ago, I would have paid money to have Beck ask me what was wrong and want to have a conversation, but right now, I was so out of sorts I didn't know *why* I was all fucked up.

"Alex." He closed the textbook. "You know you can talk to me about anything."

I bit back my retort. That might be true, but it was only on his schedule. I understood where Beck was coming from. He was in a new relationship and was in love for the first time. Of course Finn would be his priority now. But understanding it and accepting it were two different things.

I'd always been... possessive of people I cared about. My attention could be stifling, and most of my friendships ended when the other person got sick of dealing with my shit.

Beck was the one person who never seemed to care how intense I got. He was so laid-back and go-with-the-flow that he'd happily tagged along as I'd let my impulsive nature take over. He'd been there to rein me in when I spiraled. Now I had no one, and it was getting harder to self-regulate.

"I'm stressed." I sat down on the loveseat next to him, accepting the olive branch he was offering.

"Anything in particular?"

How the fuck could I tell him I was on my way to a full-blown meltdown without making it sound like I blamed him? I didn't. Beck was my best

friend. It wasn't his fault I didn't have anyone else.

"School and a stupid group project for Professor Meyers's class."

"I hate those. Are you teamed up with a bunch of slackers?"

"It's a partnered assignment. And he's doing the work." I sighed. As much as I wanted to bitch about Kai, it wasn't him my stupid brain was fixated on.

I hadn't talked to Wrong since our last session a week ago. He'd been online the few times I'd checked, but instead of messaging him, I'd gotten irrationally angry and jealous at the thought he might be sexting or talking to someone else.

He was a rando on an app. I had zero claim on him. Maybe I'd shifted my obsession from Beck to him because of how easy he was to talk to?

"Is everything okay back home?"

"Yeah."

"Come on, Alex." Beck's voice was gentle. "You can tell me what's really going on."

"I've kind of been talking to someone online."

He blinked as if startled by my answer. "Really?"

I nodded.

"And that's a bad thing?" he asked carefully.

"Not exactly a bad thing. It's just confusing."

"How so?"

"Well, he's a he," I said wryly, pushing my hair back off my forehead.

"Oh." Beck's expression shifted to one of confusion. "Wow."

"Yeah."

"I didn't think you were looking for something with a guy."

I'd told him I was bisexual when he'd finally come clean about him and Finn. But as far as he knew, I had no interest in guys and was exclusively with women. And until Wrong, that had been true.

"I wasn't. It just kind of happened. It was supposed to be a one-time thing, but it happened again."

"You chatted with him?"

"More like had phone sex with him," I mumbled.

Beck chuckled. "I don't know why I'm so surprised. Phone sex is one of the tamest things you've confessed to."

I smiled tightly. I wasn't proud of my fuckboy reputation, and he wasn't wrong. I'd done some crazy shit in the past, but not all of it had been a

conscious choice.

I'd never told anyone, but a lot of the more extreme things I'd done in my life were when I was in one of my spirals. When my impulse control was at zero and my desire to feel *something*, especially a nice dump of dopamine, overruled my logical brain.

I was no saint, but I didn't fuck around as much as people thought I did. Mostly because of my concentration issues. Fooling around was easy, and I didn't need to be fully present to get someone off. Sex, seduction, that took more effort than I could usually muster for some pretty girl I met at a party.

"Was it good?" Beck asked.

I nodded, unable to meet his gaze.

"I'm not sure I'm getting the problem. You liked it, and it happened twice. Is he ghosting you or something?"

"More like a mutual ghosting."

"Do you want to do it again?"

"Kinda."

"Then message him. The worst that can happen is he says no. And whatever, right? It's not like he's someone important. Especially if you've only talked to him a few times."

That was the problem. Wrong might not be important, but I liked the guy. We'd chatted for a bit after our last session, and it had meant something to me. I could be myself around him and didn't bother holding anything back.

He might be a faceless stranger, but the thought of him rejecting me sent a ripple of panic through my chest.

"You're right." I slipped on my mask of casual indifference. "Want to play something for a bit?" I motioned to the TV.

Matt and Jax came into the living room, laughing and shoving each other.

"Hey." Matt flopped down on the couch dramatically.

Jax upnodded us and sat down as well, albeit with more grace.

Both guys played on the school baseball team, so they were ripped and toned, and they were both ridiculously attractive. Matt was blond, while Jax had nearly black hair. Matt's eyes were bright blue, but Jax's were emerald green. Everything else from their builds to their mannerisms was eerily similar.

Their friendship was strange. They spent nearly all their time together, but they seemed almost *too* close.

As if I was one to talk, considering how obsessive I could be with friends,

but Matt and Jax were different. Jax was at the house so much that none of us had objected when Matt had asked if he could give Jax a key. As far as I knew, Matt was straight, but they were always in each other's space. Was something else going on between them?

Matt shifted and swung his legs up so his feet were on Jax's lap.

"Whatcha playing?" He leaned back against the arm of the couch as Jax casually rubbed his calf. Matt sighed in contentment, obviously enjoying his massage.

"Haven't decided." Beck shot me a look.

"Make it four player. We're bored."

"And that's our problem, how?" I asked sweetly, secretly relieved that we'd been interrupted.

Beck, Jax, and Matt argued about what game they wanted to play, but I didn't pay much attention.

I should unmatch Wrong and forget all about him and his magic voice. I was getting attached. It would be best to cut ties with him before he got sick of me.



AN HOUR LATER, my stomach growled. Shit. I'd forgotten to eat again.

"Gotta grab some food." I handed Beck my controller.

"I have to meet Finn." Beck put both controllers on the coffee table. "It's all yours, fellas."

"You ready?" Matt grinned at Jax.

"Bring it."

Beck and I exchanged another look.

Athletes were insanely competitive, myself included, but Matt and Jax took it to a whole new level. The amount of trash-talking they did while they played any sort of game together seemed like more than friendly competition. It reminded me of foreplay.

I said a quick goodbye to Beck and went into the kitchen to get some food.

I stared blankly into the fridge. My choices were limited. I needed to go grocery shopping. Finally, I pulled out a few eggs to make a sandwich. It wasn't fancy, but it was better than nothing.

While I was waiting for my toast to pop, I grabbed a nearly empty bag of tortilla chips out of my cupboard and shoved a handful of crumbs into my mouth. The salty crunch was satisfying, and after assembling my sandwich, I ate it standing at the sink.

When I'd cleaned up my mess, I headed up to my room.

It had been a week since I'd gone to the gym, and I was antsy as fuck. I'd spent the entire time we'd been playing video games trying to stop my legs from bouncing and resisting the urge to get up and pace.

Now that I was in my room alone, the need to move was nearly overwhelming.

I needed to find a new gym buddy. Exercise was one of the few ways I could shut my brain down without having to resort to chemicals. Focusing on one more set or one more quarter mile soothed not only my mind but also my body, as I was able to direct my excess energy toward something productive.

Should I go for a run? I glanced out the window. Maybe not the best option. The sky was heavy with clouds. Rainy season was starting, and getting caught in a downpour wasn't my idea of a good time.

Sighing in frustration, I flopped onto my bed and grabbed my burner phone to check my notifications. I'd left it at home today so I wouldn't be tempted to open Kinksters on my breaks.

Kai had texted. I unlocked the phone and tapped on the notification.

Asshole: meet again on wed?

Something niggled at the back of my mind. I dug my regular phone out of my hoodie pocket and checked my calendar.

Alex: can't

Alex: have a huge test the next am I need to cram for

Alex: tomorrow?

Kai's answer appeared only seconds later. Fucker must be on his phone.

Asshole: have to babysit my little sis

Asshole: thurs?

Alex: have a late class and a paper due on fri

Alex: weekend?

Asshole: I work all weekend

Asshole: you can come over while I'm babysitting

Alex: really?

Asshole: really

Asshole: we need to get this done and she'll be asleep at 8

I wanted to say no. The thought of seeing Kai with his little sister was unsettling, and I had no idea why.

Alex: fine

Asshole: around 6?

Alex: 6 works

He sent an address I didn't recognize. I waited to see if he'd say anything else. He didn't.

Still feeling out of sorts, I opened Kinksters.

I had every intention of unmatching Wrong, but the little green dot under his name made me pause. One more time couldn't hurt, right?

Biting my lip, I opened our messages. One more time. Then I'd unmatch him and go back to talking to chicks.

KAI

The little bolt of happiness that shot through me when Fun's message appeared in our thread was disconcerting.

We hadn't messaged since our last session, and I'd figured he was over his little experiment with a dude. I'd been waiting for him to either unmatch me or block me. He hadn't done either. And my relief was confusing.

I used Kinksters to avoid the hassle of dealing with people. My life was a clusterfuck of work and school, and I didn't have the time or the motivation to go out and pick someone up.

Phone sex was impersonal, but an orgasm was an orgasm. And since getting people off with only my voice was a major kink of mine, it didn't feel like anything was missing from my sex life. At least, it hadn't until Fun.

The problem was I liked the guy. I enjoyed getting him off, but talking to him after had been almost as nice as the shared orgasms.

The smart thing would be to block him now before I got any more attached. Too bad I never did the smart thing.

I'd gone online a few times this last week looking for a new sexting partner, but none of the profiles I'd matched with had sparked even the slightest bit of interest. Instead, I'd compulsively checked to see if Fun had messaged me or was online, and scrolled through his pictures.

Shoving those thoughts aside, I opened our message thread, a smile on my lips, and settled back on my pillow.

FunTimes: hey

MrWrong: hey

MrWrong: it's been a while

MrWrong: everything okay?

Why did I type that? I should have gone right into sexting. Engaging in conversation was going to make cutting ties with him harder.

I knew that but found it hard to care. The little dots appeared in the thread.

FunTimes: are you asking cause you want to know

FunTimes: or because you're being polite

MrWrong: any time I ask a question is because I want to know the answer

The dots appeared, disappeared, and reappeared.

FunTimes: not really

MrWrong: you want to switch to voice?

The phone icon lit up, and I grabbed my headphones off my bedside table.

"Just getting my headphones connected," I answered his call.

"Giving the old guy next door a break from all the screaming?"

The app distorted people's voices, but he sounded different. Something was off.

"He's had a break for a while," I said. "I'm pretty sure he's wondering if I'm still alive with all the silence."

"Not bringing screamers home lately?"

His words were casual, but something in his tone made me pause.

"No. Not in a long time."

"Oh." He let out a heavy-sounding sigh.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"I'm just... nothing. You didn't sign up to listen to my problems."

"Maybe not, but I did ask. You can talk to me. I know we're strangers who listen to each other come, but sometimes that kind of anonymity is a good thing. If you need to talk, I'm here to listen."

"It's all stupid stuff. My best friend doesn't have time for me anymore."

"What do you mean?"

"Remember I told you about my roommates who're fucking? One of them was my best friend."

"Was?"

"Yeah." He sighed. "I sound like such a baby when I say this, but I miss him. We used to do everything together, talk about everything. He was my

person, you know? And now I barely see him.”

I waited. Would he keep talking?

He didn't.

“That's rough.”

“Yeah. I mean, I get it. He's in love, and he's happy. I'm happy for him. I really am, but it hurts. He lied to me for weeks when he and his boyfriend got together. I knew about them. I mean, come on, my room is under his. I heard them. The whole house did. But they walked around pretending they weren't even friends, and every time I talked to B-my buddy, he lied.”

“Did he eventually tell you the truth?”

“Only after I told him I knew. I thought maybe that would make things go back to the way they were. That he'd stop avoiding me. Now he's just busy.”

“It sounds like there's something else there. Something beyond just missing him.”

“I... I don't have a lot of friends.”

His voice cracked.

“I know a shit ton of people, but they're not friends, you know? Like right now, I feel like I'm going crazy, but I don't have anyone I can talk to about it now that my buddy is so busy. He used to be the person who talked me down when I was spiraling, who reined me in when my stupid brain would go rogue and make me do dumb shit. I know it's not healthy, but he kept me in check. Now I don't have that, and it's like my brain won't shut off.

“And I understand why he's like that. He has this big, loving family, and they're super close. He has his boyfriend. He gets his emotional needs met elsewhere. But I don't have that.”

“Family?”

“No, not really.” A pause. “I have one relative who gives a shit about me, but that's it. Everyone always gets sick of me. I thought things with my buddy would be different, but he's moving on, and I'm alone again.”

“Who's the relative who cares?” I asked gently.

“My grandmother. She took me in when my parents got sick of me.”

“What do you mean?”

“My parents are... not good people. They're con artists.”

“Wow. I didn't see that coming.”

He snorted. “Yeah. It's not something I advertise for obvious reasons. My parents are social climbers. Mom is a cliché. The small-town girl who moved

to the big city to be a model and make it big. She's been trying to reclaim her glory days since they ended twenty years ago. Dad is a chameleon and always chasing an easy buck. He was a televangelist when I was little."

"Seriously?"

"Yup." He laughed sardonically. "He was one of those assholes who could convince his followers to send him their life savings because it was *God's Will*." The inflection in his voice told me exactly what he thought about that.

"And the really fucked-up part was it was all an act. He preached brimstone and fire and all that crap, but he didn't believe any of it. It was all about the money."

I kept quiet and let him talk it out. I had a feeling he'd been holding this in for a long-ass time and it was more a stream of consciousness than a conversation.

"But when I was thirteen, they fucked up. They got caught up in some bad investments. Then it got out that they'd gambled, drank, and snorted their way through the millions they'd managed to scam from their followers. They were arrested and charged with a bunch of shit, and I was sent to live with my grandma."

Silence stretched.

"Where are your parents now?" I asked.

"Mom is... somewhere. Last I heard, she was trying to find a new sugar daddy to take care of her. Dad's in prison."

"I'm sorry."

"Not your fault I have a shitty family."

"No, but I'm still sorry you had to deal with that."

"What about you? Perfect family with the picket fence and yearly family vacations?"

I snort-laughed. "Not even close."

He kept quiet.

I didn't talk to people about personal shit. But Fun had opened up and shared with me. The least I could do was reciprocate.

"My sob story isn't anything new or interesting." I toyed with the hem of my shirt. "Mom got pregnant with me young. My dad bailed, and my grandparents kicked her out. She raised me alone."

"Was she a good mom?" he asked.

"Yeah. A great one."

“Oh.” His defeated tone sent a rush of sympathy through me.

I might not have had an easy childhood, but my mother loved me, and I’d never once questioned how much. Fun might have had everything money could buy, but he hadn’t had the kind of emotional stability I had.

“We struggled.” Why was I going into more detail when he hadn’t asked? “We never had enough of anything. It got easier when I was older and could work to help her out, but she’s still struggling.” I bit my lip. “She deserved better. She’s smart, and she had dreams. But she gave up everything for me. To have me.”

I sighed. Now that I’d started, I wasn’t able to shut my stupid mouth up.

“She wanted more for me. She always encouraged me to be the best version of myself I could be. A lot of the guys I went to school with didn’t have that. They’re happy being stuck here, working dead-end jobs, and having families they can’t support. It’s what they’ve always known.”

“It sounds like you’re on your way to changing the cycle,” Fun said softly.

“I am. It’s not easy, but I’m determined and stubborn as fuck. I’m getting out of this town, and I’m going to give my mom the life she deserves.”

“You’re a good person, Wrong.”

“Don’t tell anyone,” I joked. “I have a rep as an asshole to maintain.”

He laughed. “Promise.”

Thud. Thud. Thud.

I looked up at the ceiling and chuckled.

“What?” he asked.

“My upstairs neighbors are going at it again.”

“Oh yeah?” His voice took on a sexy undertone. “You like listening to them?”

“Hell, yeah. They’re freaky, loud, and hot as fuck.”

He snorted. “Maybe they’ll invite you in as a third.”

“I wish. These guys aren’t that kind of couple. They’re so into each other it’s like the rest of the world fades away.”

“That sounds like my buddy and his guy.”

“Want to try something different today?”

“What did you have in mind?”

“I have an idea that might help you get out of your head for a while.”

“Yeah? I like the sound of that.”

“But for it to work, you’ll have to do what I say with no pushback.”

“I can do that. Or at least I’ll try.”

“How quiet do you have to be?”

“Pretty quiet. It’s a full house tonight.”

“I can work with that. You ready?”

“Ready.”

“I want you to get naked for me. When you are, get under the covers. I want you nice and warm and comfortable.”

“Okay.” The rustling of fabric filled the line. “They’re off.”

“Lie back and close your eyes.” I waited for a few counts to give him the chance to obey.

“Now I want you to focus on your breathing. Just on your breathing. Deep breaths in, and deep breaths out. Breathe for me, Fun. Let your body relax.” I listened as he obeyed. “Good. Now focus on my voice. Keep breathing for me, but put your focus on me. Can you do that?”

“Yes,” he whispered.

“Very good. Now picture me in your room. I’m standing next to your bed. I’m looking down at you. Can you see me? Can you see the desire in my eyes as I check you out?”

“I can.”

“Good. I’m kneeling next to the bed. My hand is on your stomach. I slide it down and cup your dick. You’re hard for me. Can you feel it?”

“Yes.”

“Put your hand on your dick. Just hold it and pretend it’s mine.”

His answering sigh sent a rush of possession through me.

“That’s it. You’re doing good,” I purred, smiling when he made a happy little sound. “I’m stroking you. You’re so hard for me. Do that, okay? Slowly stroke your dick for me.”

“Okay.”

“So good. Now I want you to picture me leaning over you. I’m sucking your dick into my mouth. You feel so good, taste so good. Can you feel it? Can you feel my mouth wrapped around your dick as I suck you?”

“Yes.” His breathing picked up.

“Pretend your hand is my mouth teasing you. I want you to enjoy this, but I’m not ready to let you come. Not yet. I’m using my tongue, licking your head, pressing it into your slit. Your hands are in my hair. You’re holding me tight. I like it. You try to move your hips, but I hold you down. It’s my show. Do you relax for me?”

“I do.”

“Good. Now spread your legs.”

He moaned, the sound low and needy.

“Fuck, you’re so hot, all spread out for me. Do you want my tongue? Do you want me to tease your hole while I get you ready for my dick?”

“Please,” he said softly, a tiny whine creeping into his tone.

Goddamn, he was responsive. “Use the tip of your finger to tease your hole for me, okay? Pretend it’s my tongue. I love rimming. I’d take my time with you. Let you get used to it. Then I’d go faster, harder. I’m circling your hole, dipping the tip of my tongue inside. Can you feel it? Can you feel me fucking you with my tongue?”

“Fuck, yeah, I feel it.” He groaned. “It’s so good.”

“It is. Keep teasing yourself. Stroke your dick while you play with your hole. But don’t come, okay? It’s not time yet.”

“Okay.” His voice was determined; he was still with me.

“I’m so hard, Fun. I want to fuck you so bad. Do you want that? You want me to fuck you?”

“So bad.”

“First I need to get you ready. I’m sliding one finger inside you. You’re so tight, so hot and perfect. Do you want two?”

“Yes.”

“I’m sliding in another, but I’m staying away from your spot. You’re so tight around me. Are you ready for three?”

“So ready.”

“Good. Now I’ve got three fingers inside you. You’re perfect, so fucking perfect as you take them. I’m so hard it hurts. I want nothing more than to slide my dick inside your perfect ass. Are you ready for that? You want me to fuck you?”

“Yes. Gimme your cock.”

I drew in a shaky breath and pressed the heel of my hand against my dick. I was already right there on the edge, and I hadn’t even touched myself. “Fuck. You’re so hot like this. I’m between your legs. You’re spreading them wide for me. I’m sliding into you as I stroke your dick. You’re looking up at me. You want me.”

“I want you,” he repeated, his tone full of wonder and awe. “I want you.”

“I’m all the way inside you now. You feel so good. I’m holding your wrists, pinning them to the bed.”

He gasped.

“You wrap your legs around my waist. I’ve got you, Fun. All you need to do is let go and let me take care of you. Can you do that? Can you let go and just feel while I fuck you?”

He moaned loudly. “Yes.”

“Good. I’m moving now. Fucking you nice and slow. You don’t need to think about anything other than how good I make you feel. *I’m* in charge. *I* decide when and if you can come.”

He whimpered.

“Are you close?”

“So close.” He panted.

“Good. I want you to keep stroking. Picture me on top of you, holding you down as I fuck you exactly how you need.”

“It feels so good,” he whispered through heavy breaths. “You feel so good.”

“Fuck,” I muttered, reaching into my sweats and grabbing my neglected cock. “I’m stroking with you. I’m pretending my hand is your ass. It feels so good.” I gritted my teeth and thrust up into my hand, my shaft already wet with precum. “You’re going to make me come so hard. Do you want it? Do you want me to fill you up?”

“Please.”

“Keep stroking. Tell me when you’re about to come.”

Moans and sighs and bitten-off words filled my ear as I stroked in earnest, not bothering to hold back.

“I’m close,” he whimpered. “So close.”

“Come for me,” I murmured. “Come on my cock and let me see it.”

A strangled cry came over the line, and I was *done*. My orgasm hit hard and fast. I cried out, bucking my hips up as I fucked my fist.

“Holy shit,” he mumbled dreamily.

“That was so hot.” I shook my head to clear it. “Are you still under the covers?”

“Yeah.” His answer was barely audible.

“That’s good. Now keep your eyes closed and think about how good it felt to let me take control. Enjoy the afterglow. I’m right here with you.”

I continued talking to him, telling him how good he was, how hard he’d made me come.

“I really liked that,” he said in a blissed-out tone. He was still deep in it.

“I did too.”

“I like you,” he whispered. “I didn’t want to, but I do.”

“I like you too.”

My throat tightened. I was getting attached. Fun might not even be aware of what he was saying, but I was in full control of my faculties. I liked him, and that was dangerous.

A moment later, he let out a happy-sounding sigh. Then silence.

“You with me?” I asked.

“I think so.”

“Did that help?” Had I been able to get him out of his head?

“Yeah.” He cleared his throat. “It worked.”

“Have you ever tried bondage?” Hopefully he had enough brainpower to have a conversation. I wasn’t ready to hang up yet.

“A few times.”

“Have you done it where you’re the one who’s tied up?”

“No.”

“Have you wanted to?”

A pause. “Yes.”

“What about sensory deprivation?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Like blindfolds, headphones, that kind of thing.”

“No. And before you ask, I’ve wanted to. Just never found someone I trusted enough to let them have that kind of control over me.”

I hummed.

“Why?”

“Just wondering.”

“I bet you’ve done it a lot.”

“Not a lot, but I have done some of that before.”

“Shit. One second.” A pause. “I have to go. Phone call.”

“Have a good night.”

“You too.”

The line went dead, and I looked down at my stomach. I needed to take a shower.

The thumping from upstairs was frantic now. Muffled voices filtered through the ceiling, and the bed rhythmically slammed into the wall. Smirking, I sat up. I wasn’t ashamed to admit I’d jerked off more than once while listening to Ash and Jules fuck each other’s brains out.

But after that orgasm with Fun, my dick was down for the count. Time to shower and get back to studying.

I swung my legs over the side of the bed and stood, then grabbed a clean pair of sweats out of my drawer and headed to the bathroom. I'd have time to think about how stupid my attachment to Fun was later. Right now, I had shit to do.

ALEX

I'd never felt more out of place than I did standing in front of the door to Kai's apartment. It was weird to be here, in his space. It humanized him, and I didn't like that. I wanted to stay angry at him. To keep seeing him as the asshole I hated.

Pulling in a deep breath, I knocked on the door.

A moment later, it swung open, but instead of Kai standing on the other side, a little girl stared up at me with big blue eyes.

"Hi." She grinned. Long black hair framed her cherubic face and fell to her hips in loose waves.

"Um, hi. Is Kai home?"

"Rain," an exasperated voice said from inside the apartment. "How many times have we told you not to open the door unless I or Mom is with you?"

The little girl looked over her shoulder. "Lots?"

"And are you going to listen?" Kai appeared behind her, a soft smile on his too-handsome face.

Fuck. This was a bad idea.

"Maybe." She turned back to me. "Are you Kai's friend?"

"Um." How was I supposed to answer that?

"This is Alex. He and I go to school together." Kai ran a big hand through Rain's hair. "Let's let Alex come inside." He scooped her up and held her on his hip. She leaned her head against his broad shoulder.

I stepped into the apartment and closed the door behind me.

"You remember what we talked about?" Kai asked his sister and motioned for me to follow him into the apartment.

The building was old and run-down like most buildings in the area, but the apartment was homey and lived in. Art prints and photographs dotted the walls, and brightly colored area rugs gave the room a cheery feel, even though it was obvious the apartment had been neglected over the years. The furniture was worn and had seen better days, but it was clean and inviting.

Rain nodded against his shoulder.

He put her down and dropped a kiss on her head. She made her way over to a pile of trucks and plopped down on the floor while Kai sat on the couch, where a colorful quilt was draped over the back.

“How old is she?” I asked.

“She just turned six.” He patted the cushion next to him. “Unless you want to stand for the next few hours.”

I sat, feeling more than a little off balance. Seeing Kai with his sister was fucking with me.

“Is this your apartment?” I asked awkwardly.

He nodded.

“Are your parents working?”

“Our mom is. I watch her every Tuesday while she works a night shift.” He lowered his voice. “It’s just the three of us.”

Was Rain his half sister? That would make sense, considering their age difference.

Crash.

I looked over at Rain, who lined up two cars and smashed them into each other head on.

“Should you be worried about that, Mr. Psychologist?” I asked before I could stop myself.

He smirked. “Nah. I didn’t worry when she cut the heads off her Barbies either.”

I snorted. “Destructive kid.”

“She’s curious. It’s how she learns.”

The fond look in his eyes as he watched his sister did weird things to my insides.

“So, the project.” I cleared my throat.

Kai sat up straighter, his expression serious. “Right. I had a few ideas I wanted to run by you.” He grabbed a laptop off the coffee table, opened it, and clicked on a few keys.

I scooted closer, making sure we still had a few inches of space between

us.



THE RINGING of a phone alarm knocked me out of the haze of concentration I'd fallen into and back to reality. Kai tapped on his phone screen, silencing the alarm.

"It's time, pumpkin," he said.

"Pumpkin?" I asked before I could stop myself.

"Kai calls me pumpkin because my birthday is Halloween." Rain came to stand in front of us.

"I used to call her jack, like jack-o'-lantern, but that confused people."

"You like jack-o'-lanterns?" I asked Rain.

She nodded and tugged on a lock of her hair. "They're pretty."

Kai's phone beeped, and he glanced down at it. "I have to get this." He grabbed the phone and wagged a finger at his sister. "But then it's bedtime."

She nodded innocently.

Kai stood and swept out of the room. "Hello." A door closed. Rain and I were left alone.

"Hi," I said awkwardly as Rain stared at me with her big blue eyes.

"Are you Kai's friend?"

"Um, yeah. We go to school together."

"I like your hair."

"I like yours too."

"Are you sad?"

"No. Why would you ask that?"

She tilted her head. "Because you don't smile."

I opened my mouth, then closed it.

"Kai doesn't smile a lot either."

"He doesn't?"

That was news to me. The fucker was always smiling in that casual, breezy way that drove me up the wall.

"Not his real smile." She moved around the coffee table until she was right in front of me. "Do you need a hug? Kai hugs me when I'm sad, and it helps."

"Um..."

“Or you can ask Kai to hug you. He gives the best hugs.”

“I’m not sad.”

She studied me. “Are you sure?”

I pasted a smile on my face. Hopefully she would talk about something else. “I’m sure.”

“I don’t believe you.”

Wow. This kid was like a mini version of her brother. Way too smart and observant for her own good. Not to mention bold.

She held out her arms. “I give really good hugs too.”

Before I could answer, Rain stepped into my space and wrapped her thin arms around my neck. My first instinct was to jump away from her. I’d never been around kids and had no idea how to act around them. Plus, I wasn’t a hugger.

Rain tightened her grip and hummed a soft tune in my ear. Her body was warm, and her quiet voice soothed some of the panic that had been bubbling under the surface since I’d woken up that morning.

A wave of calm washed over me as I hugged her back and closed my eyes.

“Time for bed, pumpkin.”

I snapped my eyes open, my entire body tense. Kai stood on the other side of the coffee table, a soft smile on his lips. The fight left in a rush as Rain gave me one last squeeze, then let go.

“Goodnight, Alex.” She leaned in and smacked a kiss against my cheek.

“Night.”

“I’ll be out in a bit. Make yourself comfortable.” Kai gave his sister a firm look. “And someone isn’t going to stall tonight, right?”

Rain came around the coffee table and, when she was in front of her brother, raised her arms. He scooped her up and kissed her forehead. They headed down the hallway, talking in hushed voices. A door closed.

I looked around the room. Being alone in Kai’s space was weird, and antsy flutters replaced the momentary calm from Rain’s hug.

I jumped up and strode over to the wall covered in photographs. Snapshots of Kai and Rain and a woman I assumed was their mother smiled back at me. Young Kai, older Kai, a baby with dark hair and eyes, and another baby who was identical outside of a set of big blue eyes.

Huh, Kai had gone through an awkward phase in his teens. That was comforting, but it humanized him even more, which I didn’t like. Their

mother was an older version of Rain with her jet-back hair, big blue eyes, and easy smile. She also looked way too young to have a kid in college. They were a good-looking family, and they obviously adored each other.

I studied a picture of Kai on some sort of trail. He wore cargo shorts, hiking boots, and a baby carrier with a baby Rain snuggled into it.

In the next picture, Kai sat in front of a Christmas tree, wearing a Santa hat and a big goofy grin. Rain, an elf hat on her curls, was in his lap. She beamed at the camera as she held up a stuffed cat.

My heart clenched at a picture of Kai and his mom. She looked incredibly young in the photo, barely a teenager, holding a sleeping baby with a shock of black hair against her chest. Her smile was soft, serene, and happy.

“That’s one of my mom’s favorite pictures.”

I jumped as Kai’s voice rang out behind me. I whirled around, bracing myself for him to say something about me snooping. He didn’t, just stood there with an unreadable expression on his face.

“Your mom. She looks really young here.” I nodded to the photo.

“She was.” Kai came to stand next to me. “She was fifteen when she had me. That was taken a week before my grandparents kicked her out.”

“They kicked her out at fifteen?”

“Because she refused to give me up.” He chewed on his lip as he stared at the picture. “Come on. Let’s get back to the assignment.”

Feeling off-balance, I followed Kai back to the couch and sat down next to him.

“What you saw, with your sister. She hugged me. I swear—”

“Relax.” He chuckled. “I’m not mad. Rain is incredibly intuitive. I’m guessing she wanted to hug you to make you feel better.”

“She said I looked sad.”

“Are you sad?” His dark eyes bored into me, his expression searching.

“No. Not sad.” I swallowed.

“But there’s something.”

I tore my eyes from his. Dammit, why could he read me so well? “Let’s get back to the project.” I focused on his laptop screen.

Kai ran his finger over the touchpad to wake the machine up.

I half listened as he explained the graph he wanted to use, something about showing the correlation between censorship and political parties.

That antsy feeling was back, but instead of wanting to run as far away from Kai as possible, I had the overwhelming urge to talk to him. To ask him

for a damn hug to make me feel better.

It was madness. I didn't even *like* Kai, but all I could think about was how nice it would feel to be wrapped up in his strong arms. How warm his big body would be against mine. How safe he'd make me feel.

"Alex?"

I jerked. "What?"

"You okay?"

"Fine." I cleared my throat. "Just thinking about something."

He motioned to my leg.

I looked down. I was tapping out a random pattern on my bouncing knee with my fingers.

"You fidget a lot."

"So?"

All thoughts of warmth and hugs were replaced with defensiveness.

"Just an observation." He pursed his lips.

"What?"

"Nothing."

I narrowed my eyes. "What's that supposed to mean?" I snapped.

"Nothing." He leaned back against the couch. "Why do you hate me?"

My mind blanked. I should have expected the question, but it still took me by surprise.

I wanted to run. To jump up and sprint out of the apartment and away from Kai and his sister and everything that reminded me he was just a guy and not the evil creature I'd built him up to be over the past year.

"You don't remember me at all, do you?"

He shook his head. "No, I don't. And I'm guessing that's the problem?"

I crossed my arms to stop from fidgeting. "Part of it."

He sat quietly.

"We flirted at a party." I tore my gaze from his, unable to look at him. "Last year. You asked for my number. You said you'd text, but you didn't."

He nodded slowly. "That's very possible. And I hurt your feelings by not texting?"

"It's not so much that. More that I broke a rule for you, and you didn't even care." God, could I be a bigger loser?

"What else?" he asked softly. "I can tell there's more."

"You fucked my girlfriend."

His eyes widened, and his mouth dropped open comically. "Come

again?”

“You hooked up with my girlfriend. Elissa.”

He blinked. “Who?”

“Wow. You don’t remember her either? Guess I shouldn’t feel special.”

“I’m no saint, but I don’t have sex with people and not remember their names.”

“That party at the old barn last month. You were there.”

“I remember the party.”

“I got there late. When I walked in, you had your tongue down my girlfriend’s throat.”

His expression shifted.

“Now you remember her.”

“I remember kissing her. But that’s as far as it went. And I had no idea she was with someone. She came onto me.”

“It must have been a hell of a kiss because she dumped me for you.”

“What?”

“I confronted her about it when she finally pried herself off you. She said she was done with me. That she hadn’t signed up to deal with my ‘issues’— I made little air quotes—“and that she needed to be with a real man who could give her what she needed. You were that guy.”

“I don’t know where she got that idea, but I never promised her anything. That party is the only time I’ve ever seen her.”

I snorted, crossing and uncrossing my legs as nervous energy poured into my system. “How fucking pathetic must I be to get dumped after a single kiss? Either that or you’re just that good.”

“I’m sorry I came between you two, I really am. But I don’t hook up with taken people. I would never have kissed her if I’d known you were together.”

I dropped my eyes, the anger slowly draining out of me. I wanted to hate him, damn it. I didn’t want to hear his excuses, to see him as anything other than the asshole who’d not only rejected me after I’d broken my rule against flirting with guys but who’d also stolen my girlfriend.

The worst part about the whole situation with Elissa wasn’t how much she’d hurt me. But how much Kai had.

That night, when we’d flirted, had meant something to me. We’d sat in a corner, completely sober, talking about everything and nothing.

It had been one of the best conversations I’d ever had, and when he’d asked for my number, I hadn’t hesitated. The stupid part was that I’d given

him my actual number and not my burner one. I'd thought we'd connected, but I'd obviously just been another person he flirted with.

When I'd seen him and Elissa wrapped up in each other, I hadn't been angry or even devastated at witnessing my girlfriend cheat on me. I'd been jealous.

But more than that, I'd been jealous of *her*. That had messed with my head almost as much as her cheating.

Now, after all this time, I found out he hadn't slept with her. She hadn't dumped me because Kai had promised her a future or a relationship. She'd dumped me because of me. Because I'd been too much to handle.

I jumped up. "I need to go."

"Alex—"

"I can't. Not now."

He stood and reached for me, but I backed away. He pulled his hand back, indecision clouding his eyes.

I had to get out of there. Kai might not be the asshole I'd thought he was, but that didn't mean I was ready to face the fact that Elissa had dumped me because she'd gotten sick of me. Everyone always got sick of me.

I raced out of the apartment and down the stairs, taking them two at a time. My heart pounded in my chest, and a roar filled my ears. I needed to do something. To get lost for a while and stop the constant stream of thoughts spiraling through my head.

Loser. Stupid. Crazy.

Digging my car keys out of my pocket, I raced to my car.

You're not worth it.

My hands shook as I unlocked the door and slid inside.

No one will ever put up with you.

I gripped the steering wheel with one hand and started the car.

No one will ever love you.

Blinking back tears, I put the car in reverse and peeled out of the spot.

ALEX

Slam.

I closed the door to the house with a little too much force. I didn't remember the drive home.

That in itself was concerning, but the empty, hollow feeling inside me was even worse. I was spiraling.

"Alex?" I stopped dead at Finn's voice.

"What?" I peered into the living room, Finn and Beck were cuddled up on the couch together. Finn was sitting on one end, a thick book in his hands, and Beck lay with his head on Finn's lap, holding his phone.

"Nothing," I said automatically. Had one of them said anything? I was too out of it to focus.

"Alex?" Beck was in front of me, his dark eyes filled with concern.

"What?" I croaked, looking away.

He grabbed my arm and gave it a little shake. "Look at me."

I did.

"Let's go upstairs."

Wobbling as if my body wasn't under my control, I followed him up the stairs to his room.

Once we were inside, he marched me over to his couch and sat me down with a push on my shoulders. I landed on the cushions in a heap.

"What's going on?" Beck sat on the edge of the bed across from me, his arms on his thighs. "What happened?"

"I'm a mess," I whispered.

Sadness clouded Beck's expression. "Talk to me, Alex. I know I've been

a shitty friend lately, but you can talk to me about anything.”

I wanted to say something scathing about how ignoring me wasn't the best way to show he cared, but I bit it back. Taking my anger out on him wasn't fair. Beck had put up with more of my shit than anyone else. He didn't deserve to be my emotional punching bag because I was fucked up.

“Do you remember when Elissa and I broke up?” I picked at the skin around my thumbnail.

“Yeah. You never told me why. Just that it was over.”

“She cheated.”

“Shit, man. I'm sorry.”

“I saw it.”

“What?” Beck gasped.

“I was late to a party. When I walked in, she had some guy's tongue down her throat. When I asked her about it, she said she was over dealing with my *issues* and she wanted a real man. One who could give her what she needed.”

“Fuck. That's harsh.”

I snorted. “Yeah. And the worst part is I kinda knew the guy.”

“Knew him how?”

I stared at the ceiling. Now would be a great time for some guidance from a celestial being, or for the floor to open up and swallow me whole so this conversation and these feelings would be over.

“We flirted at a party last year. He asked for my number, but he never texted.”

Beck pursed his lips.

“I know. It's not like I've never done that to someone.” I blew out a breath. “But this went beyond just normal flirting, you know? Like, we *talked*. I thought we connected, but apparently, it was one-sided.”

“You told me you were exclusively with women,” Beck said slowly.

“I was. He's literally the only guy I've been tempted to break that rule with. I guess that hurts as much as him not texting. The one time I ignore my rules, and I get rejected.”

“I feel like there's more to this. You and Elissa broke up a month ago. You weren't this upset when it happened.”

“Remember that group project I told you about? The one where I was partnered with a random from my communications class?”

Understanding dawned on his face. “You're paired up with that guy.”

I nodded and looked down at my hands. “He didn’t remember me,” I said bitterly. “He asked me why I hated him tonight. Turns out he and Elissa never had a thing. That kiss was as far as it went.”

I chuckled, the sound hollow and cold. “I hated him. I blamed him for our breakup. But it was my fault. She didn’t break up with me *for* him. She did it *because* of me. Because I’m too much.”

Beck hummed. “You guys broke up while Finn and I were getting together.”

I kept my eyes on the floor.

“So you had to deal with her rejection, the leftover hurt from that guy rejecting you last year, and I wasn’t there for you.”

I rubbed my palm on my thigh, the rough material of the denim keeping me grounded.

“Fuck, man. I’m so sorry.”

“I know you are.” My voice cracked, and I cleared my throat. “I know you’re sorry. And I get it.”

I looked up. His dark eyes were trained on mine.

“I’m going to do better.”

I wanted to tell him to forget it. That I wasn’t worth the effort. He’d just get sick of me eventually.

“Finn is important to me, but so are you.”

A spark of hope flickered in my chest, then died again. We’d had this conversation before.

“Want to go back to our gym schedule?”

“Huh?” I blinked at the sudden topic change.

“It’s not as fun going alone. I need your annoying ass to make me push myself.” He grinned crookedly.

A smile tugged at my lips. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. Start tomorrow?”

“Okay.”

“Do you want to hang out with us? We were going to watch a movie when Finn is done studying.”

I didn’t feel like sitting through a movie but accepted the offer for the olive branch it was.

“Sure. I’ll be down once I change.”

He patted my shoulder, then gave it a little squeeze. Beck was a toucher. I hadn’t realized how much I’d missed the casual intimacy between us until

that moment.

Standing, I gave him a tight smile and headed out of his room to change. My mind was still spinning, but at least that little voice that whispered a near-constant stream of criticisms was quiet. It would be back. It always came back.



THREE HOURS LATER, I was lying on my bed, staring into the darkness. Random thoughts filtered through my consciousness.

I felt better after my talk with Beck, but my mind was still a mess. I'd always been hypersensitive to rejection, whether real or perceived. I didn't need therapy to tell me it was because of my parents.

Ping.

My burner phone lit up with a notification, and by the sound, it was from Kinksters.

Who would be messaging me at midnight on a Tuesday? Was it Wrong? Tapping down the flare of excitement, I opened the app.

A message from Wrong sat in my inbox. I sat up and turned my bedside lamp on. The warm light was jarring, and I blinked to clear the spots dancing before my eyes.

MrWrong: I jerked off to one of your pics tonight

Biting my lip, I quickly typed out a message before he went offline.

FunTimes: oh yeah? Which one?

His avatar appeared in the thread, telling me he'd seen my message.

MrWrong: the one of you on the beach

I pursed my lips. That was one of the only photos in my folder that didn't show my dick.

MrWrong: I thought I was the only moron still up at this hour

FunTimes: not the only one

MrWrong: have trouble sleeping?

FunTimes: most nights

MrWrong: same

MrWrong: I work nights all weekend, and it's hell constantly switching my schedule

FunTimes: I wish I had that excuse

FunTimes: my head gets really busy at night

FunTimes: makes it hard to sleep

Why was I telling him this? Maybe it was the late hour, but it felt natural to be honest with him.

MrWrong: that sucks

MrWrong: I have that problem when I'm stressed

FunTimes: I wish it was only when I was stressed

FunTimes: I'm always like this

MrWrong: sounds rough

FunTimes: it is

FunTimes: you work at a bar or something?

MrWrong: club

FunTimes: bartender?

MrWrong: not exactly

FunTimes: bouncer?

MrWrong: dancer

I stared at my screen for a few beats.

FunTimes: like the naked kind?

MrWrong: the nearly naked kind

MrWrong: male entertainer

MrWrong: stripper works too

FunTimes: really?

FunTimes: wow

FunTimes: I bet you get a lot of tips

MrWrong: why would you say that?

FunTimes: you're fishing for compliments

MrWrong: maybe

I sent an eye roll emoji.

FunTimes: you don't need me to feed your ego

MrWrong: awww but it's hungry

He sent the pleading face emoji with the big eyes.

FunTimes: you know you're gorgeous

MrWrong: true

MrWrong: but it always feels good coming from a hot guy

FunTimes: is it weird?

MrWrong: is what weird?

FunTimes: dancing

MrWrong: I wouldn't say it's weird

MrWrong: some days it's easier than others

MrWrong: being "on" when the crowd isn't into it is rough

MrWrong: but most days it's fine

FunTimes: I don't think I could do it

FunTimes: dance

MrWrong: no?

FunTimes: no

FunTimes: I'd be too aware of everything else going on

MrWrong: what do you mean?

FunTimes: I just get distracted easily. It's hard for me to concentrate on things sometimes

FunTimes: ask my ex gf, and she'll tell you

Shit. Why had I written that? I should be done talking about Elissa. She'd dumped me, end of story. I needed to stop fixating on it.

MrWrong: what would she say if I asked her?

FunTimes: that I'm shit in bed

Jesus fuck. What was wrong with me? Why couldn't I stop talking?

MrWrong: really?

MrWrong: because that hasn't been my experience

FunTimes: it's so embarrassing to talk about this

MrWrong: you don't have to, but I'm a good listener

FunTimes: I have issues with... finishing

MrWrong: like orgasming?

FunTimes: yeah

MrWrong: what kind of issues? Something medical?

FunTimes: no

FunTimes: nothing like that

FunTimes: sometimes it's hard for me to come because I can't focus

MrWrong: like you're not interested?

FunTimes: no. I'm always interested in sex

I sent a smirking emoji. Hopefully that would break some of the heaviness in the conversation.

MrWrong: is it a concentration thing?

FunTimes: yeah

FunTimes: like I want to be there, and I want to have sex, but my brain never shuts down. I get distracted by stupid shit and lose focus. I can go

forever some nights, but actually finishing doesn't always happen

MrWrong: and I'm guessing the girls you've been with have taken it personally?

FunTimes: yep

MrWrong: is it just with partners?

FunTimes: no

FunTimes: it happens when I'm solo too

FunTimes: now that I've completely humiliated myself, it's your turn to tell me something embarrassing.

MrWrong: so that's how it's going to go?

FunTimes: yup

MrWrong: fair enough

I waited for him to start typing, but my screen went dark. I woke the phone back up.

FunTimes: and?

MrWrong: I'm thinking

FunTimes: not a lot of humiliation in your life, huh?

MrWrong: it's not that

MrWrong: more I'm trying to narrow it down

MrWrong: I have one

FunTimes: what?

MrWrong: remember I told you about my friends? The ones who like me to watch them?

FunTimes: I remember

FunTimes: kinda jelly you have such kinky friends ngl

MrWrong: they're unique, that's for sure

MrWrong: the first time they invited me over, back when we were just getting to know each other, I didn't realize that the invite was for a 3some

FunTimes: really?

MrWrong: nope

MrWrong: looking back, it was obvious, but I showed up thinking we were just hanging out

FunTimes: what happened?

MrWrong: they started making out, and I thought "cool. I like watching"

MrWrong: then one of them went down on the other

MrWrong: and I thought "okay. A bit bold, but I'm into it"

FunTimes: then what?

MrWrong: I watched them for a while. Then one of them knelt in front of me

FunTimes: please tell me you figured out they wanted you to participate when that happened

MrWrong: you'd think, but nope
I snickered.

FunTimes: omg you're oblivious

MrWrong: that night I was

FunTimes: then what?

MrWrong: he went to unzip my jeans, and I was so shocked I jumped up

MrWrong: I still don't know how it happened, but somehow I ended up falling over the back of the couch and landed on my ass on the floor

A laugh bubbled out of my chest.

FunTimes: omfg

FunTimes: did you end up hooking up with them?

MrWrong: yeah

MrWrong: once they stopped laughing at me

MrWrong: my ass was bruised for nearly a week

MrWrong: made sitting suuuuper fun

FunTimes: I bet

MrWrong: can I ask you something?

FunTimes: sure

MrWrong: you don't have to answer, but I've kinda picked up that you don't hook up with guys often

FunTimes: not often, no

No way would I tell him he was the only one in years.

MrWrong: is there a reason?

FunTimes: don't find a lot of guys I want to hook up with

MrWrong: is that the only reason?

FunTimes: no

I stared at the phone, a rush of panic shooting through me.

Was I seriously about to tell Wrong about what had happened with Brett?

MrWrong: you don't have to tell me if you don't want

FunTimes: I don't talk about it, not ever

FunTimes: the first guy I hooked up with kinda messed me up

MrWrong: how so?

FunTimes: he was my best friend

I swallowed as the memories came rushing back to me.

FunTimes: or at least I thought he was

FunTimes: remember I told you I moved in with my grandma when I was 13?

MrWrong: I remember

FunTimes: he was the first friend I made when I moved, and I guess I kind of got fixated on him. I put up with a lot of shit from him because I thought I was in love with him

FunTimes: he caught me kissing another guy in our class at a party

FunTimes: I didn't even realize he'd seen us, but he confronted me a few days later. Asked if I liked dick

FunTimes: I told him the truth

FunTimes: I told him I liked both, that I was bi

FunTimes: long story short, he pulled his dick out and told me to suck it

FunTimes: I did

FunTimes: I thought it meant something. He was my best friend. I thought we'd be together

MrWrong: he didn't want that?

FunTimes: not publicly

FunTimes: he was perfectly happy using my mouth or ass in private, but that was it

FunTimes: he ignored me at school

FunTimes: he kept promising he'd come out, but he always had an excuse or reason why he couldn't

FunTimes: I let him use me for almost two years

FunTimes: but it was all one-sided

FunTimes: he never once reciprocated

FunTimes: wouldn't kiss me

FunTimes: wouldn't even prep me

I swallowed hard as a lump formed in my throat.

FunTimes: and I let him use me because I stupidly believed he was in love with me too

FunTimes: that he would come out and we'd be together for real

MrWrong: that didn't happen, did it?

FunTimes: no

FunTimes: I kept making excuses for him when he was mean to me at school or when I saw him with girls. He told me it wasn't cheating because

they didn't mean anything to him. That they were just to take suspicion off us

FunTimes: one night I confronted him. He wanted to have sex, but I could smell some chick's perfume all over him. He said he'd just messed around with her but wanted me

FunTimes: I told him no, told him I was done being his sidepiece and if he wanted to fuck me, he'd have to date me

FunTimes: he laughed in my face

FunTimes: told me the only reason he'd bothered to keep me around was because he wanted to get his dick in me

MrWrong: shit

FunTimes: yeah

FunTimes: that was the last time he ever spoke to me

FunTimes: and I'm going to go die in a hole now that I've completely overshared

MrWrong: you didn't overshare

FunTimes: really? Cause I feel like I did

MrWrong: you shared, but you didn't overshare

FunTimes: I don't know why it's so easy to talk to you

MrWrong: maybe because you feel safe with me

My chest tightened. He was right. I did feel safe with him. It was stupid and reckless to put any faith in a rando from a hookup app, but Wrong understood me on a level no one else ever had.

MrWrong: and being a faceless stranger probably helps too

FunTimes: kinda

MrWrong: if it helps, I feel safe with you too

FunTimes: really?

MrWrong: really

FunTimes: that does make me feel better

MrWrong: I'm sorry about your "friend." That's a horrible thing to go through

FunTimes: has something like that happened to you?

MrWrong: sort of

FunTimes: sort of?

I stared at the screen. Would he elaborate and share something personal with me too?

MrWrong: I was a late bloomer

FunTimes: really?

MrWrong: oh yeah

MrWrong: I was a skinny, awkward nerd in high school

MrWrong: I got bullied a lot

FunTimes: I would never have guessed

MrWrong: I grew out of it eventually

MrWrong: I didn't have a lot of friends. Growing up in a small town meant I knew everyone, but that didn't make us friends

MrWrong: in tenth grade one of the most popular girls in school asked me to homecoming

MrWrong: I was so floored that someone wanted to go out with me I didn't see it for what it was

I winced. I could sense where this was going.

MrWrong: long story short, it was a prank. I went to pick her up, and a group of our classmates was waiting for me. I got a shit ton of eggs and water balloons thrown at me. Then they all left to enjoy the dance while I went home and had to explain to my mom what had happened

MrWrong: then I got to see it again and again as a video of the attack was passed around school

FunTimes: shit

MrWrong: it taught me to stop giving a shit what people thought of me. Then I hit a growth spurt, started working out, and suddenly everyone wanted to be my friend

FunTimes: at least you found a silver lining

MrWrong: what's yours?

FunTimes: what do you mean?

MrWrong: your friend. What's the silver lining that came out of that?

FunTimes: there isn't one

MrWrong: are you sure?

I paused. I'd spent so many years focused on what had happened to me that I'd never stopped to think about what good might have come out of it.

FunTimes: I swore I'd never hook up with someone who wouldn't reciprocate again

MrWrong: that's a silver lining

FunTimes: and I promised myself I'd never let someone cheat on me

MrWrong: another one

I didn't tell him that my workaround was to never date.

It figured that the one girl I'd broken that rule for hadn't been worth it.

Not only had she cheated on me, but she'd also epically dumped me for a guy I had the hots for.

FunTimes: thanks

MrWrong: for what?

FunTimes: talking with me

MrWrong: talking with you isn't exactly a hardship
I flushed hot.

FunTimes: I mean talking without the sexy times

MrWrong: again, not a hardship

FunTimes: I should probably go to sleep. I have class in the morning

MrWrong: same

MrWrong: are you feeling better?

FunTimes: a lot better

MrWrong: I'm glad

FunTimes: night

MrWrong: night

I exited out of the app and put my phone on the bedside table.

Usually, talking about my traumas only made things worse. I was so used to compartmentalizing and repressing things that talking about them only brought them back to the surface. Then I'd have to fight to push them back down.

The conversation with Wrong hadn't solved anything, but I did feel better.

As I snuggled into my pillow, an image of Kai holding his sister in his arms flashed in my mind. He wasn't the monster I'd built him up to be.

Yes, he'd rejected me, but it hadn't been malicious. It wasn't his fault our conversation had mattered more to me than to him. And the whole Elissa debacle wasn't his fault either. He wasn't the bad guy in this story.

Sighing, I rolled onto my side and turned off the light.

Right now, I needed to sleep. I could ruminate later.

KAI

“**B**ut why purple?”
“Why not purple?”

Alex rolled his eyes and slumped back in his seat.

We’d been at this for nearly an hour, and we’d accomplished next to nothing. It didn’t help that both of us were in bad moods.

I still didn’t understand why I’d invited Alex to my place and introduced him to Rain. I kept my personal life as far away from my student life as I could.

It might be harsh, but I wasn’t at school to make friends and lifelong connections. I was there to get my degree, get into grad school, and eventually get my mom and sister out of this god-forsaken place.

I could count on one hand the number of people who’d been to my apartment in the six years I’d lived there. Jake and Derek, my occasional threesome buddies, the friend who’d done my ink, and a girl I’d had a casual thing with back when I’d first moved in. That was it.

And I’d never introduced anyone from school to my sister.

Having Alex in my space had affected me in ways I wasn’t quite ready to examine. He’d looked good sitting on my couch, like he belonged. And the tug on my heartstrings when Rain had hugged him, her little arms wrapped tight around him as she hummed the theme song to her favorite TV show. Alex had been relaxed, a small smile on his lips as he breathed deep. He’d looked younger, softer, and so damn sad.

My sister was an empath. She was incredibly intuitive and gravitated toward people who were hurting or seemed to be going through something.

When we went out, she always found one person, whether we were in line at the grocery store or sitting on a bench in the park. She'd stare at them until they looked at her. Then she'd smile and wave. Usually, people would give her a quick smile and avert their eyes. Some people ignored her. Others would return her smile and wave back.

Rain never got discouraged when someone ignored her or didn't cheer up. She just kept looking at them, giving them big smiles every time they'd look back until they eventually gave her a genuine, happy smile.

I wasn't shocked she'd hugged Alex. The guy was coiled so tight he could snap at any moment. What bothered me was how much I'd wished I'd been in Rain's place. I wasn't a hugger. I didn't cuddle, and snuggling with someone didn't appeal to me. Yet I'd stood there, jealous of my six-year-old sister because she was hugging a guy who *felt* like mine.

"Purple is a random choice. The rest of the graph is in red and yellow. Why not go with green?" he asked.

"Because green doesn't have that same element of surprise. People are used to seeing red, yellow, and green together."

"A stoplight." Alex pursed his full lips. "But what does that have to do with our presentation?"

"Do you know what change blindness is?"

He shook his head.

"The graph on the previous slide is nearly identical to this one. Humans don't see changes while they're focusing on something. Have you ever taken a psych course?"

"101 and 102. They're school requirements."

"Did you do that experiment where everyone watches a video clip, but you're concentrating so hard on something specific you miss whatever the prof asks about?"

He nodded. "It was a halftime show at a basketball game. We were supposed to watch the mascot and count how many times he clapped. The prof asked us about the clown. When no one knew what he was talking about, he played the clip back. A random clown did a face-plant in the corner of the clip, and no one noticed."

"That's change blindness. If we want people to notice the point we're making, then it has to stand out and catch their attention."

"I guess." Alex ran a hand through his hair, messing up the long strands.

My hand itched as I pictured gripping his hair and holding him in place.

Fuck. Ever since Alex had told me we'd flirted, I'd been trying to place him. I flirted with a lot of people. Pretty much everyone. He wouldn't be the first I hadn't texted when I'd said I would.

I'd never thought about how much that could hurt someone. I was wired differently. If someone blew me off or didn't message when they said they would, I brushed it off and forgot about them. But that was me.

I'd hurt Alex's feelings and most likely a shit ton of other people's over the years, and that made me feel like an asshole. Adding to my assholery was how I'd apparently been the wedge that had driven him and his girlfriend apart.

I didn't hook up with taken people, and I always asked before I did anything physical with someone.

I remembered Elissa. She'd come onto me hard, zeroing in on me the second I'd arrived and gluing herself to my side. The barn party was one of the few I'd attended in years, and I'd only gone because Derek and Jake had invited me.

I'd enjoyed kissing her. She'd been flirty and pretty and eager, but the spark hadn't been there. An hour later, I'd bailed on the party and hadn't thought of her since.

Alex's anger made sense now, especially if she'd made it seem like I'd promised her more.

This was such a clusterfuck.

I'd had an inkling that Alex wasn't completely straight by the way he'd sometimes look at me. The appreciation and heat in his eyes weren't exactly subtle. Now that I knew he swung both ways, my imagination was having a field day creating one lewd image after another.

Alex had a beautiful mouth, his lips pouty and full. Dick-sucking lips, as some people would call them. Then there were his eyes. So dark but so expressive.

How would he look on his knees? Those eyes staring up at me, his lips stretched wide around my cock. Would he glare at me as he swallowed my dick?

Blood rushed south, and my cock filled until it was fully hard. Great. Now I had a boner in the middle of the library. Just fucking awesome.

The image of Alex on his knees melted into the faceless one that my mind had created for Fun.

I had no idea what he looked like from the neck up, just that his hair was

longish. That didn't stop my imagination from inserting him into all my dirtiest, filthiest fantasies. The ones I only broke out in the dead of night when I was alone. The ones that would make any sane person run away and never look back.

Fuck. I needed to get laid.

It had been months since I'd had sex. Well, sex with another person who was in the same room as me.

Between work, school, and helping my mom out, I barely had enough time to sleep. Finding a hookup had been low on my priority list for a long time.

Kinksters was perfect because I could log on, get off with someone in real time, and go back to my life until the urge hit again. Lather, rinse, repeat.

But Fun had changed things for me. The thought of swiping on some random didn't hold the same appeal anymore, and the few times I'd looked for a new match, I'd closed the app and took care of business on my own. Usually while I thought about Fun.

Now that I knew Alex was into guys, my sex drive seemed to have tripled overnight. Everything about him turned me on from his pretty face to his surly attitude.

Blowing out a breath, I pulled my hoodie off. *Focus, Kai.*

"So, we agree that purple works?"

"Yeah, sure."

I glanced up from my laptop. Alex was staring at my left arm.

"Do you have a lot of ink?" he asked, his voice hollow and his eyes blank. His shoulders tensed.

"Yeah. Two sleeves, chest and side piece, back piece too."

The way he was staring intensely at me was a bit concerning. "What? You don't like tattoos?"

"No. Not that. How did you afford to get ink like that done? That couldn't have been cheap."

"It was for me. A friend I used to work with apprenticed to be a tattoo artist a few years ago. We did a trade. He got a blank canvas to practice on, and I got all the ink I wanted for free."

"You let an apprentice work on you with zero direction?" He gaped at me.

"I let my friend work on me." I shrugged. What had caused this shift in his attitude? "Dude's an amazing artist. And it's not like I didn't have a say

in what he designed. Why?”

“No reason.” He looked down at the laptop screen. “So purple. What’s next?”

Huh, what was that about? I clicked to the next slide. The little question mark in the bottom right-hand corner caught my attention. Right, I hadn’t had the reference for the information I’d plugged in.

“Do you remember where we got these statistics?” I asked.

A paper was shoved under my nose.

I took it and turned the laptop toward me so I could input the reference information.

Zzzzz zzzzz zzzzz.

Typing with one hand, I pulled my phone out of my pocket and checked my notifications. One was from Kinksters.

Fun and I had been randomly messaging for the last week, ever since we’d had that midnight talk. That had also fucked with me. I wasn’t in the habit of chatting with people I’d gotten off, and I’d never told anyone about that homecoming incident. But I’d sat in bed like some eager teenager and texted about personal shit with Fun. I liked the guy, and in another world, I could see us being friends. But I was way too attached to him.

I unlocked my phone and opened Kinksters while I typed in the reference info.

The last message I’d sent had been an illustration of a guy getting railed by a werewolf-type monster. Fun had told me he enjoyed animated porn, and after doing a bit of googling, I got the appeal.

Fun had sent me a GIF of Blanche from The Golden Girls fanning herself.

I chuckled and sent back a smirking emoji. I was just about to close out of the app when another message appeared.

FunTimes: look up

Confused and more as a reflex than a conscious choice, I did. My eyes collided with a pair of wide, dark ones.

The panic in them was unmistakable.

“You’re Wrong,” he croaked.

“I didn’t even say anything...”

I snapped my mouth shut as the reality of the situation hit like an anvil.

No. No fucking way. Alex couldn’t be FunTimes.

Could he?

“No,” Alex whispered, jumping up.

His entire body was tight, his eyes flashing with what looked like terror.

“Wait—”

I stood, knocking my chair over in my haste. “Alex—”

He shook his head so violently his hair whipped around his face. “No.”

As I stepped around the table, I tripped on the strap of my backpack. “Fuck.”

Alex darted across the room in a full sprint.

“Shit!” I kicked off the strap wrapped around my ankle, but Alex was long gone. The heavy door to the stairwell banged closed. “Fuck.”

How the fuck could I have been messaging with *Alex* and not known?

We’d kept things pretty anonymous on the app, not sharing any identifiable details. But still.

I glanced at my arm and winced. No wonder he’d recognized my tats. The sleeve on this arm was a mishmash of nature-themed pieces. Lots of flowers, vines, birds, and leaves. The work was custom, and the small jack-o'-lantern nestled among a cluster of pastel-orange marigolds was one of a kind.

Had he seen me in a T-shirt before? I cycled through the memories of the few times we’d met up. I’d always had a sweater on. Even when he’d come to my place, I’d been wearing long sleeves.

Shit.

In a daze, I righted the chair I’d knocked over, then slumped into it. I’d told Fun—Alex—shit I’d never told anyone.

I closed my eyes. The image of a faceless Fun on his knees merged with one of Alex doing the same, all pouted lips and flashing eyes as he glared up at me. All those times I’d gotten Fun off, it had been Alex on the other end of the line.

Sounds of Alex coming for me echoed in my ears, and a rush of heat shot through me. I cursed my sex-starved brain.

What were the fucking odds that the one guy I’d connected with online also happened to be not only my presentation partner but also someone who hated me for being a dick to him.

I scrubbed one hand over my face.

Alex had left all his stuff, including his phone, on the table. Should I wait for him to come back?

He’d been pretty spooked, and I wasn’t sure he would come back, not even for his phone.

Sighing, I stood, gathered our stuff, and shoved everything into our bags.

When the table was clean, I pulled on my hoodie and tucked Alex's phone into my front pocket. Hopefully, he'd get a friend to text his phone or call it so I could drop it and the rest of his stuff off at his place.

KAI

Three hours later, I sat on my couch, staring at the wall.

I'd gone to the gym, taken a long shower, eaten a balanced meal, and chatted with Rain over video call as she told me about her day.

None of that had managed to take my mind off the fact that Alex and Fun were the same person. That I'd not only had phone sex with my presentation partner but had also shared a crap ton of personal stuff with him.

I wasn't afraid of him using it against me, but he knew shit no one else did. Like my job.

I'd never told anyone I stripped for a living. But I'd told Fun and, by extension, Alex. I'd talked about being bullied, my childhood, and my family.

I didn't share personal shit with people. Maybe that made me an emotionally stunted asshole, but I had my reasons for not getting involved with people.

My secret, the one I hadn't even told Fun about, was that I was a jealous, possessive bastard. When someone was mine, they were *mine*.

My attention could be stifling and obsessive, and I didn't need my future degree to tell me it was unhealthy.

Until now, I'd never met someone who'd triggered that possessive instinct. Fun had tripped it, and so had Alex.

I still hadn't fully managed to merge their personas, but now I couldn't think about Alex without that little voice whispering in the back of my mind.

Mine.

But he wasn't mine. He'd never be mine.

Knock knock knock.

Who could be at my door at this hour? Half in a daze, I stood and padded over to my door.

Probably one of my neighbors dropping off my mail. Our letter carrier had a habit of shoving handfuls of random letters into people's boxes.

I pulled the door open and froze. It wasn't one of my neighbors.

Alex stood in my doorway, his hair wet and dripping onto his cheeks. His sweater was soaked, and his jeans were dark with water.

He looked down at his hands, which were clenched in front of him. "I didn't know where else to go."

I moved back, silently letting him in.

He took two steps inside, then stopped.

I reached around him and closed the door, then took a few steps back so I wasn't crowding him.

He kept his eyes on the floor.

Silence stretched between us.

"I have your phone," I said.

He kicked the toe of his shoe against the floor.

"It's a burner. Not important." His voice was soft, hollow, and hoarse.

"You use a burner phone?"

He shrugged.

"I do too."

He jerked his head up. His dark eyes were red-rimmed. "You do?"

"I have my main phone and a basic one I use to talk to people from school or work."

The corner of his mouth lifted in a barely there smile. "Same. And for randoms I meet off Kinksters." His throat worked as he swallowed.

Transfixed, I watched the muscles working, even as jealousy coursed through my veins. "You still meeting people off there?" My voice was gruff and angry.

He snorted. "No. Not since before I started talking with..." He clenched his fists. "You weren't supposed to be real."

He glowered at me. "You weren't supposed to be a real person. Just a voice I could get off to." He drew in a shaky breath, his entire body tight as a drum. "I hate what you've done to me."

"What did I do to you?"

The little growl he let out shouldn't have been so hot.

“You made me *feel*.” He swiped at his wet hair, pushing a few of the strands out of his eyes. “I hate you. I spent the last god knows how many hours walking around in the fucking rain, and all I could think about was how I needed to see you. So *you* could make it better. I don’t even remember deciding to come here, but here I am. I hate you, but I need you. How fucked up is that?”

“It’s not fucked up.” I stepped closer to him.

His nostrils flared. “It *is* fucked up. I want to hate you! Why couldn’t the universe let me have that? Why did it have to be *you* on the other end of the line? Why are *you* the only one who can make the noise in my head shut up?”

“Because you were made for me.”

“I wasn’t,” he snapped. “I would never have swiped your profile if I’d known it was you.”

“But I would have swiped on your profile if I’d known it was you.”

“What?”

“I know I hurt you, but that doesn’t change the fact that I think you’re hot as fuck. Did you know I fantasized about you? Even when you hated me, I still wanted you.” I leaned in so my lips were next to his ear. “And you want me.”

“I don’t.” He stepped back, hitting the door with a dull *thud*.

“You do.” I took a half step forward, close enough that our chests brushed every time he pulled in a ragged breath.

“No.”

“Yes.”

I trailed my lips over the wet skin of his earlobe. “Remember how hot I made you? How loud you moaned for me?”

“I hate you,” he muttered, his voice strained and breathy. “I hate you.”

“Maybe, but you still want me. You want this.”

I grabbed his wrists and slammed them against the door. Our chests touched, and our lips were only inches apart.

Alex glared at me, his cheeks flushed pink, his perfect lips parted and shiny and so fucking inviting.

“Stoplight method,” I murmured. “Red, yellow, green. Got it?”

He nodded minutely, just a quick tick of his chin.

“What’s your color?” I scraped my cheek against his, our stubble catching. Zings of pleasure zapped through me.

“Green,” he whispered.

“Mmmmmmm.” I ground my dick against his.

He gasped.

Wetness seeped into my clothes, but even the cold rain couldn't hide how hard and hot he was. He wanted me.

That little voice in my head was loud now.

Mine. Mine. *Mine*.

“You loved every second of it,” I said in his ear, circling my hips so my cock brushed over his with every swirl. “Do you remember how hard I made you?”

“No.” He let his head fall against the door. Droplets dripped from his hair onto his face.

“You came so hard for me.” I licked up a streak of water from his cheek.

He moaned softly, his body going limp.

“How does it feel to know it was me getting you off? The guy you hate?”

His eyes flashed. The anger from before was back.

Perfect. Fun—Alex—had told me he liked fighting. So did I.

“What are you going to do about it?” I taunted, squeezing his wrists tight. “You’re just going to stand there and take it, aren’t you? Like the good little cocks slut you are.”

I was taking a chance by calling him that, but by the way Alex’s pupils dilated, he didn’t hate it.

“No!” He shoved his hips against mine. The suddenness of the move caught me off guard.

Fuck, yeah.

He bucked and twisted, practically hissing as he tried to shove me off.

“That’s right,” I growled. Adrenaline poured into my system as I pinned him against the door with my bigger body. “You’re going to take everything I give you.”

“Never.” He glared at me.

Bracing myself, I yanked him away from the door.

He grunted as his feet slipped on the floor, giving me the leverage I needed to drag him into my apartment.

When I was next to my couch, I stopped. “On your knees.”

“Fuck. You.” He tried to rip his wrists out of my hands.

I chuckled darkly. “That’s not how it’s going to go.”

Heat pooled in his eyes, mixing with the anger.

“On your knees.”

I let go of his wrists and took advantage of his momentary surprise to slide my fingers into his hair. I gripped the strands close to his scalp and used my foot to sweep his right leg out from under him.

He landed on the floor, his knees smacking loudly. “Oof.”

“Now, was that so hard?” I made sure to keep a taunting lilt in my voice.

He glared up at me, his chest heaving as he drew in hot, heavy breaths. “Fuck. You.”

“Nah. But I am going to fuck you.” I tightened my grip on his hair, but I didn’t pull, just held him. “And you’re going to like it.”

“In your dreams.”

“Take out my cock.”

He smirked and planted his hands on my thighs, then gave me a hard shove.

“Bad boys get punished.” I let go of his hair and yanked him to his feet. Using his momentum, I tipped him to the side and shoved him onto my couch.

“Argh!”

He landed hard on his back, his face red with either rage or arousal. Or both.

I swung one leg over his chest, keeping the other one firmly on the floor. “Hit my leg three times if you need to tap out.” I held his gaze to make sure he understood what I meant.

He nodded again, a half smile tilting the corner of his perfect mouth. He slowly, deliberately, ran the tip of his tongue over his full bottom lip.

“Fuck.”

I sat my weight down on his chest and ripped open my pants.

“I can’t wait to get my dick in your mouth,” I growled, fishing my cock out of my briefs. I was wet and slick already, the head a dusky red.

Alex stared at my cock hungrily, all pretenses of fighting gone.

I grabbed one of his wrists and pinned it to the arm of the couch.

“Open that pretty mouth for me.” I gripped the base of my shaft and pumped my hips, forcing my cock to slide through my hand.

“Never.” He glowered at me.

“Come on, princess. Open your mouth.” I poked at his lips with the tip of my dick. “You know you want to.”

“Get off.”

I paused, giving him a chance to let me know if he wanted to stop or if

this was part of his fantasy.

He grinned, dark and feral.

My heart pounded in my chest, and my vision tunneled in until all I saw was Alex. Usually, I could maintain a certain level of detachment when I did role-play. It allowed me to keep on top of the situation and tailor my act to whatever my partner wanted me to be.

Not with him.

He was all flashing eyes and pouting lips under me. He looked perfect. He looked like mine.

This wasn't real, but it *felt* real. Fighting him as his dark eyes flashed with anger was beyond hot. It triggered that primal part of me that liked the idea of taking what was mine.

"Open your mouth." I pulled my dick up so it rested against my abs, then let go. It swung down and slapped his lips.

He wiggled under me but didn't put much effort into throwing me off.

"Open your mouth and suck me."

"No." He clenched his lips together.

"Here's what's going to happen, princess. First, you're going to get me nice and wet. When I've had my fun, it'll be your turn. I'm going to make you writhe for me. Scream for me. But I won't let you come. Not until you're wrapped around my cock. Then I'm going to fuck you, and you're going to like it."

"No."

"Yes. You're going to take everything I give you. And you're going to thank me."

"Never." He widened his eyes, and his pupils dilated the slightest bit.

Oh, he liked that.

"You will. Now open that pretty mouth. Use those dick-sucking lips." I held still. Had that crossed a line?

He parted his lips, his eyes never leaving mine. The anger was there, but so were heat and desire.

"Fuck." I pinched his chin and pulled it down, then slid my cock into his waiting mouth. He didn't resist. "Suck."

He closed his lips around my cockhead but didn't suck.

"Now." I thrust my hips forward and groaned softly as my shaft slid over his tongue.

How he managed to smirk with a dick in his mouth was a mystery, but he

did, blinking at me innocently, his challenge clear.

“Brat.” I gripped his cheeks, holding his face still. “Guess we’re doing this the hard way.”

As I let go of his face and held his hair again, he moaned.

“That’s right.” I tilted his head back the slightest bit, enough so he’d feel completely immobilized. My dick slipped out of his mouth.

“Open that pretty mouth for me.”

Annoyance filled his eyes, but he parted his lips and didn’t fight as I pushed into his mouth.

“There you go.” I bit back a moan. “Suck me good. Get me nice and wet for you.”

His annoyance shifted to defiance, then to something I couldn’t read. He sucked hard, hollowing his cheeks.

“Holy fuck.” I groaned.

He stared at me as he worked my dick, his cheeks hollowed and his eyes bright with challenge.

“That’s it. So fucking good.” I gripped the armrest with both hands and braced myself over him. “Relax your throat.”

He glared at me but did as I told him, letting me thrust into his mouth.

Fuck, he felt good. And having him under me, at my mercy, was so fucking hot.

“Look at you, taking it like you were made for it.” He swallowed around my cockhead, and I let out a little grunt. His eyes were still defiant. Time to fix that.

Pulling out of his mouth, I wiggled down his body so I was sitting on his thighs. Alex was panting, his eyes bright and his cheeks flushed red. His lips were wet and swollen and so fucking inviting.

Shit. I hadn’t kissed him yet.

Kissing wasn’t exactly part of CNC role-play, but it felt wrong to continue without tasting his lips. Alex wasn’t some random I’d made an agreement with. He... I had no idea what the fuck he was, but he *meant* something to me. I liked him, and that primal part of myself was itching to claim him in every way possible.

“Oh!” Alex gasped as I slammed our mouths together.

The angle was off, and his skin was cold and wet, the smell of rain and ozone surrounding him. It should’ve been awkward and weird, but as Alex’s lips molded to mine, he let out the softest, sweetest sigh.

That sound was my undoing. As much as he might hate me, he still wanted me.

Mine. Mine. *Mine*.

Shoving that voice to the back of my head, I shifted so I was lying over him.

The kiss was hard and hot, all lips and teeth and swiping tongues. He wasn't surrendering, and I didn't want him to. Strong hands raked down my back, and his nails dug into my muscles through my shirt. He parted his legs and angled his hips so our cocks lined up. He whimpered when I kept still over him.

Fuck. I'd known he'd be responsive in person, but even my fantasies had nothing on the real thing.

Cold hands slipped under my shirt and ran up and down my back, grabbing, squeezing, and kneading my muscles. He shifted his hips, forcing me to rub against him.

I let him, sinking into the kiss as we battled for dominance.

Alex was whimpering now, a steady, constant stream of needy sounds. My dick ached. As much as I wanted to keep kissing him, to own his mouth so completely I'd be branded on his brain forever, I needed more.

With a strangled sound, I tore my lips from his and kissed a trail over his jaw, then down his neck. Alex wiggled and moaned as I peppered his skin with wet, hungry, openmouthed kisses.

Alex stilled under me, and I looked at his face. Was he still with me?

He blinked and shook his head like he was trying to clear it.

Right. Fun—Alex—had told me about his concentration issues. His wet clothes were probably distracting him.

“You want to move to my room?” I asked, breaking the role-play.

His eyes were wide and frustrated.

“Answer me when I ask you a question.” I added a bit of a command to my tone.

He immediately relaxed and nodded.

I climbed off him and offered him a hand so I could help him up.

He looked timid and off-balance. Was that from our kissing or the break in the action?

Not wanting to give him a chance to overthink things, I grabbed him behind the neck and dragged him to me for another wet kiss.

He moaned into my mouth, gripping my hips tight enough he was going

to leave bruises. Good. I wanted them. Just like I wanted to mark him, bruise his pale skin. Leave love bites all over his beautiful body. So anyone who looked at him would know he was mine. And more than that, I wanted his marks. I wanted him to brand me. I wanted to carry the proof of his desire long after we parted ways.

My heart clenched at the thought that this might be the only time we hooked up.

Alex's reasons for hating me might seem trivial to most people, but after talking with him online, I understood him. Or at least I thought I did.

He was hypersensitive to rejection, and not only had I rejected him when I hadn't texted, but his girlfriend had rejected him for me as well. That was a lot of pain for someone to process, and he'd told me how his best friend didn't have time for him anymore.

That meant he was dealing with all these emotions alone.

He might not hate me anymore, but I was still a constant reminder of that night a year ago. That night at the party, and he was also dealing with the emotional fallout of discovering that the guy he'd been having phone sex with was yours truly, the guy who'd hurt him.

That was a lot for anyone to process.

Alex buried his hands in my hair and gripped the strands tight, then kissed me hard, desperate, and crazed.

I held him against my body and played passive, letting him get out whatever was in his head. He bit and swiped at my lips with enough force it turned the kiss into something punishing and painful.

When he finally tore his mouth from mine, we were both panting hard. His eyes were dazed.

"Color?" I asked softly.

"Green," he whispered. "You taste good."

Groaning, I shifted my hands and grabbed his inner thighs.

As I lifted him, he let out the cutest squeal.

He wrapped his long legs around my waist and gripped my shoulders. "Holy shit." He blinked and looked around.

"Never been carried before?" I asked, unable to keep the pleasure out of my voice.

He shook his head.

I adjusted my hold on him, dragged his mouth down for another kiss, and slowly made my way toward my room.

When I was standing beside my bed, Alex was cupping my cheeks, his lips soft and pliant.

Carefully, I lowered him to the bed, laying him on his back. He blinked up at me, adorable and dazed.

Planting one knee on the bed beside him, I yanked him up and pulled his hoodie off. His T-shirt got caught around his neck. I tossed the hoodie aside, then untangled his shirt.

He fell back onto the bed, panting, his eyes wide. As I ripped open his jeans, I half expected him to fight me, but he lay passively as I tugged them down.

The wet material kept getting caught on his thighs, but the view of slowly peeling off his jeans and revealing his long, shapely legs was one hundred percent worth the extra effort and struggle.

I'd always had a thing for legs and asses. Thick thighs, curvy calves, and round butts were my kryptonite. They didn't even have to be bubble butts, just have enough extra padding they jiggled when I spanked or fucked them.

Alex's legs were incredible. His entire body was perfect. His long, lean muscles were tight in all the right places, and the tiny little pouch of skin just under his belly button made my mouth water.

I had no clue why, but that little bit of softness among tight, toned muscles was so hot. Abandoning his jeans, I pressed my cheek against that spot, rubbing into the softness like a touch-starved cat and pressed soft kisses against it.

"Oh fuck," Alex breathed, burying his hands in my hair.

My chin bumped against his dick, still covered by his briefs.

I lifted my lips from his stomach and looked up at him. "Do you usually wear underwear like these?"

I traced my finger over the waistband of his briefs. The black material over his junk was opaque and soft to the touch, but it was the sheer, peek-a-boo panels over his hips that my dick appreciated.

Half of what looked like a phoenix tattoo peeked through one panel. He must have edited it out of his pics on Kinksters.

He nodded, his cheeks pinking a little bit more.

"So hot." I dropped a kiss on the tip of his dick.

"Wrong..." he breathed.

Pressing another kiss to his dick, I tried not to get jealous. It was stupid to be jealous of myself, but that primal part of me hated that Alex was picturing

me as his phone sex buddy.

We were the same person, damn it. Why did it bother me so much?

Pushing those thoughts out of my head, I sat up. Bracing myself with my knee, I slipped my hands under Alex's body and positioned him so he was in the middle of my bed.

"Put your hands behind your head. Clasp them together."

He shot me a glare but did as I said.

"Keep them there. If you move them, I'll stop. Got it?"

He nodded, desire and lust flaring in his eyes.

"Do you want me to finish taking your jeans off?" I broke the role-play again. "Or can I leave them on for a bit?"

"Leave them," he whispered.

"Now, lie back and breathe for me. I want you to breathe in to a count of four and out to a count of six. If you stop, I stop. Got it?"

He nodded and pulled in a deep breath. Hopefully, giving him something to concentrate on would help him relax.

Slowly, teasingly, I ran my fingertips down his chest, across his stomach, and over his hips.

He moaned and shifted his hips as I stroked the visible part of his tattoo, gently rubbing over the soft material of his underwear. Needing more, I hooked my thumbs under the waistband of his briefs and pulled them down until they rested under his balls. His cock bounced free and slapped his stomach.

His tattoo was beautifully done in watercolor-style, the shading so detailed it made it seem 3D. But the workmanship wasn't what made me pause. That would be the semicolon inked next to the phoenix.

I tore my eyes away from his tat and focused on his dick. It was perfect. Long and hard and already wet with precum. He wasn't especially thick, but he had a sexy-as-fuck vein running down the length of his shaft.

I leaned down, sucked the head of his dick into my mouth, and swallowed.

"Holy shit!" He arched his hips and shoved his dick down my throat.

I let him fuck my mouth for a few beats, then used my hands to pin him to the bed.

Alex was panting and moaning and mumbling nonsensical words as I worked him over with my mouth.

I loved watching a guy come apart as I blew them. Edging was one of my

biggest kinks. Something about being completely in charge of someone's pleasure just did it for me. Bringing someone close, then backing off while they protested and whined was just as hot as having someone go down on me.

I pulled off his dick and idly licked around his crown, keeping my touch light and teasing

“Wrong, *please*,” he begged.

Another rush of jealousy shot through me at the sound of my handle on his lips. It was stupid and irrational, but I wanted him to be fully present. I wanted him to not only see me but also to remember *I* was the one who'd gotten him off.

Determined, I swallowed his cock, sucking hard and fast as I bobbed over him.

He cried out, his breathing forgotten, as I worked him over.

When he was trembling and babbling about how close he was, I pulled off.

“Fuck!” He bucked his hips, staring at me with sex-crazed eyes.

“What?” I asked innocently, using one hand to push his hip down.

“You cocktease,” he grumbled.

“Oh, you haven't seen anything yet,” I said darkly.

He widened his eyes, and as I leaned down and licked his slit, some of the fight left him.

“Fucking come *on*,” he whined.

I did it again. “Nope.” Another lick. “This is my show.” Two licks. “You're going to lie there and take everything I give you.” A slow lick. “Don't make me tie you up.”

I slowly stroked him, and he gasped, anticipation flashing in his eyes.

I took my time teasing him, using my mouth and hand to bring him right to the brink of orgasm, just to pull away and taunt him as his body calmed down. He writhed and whimpered and cursed me.

“You're so hungry for it,” I said. “You can have my cock, but only if you ask for it.”

He whined and let out an irritated huff, then opened his eyes and glared at me.

“It's cute you think that works on me.” I sat on my heels and grabbed his jeans.

I yanked them until they were around his ankles. It took a second to rid him of his shoes and socks, which were also sopping wet. Then his clothes

were on the floor, and he lay before me, naked and perfect.

A blush painted his cheeks.

It didn't escape me that I was fully clothed with only my dick out while he was nude, and the power imbalance did things to my insides.

Alex parted his legs in a silent invitation. As much as I wanted to bury myself in his ass, I needed to finish prepping him.

"Flip over."

He bit his lip, indecision marring his features.

"I said, 'flip over.'"

A tiny smile tilted one corner of his mouth. "Make me."

Growling, I grabbed his hips, flipped him onto his stomach, and angled his hips up so his hole and dick were completely exposed.

"Oh shit," he mumbled, rubbing his face against the comforter.

Not giving him a chance to get used to the new position, I licked a stripe over his hole. His cry was loud enough to wake the dead. Hopefully, the old man who lived next door was already in bed because I wasn't about to tell Alex to quiet down.

Alex was nearly sobbing as I split his cheeks and ate him out. I loved rimming, and Alex's enthusiasm was a huge turn-on.

He bumped his hips back, forcing my tongue deep inside him.

"Please, please, please, please," he begged.

I sucked my thumb into my mouth and sank the tip inside him.

"Yes," he breathed.

He was loosened up from my teasing, but I needed lube.

"Don't fucking move." I grabbed his hips and held them still.

He whimpered in protest but obeyed as I dug through my bedside table and found my lube and a condom. He looked amazing. All helpless and waiting for me. His round, full ass high, his dick so hard it was nearly purple as it hung between his spread legs.

He was mine. All mine.

"Put your hands behind your back."

He looked over his shoulder, a smirk on his lips, and slid his hands under his chest.

"Brat." I smeared some lube over his hole.

He grinned wider as I slicked up my fingers.

The smile fell from his face and was replaced by a look of pure rapture as I grabbed his upper arms with my dry hand and forced him to put his arms

behind his back.

Gripping his wrists, I slid one finger inside him. Holy fuck, he was tight. His muscles clenched around my digit as he fought the invasion.

Was that because of his history? Or maybe because it had been a while since he'd taken a dick?

I took my time teasing him open, moving my finger in and out of him as gently as I could.

He whined as I rubbed his spot. I pulled my finger all the way out, then slowly pushed back in a few times.

"More," he demanded.

Silently, I added a second one. As much as it was killing me, I kept my pace slow and even, holding his arms in place to keep him immobile.

"I need more," he begged.

I added a third. His ass looked amazing, swallowing my fingers. I watched raptly as I finger fucked him, still moving too slow to give him any sort of relief.

"Kai," he mumbled. "Need you."

The roar that filled my ears knocked me momentarily senseless. He clenched around my fingers. Shit, I'd stopped teasing him.

Carefully, I pulled my fingers out of him. I grabbed the condom, tore it open with my teeth, and thumbed out the latex. Using one hand, I suited up, not letting go of his wrists.

When the condom was nice and slick, I shifted closer to him, lining my cock up with his waiting hole. Moving slowly, I rubbed my cockhead against him a few times, then gently pressed in.

The sharp hiss of his breath told me he wasn't ready for more, not yet.

"That's it," I said softly. "Relax for me."

He whimpered, his body still locked up tight.

I didn't want to hurt him, not with his history. I leaned over his back, covering him with my body.

He relaxed slightly, and I pushed in until the resistance came back.

"You have no idea how much I want to fuck you," I murmured in his ear. "How many times I've thought about fucking your perfect ass."

He moaned, relaxing slightly.

"You're so tight, so hot." I kissed the spot just under his ear. "Do you want that? Do you want my dick in your ass?"

"Yes," he mumbled dazedly.

“Yeah, you do.” I pushed in a little more. “You’re going to look so hot with my dick splitting you open. You want that? You want me to fuck you?”

“I want it.”

His voice was faraway and dreamy.

“Breathe out and bear down,” I whispered. “I’m not going to hurt you, I promise.”

His body locked up tight for a few beats, then relaxed.

I slid the rest of the way inside him and paused when my thighs were pressed against his ass.

“That’s it. You’ve got all of me.”

Fucking hell, he felt amazing. His walls gripped my cock in the most perfect way. I wanted to move, to slam into him as hard and fast as I could, but I held back.

This was his first time in years, and I’d meant what I’d said. I didn’t want to hurt him. Pain with pleasure, or pain as pleasure was one thing, but I could do some real damage if I wasn’t careful. I’d never betray his trust by causing him pain without setting clear boundaries first.

“Kai,” he moaned, clenching around my dick. “You need to move.”

“Do I?”

He huffed out a frustrated grunt. “Move!”

“Why should I?”

I licked the shell of his ear as he wiggled under me, desperately trying to force me to move. My body was tight, and my muscles ached with the effort it took to hold still.

“Kai!”

“What?”

“Fuck me!”

“You asked for it.”

I settled back on my knees behind him, pulled almost all the way out, and pushed back in nice and slow.

He was beautiful, all spread out for me, his cheek pressed against my comforter, his eyes closed, and that blissed out look on his face. My dick looked obscene, so hard and red, as it slid into his tight hole, the paleness of his ass cheeks creating the most alluring contrast.

Still gripping his wrists, I set a deliberately slow and steady rhythm.

Alex was moaning nonstop, his body limp. I had to support him under the hips with my other hand to keep the angle. Would he enjoy being suspended?

“Kai,” he whined.

“What?” Somehow, I managed to keep my voice casual and nonchalant and not at all like I was right on the edge of snapping.

“I need more.” He panted.

“Yeah?” I pulled all the way out.

“Argh!” His hole clenched. The sight was so sexy I had to look away and center myself.

I also had issues with concentration, but not in the same way as Alex. I didn't get distracted, I became laser-focused on my partner until reality melted away. The room, building, even the world around us could have fallen away, and I wouldn't have noticed.

“Kai!” He bumped his hips back.

“What?”

“Fuck me!”

“Say please.”

“No.”

I chuckled and ran my free hand over the swell of his ass. “Yes.”

“You're annoying.”

“You like it.”

“Kai.” His voice was sugary sweet now. He was up to something.

“What?”

“Don't you want to fuck me?” He looked over his shoulder. “Don't you want to make me come on your cock?”

“Brat.”

He grinned serenely. “Come on. You know you want to.” He wiggled his ass. “I'm so wet and ready for you,” he purred.

The surge of arousal that shot through me set my entire body on edge.

“I'm lying here all helpless.” He licked his bottom lip. “You could do anything you wanted to me. And I'd have to let you.”

The cry that tore from my throat was loud and primal and inhuman.

I sank back into him and set a steady pace.

“Yes,” he muttered.

As much as I wanted to drill him into the mattress, I still had enough self-control to hold back. He might have gotten the upper hand, but I wasn't ready to concede.

I tightened my grip on his wrists and held his ass open with my other hand, watching as my cock disappeared inside him over and over again.

He was moaning up a storm, that blissed out look back on his face.

“You want to come?” My balls drew up and hugged my dick. I was too close to keep edging him.

He didn’t answer, just clenched around my cock.

“Fuck,” I snarled, slamming into him with zero finesse.

We were being too loud. The bed hitting the wall with every punishing thrust, and the cries we let out wouldn’t have been out of place in porn.

“Come for me, Alex,” I gritted out.

“I can’t,” he sobbed, fighting against my grip on his wrists.

I would have loved to see if I could make him come hands-free, but I was too fucking close. Keeping a grip on his wrists, I reached under him and stroked him in time with my thrusts.

Alex’s entire body seized up, then relaxed as he screamed, the sound filled with relief and pleasure.

I fucked him through his orgasm. His walls rippled around my dick, setting off my own. Burying myself as deep inside him as I could, I emptied my load—and what felt like my consciousness into the condom.

A soft whimper brought me back to reality.

I was lying on him and mouthing the back of his neck, worrying the soft skin between my teeth. His spent dick was in one hand, and the other was tucked under his racing heart.

Carefully, I pulled out of him.

He whimpered at the loss.

Kissing the nape of his neck, I slowly moved off him.

He lay on the bed, his legs spread, his ass on display, moaning softly.

I stripped off my clothes and tossed the condom into the trash, then grabbed a blanket out of my closet.

I climbed into the bed and carefully rolled him onto his back so I could check his eyes. They were glassy and unfocused; his breathing was shallow and quick.

“Come here,” I murmured and pulled him against my chest.

One of his hands landed on my happy trail, and he sifted his fingers through the hairs as he settled his head against my pec.

I arranged the blanket over us, making sure to trap in the warmth from our bodies.

“You’re okay, Alex,” I whispered, running my hand through his hair. “I’m here. You’re safe. It’s okay to let go.”

He mumbled something unintelligible and moved his hand lower. Loosely, he held my soft dick in his hand.

I kept whispering to him, holding him tight as I played with his hair. The strands were still wet, but at least his skin was warm.

He came back to reality, and I tightened my grip on him. His body tensed. "Let me go," he whispered.

He was still holding on to my dick, and he wasn't fighting or using his colors.

"No." I held him tighter. "You're not running away, not now."

"I need to go."

"You need to stay here and let me take care of you."

"You're not real." He nuzzled into my chest, relaxing. "You were never supposed to be real."

"I know." I kissed his hair. "You were never supposed to be real either."

"I hate this." He bit my pec.

I jumped at the sting of pain.

"I hate that you know all this stuff about me."

"Do you still hate me?" I asked softly.

"I want to. Fuck, I want to." He gripped my dick a little tighter. The move wasn't sexual. It felt more like a security thing, like it was grounding him.

"But do you?" I pressed.

"No." A deep sigh. "You're too damn perfect to hate."

I chuckled at his petulant tone. "If it makes you feel any better, I'm not okay with you knowing all that shit about me either."

"No?"

"No." I kissed his hair absently. "I told you stuff I've never told anyone."

"Same." He pulled in a deep breath. "You're a stripper?"

He lifted his head, his eyes wide and filled with shock. I laughed. The effect was hilarious. He looked like a surprised meerkat.

He glared at me.

"Shut up." He untangled himself from me, and settled next to me.

"You just now remembered that I strip?" I asked teasingly.

"It's a lot of information to process. I mean, I know Wrong strips, but it didn't click that you do until just now."

I rolled onto my side so I was facing him. He did the same, his eyes clear and his face relaxed.

"Where?" he asked. "Is there a strip club in town? Is it one of those

places that do lap dances?” He narrowed his eyes adorably.

“I drive into town. There’s an all-male club I work at. And no. My club doesn’t do lap dances. We can bring people on stage, but there’s a strict no-touching rule.”

“Oh.” The pleased look on his face made my stomach swoop.

He traced the outline of my jack-o’-lantern tattoo with his fingertips. “Did you get that for Rain?”

I nodded.

“What do the orange flowers mean?”

“They’re marigolds. They’re her birth month flower, but they’re also a symbol of positive energy and emotions.”

He smiled. “Is that the only one with meaning?”

I shook my head. “A lot of elements in the piece are things I asked for. He just worked them into his design. The swallows are for my family, three of them, three of us. The raven is for the pursuit of knowledge, and the hawk is for my darker side. The lotus flowers remind me to rise above the shit that drags me down. The vines are for strength, and the daylily is for my mom. To represent the sacrifices she made for me.”

“What was your first tattoo?”

I pointed to the spot over my heart. “This one.”

“A footprint?” He ran his finger over the small tattoo nestled among one of tangled ropes.

“Rain’s.” I sighed as he put his palm over the footprint, his skin hot and soothing. “I was in a bad place when mom was pregnant with her. I was just out of school and lost. I worked on a construction crew and made decent money, but I drank most of it away.”

Alex’s dark eyes met mine, open and curious and soft.

That softness was what made me keep talking.

“I was pissed at the world, and a stupid part of me resented that Mom was having another kid. It felt like she was replacing me. Like I’d been her starter kid, and now that I was grown, she was having a do-over.

“That anger only intensified when we found out she was a girl. Mom was over the moon, and I know she didn’t say it to hurt me, but the excitement and her overt happiness at having a daughter made everything worse.”

Alex’s hand was still pressed against my heart, and I stared at his long fingers, so pale against my inked skin.

“Her birth wasn’t an easy one. Mom ended up having an emergency C-

section, and Rain spent a week in the NICU. I moved back home to take care of her while Mom recovered, and the first time I held her, saw those big blue eyes staring back at me, the world... settled."

Alex made an encouraging sound.

"All that anger I was carrying around at people from school, about my situation, seemed so stupid. I was letting my past dick me around, and I'd forgotten what was important. Family."

"Is this part of it too?" He traced the infinity symbol that cut through the footprint.

"Yeah. To remind me that love is infinite and family is forever."

He pulled his hand away, rolled onto his back, and stared up at the ceiling.

"What does the phoenix mean?" I asked.

"The same thing it always means. Rebirth, rising from the ashes, yada yada yada."

"And the semicolon?"

"Same thing as always," he whispered.

"Tell me."

He sighed. "I got it to remind me that even the worst moments of my life are just moments. That my story isn't over, even when it feels like it is." He slid his gaze to mine. "That shit I told you, about my ex... whatever he was."

I nodded.

"It really fucked me up. I don't handle rejection well, and I... fixate on people. When he rejected me, it tore me apart. The shit he said stuck with me. I still hear his stupid voice in my head."

"What does it say?"

"That I'm not worth it. That no one will ever put up with me. That no one will ever love me." He looked away and stared at the ceiling again. "I don't know how to do this."

"Do what?"

"This. You and me." A sigh. "You know all this stuff about me, stuff no one else does. And what happened between us, it's never been like that for me. I don't know what to do with it."

"You don't have to do anything." I stamped down the flare of jealous anger that shot through me. I wanted to tie him to my bed and tease him until he was screaming that he belonged to me.

Pushing those creepy thoughts aside, I gave him what I hoped was a lazy

smile. "You never thanked me."

He snort-laughed. "Really?"

"Really." I leaned up on one arm so I was looming over him.

His breath caught, his eyes flashing with something dark and desperate.

"I was nice enough to give you my cock. You should thank me for it."

"Thanks for the dick." He grinned mischievously. "It was passable."

"Oh, you've asked for it now."

Diving onto him, I dug my fingers into his armpits.

Alex squealed, bucking up as he tried to get away.

"Ready to thank me properly?" I asked as he heaved in heavy breaths, still laughing.

I wasn't even tickling him anymore, but every time he wiggled or moved, he forced my fingers deeper into his muscles.

"Never!"

Straddling him, I pulled my fingers out of his armpits and caught his wrists. "Now?" I pinned his hands next to his ears.

"No." He slowly scraped his teeth over his bottom lip.

"Keep looking at me like that, and you're going to end up with my dick in your mouth," I warned.

"Maybe I'll even thank you this time if you do a good job."

"Brat."

He blinked up at me, the picture of innocence. "I have no idea what you mean," he said serenely.

"Open your mouth."

"Make me."

His smile was big and playful. My chest tightened with a pang of longing. He was perfect, but he wasn't mine. He'd never be mine.

"If you insist."

I leaned forward and pressed the tip of my cock against his lips.

Alex rolled his lips inward, making a big show about not obeying as his eyes laughed at me.

Fuck, yeah. This time I wasn't going to go easy on him. And by the look on his face, he didn't want me to.

ALEX

I slinked into the house at nearly two in the morning.

Kai and I had had another enthusiastic round of sex that had ended with me begging him to let me come while he edged the fuck out of me. When we'd recovered, he'd given me some clothes to wear and had driven me to the library so I could get my car. When I'd figured out he was Wrong, I'd been so out of it that I'd left it in the lot, not trusting myself to drive.

The house was dark as I made my way to the second floor.

A big body appeared on the landing in front of me, and I nearly fell down the stairs.

"Shit!"

"Fuck!"

"Jax?" I gulped in a big breath, my hand over my pounding heart.

"Shit, sorry, Alex." He shrugged on his jacket. "I didn't mean to scare you."

"Are you leaving?"

"Yeah. Matt and I were studying, and we ended up falling asleep."

I stepped aside so he could continue down the stairs.

"Have a good night. Even though it looks like it's been pretty good already."

I flushed hot as he brushed past me. "Night." I hurried up to my room.

The sweats Kai had lent me were a bit big, and I'd had to roll them so they'd stay on my hips. The shirt and hoodie hung off me. I wasn't skinny, but I wasn't jacked like him, and being wrapped up in his clothes comforted me in a way I didn't understand.

They smelled like him: earthy and dark with a hint of spice and an undertone of sweetness. Did he wear cologne? Or maybe aftershave? Whatever it was, the scent was perfect, and I reveled in the fact that my skin would smell like him in the morning.

Dropping my bag on the floor, I kicked off my shoes, then peeled off the hoodie and draped it over my desk chair.

I should shower. I'd come twice tonight, and Kai had come all over my back that second round.

Shuddering, I slid into bed and snuggled into my blankets. That first round he'd been a perfect mix of commanding and gentle, pushing me when I needed it and backing off when it was too much. That second time he hadn't held back at all. We'd wrestled and grappled, rolling around on his bed, battling for dominance.

Kai was stronger than me, and his fighting skills were far better than mine. And that look that came over him when he got into it. The confidence radiating off him was almost as hot as his ridiculous body and model-perfect face.

He'd taken what he wanted. And he'd wanted me.

I pulled the blanket tighter around myself. As hot as the sex had been, and as perfect as Kai was, I still wasn't sure what to do with all the feelings bouncing around inside me. I was mortified that he knew all that personal shit about me, but I loved how single-minded he'd been during sex. I'd been his entire focus, and having his attention, all of it, had been as exhilarating as it had been arousing.

The hate and the anger from that incident last year and even the party where he'd kissed Elissa were gone. I didn't hate him, and in retrospect, I'd never hated him.

I'd been hurt and had shifted my anger onto him because it was easy. If it was his fault, then it wasn't mine. But it wasn't his fault. None of it. I'd hated him because I'd wanted him. And now that I'd had him, I didn't want to let him go.

But how could I pretend like we hadn't shared such deep parts of ourselves? How could I pretend he hadn't taken me apart not only over the phone but also in person?

Sex had never been like that for me. My mind hadn't wandered, and my concentration had never waned. I'd been fully present, and rather than being overstimulated while he'd edged me, it had soothed me.

Kai was in control. He made the decisions, and I could lie there and feel. It had been the most profound sexual experience of my life.

I liked Kai, but I was embarrassed by how I'd acted. It had turned him on. That much was obvious. He'd told me he liked it when his partners fought back or goaded him, but he had to be judging me, right?

I'd been a begging, writhing mess, acting like I'd die if he didn't make me come. A total cockslut, delirious with pleasure and frustration as he'd edged the fuck out of me.

I shifted onto my back and winced. My ass stung a bit. He hadn't fucked me that second time. He'd used my mouth, edging himself until he'd flipped me over and come all over my back.

Then he'd lain over my body and jerked me off as he whispered all sorts of filthy and possessive things in my ear. Bringing me close, then backing off as I begged and pleaded and tried to fight him.

When he'd finally let me, I'd come so hard I'd seen stars. That weird fog had taken me away again, and Kai had been there, holding me and guiding me back until my brain and body had come back online.

The sex might be amazing, but being vulnerable like that in front of him was fucking with my head. As much as I wanted to believe that Kai wouldn't get sick of me, he would.

Maybe we'd fuck a few more times, and he'd realize I was too much work, that he could get it better from someone else who wasn't so high maintenance. Or maybe he'd get tired of dealing with my moods and attitude.

Hell, he was probably sick of me already. He'd gotten my ass, and now it was time for him to move on to his next conquest.

Kai wasn't looking for anything. He was into hooking up and having fun. I'd thought I was too, but after sharing what we had, that stupid, fanciful part of me that yearned for an actual connection wanted more.

I didn't just want to be a guy he fucked. I wanted to mean more to him, but that was not only dumb but also a recipe for getting hurt. I needed to keep some distance between us. We had ten days until our presentation was due. When that happened, there'd be no reason for us to meet up or talk.

My chest clenched, and my stomach flipped. I was too attached to Kai. I needed to remember this was just a physical thing and we had an end date. The sooner I got that through my head, the less it would hurt when he got sick of me.



FUNTIMES: what club do you work at?

I grimaced as I read the message I'd sent that morning. Why the fuck couldn't Kinksters have a remove option in their messages?

I closed out of the app, tucked my phone into my pocket, and stretched out on the couch.

It was Friday afternoon. Matt was out, Beck and Finn had gone to Seattle for the weekend to visit people, and Eli was curled up on the loveseat with a thick book. I could game or watch something, but I was comfortable and didn't feel like paying attention to anything.

Zzzzz zzzz zzzzz.

Tapping down my excitement, I pulled out my phone. I had a message on Kinksters.

MrWrong: Crimson club

MrWrong: are you home?

FunTimes: yeah

MrWrong: what's your address?

FunTimes: why?

The flutter of anticipation that shot through me mixed with a flare of arousal, and my dick went half-hard.

A picture loaded in the thread. He was in a car, and he'd taken it looking down, his shirt pulled up and his jeans undone. His hard dick peeked out of the top of a pair of black underwear.

My entire body clenched, and my mouth watered as I remembered how good he'd tasted, how much I'd loved feeling his cock stretching my lips and pressing down my throat.

MrWrong: what's your address?

I typed it out and sent it before I could think twice.

MrWrong: be there in ten

When the screen went dark, I pocketed my phone.

The next ten minutes were a test of patience. I resisted the urge to pull my phone out to check the time, but I did keep looking at the door.

Finally, the doorbell rang.

"I'll get it." Eli looked up from his book.

"I've got it." I scrambled to my feet.

"I'm expecting a package." He gave me a strange look. "But sure.

Whatever.”

I hurried to the door and flung it open.

Kai stood on the stoop in a dark hoodie and a pair of tight jeans, a sultry smile on his lips.

“Hey.”

“Hi.” I moved back and let him in.

He stepped right into my space, his chest brushing mine, and closed the door behind him. “You look good enough to eat,” he murmured next to my ear. His hot breath tickled my skin.

I shivered. “Yeah?” I bit my lip, trying to stop my grin. “What are you going to do about it?”

“Where’s your room?” His look was dark and primal and set my nerves on fire.

“This way.”

As I turned to show him upstairs, he fell into step behind me.

“Kai?”

We both stopped dead in our tracks.

“Eli.” A warm grin slid over his face, replacing the sexy one he’d given me. “You live here?”

Eli jumped up, ran around the loveseat, and threw himself into Kai’s arms.

The flare of jealousy that hit nearly stole my breath.

“How have you been?” Kai asked, his voice warm and affectionate as he hugged Eli’s smaller frame against his.

They looked good together. Eli’s delicate, ethereal beauty was amplified by Kai’s stronger, rugged handsomeness. Had they fucked?

A pang of devastation hit as I pictured them together.

“Good.” Eli grinned up at him. “It’s been forever since I saw you.” He pouted prettily.

“I know.” Kai booped his nose.

Eli giggled, the sound somehow masculine and cute at the same time.

“But it’s not my fault you’re too busy for me now.”

Eli rolled his eyes and finally untangled himself from my man.

Wait, what? Damn it. I needed to stop that line of thinking now. Kai wasn’t mine. He could hug or fuck any guy he wanted. Even my roommate.

“Not too busy. You just forgot about me.” Eli grinned impishly. “What are you doing here?” He glanced at me. “You two know each other?”

“We’re doing a presentation together in one of our classes.”

My heart deflated.

A small part of me had hoped he might introduce me as a friend, but this solidified what I’d already thought. I was nothing more than a temporary plaything. Someone Kai could get his freak on with before he moved on to someone else. Like my beautiful, supersmart, and put-together roommate, who elicited the kind of smile from Kai I could only dream of getting.

“I’ll let you get to studying.” Eli gave me a sheepish look.

I smiled tightly at him.

“Say hi to Gray for me when you see him.” Eli turned his attention back to Kai.

Kai nodded and ruffled Eli’s hair playfully.

Eli yelped and darted away, a big smile still on his lips.

Kai winked, then turned back to me.

“This way,” I said woodenly, my body heavy and my stomach churning.

Kai followed me up the stairs and into my room.

I sat on the edge of my bed as he closed the door.

“You okay?” He leaned against the wall and studied me.

“Fine.” I looked away. “You can go down and hang out with Eli if you want. I have studying I need to do.”

Kai moved across the room, his long strides cutting the distance in three steps. He knelt in front of me, his eyes serious. “What do you think you saw?”

“You being reunited with one of your other fucktoys.” I couldn’t keep the hurt out of my voice, and a little flare of anger shot through me. What was it about Kai that lowered all my defenses?

Kai grimaced. “Ew.”

“Huh?”

“I’ve known Eli since he was in diapers. I work with his brother. Trust me when I say I’ve never thought about him like that.”

“But he’s your type,” I whispered, the hurt from watching their exchange lingering. “Prettier than me, and I’m sure you could corrupt him.”

He tipped my chin until our gazes met. “I’m not interested in him that way. Eli’s grown into an incredibly handsome man, but he’ll always be a little kid to me. And his brother would rip my nuts off and hang them from his front door if I ever touched him.”

I snorted at the visual. “His brother’s a big guy?”

“As big as me.” His eyes were bright with silent laughter. “You were jealous.”

“Was not.”

He held my face still, and a cocky grin slid over his lips. “You were.”

“So?” I tried for defiant, but it came out breathy and eager.

“So it’s kinda hot.” He licked his lips and dropped his gaze to my mouth.

“Why did you want to know where I work?” He let go of my chin.

“Huh?” I blinked, trying to keep up with the shift in conversation.

“Why did you want to know where I work?”

“Curious?”

“You want to watch me dance?”

“Maybe.”

“I’ve never danced with someone I know in the crowd.”

“I’ve never watched someone I’ve fucked strip. Looks like we’re even.”

He laughed and sat back on his heels. “And what would you do if you watched me dance?” His voice was a seductive purr. “Would you picture me dancing for you?”

“Maybe,” I croaked.

“Would you wish you were under me while I danced?”

“Probably.”

He grinned that cocky smile I loved. “Would you get jealous when the ladies touched me?”

“You said no touching.”

“No sexual touching. But we do get touched. It’s part of the job.”

I pursed my lips. “No. I wouldn’t get jealous.”

“No? It looked like you were about to punch Eli in the face downstairs.”

“I wouldn’t get jealous because they only get to touch.”

His grin widened. “That’s true. They only get to touch.”

“And I wouldn’t have punched Eli.”

“No?” He quirked his eyebrow.

“No. I hated thinking you and him had been together, but I like him. He’s a sort of friend, and I don’t have a lot of those.”

“He’s a good kid. Hasn’t had it easy, but he’s good people.”

“Way to make me feel like even more of an ass.”

Kai chuckled. “Are you going to come watch me dance tonight?”

“Can I?” I’d thought he’d tell me no and bar me from the club.

“If you want.” He sat on the bed next to me. “It could be fun performing

for you. Dancing for you in a crowd of people.”

I swallowed hard. That sounded pretty fucking awesome to me.

“The only thing you should know is that Crimson caters to women. Our audience is almost exclusively female. You’ll stand out if you show up.”

“So? It’s not like I care what a bunch of random women think of me.”

He shifted and put one arm behind me, leaning close as he whispered in my ear. “If you show up, and if you’re a good boy, you’ll get a reward.”

I shivered at both his words and his tone. What was it about his growly voice that could turn my insides into mush? “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” He dragged the tip of his nose over my jawline, then abruptly stood.

“What?” I blinked at him, my dick so hard it ached.

“Gotta go to work.” He winked.

“Really? You’re going to get me all worked up and bail?”

“Yup.” He leaned down, that cocky, confident smile on his lips. “And now I’ll feel better going to work, knowing that you’re thinking about me.”

I wanted to tell him I wouldn’t be, but we both knew that would be a lie.

He pressed a quick kiss against my lips, then swept out of my room before I could say a word. His heavy footfalls stomped down the stairs.

My head spun. What time did the club open? I grabbed my phone to do some googling. I wanted that reward almost as much as I wanted to see him dance.

KAI

“Holy shit.” Enzo came into the back room, his grin wide and his dark hair mussed. “Holy. Shit.”

“Good night?”

He held up a crisp hundred-dollar bill.

“Jesus,” Gray exclaimed.

“Right?” Enzo stared at the bill like it was the last waffle cone in an all-you-can-eat ice cream shop.

I didn’t know too much about Enzo’s home life, just that he was married and had twin sons. That hundred bucks would really help him out.

One of the ways we got around the no-touching rule was that the club allowed patrons to step onto a small platform next to the stage and offer the dancer a tip. They had the option of stuffing it into our clothes, handing it to us, or sticking it in a part of their clothes so we had to pull it out. I’d gotten a few twenties that way, but never more than that.

“You must have a new superfan.” I pulled a cheap undershirt on.

“Hopefully, she keeps showing her appreciation.” He waggled his eyebrows and hurried over to his cubby to put the money away.

Corey, one of the co-owners and our stage manager, was responsible for collecting the cash people threw onto the stage, then handed it out at the end of the night.

I liked that the club didn’t do tip-splitting with the bar staff. They kept their tips, and we kept ours.

“Hey, Kai?”

I glanced over at Nick. Jesus, the kid looked young. He was twenty-one,

but between his light blond locks, big blue eyes, and lithe, lean body, he teetered on the line between barely legal and jailbait.

“What’s up?” I grabbed a pair of dark blue pants.

“You have a car, right?”

I nodded.

“Do you think you could give me a lift home?” He bit his full bottom lip bashfully. “I know you have a long drive, but it’s kinda on the way.”

“Yeah, sure.” I buttoned the pants. “What happened to your usual ride?”

“Canceled on me. But thanks. I don’t like taking the bus so late.”

We didn’t get off work until after two most nights. That was way too late for a kid to take the bus alone.

“No problem. I can keep driving you until you find a new ride.”

“Really?” He beamed at me. “You’re so awesome!”

I chuckled and pulled on the dark blue uniform shirt. “It’s no problem.”

“You doing your sexy cop routine?” He jiggled a pair of handcuffs.

“You know it.” I took the handcuffs from him and tucked them into the utility belt I’d put on.

“Do you want to do our routine again tonight?”

On a normal night, I would have said yes without hesitating. Dancing with Nick always brought in a shit ton of tips, but I didn’t want Alex to see me dancing with another guy.

His jealousy was hot as fuck, and that baser, primal part of me loved how possessive he was. With someone else, I’d have had no issues teasing them and pissing them off by dancing with someone else in front of them. But with Alex’s history and how hard he took rejection, I wouldn’t do that to him.

I wanted him jealous and sassy, not sad and broken.

“Can’t tonight.”

His face fell.

“You don’t like solo dancing, do you?”

He shook his head, a blush on his cheekbones. “It’s easier when I’m not up there alone.”

“Here’s some advice someone gave me when I started.”

He perked up.

“Pick one person in the audience and pretend you’re dancing for them. Don’t stare because that’ll piss the other patrons off, but keep bringing your focus back to that one person.”

He nodded. “Yeah, that could work. I’ll give it a try.”

“Kai!” Corey’s frantic voice came from the backstage door.

“What?” I called back.

“You’re up.”

“I’m supposed to be after the twins.”

River and Zane were identical twins and two of our most popular dancers. They skirted that line between twincest and dancing, and the ladies loved when they did routines together.

“They called in sick.” Corey’s expression was grim. “Can you do a double slot so we’re not redoing the entire schedule?”

“Yeah, fine.” I did a final check of my uniform. An idea popped into my head. “Can you put a chair out for me?”

“Sure. Which songs?”

“Four, then seven.”

Each of us had a list of solo and partner songs we danced to. Usually, we handed in our set list at the start of our shift, but the DJ was flexible and had no issues with us doing last-minute changes.

“You got it.” The door banged shut behind him.

“Chair?” Gray asked.

“Yup.” I winked at him, then hurried over to the backstage door.

Pulling in a few deep breaths, I shut out the noise of the guys getting ready and focused on my routine.

The opening bars of “Pour Some Sugar on Me” began to play, and I stepped onto the stage. The song was a crowd-pleaser, and while I thought it was overused, it never failed to get people singing along at the top of their lungs while I ground to the beat.

It took a second for my eyes to adjust to the bright spotlights on me, and I used the slow opening to saunter into the middle of the stage.

The crowd roared as I posed and flexed my muscles. The beat kicked in; I started to move.

The steady downbeat and sensual guitar riffs made it an easy song to dance to, and it was so well known most people recognized it from the opening bars.

Rolling my hips, I pulled the fake baton out of my utility belt and pointed it at the audience, moving it from person to person while I looked to see if Alex had shown up. He had.

He was sitting at a table near the stage, alone and with a look of pure wonder on his face. Shooting him a private smirk, I spun the baton in my

hand, then gripped it so I could swing it around my body as I rolled my hips and slowly turned around, giving the audience a view of my ass.

As soon as the beat dropped, I did a dolphin dive and held myself up with one arm as I did some floor work, including lots of grinding and body rolls.

When Joe Elliot started singing, I jumped up and started my dance routine, making sure to use lots of hip action, all while stroking and toying with the baton suggestively.

A few bills landed onto the stage, and I winked at the ladies who'd tossed them for me before they scurried back to their tables.

Slipping the baton back in its holster, I made my way over to the metal chair Corey had set up for me. Chair routines were tricky in this uniform, since the polyester material had zero give, but people loved it. I could suffer some minor muscle strain for tips.

The crowd screamed and cheered as I spun the chair around, flipped it, then leaned over it and thrust my hips, mimicking fucking someone. Keeping my concentration on my dancing so I didn't hurt myself, I worked the chair, pulling out all my best moves.

Bills littered the stage, and when the song came to an end, I was sweating like a motherfucker under my uniform. A quick sweep of my take showed that I'd made a fraction of what I usually did. That was fine. I still had another song to go.

The lights lowered, then lit back up. The crowd cheered as "SexyBack" by Justin Timberlake blared over the speakers.

Another obvious choice, but the steady beat and his hypnotic voice drove our audiences wild. Plus, it was a bit of nostalgia for all the millennials in the crowd.

I leveled my baton at Alex as the opening bars were played on repeat. This was my pull-someone-from-the-audience song, and our DJ knew to keep the loop going until I had someone in my chair.

Alex looked around.

Keeping my baton pointed at him, I patted the chair. I was putting him on the spot. If he declined, I'd move on to someone else.

It was also a risk to bring a guy on stage. The crowd was exclusively women except for him, and while the ladies loved it when we got handsy with each other, I wasn't sure they'd be so receptive to a male audience member getting such personalized attention.

But fuck it. I still had three more slots tonight and all tomorrow to make

tips if this routine fell flat. I'd enjoy it, and so would Alex. That was all I cared about.

Moving my hips to the beat, I patted the chair again.

He glanced around, then stood. Confidently and like he owned the place, he strode up to the stage and stepped onto the platform.

Crooking my finger at him, I waited for him to come to me.

He did, smirking as he kept his eyes on mine and ignored his surroundings.

As soon as he was in front of the chair, the loop ended, and the song began. At J.T.'s first notes, I shoved him down onto the chair. He went willingly, his full attention focused on me.

Quickly and with a familiarity that came from doing this routine every weekend for months, I pulled out the prop handcuffs and snapped them on his wrists. His eyes blazed with lust as he looked up at me.

Moving around him, I used him as a prop as I did my routine, slowly unbuttoning my shirt. The audience went wild. When my shirt was off, I undid my utility belt and let it fall to the floor.

I turned back to Alex, put my hand on the back of his chair, and lowered myself so I hovered over him. We were only inches apart, and his perfect lips were parted and shiny. Fuck, I wanted to kiss him, but that wasn't allowed.

I split my time between dancing for Alex, making sure to do as much bodywork as the song would allow, and stripping off my clothes for the audience.

When I was down to my undershirt and briefs, I waited until the song asked the audience if they were ready, then tore off my shirt, ripping it down the middle. The audience went wild. Bills rained down as I tossed the shirt into the crowd.

Left in only my micro briefs, I sauntered over to where Alex sat in the chair, his wrists bound and his chest heaving. He stared at me with open lust in his eyes.

Grabbing the cuffs, I pulled him out of the chair and brought him to the center of the stage. He came willingly, smiling. I pulled the chain of the cuffs behind his head to make sure he didn't get handsy and get me in trouble, then gave his shoulder a little shove so he dropped to his knees.

The last thirty seconds of the song I ground around him sensually. The crowd screamed and shouted.

A lineup of women stood at the tip platform. I made eye contact with the

first few. Hopefully, my smile told them I'd be right there.

As the last few bars of the song played, I hauled Alex back up and snapped the quick release cuffs off him. The lights stayed low as the song melted into "High for This" by The Weekend.

I took Alex's hand and led him over to the platform. He looked utterly wrecked, his eyes glassy and his cheeks flushed. I kissed his cheek, which was allowed, and helped him onto the platform so he could go back to his seat.

One of the women in line held out a handful of bills to him as he passed her. Alex glanced at me, and I shrugged, amused by the entire situation.

Blushing, he took the money and let the woman kiss his cheek. She was probably old enough to be his mother, but it was all innocent fun.

When I was sure Alex was on his way to his seat, I turned my attention to the lineup and accepted the personal tips. Most of the ladies wanted to shove the bills into my briefs. A few stuck them into their cleavage and swooned when I used my teeth to pull them out.

I didn't particularly like putting dirty bills into my mouth, even if I only used my teeth, but the move was a crowd pleaser, and it usually doubled the personal tips during my next solo song.

When the last person was back in their seats, the music cut out, and I gave the cheering crowd a little wave.

"Who was that?" Nick asked as soon as I'd closed the backstage door behind me.

"Huh?" I blinked as the adrenaline drop from being on stage hit.

"That guy. You know him?"

"He's a... friend."

Calling Alex that felt off, but what could I say? He was the guy I was fucking?

I kept my personal life away from work, and while that description would be true, it felt disingenuous. Alex was more than a guy I fucked, but I had no idea what we were to each other. Friends? Kind of. Lovers? Sure. Fuck buddies? Maybe. None of the titles felt right.

"Bold move, dancing for a guy." Gray gave me a strange look.

"I took a chance." I grabbed a towel from the stack near the door and wrapped it around my waist.

The backstage door opened, and Corey popped his head in. "Nick, get your ass ready. You're on in thirty seconds!"

“Shit!” Nick squeaked, grabbed a pair of angel wings, and hurried to the door.

Corey ushered him onto the stage, then motioned for me to come to him. “Kai.”

Fuck. I was going to get in trouble for using Alex instead of one of the women.

I followed him into the prop closet, which was the only private place in the backstage area.

He closed the door and crossed his arms over his chest. “What was that?”

“What was what?”

“You bringing that kid on stage.”

“He’s obviously at least twenty-one. Not a kid.”

“Kai.” Corey sighed heavily, his gaze condescendingly gentle. Like I was a toddler he was scolding after having a tantrum.

I liked Corey. He and Ray were married and owned this club and another on the end of the block that was all female and catered to a male crowd. Crimson was only open on the weekends, but Scarlet was open all week, and Ray spent most of his time at Scarlet while Corey ran Crimson. They were fair bosses and fun guys, but Corey had a bad habit of acting like a mother hen, even though he was only a few years older than me.

“You know how things are run around here.”

“I do.”

“Was that your boyfriend?”

“No.” That wasn’t a lie.

“Why did you bring a man on stage? You’ve set a dangerous precedent.”

“How is that dangerous?”

“We cater to women. This is their safe space. If it gets out that we encourage male audience members, it could affect our clientele and reputation.”

“I get what you’re saying, but how is one dance with a guy going to fuck up our reputation?”

“People talk. Stuff gets out online.”

“But isn’t there a rainbow sticker in the doorway?” I tilted my head, studying Corey, who shifted uncomfortably. “The guy I pulled up was obviously into men, so how is he making the place unsafe?”

“We don’t want straight guys to come here.” He sighed. “You know what it’s like at queer clubs. Straight guys come and harass women and get pissed

if they get hit on. They make everyone feel unsafe.”

“That’s true.” I nodded slowly. “But this isn’t a club. And no straight guy is going to sit and watch other dudes shake their junk just to ogle women who are ignoring them and watching us dance.”

“Maybe not, but we’ve worked really hard to maintain our reputation.”

I didn’t agree with anything Corey said, but he was my boss, so I let it go. “It won’t happen again.”

“See that it doesn’t.” He put his hand on the door handle.

“Can I ask you something?” I said.

“What?”

“How did I do in tips?”

He hesitated. “Good.”

“So obviously, the audience didn’t hate it.”

“Because you picked a pretty boy. Young and pretty is always a crowd-pleaser.”

Without another word, Corey pushed open the door and stepped out.

What the fuck was that about? I followed him and went to my cubby to get dressed.

“Who was that kid?” Gray asked as I wiped off the body oil still coating my skin.

“A friend. He lives with your brother.”

Gray shifted his eyes to the floor. “Oh yeah?”

“He told me to say hi.”

“Yeah.” Gray ran a hand through his hair. “I’ve been busy.”

“Not my place to judge. Just passing on a message.”

“That friend. Are you with him?” Gray pressed.

“Why?”

He shrugged. “Just wondering. You never mentioned you were with someone, and it’s not like you to bring people to work.”

That was true. Even when I’d worked at the dance club, I would ask one of the other bartenders to serve people I knew. Something about accepting tips from someone who’d known me since I was a toddler felt weird, especially when I knew how tight money was for most people I grew up with.

“He’s a friend, and he’s into guys. I figured he’d enjoy a night of watching us get our dance on.”

Gray nodded, his expression closed off. Whatever. Gray was a friend, but I didn’t have time for his bullshit.

I donned a pair of jeans and slipped on my Converse.

When Nick's song ended and melted into an instrumental, I made my way to the front of the club.

Nick had a lineup of ladies waiting to pass him personal tips, and I skirted around them.

Several women grabbed at me, but I ignored them until one woman grabbed my back pocket and tried to pull me to a stop. Keeping my face calm, I wagged my finger at her in a mock scold.

She was clearly drunk and slapped my ass hard enough to sting. Fuck. I didn't want to deal with this.

Corey and Ray encouraged us to do laps around the bar after our sets. It kept people interested, and it was a good way to keep the crowd busy between sets. Javi was on after Nick, and it took a while for them to set up his pole and silk ropes.

Biggs, our bouncer, appeared next to me, his huge arms crossed over his massive chest, and glared down at the woman who'd spanked me.

Leaving him to deal with her, I made my way to Alex's table and knelt next to him.

"That was unexpected." He blushed.

"Did I put you on the spot?"

He shook his head. "I liked it."

"Me too." I glanced around. "I still have three more sets. I won't be able to bring you on stage again."

"Did you get in trouble?"

"No," I half lied. "It's just not a good idea to show favoritism when I'm shaking my junk for tips."

He chuckled, his eyes bright and filled with so much happiness my breath hitched.

Had I ever seen him smile like that? Surly, sulky Alex was hot as fuck, but happy Alex was breathtaking.

"How about you go back to my place and relax? I'll be home later."

He gave me a strange look.

I leaned in and spoke close to his ear. "I want to try something with you tonight." Britney's "Gimme More" began playing, a sign that Nick was done and they were still setting up for Javi's slot. "How would you feel about making one of your fantasies come true?"

"Really?" he asked breathlessly.

“Yeah. Take a shower and get all nice and ready for me. I want you asleep in my bed. I’ll be home around three. You’ll get your reward then.”

He swallowed hard. “Okay.”

I pulled my keys out of my pocket and slipped my house key off the ring.

He took it. “Do you need me to leave the door unlocked?”

My building wasn’t in a great neighborhood, but the building itself was relatively safe. Other than package thieves, there hadn’t been any issues since I’d lived there. Still, I didn’t like the idea of Alex being vulnerable and alone with the door unlocked.

I shook my head. “I have a spare.”

He gave me a small smile. “I’ll see you later?”

“Later.”

I wanted to kiss those shiny, perfect lips but held back. For one, I had no doubt Corey was watching us, and two, kissing wasn’t allowed, even our partners or lovers. If the women saw me planting one on Alex, they’d think it was okay to do the same.

Giving him what I hoped was a sexy, secret smile, I stood and did another lap of the tables, quelling the urge to turn around to watch him leave.

I picked a few timid-looking women and went over to say hi and ask them if they were enjoying themselves. Not a great strategy for making tips, but I liked seeing their faces light up as I talked to them. It was vain as fuck, but I knew I looked good, and a little attention could go a long way in boosting someone’s self-esteem.

The lights flickered, the signal that Javi’s routine was about to start, and I quickly made my way backstage. One hour down, three more to go.

ALEX

Being in Kai's apartment alone was weird. I liked that he trusted me enough to be in his space without him, but it was still strange. I'd never been a snooper. I didn't check people's medicine cabinets or riffle through their stuff when I was at their houses.

Kai didn't know that, and the fact that he wasn't hiding anything from me felt big. Like more than just something he'd do with a random hookup.

The first few hours, I watched *Heartstopper* for the umpteenth time and played on my phone. I usually wasn't into shows or movies aimed at teenagers, but *Heartstopper* was cute. And watching someone go through what I had, trying to figure out if the pull I'd felt toward a male friend was attraction or not, was validating.

Around midnight, I took a shower and got myself ready for my reward. Kai used a spicy- and earthy-scented body wash, and I got a ridiculous thrill as I used it. Not only did I smell like him, but the whole bathroom did.

After washing my hair, I toweled off and headed to Kai's room. The first door I opened wasn't Kai's room, though. The last time I'd been in his place, I'd been a bit distracted and hadn't been paying attention as he'd carried me to his room.

From the single bed with bright dinosaur sheets, a sheer princess canopy, and a mountain of stuffies, it was obvious Rain slept there when he watched her. The fact that Kai had a room in his apartment for his little sister made my heart clench. He had so many layers beyond being a confident, cocky asshole. He was sweet and kind and thoughtful, and he loved fiercely.

A pang of loneliness stabbed me as I closed the door to Rain's room. My

grandmother was a good woman, and she loved me, but she was all I had. My mom hadn't tried to contact me in the eight years since she was acquitted, and I'd never once tried to contact my dad in prison.

I was utterly alone in the world.

Shaking off my melancholy, I opened the next door. Bingo.

I walked inside and over to his dresser and opened the top drawer. I grabbed one of the neatly stacked T-shirts and slipped it on. It smelled like clean laundry and sunshine.

Should I put on my underwear? Kai had liked the last pair I'd worn, and I'd worn one of my favorite pairs tonight in anticipation of my reward. Decision made, I pulled them out of the bundle of clothes I'd carried into the room.

When they were on, I folded my clothes and stacked them on the dresser. I wasn't this neat at home, but I wanted to make a good impression.

Shit. I had two hours until he came home. He'd said he wanted me asleep. I was so keyed up I wasn't sure if I'd be able to fall asleep in time.

The noise in my head wasn't the constant loop of criticism and catastrophic thoughts that usually took over at night. Nope. Tonight I was thinking about Kai's dancing.

Kai had an incredible body, but his sense of rhythm was next level. Every move had seemed effortless, casual even. At one point, he'd held himself on the chair and rolled his hips, completely suspended. The crowd had gone insane, but I'd been too busy wondering how the fuck that had been possible, considering, you know, gravity.

Then he'd called me on stage. My dick chubbed up at the memory of the look he'd given me as he'd crooked his damn finger at me.

"Come here," it had said.

And I'd come. Almost literally.

Thank fuck he'd handcuffed me so I didn't have to worry about what my hands were doing and could focus on watching him dance for me. And he had. Every time he'd looked at me, he'd had that same laser focus he had during sex.

It was completely different from the look he gave the crowd when he was working them. Then he was the casual, cool, and überconfident guy who could bring anyone to their knees with a well-placed smile and wink.

The guy who'd danced for me had burned with desire, his expression dark and primal and so damn possessive.

Mine.

The word had echoed in my mind as he'd taken his tips, especially when he used his teeth to pull a bill out of their cleavage. The weird thing was that I hadn't felt any jealousy when he'd danced and interacted with other patrons.

I'd been proud as fuck that someone like Kai had invited me to watch him. They might get a few seconds of his attention when they gave him money, but *I* was the one who'd gotten the hot looks. *I* was the one he'd focused on, and *I* was the one who'd gotten to go up on stage.

The apartment was cold, but his sheets and comforter were warm, and I snuggled into them. The bed smelled like a wonderful mix of Kai and soap. Clean and bright but still dark and heady. Maybe falling asleep wouldn't be an issue.

I wanted to jerk off to memories of my public lap dance, but Kai hadn't said I could. Coming twice in a few hours wasn't anything out of the ordinary for me, but I kept my hands off my dick. I had no doubt my reward would be worth dealing with some blue balls now.

Feeling bold, I opened the camera on my phone and took a few pictures. I went to send them to him, but I was using my actual phone. Shit. Did I even bring my burner? No. I'd left it on my desk in my haste to get to the club.

Pouting, I opened Insta and scrolled my feed.

Beck and Finn had posted some snapshots of their trip. They looked so happy together, and I was proud of Beck for finally coming out and living his truth. Too bad I was too much of a wuss to do the same.

My grandmother wouldn't freak out or anything. She might be in her early seventies, but she was a hippie at heart. Two of her closest friends were lesbians who'd come out late in life. She wouldn't even blink if I told her I was bi.

I didn't have any friends I cared enough about to worry if they'd be okay with it. Beck was, and I didn't think Matt or Eli would have a problem with it. Not that I was really *friends* with them, but we lived together. Life would be infinitely harder if my roommates were homophobic asshats.

Nope. The only thing holding me back was me and my issues.

Letting out a frustrated sigh, I made a few supportive comments on their posts, then kept scrolling.

Matt and Jax were out with the team at some bar and obviously wasted. The snapshot Matt had uploaded was hilarious. Both were wearing their caps inside out and backward, and I was pretty sure they'd switched jackets. Matt

was hanging off Jax and pretending to lick his face while Jax laughed. Bros doing bro shit.

I scrolled for a few more minutes and stopped at a pic of Ash Summers and his boyfriend, Jules.

Ash and I were casual friends. We'd ended up at a lot of the same parties over the years, but we'd never gotten close. When I'd first met him, I'd had a thing for him for about five minutes. He was my type with his bad-boy hottie looks, but he'd been an angry, surly asshole, and not in a good way.

Now he was all smiles as he took selfies with his boyfriend, who was also his stepbrother, whom he hated up until a few months ago. Whatever. I'd had no idea Ash even swung my way, but good on him for finding someone who'd helped him mellow out and actually smile.

Sighing, I closed out of the app and put my phone on the bedside table. Seeing all those happy couples and a weird bromance reminded me of how alone I was.

Sure, I was in Kai's bed, waiting for him to come home and fuck my brains out, but it wasn't the same. I wasn't suddenly craving cuddles or lazy mornings in bed, but it would be nice to have what Beck and Finn had.

Orgasms were awesome, but the needy, emotionally stunted part of me wanted more. I wanted someone to look at me the way Beck looked at Finn. I wanted someone who could help me self-regulate. Who'd be there when I needed them.

Hell, I wanted the reverse too. I wanted to be someone's person. To be the one they needed. To be their entire world, like they'd be mine. Someone who wouldn't be scared off by my issues, who could love me, even though I was... me.

"Ugh." I sat up and shook my head. I was spiraling again.

I opened Insta again and looked up Kai's profile. He hadn't lied. He really didn't post much. Mostly nature shots he took while hiking. The last one was from the summer.

Should I do it? Biting my lip, I quickly DMed him one of the pics I'd taken in his bed.

I didn't expect an answer, considering he was never online, but the usual surge of panic from doing something so impulsive didn't come. Maybe he'd see it later; maybe he wouldn't.

A glance at the time told me he was just getting off work. Time to prep myself and go to sleep so I could get my reward.



THE SENSATION of something tickling my thighs slowly penetrated my consciousness. “HmMMM.” I snuggled into the warmth surrounding me.

The tickling intensified, then shifted to my ass.

I was in that weird place between sleep and wakefulness. Elements of my dream still swirled around in my mind. I was on a beach, the sound of waves lapping in the corner of my consciousness. The sun was warm on my back, and a soft, cool breeze played over my skin.

A shadow appeared over me. I should open my eyes, but I didn’t want to. I was warm and comfortable, and the delicious sensation on my hole was both soothing and arousing.

“Hgnggh,” I muttered.

A warm hand touched my hip, shifting me so I was on my side and not my stomach.

“Sleepy,” I mumbled and pressed my face into my towel. Or was it a pillow?

The tickling on my ass stopped.

I whined softly, still fighting the urge to wake up. I didn’t want to wake up.

Warmth and wetness surrounded my cock.

“Hmpf.”

The shadow was blocking the sun. I wanted to tell it to go away.

A weird pressure penetrated my haze. Something was pushing at my hole. Was the stranger trying to fuck me?

With a low groan, I spread my legs. I shouldn’t want it, but I did. I wanted that stranger to take me right there on the beach.

A strong hand ran down my spine.

“Are you with me?” a soft voice asked.

“Mmfp,” I grumbled and bumped my ass back.

A kiss was pressed against my neck, and the pressure intensified.

“What?” My dream state finally broke.

“Do you want more?”

“HmMMM.”

“I need the word.”

“Yes,” I said, then moaned as my ass was stretched and a hard length filled me.

“That’s it,” a low voice rumbled. “Relax and take all of me.”

Groaning, I did as the voice said. I was awake, but not fully with it. I didn’t want to open my eyes, afraid the body at my back and the cock in my ass would disappear.

“There you go.” The low purr sent another shiver of pleasure through me.

Hands grabbed my hips and turned me so I was on my stomach again. A strong, hot body lay over my back. That cock, so big and perfect, was buried deep inside me.

“Wake up, baby.”

“Huh?” I opened my eyes.

The room was dark, the only light coming from the streetlights filtering through the blinds. Where was I? This wasn’t my room.

“Give me your hands.”

Reluctantly, I let go of the pillow I was cuddling and moved my arms to my side.

Something circled my thigh, cold and a bit rough. A rasp filled the silence. Velcro?

“Kai?”

“Shhhh, I’ve got you.”

“Kay.” I closed my eyes. Another one of those straps was wrapped around my other thigh.

“I need your color, baby.”

“Green,” I breathed. I wasn’t sure exactly what was going on, but I didn’t want it to stop.

The pressure in my ass was incredible, so full, stretching me as he stayed buried inside me. The warm, wet sensation, like a mouth, surrounded my cock.

How was that possible?

My wrist was pulled down until it was next to my thigh.

I grumbled as the body behind me forced my hips up to close the distance between my wrist and thigh. Something smooth and cold wrapped around my wrist.

I tugged gently on whatever was holding me, but it didn’t give. Why couldn’t I move my arm?

“You okay?” the voice asked.

“Mmmm hmmm.” I clenched around the length inside me.

My other wrist got the same treatment.

“I need your color, baby.” A strong, warm hand ran down my spine.

“Green.”

The length inside me pulled almost all the way out, then slowly pushed back in.

More of reality seeped into my consciousness.

I was in Kai’s room. It was dark. The man behind me was Kai. I was getting my reward.

He sat back until the only point of contact between us was his cock, still slowly fucking me.

A long, low moan escaped me. I couldn’t move. Whatever was holding my wrists against my thigh was strong. I didn’t want to escape.

The wet sensation around my cock was incredible, but how was it moving? Jesus. Was someone sucking me off?

The last of my sleep haze left me, and I opened my eyes. No. I was on my stomach. No one was under me.

A hand ran through my hair, stroking the strands. Tingles exploded on my scalp.

I knew it was Kai behind me, but I closed my eyes and pressed my face against the comforter as the remnants of my dream came back to me.

I was on the beach, naked and alone. A man had come up to me. He wanted me. He was taking me.

Another man was there. One was fucking me while the other was sucking me. They worked in tandem, using me to get off.

I should protest. I should say no.

But I didn’t want to.

The moans falling from my lips were obscene and needy. So fucking needy.

The cock sped up. He was fucking me faster.

I wanted to come.

“Don’t you dare come,” a voice ordered.

“Need to,” I mumbled, sinking deeper into my fantasy.

“No. Not until *I* let you.”

Grumbling, I pressed my face into the comforter. Not being able to move should have freaked me out, but it didn’t. Something about being held in place soothed me. It helped me relax and quieted some of the noise in my head.

I didn’t have to think, to react, to do anything. I could just lie there and

enjoy everything that was happening to me.

“More.”

“No.” The voice behind me was amused.

I grumbled and spread my legs as wide as they could go, intensifying the sensation of being held down.

My fantasy played in my head. The stranger behind me was still fucking me, but the one in front of me, on his knees for me, wasn't faceless anymore. It was Kai. He was sucking me, his eyes dark and filled with so much lust as he worked my dick.

“Kai,” I said brokenly as my body tightened.

“That's it, baby. Say my name.”

The stranger behind me thrust hard, nailing my prostate.

“Kai,” I gasped.

“Whose ass is this?”

“Yours.”

Another hard thrust.

“Who's the one who can make you come?”

“You.”

Two more.

“Who were you made for?”

“You.”

Three more.

“Fuck.” I slowly came out of my fantasy.

As hot as the idea of being tag teamed by Kai and some random was, that wasn't what I wanted right now.

“Tell me you love my cock.”

“Love your cock,” I mumbled.

Four hard thrusts.

“Tell me you're a slut for me.”

“Always.” I opened my eyes.

“Say it. I want the words.”

“I'm a slut for you.” I looked over my shoulder.

His big body was shrouded in shadows, his muscles outlined and so damn perfect. His tats were a blur of darkness with hints of color. He was perfect.

“Only for you,” I whispered. I wanted to see his eyes, but it was too dark.

He let out a strangled sound, planted his hands next to my sides, leaning over me, and thrust hard. He nailed my spot over and over.

“Oh fuck,” I moaned.

He was keeping his weight off me, but the heat from his body against my skin soothed me. A mix of comfort and pleasure rippled through my body as Kai grunted and panted above me.

I was moaning and muttering, too far gone to care about what I was saying or how I sounded. All I could focus on was how good he felt inside me. How much I wanted to come.

The pleasant ripple slowly shifted to one of intense, mind-melting pleasure, and time and space ceased to exist.

He railed me, the slaps of skin against skin echoing in the room. The wet warmth around my cock stroked me every time one of his punishing thrusts forced me to move against the bed.

“You going to come for me?” he asked, his voice gruff, and slammed into my ass, his pace frantic.

“Yes. So close.”

He covered me with his big body, slid his hands under my chest, and hugged me tight. The sensation of being completely surrounded by him, immobile and helpless, sent my pleasure into overdrive. My body tightened, my cock pulsed, and my ass clenched.

I was close. So fucking close. But he hadn't said I could come yet.

“Whose ass is this?” he asked again and pressed his cheek against mine, his hot breath ghosting over my face.

“Yours. Kai's.”

“Come, Alex. Come for me,” he said in that strangled voice he used when he was about to lose control.

My entire body tightened to the point of pain. Then it released in a dizzying pulse of pleasure and need.

I screamed, or at least I think I did. My throat felt raw as I shook and shuddered under him.

Not being able to move only heightened the pleasure as he kept on fucking me through my orgasm. It was so good but nearly too much. My body was overstimulated, but my mind was single focused on how incredible it felt to lie there and let Kai use me.

He was grunting in my ear, holding me tight.

The fog came back, and I gave myself over to it, and as Kai kept on fucking me, I floated away.

I was dimly aware of him stiffening over me, then pushing his cock deep

inside me. Warmth filled me. He let out a string of curses.

Sighing happily, I nuzzled into the comforter as he pressed sweet kisses against my cheek.

“Alex.”

“Huh?” How did I end up here?

I was lying on Kai, my head on his strong chest, one leg threaded through his. He sifted his fingers through my hair.

“You with me?”

“I think so?” I closed my eyes, enjoying his attention.

“Just breathe. You’re okay. I’m here.”

I was holding his soft dick in my hand. When had I grabbed it? Feeling the warm organ, so alive and real, was grounding.

“That was really hot.” The fog lifted. I pressed a kiss against his chest.

“Are you okay with what happened?”

I snorted softly. “I just said it was hot. Obviously I liked it.”

“I did too,” he said softly.

I flushed at the memories of waking up with him already inside me. “You were right. I’ve had that fantasy before.”

“What fantasy?” He stroked my hair. It felt so good, but it was also making me sleepy.

“Of a stranger fucking me while I’m asleep. Waking up and them already being inside me.”

He hummed deep in his chest. “Did you picture a stranger?”

“At first. But then I pictured you.”

His arm tightened around me. “Let’s sleep.”

“Kay.”

The few times I’d cuddled with someone, I’d been the big spoon and hadn’t liked it. I’d felt crowded and overheated, and the sensation of long hair on my chest had felt like tiny blades dragging across skin. It was one of the reasons why I didn’t sleep with people.

The other reason was that sharing a bed was intimate. Being vulnerable in front of someone didn’t come easily to me. Add in my sensory issues, and I couldn’t relax until I was in my own space and alone.

Kai kissed my hair, then shifted me so I was next to him.

As much as I’d liked snuggling him, I was grateful. His body was big and hot, and everywhere our skin had touched burned. Having my own space while still being able to sense him next to me was exactly what I needed.

Fatigue swirled around me, sleep tugging at my consciousness. I sighed, a deep, cleansing one, then allowed myself to drift off.

KAI

I blinked my eyes open, shaking off the remnants of sleep, and stared at messy black hair.

At some point during the night, I'd shifted onto my side. Alex was still next to me, on his stomach, with his face turned toward me. He was fast asleep, and I looked at him. *Really* looked at him.

He seemed younger and so relaxed. His features were soft, his lips parted as he breathed heavily. Almost snoring but not quite. It was endearing, and a rush of primal possessiveness shot through me.

I'd always wanted to try somnophilia or sleep sex, but that wasn't something you could do with a casual hookup. The amount of trust Alex had shown me by not only following my orders and sleeping in my bed but also for his subconscious to give in and let me fuck him was humbling.

I'd come home expecting my apartment to be empty, but Alex had been snuggled up in my comforter, hugging the spare pillow like a teddy bear.

The irrational jolt of pride and pleasure that had shot through me when I'd noticed he'd put on one of my T-shirts had only heightened my already desperate arousal. Something about seeing him in my clothes just did it for me.

I had no idea if he was normally a deep sleeper, but he'd barely moved as I'd stripped off my clothes and climbed into bed with him. His underwear had been a little harder to take off, but he'd stayed asleep as I'd slowly lowered them down his legs.

The back was made of black fishnet, showing off the incredible swell of his ass and his creamy skin. They'd been so sexy, and the knowledge that

he'd put them on for me had sent another pulse of that possessiveness through me.

As I'd split him open and gently swiped my tongue around his hole, he hadn't moved. He'd prepped for me, and while I didn't especially like the taste of lube, I'd been so overcome with lust for him I'd needed to rim him. Maybe it was that whole "I licked it, so it's mine" thing, but the breathy little moans he'd let out had only spurred me on.

Sleep sex was risky because I couldn't get his express consent. I would have loved to wake him up with my dick already in his ass, but I'd needed him to tell me it was okay to continue.

He'd been perfect. So pliant and needy. I loved it when he sassed and fought back, but last night had been about getting him out of his head and letting him experience what it was like to fully give over control.

The entire experience had affected me on a level I hadn't expected.

Alex was the one person I couldn't stay detached from. All my other sexual partners, even the friends I'd hooked up with regularly like my tattoo buddy, and the one girl I'd had an arrangement with for more than a few months, still hadn't gotten all of me. I'd held a part of myself back. We'd had fun, and the sex had been satisfying, but it had been all about the physical.

Sex with Alex was a full-body experience, and as much as I tried to keep that control, to stay detached, I couldn't.

The entire situation had disaster written all over it. I had plans, and none of them involved a partner.

Alex wasn't looking for anything either, and I wasn't even sure he liked me. Sure, he liked my dick and my bossy attitude, but did he like me as a person?

Every once in a while, I'd catch a glimpse of something in his eyes. Something that looked like it *could* be affection or warmth, but I didn't know him well enough to be sure.

He cracked one eye open. "Are you watching me sleep?"

"Maybe."

He blinked both eyes open and smiled as he nuzzled his cheek into the pillow. "That's kinda creepy."

"Creepier than waking you up by shoving my dick in your ass?"

He chuckled, his face still soft and sleepy. "Actually, yeah."

I brushed a lock of hair off his cheek and tucked it behind his ear.

His breath caught, his gaze going from sleepy to seeking.

“Are you still okay with what we did last night?”

He licked his bottom lip. “Yeah. I really liked it.”

“Me too.”

“How was the rest of your shift?”

“Good. Made more in tips than last week, so I’m calling it a win.”

He grinned. “I owe you thirty bucks.”

“Why?”

“That lady, she gave me three tens.”

“Really? I’ve never gotten more than twenty from someone. And I’m the one who did all the work,” I teased.

“Guess I’m prettier than you.”

“You definitely are.”

His expression shifted to a thoughtful one.

“What?”

“Some things about last night are a bit blurry, but I swore someone was sucking me off. I had to have dreamed that because it was just us, but it felt so real.”

I rolled over and grabbed the toy I’d used on him.

His eyes widened. “A sex sleeve?”

“Best of both worlds.” I tossed the thing back onto my night table. “Feels like a mouth without needing a third.”

He swallowed, heat flaring in his eyes. “Did you tie me up? I remember feeling something, but it wasn’t rope or anything like that.”

I sat up and picked up the restraints I’d tossed onto the floor last night. They were simple, just woven circles that attached with Velcro. One loop was large, and the other was small, like a strange-looking figure eight.

He licked his lips again. Then his face fell. “I bet those get a lot of use.”

I scooped up the plastic casing they’d come in. “Nope. I’ve had them forever but only opened them last night.”

“Really?” Hope flared in his eyes.

“Yup. Same with the sleeve. I have one for me, but that’s the first time I’ve used one with someone else.”

He rolled onto his back and covered his eyes with his hand. “I’m sorry. I’m ruining everything.”

“You’re not ruining anything.” I tossed the packaging aside and settled back on my pillow.

He shook his head. “I shouldn’t care who you fuck or how you do it, but I

do. I care, and I fucking hate it.”

“Alex. Look at me.”

He didn’t.

“Please.”

He lowered his hand and turned his head.

“Any kind of power exchange requires trust. You have a right to know who you’re trusting. What we’ve shared is way deeper than just sex. It requires a connection that goes beyond lust.”

He chewed on the inside of his cheek.

“I’m not fucking anyone else. Not interested, not looking.”

His expression relaxed. “Me either.”

“And if you have questions about my past or my experience, just ask. I’ll always be honest with you.”

“Why are you so fucking perfect?” he grumbled. “You always know what to say. It’s annoying.”

I grinned. “Wisdom that comes with age.”

“You’re only three years older than me.”

“Maybe, but I’m wise beyond my years.”

“Yeah, I take it back. You’re too arrogant to be perfect.”

“You like it.”

He chuckled. “Maybe.”

“Do you have anywhere you need to be?”

“What time is it?”

I glanced over at my phone. “Nearly eleven.”

“Nope.” He bit his lip. “But I can go.”

“That’s not what I was getting at. I just wanted to make sure I wasn’t keeping you from anything.”

“No. No plans today. You work again tonight?”

“Yeah. Hungry?”

He smiled shyly. “A little. And I need coffee.”

“Coffee is a must.” Giving in to temptation, I pressed a quick kiss against his lips. “I’ll go put a pot on. How about you put those sexy briefs back on and meet me in the kitchen?”

“What about pants?” he asked.

“No pants. I want you in my shirt, those sexy-as-fuck briefs, and nothing else.”

“It’s cold.”

“I’ll turn up the heat.”

His eyes raked up my body as I stood. “Then I want you in nothing but your boxers.”

“Cooking us breakfast could be dangerous like that.”

“You’re going to cook for us?” He gaped at me.

“How else are we going to eat?” I grabbed a pair of worn sleep pants. “How about I wear these until we’re done eating?”

“I’ll accept that.”

He lifted his arms over his head and stretched, letting out a happy sigh as he closed his eyes and arched his back.

Fuck. I dragged the sleep pants on so I didn’t jump on him, then hurried into the kitchen to get breakfast started.

It should have felt weird knowing he was going to be coming out of my room half-naked to eat breakfast. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d woken up with someone and fed them. The few times I’d slept with my consistent hookups, we’d had an unspoken agreement that we woke up and parted ways. No kisses, no talks, and no breakfast. This was a complete one-eighty.

Soft footsteps approached. I looked over my shoulder.

Alex, looking adorably shy, stood a few feet away in my shirt and presumably his sexy undies, which were hidden by the hem of the shirt.

“Have a seat. Coffee will be up in a few.”

He slinked over to the small kitchen table in the dining nook next to the tiny kitchen.

“How do you take it?” I busied myself with scooping coffee into a filter and putting the pot on.

“With enough cream and sugar to make baristas give me the side eye.”

I laughed and went to the fridge to fetch the coffee creamer I used. “You like salted caramel and chocolate?”

“Doesn’t everyone?”

“Try this.” I put the bottle in front of him, then grabbed a few packets of sweetener out of the tin I kept next to my coffee machine. “In case you want it sweeter.”

“Not judging? I figured you’d be a coffee purist.”

I snort-laughed and went back to the fridge to see what I could make us. “Not with the swill I buy. I add so much shit in mine it doesn’t even resemble coffee, just sweetness with a kick of caffeine. You like omelets?”

“Big fan.”

“I’ve got peppers, mushrooms, and cheese.”

“Yes to all.”

My coffee machine clicked, indicating that it was done percolating.

“I’ll get the coffee while you do that.” He jumped up, and something about his eagerness and how relaxed he was tugged at my chest.

This scene was utterly domestic and should have scared the piss out of me. All I could think about was how I could get used to it.

“Really?”

“What?” I looked up from where I was cracking eggs.

“I never took you for a fruity cereal fan.” He pointed at the open cupboard where I kept my dry food, including cereal.

“Rain loves them. They make a good snack when I want something sweet and crunchy.”

“I’m guessing the bran stuff is yours?”

“Gotta keep the abs tight.” I patted my stomach. “Occupational upkeep.”

He snorted and pulled open another cupboard.

I went back to prepping our breakfast as he poured two cups of coffee.

“I hope this is sweet enough.”

A mug was placed on the counter next to me. Alex’s warm body was close enough that our arms brushed.

I put the knife down and picked up the mug. I took a sip. “Perfect.”

He grinned, his cheeks pink and his eyes bright.

Unable to stop myself, I leaned in and kissed him. Just a soft, gentle press of lips.

As I pulled back, Alex sighed.

“Warm enough?” I asked.

“Huh? Oh, yeah. I’m good.”

I kissed him again. “Have a seat and enjoy your coffee while I finish cooking.”

“I’ll enjoy the view too.” He pinched my ass playfully. “Nothing’s hotter than a man who knows his way around a kitchen.” He sauntered back to the table, a sexy swing in his hips.

I was a pretty good cook, and the desire to feed him, to take care of him hit hard.

I was royally and utterly fucked. Did I care? Not even a little bit.



ALEX and I spent the rest of the day working on our presentation that was due Monday. Professor Meyers hadn't posted a list of when everyone would be presenting, but since we'd ended up on his shit list, we figured we'd be one of the first.

It would take three classes for everyone to present, but we all had to hand in our work on Monday. We had the slides and report done, and when we'd finished practicing, I was feeling confident about the whole project.

"Do you work again tonight?" Alex asked as I shut down my laptop.

"I do. Every Friday and Saturday."

"Is the club open on Sundays?"

"Sometimes. Usually only for events or if it's rented out."

"What time do you have to leave?"

"Not for a few hours." I glanced at my phone to check the time. "Are you hungry? We worked through dinner."

"Yeah." He bit his lip and dropped his gaze to the floor. "I can go."

I put a hand on his arm and waited until he looked at me. "I was inviting you to stay for dinner," I said gently. "Not kicking you out."

"I'm sorry I'm so weird." He looked away.

"You're not weird." I slid closer to him on the couch so our legs pressed together. "If you're ever confused about something I say, just ask."

"You were a lot easier to be around when I hated you," he grumbled.

"Really? Why's that?" I asked playfully.

"Because now I'm going to second-guess everything." He raised his gaze to meet mine. "I'm not great with social cues. I mix up people's meaning a lot, and I miss obvious hints."

"What do you mean?"

"Like just now. I didn't want to assume that you wanted me to stay, so I made things weird. And this will make you laugh your ass off. When I was a freshman, a girl asked me to hang out in her room so we could study for a class we had together. It was the second week of school, so we didn't have any homework or anything. We just looked over the syllabus and flipped through the textbook for about ten minutes. Then she asked me if I wanted to play Never Have I Ever."

"Like the drinking game?"

"Yeah, but without drinking. She said it was a fun way to get to know someone. We played a few rounds, and her statements were obviously hints. Never have I ever been topless in front of a guy. Never have I ever kissed a

guy I've studied with. Never have I ever gotten to third base. It never occurred to me that she wanted to mess around, and like an idiot, I used my turns to say stupid stuff. Like never have I ever gone to a frat party and never have I ever had a drink before noon."

He looked at his hands, his ears pink with embarrassment. "We played for a bit, and when she mentioned she was going to a party that night, I thought she was telling me it was time to go. So I said goodbye and left. A week later, her roommate saw me at a student event and told everyone who would listen how I'd completely missed the fact that her roommate had been hitting on me and how she'd asked me to go to a party with her, and I'd just left. So I'd apparently hurt her feelings, which was why she wouldn't even look at me in class after, and everyone at the party got a good laugh at dumbass Alex and how dense I was that I hadn't realized I could have gotten some action."

"Did you want to mess around with her?" The little flare of jealousy at the thought made me want to roll my eyes at myself.

"I guess." He raked a hand through his hair. "She was nice and really pretty, but my brain just didn't go there."

"How long after your... breakup was this?"

"You mean, how long after Brett let me know exactly what I was and wasn't?"

"Yeah."

"About five months."

"Had you ever been with a girl?"

He shook his head, his cheeks bright red. "I'd kissed a few but hadn't done more than that. He didn't want me to be with anyone else, and like an idiot, I'd agreed. He could fuck whoever he wanted, but I had to stay faithful to him."

"Then it makes sense that you'd miss those cues. You'd never had a healthy relationship or even a good flirting session, I'm guessing. You wouldn't realize she was trying to tell you she wanted more because she didn't actually say it."

"Maybe." He leaned back against the couch. "It still takes me a while to figure out when a girl is hitting on me. I just assume she's being friendly, and my brain doesn't register that it could mean more until she's obvious. It's easier when I'm the one who initiates things, but I need someone to be super obvious or flat out tell me they like me or want to mess around because I miss subtle clues. That's why I started using Kinksters. There's zero room for

miscommunication because we're all on there looking for the same thing."

"A lot of people are like that. And it's probably a good thing you don't automatically assume any girl being nice to you is flirting. That would make you a creep."

He chuckled, but the sound was hollow. "Yeah, that part is good at least. But it still sucks because I get stuck in these spirals of regret. Like even now, I still think about that day in her dorm. I haven't seen her since freshman year, but I still beat myself up over it."

"It's hard to get past stuff that affects us on such a deep level."

"Maybe, but it seems like *everything* affects me on a deep level. It's like I have a constant loop of mistakes or moments of regret rolling through my head. Some days it's quieter than others, but not a day goes by when I don't beat myself up for shit that happened years ago."

I opened my mouth to say something but closed it.

The more Alex revealed about himself, the more things clicked into place. It sounded like he had undiagnosed ADHD. I wasn't an expert or anything, but I'd done a research project on ADHD last year, and Alex fit most of the diagnostic criteria in the DSM-5. But now wasn't the time to bring that up. Not when he was still in a spiral and feeling bad about himself.

"That has to be hard," I said instead.

"It's not easy. I hate my brain most days." He sighed heavily. "And now I've just dumped a crap ton more of my issues on you." He shot me a crooked smile that didn't reach his eyes. "This is why I don't have any friends. I don't know how to talk to people when it's not about stupid stuff. I overshare and infodump and take over conversations."

"If you can't talk about real stuff with your friends, then they're not real friends."

"I don't have a lot of those. Or any now that Beck is too busy for me." He rolled his eyes. "And there I go again."

"I like that you're comfortable enough around me to be so open."

He gave me a sidelong look, his expression guarded.

"I'm guessing you only talk like this around people you trust."

"Mostly. I've learned how not to talk, if that makes sense. I usually let other people lead conversations and just react to what they say or ask a ton of questions so they're the one doing the talking."

"But you don't do that with me."

"No, I don't. I never have. It's weird. Even when I hated you, I didn't

sensor myself like I usually do around people.”

“Hated, past tense?”

“I think it’s kind of obvious I don’t hate you anymore.” He grinned, his eyes glittering playfully. “I kinda like you, even if you are annoying.”

“Annoying?” I laughed. “I can live with that. It’s better than what most people call me.”

“You’re too perfect.” He punched my shoulder. “Too hot, too nice, too insightful. And you always say the right thing. It’s fucking annoying.”

“I kinda like you too.”

That was the understatement of the year. I more than liked him. I was falling for him. But neither one of us was ready for that conversation. And I wasn’t sure he ever would be.

He beamed at me, and my heart clenched at how happy he looked. It also broke my heart to know that he probably hadn’t heard that a lot in his life.

“How about some dinner?”

“Yeah. Want to go halves on something?” He reached for his phone.

“I was going to cook.”

He gaped at me. “Really?”

I couldn’t help laughing at his reaction. “Yeah. It’s cheaper, and this way I can control what I’m eating.”

“Guess you’d have to. I heard your metabolism slows down as you get older.”

I punched him in the shoulder. “I’m only three years older than you, fucker.”

He laughed and rubbed his arm. “Yeah, but you’re almost twenty-five. That’s halfway to middle age. You’re about to enter your quarter-life crisis.”

“You’re a brat.”

“Just telling it like it is. Wait. You said you were a Scorpio. That’s this month. When’s your birthday?”

“Monday.”

“Like two days from now?”

“Yup.” I stood, motioning for him to follow me into the kitchen.

“Are you doing anything for it?” He leaned against the counter as I opened my freezer.

“I don’t really do birthdays. I mean, I make a big deal for Mom and Rain on their days, but mine is just another day for me.” I grabbed a container of soup.

“Does your mom celebrate it?”

I nodded and opened the fridge. “She’s working a later shift this year, so we’re doing a birthday-Thanksgiving combo on Thursday.” I pulled out a block of cheese, butter, and a jar of mayo. “How does grilled cheese and soup sound?”

“Good.” He bit his lip.

“What?” I put the ingredients on the counter and went to get the bread from my pantry.

“So you’re babysitting on your birthday?”

“For a little while. Mom’s off at six-thirty, but Rain goes to bed at eight, so there’s no time to do anything.”

“Oh, that makes sense.”

Alex had a faraway look in his eyes. I put down the bread. “Do you want to come over on Monday?”

He looked at the floor between us. “I don’t want to bother you. You’re babysitting and probably busy after.”

“Alex. Look at me.”

He lifted his head, his expression seeking.

“When I ask if you want to come over, it’s because I want you to. I’ll never offer or ask just to be polite. That’s not how I am.”

He swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing.

“Now, would you like to come over on Monday?”

He nodded.

I closed the distance between us and pressed a kiss against his lips. I’d meant it to be a soft, quick kiss, but he sighed and melted against me. I wrapped my arms around him and held him close. He fisted my shirt in his hands, holding on tight as I deepened the kiss.

Fuck. I liked kissing him. I’d never been one for casual affection. Not with partners. Kissing was always a precursor to more. A way to get the ball rolling, so to speak.

But with Alex, kissing was just so satisfying I didn’t need more. The way he felt in my arms, how warm and solid he was. How he moaned and sighed softly, letting me take the lead and kiss him exactly how I wanted. I loved everything about it.

We stood there in my kitchen, our kisses deep and slow. Time ceased to exist until all I could focus on was Alex.

When I finally pulled away, my head was spinning. Actually *spinning*.

That had never happened to me from just a kiss.

“How about you relax, and I’ll get dinner ready.”

“Okay.” He smiled shyly and pecked another kiss against my lips.

He sauntered toward my living room, and I checked out his ass. His body was incredible, but that full, bouncy ass was next level.

It didn’t take long to make dinner, and I loved watching Alex eat what I’d prepared. His enthusiasm was palpable as he told me over and over how good it was. I liked taking care of him. That was a kink I hadn’t known I had because no one other than him had triggered it.

“I can’t remember the last time I ate so well.” He leaned back in his chair and patted his stomach. “Or ate two full meals in a day.”

“What do you mean?” I drank down the last of my water.

“I have a bad habit of forgetting to eat. I’ll have something in the morning, but even then, it’s not really breakfast. Then I won’t think about food again until I’m starving, and I eat whatever I can find, healthy or not.”

“You don’t eat breakfast?” I asked carefully.

“Not really. I get in these moods where food doesn’t appeal to me, or I forget what I bought, and it ends up going bad. Or I eat the same thing over and over. Like last week, my breakfasts were a few slices of pepperoni. The week before, it was a handful of shredded cheese. I’m weird.”

I bit my lip. Those were classic signs of ADHD, especially in adults.

“But you can obviously adult and cook.” He ran his finger over the rim of his glass. “It was good. Really good. Where did you get the soup?”

“I made it.”

“From *scratch*?”

I bit back a laugh at his shocked expression. “Yeah. It’s pretty easy. Tomatoes, chopped onion, roasted garlic, cream, spices, broth. Simmer, blend, and freeze.”

“Anytime someone says things like *chopped* and *roasted*, that’s not easy. Easy is like, two steps. Open and heat. That’s easy.”

“I suppose my definition of easy is a bit different from most.”

“What did you do to the grilled cheese? I’ve never had one with so much flavor before.”

“I used mayo on the outside and added spices to the butter on the inside so it would blend with the cheese. And sourdough bread. I like it because it’s denser and adds a little extra tang to it.”

“You really are a fully functional adult.” He laughed, the sound sardonic.

“Most days I can barely manage to remember to drink water. Thank fuck my brain seems to have the ability to keep up with my classes and assignments and tests. The rest of my life is a mess, but my grades are good.”

“What do you want to do with your degree? Start your own business?”

“Maybe. My shoot for the moon plan is to become the CFO of a Fortune 500 company before I turn forty. But I’d be okay with just making enough that I never have to worry about money again.”

“You struggled?”

“My parents were filthy rich, but other than living in their fancy house and having staff, I didn’t see a lot of that money. They were too busy using it to fund their vices. My grandmother doesn’t have much, never has. She’s a wonderful woman, and she loves me, but taking me in was a huge strain on her. She sacrificed a lot to give me a home. That’s why I worked so hard for a scholarship and had two jobs in high school. I wanted to make sure she wouldn’t have to support me once I started college.”

“That’s why I dance. I’d never be able to go to school without my scholarship, and my mother sacrificed enough for me. She’s in a much better place now than when I was young, but she deserves so much more than to be stuck in this town, working a dead-end job just to pay her bills.”

“What do you want to do with your degree? Open your own practice?”

“Maybe. I like the idea of being a clinical therapist, but I really enjoy research, so maybe I’ll go the academic route. No matter what, I’m getting out of here, and I’m taking Mom and Rain with me. I’m going to give them the life Mom should have always had.”

“Did your Mom ever go to college?”

I shook my head. “She wanted to be a nurse, but having me derailed that. I’d love to be able to pay for her to go to school and study whatever she wants. And I want to get Rain into a good school. She’s smart, but the school here sucks, and smart kids fall through the cracks. I want her to have the best life possible, not struggle and fall into the same traps I did.”

“But you have your life together. You’re in college, and you have a job, your own apartment, friends.”

“I didn’t always have this.” I crossed my arms. “I told you how I wasn’t in a good place when Rain was born, right?”

He nodded.

“I had a decent job, but I was a functional alcoholic. I was pissed off at the world because I was stuck here like everyone else I knew. I got good

grades, but my guidance counselor told me that good grades at my school were the equivalent of barely passing at a good school, so I shouldn't even bother applying to college because I'd either get rejected or fail out."

"Shit. Aren't counselors supposed to encourage their students? Mine suggested Rutherford and helped me apply for scholarships."

"At a good school, they do. But when they're overworked and overwhelmed with delinquents and kids who barely manage to graduate, they don't have the spoons to help those of us with a chance at a future. The school gets paid for every kid who graduates, so that's where the focus is. They don't give a shit about us once we do because we're someone else's problem."

"Now I get what Eli was talking about," he said thoughtfully.

"What do you mean?"

"He said he skipped two grades because his teachers hated him and wanted him to be someone else's problem."

"He's a smart kid. Like really smart. I wish he'd been able to get his IQ tested because I'd guess he's either really close to or in the genius range."

"Really?"

"Yeah. But again, a shitty school and an overworked parent meant he didn't get the advantages he should have."

"You said you've known him since he was little?"

"Our moms are friends, and they both had kids young. Mom had me at fifteen, and Eli's mom had his brother at seventeen and him at nineteen, so we all grew up together."

"And you work with his brother, right? At the club?"

I nodded.

"Is he as hot as Eli? Because holy shit, he hit the genetic lottery."

"I thought you said your type was tall, dark, and handsome?" I couldn't keep the little growl out of my tone as a flare of jealousy hit.

Alex grinned. "It is, but I can still appreciate how gorgeous he is without being attracted to him. Hell, my whole house is full of hotties. We've got Eli the model, Matt the ridiculously hot ball player. My buddy, Beck, is a pretty boy jock, and Finn is an adorkable nerd."

"Then there's you."

He flushed.

"The pretty boy brat."

"I'm not a brat."

I quirked my eyebrow. “Really?”

“Okay, maybe a little,” he conceded.

“Ever have a thing for any of your roommates, since they’re all so hot?”

He grinned. “Nope. Again, my type is super specific. They’re all too clean-cut for me.”

“Good news for me.”

“And me.” He licked his lips. “You said you find tons of people attractive. Are you into anyone at your work? I mean, they all have to be hot to make a living dancing. The ones I saw definitely were.”

“It’s the same thing. I find them attractive, but I’m not attracted to any of them. Even if we didn’t work together, none of them would be on my radar.”

I wanted to tell him he was the only one I wanted and hadn’t even looked at another person since that day he bumped into me in class, but I held back. I might be ready for more, but I wasn’t sure Alex was.

“Do you have to get ready for work soon?” he asked softly.

I glanced over my shoulder and checked the time on my stove. “Unfortunately, yeah. I do.”

“I’ll help you clean up. Then I’ll head out.”

“Don’t worry about cleaning up. It’s just the table. I did the other dishes.”

“Fully functional adult.” He sighed. “The kitchen looks like a crime scene when I try to cook.”

He pushed away from the table. “I’ll just change back into my clothes and let you get to it.”

“Keep them.” I stood as well. “I like seeing you in my clothes.”

“Yeah? I still have that other set you loaned me.”

“Keep both. I like the idea of you wearing my stuff when I’m not around.”

“I wear your T-shirt to bed.” He peeked up at me through his lashes.

“You do?” I stepped around the table and moved into his space so our chests touched.

He licked his bottom lip. “Yeah.”

I pulled him close and kissed him. By the time we pulled apart, we were both breathing heavily.

“You’d better go before I drag you into my room and skip my shift.”

He grinned playfully, his eyes sparkling. “Can’t have that.”

I wanted to ask him to stay so I could see him after work, but I had a mountain of homework to catch up on tomorrow, and I guessed he did too.

As much as I wanted more time with him, schoolwork had to come first.

I gave him one more kiss, then took his hand and walked him into the living room so he could gather his stuff.

I couldn't wait to see him on Monday morning and again on Monday night. I had something I wanted to try with him, something both of us should thoroughly enjoy.

ALEX

Ten minutes before class started on Monday, Kai slid into the seat beside me.

“Hi.” Was I blushing? Fuck, I hoped not.

I was still feeling off-kilter after spending the weekend together. I liked him a lot. But how did he feel about me? He obviously liked me, but did he like me the way I liked him? Was I just another fuck buddy to him? That was his MO after all. And until Elissa and now him, that had been mine as well.

Sex with him was amazing, but so was hanging with him. He was an incredible person, so kind and thoughtful, and he *got* me in a way no one ever had. Not even Beck.

He made me happy, and he *saw* me. He knew how fucked up I was, and it hadn't scared him away. That couldn't last forever, but that didn't stop me from wanting it.

Today was the last time we'd have a reason to see each other. We'd still have this class, of course, but once our presentation was done, our meetings would end. Well, after tonight.

But that was probably just a goodbye fuck. One more time before he moved on to the next person who caught his eye.

He put a bakery bag, an apple, and a protein bar on the desk attached to my chair, then reached into his bag and added a water bottle to the pile.

“What's this?” I tamped down my excitement and tried not to read into the gesture.

“Breakfast and a snack for later so your blood sugar doesn't drop when you get hungry.” He smiled, his gaze full of affection and fondness.

My heart skipped a beat. Fuck, why did he have to be so nice?

I'd spent all of yesterday gearing up for the big goodbye tonight, but this, this wasn't sex motivated. This was him taking care of me. I liked it way too fucking much.

"Thanks," I said thickly.

He winked and pulled a second bakery bag out of his book bag.

I slipped the apple, protein bar, and water away, then peeked in the bag. He'd gotten me a cinnamon roll.

"They're from a bakery in town called Welsh's. They make the most amazing pastries. These are my favorites, but their cream puffs are to die for. They literally melt in your mouth."

"I've never heard of it." I ripped off a piece of the roll. A flush of happiness shot through me as Kai did the same.

Jesus fuck, I needed to get a grip. I was getting all mushy over sharing breakfast with him. This was the same guy who'd had his dick in me multiple times, who'd made me beg him to come, but this was what made me all flustered and moon-eyed?

"It's a local secret. We kinda like that students haven't figured out it's there. They've already taken over everything else in town. It's nice to have a spot we can support and is just ours."

"But you're telling me?"

"You're different. An honorary townie." He grinned, and I smiled so widely my cheeks hurt.

We ate in silence, and I couldn't help sneaking looks at Kai as he flipped through his cue cards. Mine were in my bag. I didn't want to risk getting them all sticky, so I didn't bother double-checking them. I'd prepared as much as I could for the presentation. Another few minutes wouldn't make a difference at this point.

I'd just finished my breakfast when Professor Meyers came into the class and stepped up to his podium. Everyone fell silent.

"Good morning. Today we'll have nine presentations." He looked down at the papers in his hand. "Moray and Nesbitt. Alexander and Ellis."

After he announced us, I tuned him out.

We weren't first, which was a small mercy. Being second wasn't the worst thing. The class would still be fresh, so they'd hopefully pay attention. One of the things we were being marked on, which was totally unfair, was how engaged we kept the class. Eight a.m. on a Monday morning was a shitty

time to have to rely on our classmates being awake and paying attention to us.

As the first pair went to the front of the class to set up their slides, Kai shot me a little wink and a reassuring smile, then squeezed my thigh.

When he let go, my skin was hot. I took a chance and pressed my leg against his. He pushed back, the pressure reassuring and calming the last of my nerves. We had this.



THE PRESENTATION WAS, for all intents and purposes, a success.

I wasn't the extrovert everyone thought I was. I didn't particularly like public speaking, but I'd learned that slipping into a persona and playing a part made things easier.

Only one student had been asleep at their desk, and while no one had been riveted, they'd been interested.

Kai was a natural, but that wasn't exactly shocking.

He'd presented the material with the same confidence he had in his everyday life, and I'd noticed more than a few of the students checking him out.

The worst part of the class was sitting through the remaining seven presentations after we'd finished. The adrenaline drop from doing the presentation hit hard. I tried to look like I was paying attention to whatever was going on in the front of the room, but I spent the last few hours of class daydreaming and letting my mind wander.

"You did fucking amazing." Kai grinned at me as we gathered our stuff at the end of class.

"Yeah?" Goddamn it. I was blushing again. Ugh.

Kai bumped my shoulder with his. "Yeah. Did you see Professor Meyers's face? He was riveted."

"I try not to look at people, or at least not focus on them while I'm presenting. I can do this dissociative stare thing where it looks like I'm making eye contact with someone, but I'm looking right through them."

He pursed his lips, then shook it off and chuckled. "That's a handy trick. I guess I'm used to making eye contact with crowds because of my job."

I snickered as I pictured Kai doing a strip routine while presenting slides

about censorship. I shouldered my bag.

“What?”

“Nothing. Just a funny mental picture of you dancing while we presented.”

He snorted. “Maybe I should try to work this into a routine at work. The frazzled office worker trying to spice up a presentation in front of the board.”

“I mean, it’s relatable.”

Kai nodded for me to follow him down the aisle. “What time is your next class?” he asked as we made our way toward the exit.

“In an hour.”

“Mine too. Want to grab a coffee?”

He wanted to get coffee with me?

“Um, yeah. Sure. I only had one cup this morning. I could use the caffeine boost.”

“Same. I don’t like to get too jacked up before a big project or test. I end up getting jittery and shaky, and it kills my concentration.”

“Same.”

I also had a nervous bladder, so coffee went right through me when I had to do a presentation or big test. He didn’t need to know that, though.

We hurried down the stairs and toward the main doors.

“Where’s your class?” he asked.

“In the engineering building.”

“Mine too.” He shot me a surprised look. “What is it?”

“Budget analysis. What about you?”

“Neuroethics. Want to hit the café in the lounge? It’s not great coffee, but it’s in the building, so we won’t have to rush.”

“Sure.”

We fell into step together.

Kai kept up a steady stream of small talk as we walked across campus. We didn’t talk about anything deep or meaningful, but just joking and shooting the shit was fun.

The line at the café was out the door, but that was typical. The staff worked fast, and they didn’t offer complicated drinks, so the line usually moved quickly.

“This is why I pick something up on my way to school,” Kai said as we got in line.

“Me too. There’s a really good coffee shop about ten minutes from the

house. I usually grab something there.”

“I drive by at least three chain shops, but here’s another local secret.” He leaned in so his lips brushed my ear. “The best coffee in town is at Murphy’s Quik-Stop.”

His hot breath tickled my skin, and I shivered. “That sounds like a gas station,” I said, my voice breathy.

Kai grinned. “It is.”

“That’s... unusual.”

“That’s where I get the cinnamon rolls too. The actual bakery is way out of my way, but they deliver to a few businesses around town so I can get my carb and sugar fix while I grab my coffee.”

“Sounds like the perfect setup.”

The fact that he’d shared another local secret made me ridiculously happy. It was dumb to get giddy over something so simple, but it felt like more than just random conversation. Or that could just be my brain looking for something that wasn’t there.

“Kai!”

We both turned. A stunning blonde with long legs and a million-watt smile sauntered up to us.

“Hey, Darcy.” He gave her a lazy grin.

“I haven’t seen you around lately.” She pouted prettily and moved right into his space so her breasts were brushing his chest.

“Been busy.” He took a half step back, that grin still on his lips.

“There’s a party on Wednesday night at the house. It’s *super* exclusive.” She shot me an annoyed look, then went back to making mooneyes at Kai. “I can put you on the list.”

“Wish I could, but I’m insanely busy the next few weeks. I barely have time to sleep.”

She giggled and flipped her hair over her shoulder. “I know, right? But maybe you can make an exception and come on Wednesday? I’ll make it worth your while.” She added a little purr to her voice. A little flare of jealous anger flashed through me.

Fuck. I needed to get myself in check. I had zero claims on Kai. We were... I had no idea what the fuck we were, but he was free to hook up with all the sorority girls he wanted.

“It’s tempting.” He shifted the slightest bit closer to me, his arm brushing mine. “But like I said, I’m really busy.”

“Boo.” She pouted and stepped in front of me, putting herself between us. Kai’s smile dropped off his face. “It was nice seeing you again, but we were actually in the middle of something.”

“But—”

Kai turned his attention to me, effectively dismissing her.

Warmth spread through my chest.

She glared between us for a few beats, then stalked off.

“An old friend?”

“Not really.” He smirked at me. “And before you drive yourself crazy, no, I never hooked up with her.”

“I wasn’t going to ask.”

“But you were wondering.”

“Maybe.”

“You’re cute when you’re jealous. Like an angry puppy.”

“Angry puppy?”

“Yeah. Like you’re trying to look all mean and growly, but it just comes across as adorable.”

“I don’t know how to take that.”

“It’s a compliment.”

“I’ll take your word for it.” I bit back my smile.

I didn’t understand what was happening. Was this a goodbye coffee? Or a celebratory one? In all the weeks we’d been working together, Kai had never indicated that he wanted to hang out on campus. But then again, I hadn’t exactly given off vibes that I’d *wanted* to spend time with him after class.

This weekend had changed things. But what did it mean?

“What do you want?” Kai asked. We were next in line.

“Just a large dark brew.” I pulled my wallet out of my back pocket. “I got it.”

“You sure? I like treating you.”

Jesus fuck, my face better not be as red as it felt. “Yeah. You got breakfast.”

He pressed his shoulder against mine. “Thanks.”

When it was our turn, we ordered our drinks, then loaded them up with lots of creamer and sugar at the little drink station.

“I should probably head up to class,” he said as we carried our drinks out of the café.

I glanced at the clock on the wall above the cash. Class started in ten

minutes. “Me too.”

“Come over around six.” He turned his body so our chests were less than six inches apart.

“Okay.” I licked my bottom lip. His eyes tracked the movement, and a thrill shot through me.

“And bring your appetite.”

I nodded, my throat tight. Fuck. How the hell was I supposed to walk away from him when he was being so nice?

He winked, then stepped away and headed to the western side of the building.

My class was on the east side, and I made my way to the room half in a daze. I just had to make it through tonight. Then I could freak out and break down about another person getting sick of me.



AT THREE MINUTES TO SIX, I knocked on Kai’s door.

It swung open, and this time I wasn’t surprised to see Rain on the other side.

“Hi!” She waved, beaming at me. “Kai said you’re coming to have his birthday dinner with us.”

“Rain,” Kai called. “What have I told you about opening the door when I’m not with you?”

“You said not to. But it’s Alex. Alex is my friend too.” She grabbed my hand and tugged me inside.

I stepped into the hallway and closed the door. Kai hovered in the door to the kitchen.

“Why don’t you two go wash your hands? Dinner is almost ready.”

“Come on.” Rain pulled me down the hall, keeping up a steady stream of conversation.

We washed our hands. Then she yanked me into the small dining nook, still jabbering away about random topics. I answered her questions when I could, and I was glad she was filling the silence.

This was Kai’s birthday dinner? He’d told me he was doing a thing on the weekend and today was just another day.

Before I could get too far into my spiral of questions, Kai came out of the

kitchen with two plates in his hands.

“Thanks.” Rain smiled brightly at him as he put one in front of her.

“Thanks,” I echoed, feeling a bit uncomfortable I was just sitting there while he did all the work. “Do you need help?”

“I’ve got it.” He shot me a secret smile.

He’d made spaghetti with meatballs. Rain was looking at the parmesan cheese pointedly.

“Do you need help with that?” I asked, more than a little off-kilter at the entire situation.

“Yes, please.”

“Tell me when.”

I shook the container over her bowl a few times.

“When.”

Kai came into the room with a plate in one hand and a jug of water in the other. He poured out two glasses of water for us.

“This looks really good,” I said.

Rain sipped her cup of milk. “Kai’s meatballs are the *best*.”

Kai picked up his fork.

I took that as my cue to start and did the same. “They are?”

“They are.” She stabbed a chunk of meatball. “Try them.”

I split one in half with my fork and took a bite. Flavor and spices erupted on my tongue. Shit, they were good. “Wow. These are amazing.”

Kai smiled, a flush high on his cheekbones. Was he flustered? At least that made two of us.

All during dinner, Rain kept the conversation flowing. She told me all about school and her friends, then launched into a detailed retelling of her favorite movie. It was nice.

I’d never really had family dinners. My parents hadn’t been around to care when or if I ate. My grandmother had made a point to have set dinner times, but I’d usually been working or busy, especially as I’d gotten older, so I was used to eating alone.

When we finished, I helped Kai clear the table while Rain ran into her room to get something.

“I hope you like chocolate.” Kai uncovered what looked like a cake tray.

On it sat three cupcakes.

“Big fan.”

He stepped closer and bent his head. The soft brush of his lips on mine

settled the last of the nerves still fluttering around my stomach.

“Alex!” Rain shouted from the dining nook.

Kai turned back to the cupboards and pulled one open.

“What’s up?” I asked Rain.

She motioned for me to come closer, and I knelt next to her chair. “We have to sing to him,” she stage-whispered. “He always says I don’t have to, but I know he likes it.”

“Yeah, sure.” I nodded to the mess of crumpled paper on the table in front of her. “Is that for him?”

She nodded proudly. “I made it at school and wrapped it while he was cooking.”

“It looks amazing.”

“Thanks.” She beamed at me.

“Ready for dessert?” Kai asked from the doorway to the kitchen.

“Yes!” She pointed at my seat, and I sat.

He came out of the kitchen with the cupcakes and a small stack of plates. As soon as he’d passed them out, Rain gave me a pointed look and opened her mouth.

“Happy birthday...”

I joined in, loving how Kai got all flustered and blushed as we sang to him. I’d never seen him be anything other than cool and confident, so this little glimpse into his shy side was not only fun but fascinating too.

When we finished the song, Rain pushed her bundle of papers at him.

He took them and made a few comments about how beautiful the wrapping was. He peeled back the layers, revealing a small painted birdhouse.

“Thank you.” He held it up and examined it. “This is amazing. I love it.”

“I made it.” She bounced in her chair, a huge grin on her face. “Look, I put your name on it.”

Kai tilted the birdhouse so I could see his name scrawled on the roof with a big heart over the *i* and more hearts circling it.

“It’s gorgeous. Best gift ever.” He scooted out his chair and kissed the top of her head. “Thanks, pumpkin.”

She picked up her cupcake and took a big bite of icing.

We ate our cupcakes. Then Kai shoed me and Rain into the living room while he cleaned up. I felt a bit like a tool for not helping, especially considering it was his birthday, but he’d waved me off when I’d offered.

Instead, I joined Rain and sat on the couch.

“Want to watch something funny?” Rain asked.

“Sure.”

She grabbed the remote off the coffee table, then climbed onto my lap. I held still as she settled her head on my shoulder and snuggled close. Her small frame was warm and comforting. She turned on the TV and navigated to Netflix.

She’d just cued up some kid’s show when Kai sat on the couch next to me.

I shot him a questioning look. Was he okay with Rain being on my lap? He smiled at us fondly and leaned back against the couch.

Rain started the show, but instead of staying quiet so I could watch, she kept up a running commentary. It was nice, and I tried not to get used to feeling like I belonged with them.

KAI

I'd never seen Alex so relaxed as he sat on the couch with Rain on his lap. Well, that wasn't exactly true. I'd never seen him so relaxed when sex wasn't involved would be more accurate. He looked at home, and the softness in his features tugged at something deep inside me.

I barely paid attention to the show and reminded myself that while Alex might feel like mine, he wasn't.

I knew he didn't hate me anymore. I'd go as far as to say he really liked me, but I still couldn't get a read on how much. That alone was fucking with me because I prided myself on my ability to read people.

But Alex was different. I was in love with him and had been for a while. He was everything. The only person who'd ever broken through my defenses and made me want more. And with him, I didn't just want more. I wanted everything.

"Mommy!"

I jumped at Rain's excited cry.

Mom came into the living room. "Hi, sweetie." She came around the table and bent to kiss my head like I was four years old. "Happy birthday, baby."

"Thanks, Mom." I motioned to Alex. "This is Alex."

"Hi." Mom smiled warmly at him. "I'm Cassie."

"Hi," he said shyly.

"Alex and I sang happy birthday to Kai, and he liked my birdhouse." Rain grinned up at Mom, her head still on Alex's shoulder. "And we had cupcakes with lots of icing for dessert."

"Sounds like a great night."

“It was.” She sighed happily.

“Time to go, sweetheart. You have school in the morning.”

“I know.” Rain pouted.

“Say your goodbyes, then go put your stuff on so we can head home.”

“Kay.” She twisted in Alex’s lap and wrapped her arms around his neck.
“Bye, Alex.”

“Bye. Have a good night.”

“I will.” She hopped off his lap and launched herself at me. “Happy birthday, Kai.”

“Thanks, pumpkin.” I hugged her back. “Did you put your library book in your bag?”

Her face screwed up in an adorable look of concentration. “I don’t remember.”

“Go check, then get dressed.”

“Okay.” She bounded away.

“It’s nice to finally meet you,” Mom said to Alex and perched on the edge of the coffee table.

“Oh, um. You too.” He shot me a surprised look.

“I bet you’re glad that presentation is over. Kai was stressed about it for weeks.”

“Yeah. It’s nice not to have to worry about that anymore.” His eyes dimmed just the slightest bit. “But I think we did well.”

“We rocked it.” I squeezed his thigh. “I’d give us an A+.”

“I’m ready!” Rain bellowed from the hall.

“I’d better go.” Mom stood. “Have a good night, Alex.”

“You too.”

I followed Mom into the hall.

“You said he doesn’t have any family around here?” Mom said as she zipped up Rain’s coat.

“No. He’s from Vermont.”

“Wow, that’s far away. Is he going home for the holiday?”

“I don’t think so.”

“You should invite him over for dinner.”

“Yeah?”

She gave me a pointed look and leaned closer so Rain wouldn’t hear. “He’s the first person you’ve introduced me to. If he’s important to you, he’s important to me.”

She knew I was into both guys and girls and hadn't even blinked when I'd told her. I was lucky to have such a supportive mother.

"I'll ask him."

She wrapped me up in a big mom hug and squeezed me tight. "I love you."

"Love you too."

"Happy birthday." She kissed my cheek and stepped back.

"Happy birthday." Rain held up her arms for a hug.

"Thanks." I picked her up and gave her a squeeze.

"Love you." She smacked a kiss against my cheek.

"Love you too."

I closed the door behind them, then turned. Alex was standing in the doorway to the living room.

"You okay?" I walked over to him and stopped when I was right in his space and he had to look up at me.

"Yeah. It's just... nothing."

"What?" I asked softly.

"It's nothing."

I wanted him to tell me but didn't pry. I'd learned that Alex opened up better when he was the one who started the conversation.

"It's nice you have that. My parents weren't really around, so I didn't get the hugs and the 'I love yous' growing up."

I wrapped one arm around him and tugged him into a loose hug, giving him the option of pulling away.

He melted against me with a sigh.

The more he revealed about his life, the more his issues made sense. He'd been abandoned by the people who were supposed to love him more than anything. Then he'd been betrayed by his asshole ex, and a slew of other people had let him down.

At that moment, I didn't give a fuck that we weren't really anything to each other, and I made a promise to myself I'd never be one of those assholes.

Even if we stopped sleeping together, I would still be his friend. Not only could we both use a few more of those in our lives, but I was also way too attached to ever walk away. I'd be there for him for as long as he'd let me.

"Happy birthday." He kissed my neck. "I forgot to say it earlier."

"Thank you." I hugged him tighter.

“I didn’t get you a gift.”

“Yeah, you did.” I kissed his hair. “You’re my gift.”

“I am?” he asked playfully.

We pulled apart. I was taken aback at how beautiful he was. His eyes were bright and filled with happiness, and his smile was genuine and real.

“You are. Want to do something a bit different?” I kissed his full mouth.

“What did you have in mind?”

“Let’s go into my room.”

He took my offered hand and followed me down the hall.

I paused in the doorway. “I want you naked and spread out on my bed by the time I come back.”

“Okay.” He squeezed my hand, his voice breathless.

“Three minutes.”

“Count fast.” He pecked a kiss against my cheek, then sauntered into my room, a swing in his hips, and tugged his shirt off.

I closed the door and tried to get my libido in check. And get the package that had been delivered that morning.

When I had the box, I glanced at my phone to check the time. Two and a half more minutes.

Sighing, I opened Instagram for the first time in months. I scrolled for about ten seconds, already bored out of my mind.

I didn’t get the appeal of social media, and while I had accounts on every platform, I hardly ever used them.

Tapping on the DM icon, I checked to see if any of the new ones I’d gotten were important. Most were from people I’d grown up with, and a few were people I didn’t recognize but were most likely from school.

Alex’s name caught my eye, and I opened the thread. He’d sent a picture of him in my bed. The photo was relatively tame, just a close-up of his flushed and gorgeous face as he lay nestled against my pillows.

I stared at it. He looked good in my bed. Like he belonged. I saved the picture, then set it as my home screen.

Tucking my phone away, I headed back to my room.

“Look. At. You.” I closed the door behind me.

Alex lay on my bed, wearing nothing but a sexy-as-fuck smile, his cock half-hard and his body relaxed.

He reached under him and pulled out a ribbon that had been tied into a bow. He placed it over his belly button. “Happy birthday.”

“Fuck, baby.” I tossed the box onto the bed and stripped off my shirt. “I had plans to tease the fuck out of you until you begged me to let you come, but we might have to save that for round two.” I kicked off my shoes, then tugged off my socks.

He pulled in a shaky breath and ran his teeth over his bottom lip. I shucked off my pants and underwear. “I’m good with that.” He pushed up on his elbows. “What’s in the box?”

“Just a little something I ordered for my birthday.” I pulled one of the items out. “What do you think of this?”

He took the package and looked at the label. His eyes darkened as he handed it back to me. “I say we need to open that.”

“Good answer.” I put it on the bed and grabbed the other item I’d ordered.

“A headband?”

“Sort of. It has headphones built into it.”

“I don’t get it.”

“It’s for sensory deprivation. It doubles as a blindfold. Add in some white noise, and I thought it might help you relax.”

“Yeah. We can try that.” He lay back on the bed. “Now come claim your birthday present, Mr. Alexander.”

“Oh, I plan to.”

It took a few moments to connect the headphones to my phone. I checked the battery, then set it to play a loop of white noise. When it was ready, I handed it to him. “Adjust the sound so it’s loud enough you can’t hear what’s going on.”

He pushed the buttons, then settled back on the bed. He put it on but didn’t pull it over his eyes, which were bright with anticipation and lust.

I put my phone and the box away and quickly unwrapped the harness I’d bought. It was simple, just a single strap with two loops on the ends and a reinforced pad in the center.

Kneeling over him, I gently placed the pad behind his neck, then lifted one leg so I could wrap the loop around his thigh, right under his knee. He lifted the other knee, and I did the same to it. I slid a pillow under his ass to help with the angles.

I sat back and admired him. The strap looked good on him. It held his legs open while the neck pad forced his head up.

“Can you tie up my hands too?” he asked.

I nodded and grabbed the bow he'd brought. I had handcuffs and fabric wrist cuffs in my closet, but I liked the idea of trying a ribbon.

Alex held his wrists together so I could bind them. I lay over him and pinned his hands above his head. He stared up at me, his expression hungry.

I really had planned on edging the fuck out of him, but I was too close, too desperate. I pressed a kiss against his lips and let go of his hands.

I'd meant for it to be a quick kiss, but Alex immediately opened for me and sucked on my tongue. Fuck.

Giving up all pretenses of teasing, I ground my cock against his and kissed him back. Our mouths moved together, the kiss hot and heavy, more a mashing of lips and teeth and tongues than anything soft or sweet.

Needing air, I finally broke the kiss and sat back on my knees, breathing hard. Alex lay on the bed, his chest heaving as he stared at me in wonder.

Gently, I tugged the headband down so it covered his eyes. The moan he let out went straight to my dick.

I lifted it off his ear so he could hear me. "No safe words tonight. Tell me if it's too much or if you need to stop."

He nodded.

"Say the words. Let me know you understand."

"No safe words. Tell you if I want you to stop."

I replaced the headband, then took a moment to admire him. He was beautiful.

The amount of trust he was showing to not only let me have complete control over him but also to deprive him of most of his senses meant more to me than the fact that we were about to fuck.

Shaking off the wave of affection spreading through me, I grabbed the lube off the bedside table and slicked up my fingers.

Alex was hard and leaking, his breathing fast and his body tense. Hoping to help him relax, I ran my other hand over his chest, teasing his skin and getting him used to being touched while his other senses were cut off.

He sighed heavily and went boneless, the strap keeping him in place. I gripped his cock by the base.

"Fuck," he whispered.

I stroked my hand up his length, then gently pressed one finger against his hole.

The constant stream of moans and sighs he let out as I slowly worked one, then two fingers inside him was so fucking hot. I loved that he wasn't

afraid to be vocal.

Working in tandem, I stroked his dick and fingered him, getting him nice and open for me.

“Kai,” he pleaded, his voice a little too loud in the quiet room.

I paused my teasing.

“Please,” he whispered.

Slowly, I pulled my fingers out of him and wiped them on the comforter. He looked so damn hot, all laid out for me, his hole wet and shiny.

I grabbed a condom and ripped it open. Using one hand, I suited up, then slicked it up with a generous amount of lube. When I was ready, I spread my legs to lower myself and lined my cockhead up with his waiting hole.

Slowly, I pushed in, pausing when half my length was buried in him.

“Fuuuuuuuck.” He clenched around me.

Moving as slowly as I could, I pushed the rest of the way in.

“Kai, fuck. So good.” He bit his lip and arched his back, forcing me even deeper.

Drawing in a deep breath, I pulled out, then pushed back in. I kept my pace as slow as I could, moving fluidly as I fucked him.

His cock was so hard it nearly touched his stomach. His chest and neck were flushed red, and little pink spots dotted his cheeks.

I gripped his hips, holding him in place, and drank him in. He was beautiful, goddamn beautiful.

And I didn’t just mean his looks. Yes, he was gorgeous, but seeing him like this, all spread out and relaxed as he trusted me with his pleasure, was everything. *He* was everything.

“Kai, more. Need more.”

I changed my angle so my cockhead dragged over his prostate with each thrust.

“Fuck. More!” He arched into me, trying to push back on my cock. “Please, Kai.”

I let go of his hips so our only point of contact was my cock sliding into his perfect ass and moved just the slightest bit faster.

He moaned and wiggled, the sounds growing desperate. I kept my pace steady. He lifted his bound hands. I stopped, my cock half-buried in him. He dropped his hands back on the bed.

I gave him a few loose strokes as a reward, then resumed my agonizingly slow pace.

Alex wasn't the only one affected. I was already right there, my release hovering right under the surface.

"Need you," he begged.

I ran one hand down his stomach, hoping to soothe him. Had he lost focus? Or maybe he was overstimulated? I didn't want him to slip out of his happy place. I moved faster but not harder.

"Yes, that's it. So good." He clenched around me.

Stars exploded in front of my eyes. "Fuck," I muttered.

I was too close to try and edge him, but I didn't want to finish like this. Shifting, I lay over him, blanketing him with my body.

He moaned low and loud. I tugged his bound hands over my head so he could wrap his arms around my back. I wanted him completely surrounded when he came, and the selfish part of me wanted to feel as much of him against my skin as possible.

He held me tight, his body hot and hard and so damn perfect under mine.

I pressed a kiss against his lips, then sucked a hickey into his neck. This time, I didn't hold back and I fucked him as hard and fast as I could.

"Fuck, yes. So good. Love your cock," he babbled, his words slurring together.

I slid my arms under him and held him close, my body tight with desire as jolts of pleasure shot through me. I peppered his neck with openmouthed kisses, angling my body so my abs dragged over his cock.

"So good," he sobbed. "I'm so close."

"That's it." I knew he couldn't hear me, but the possessive asshole in me needed to tell him exactly who he belonged to. "You feel so damn good. Like you were made for me."

He cried out and arched his back.

"You're mine, Alex." I bit his shoulder right where it met his neck.

"Oh!"

Alex shook and shuddered, coming hard beneath me. Wetness pooled between us. I kept fucking him through his release, my lips on his neck and my mind in the stratosphere. My thrusts were wild and erratic, and Alex let out the sexiest little moans. I kept moving, not ready for it to end.

"Love this," he murmured. "Love you."

I came with a strangled cry. My orgasm hit like an anvil, slamming into me and stealing not only my breath but also my ability to think as I emptied deep inside him.

When my mind finally stopped spinning, I was lying on Alex, my soft dick still inside him. I slid one hand out from under him and gently tugged the headband off.

He blinked up at the ceiling.

“You okay? Am I crushing you?” I asked softly.

“You’re perfect,” he slurred. He was still deep in it.

I gently pulled out of him.

“I don’t like that.” He pouted adorably. “Want your cock all the time.”

“You can have it again soon, baby.” I kissed his lips. They were cold, and he was slow to respond.

“You’re okay, Alex. I’m just going to untie you. Can you stay still for me while I do that?”

“Yeah.” He sighed deeply. “I like being good for you.”

Carefully, I slid out from his grip, then knelt on the bed. He lay passively as I untied his wrists. I gently placed them on his chest. He wrapped them around himself, like he was trying to get warm.

“I’ve got you. I just need to undo your legs.”

“Kay,” he said dreamily.

I undid the first loop and set his leg down. As the tension on the neck pad was released, his head flopped back. He giggled.

“You did so good for me, Alex.” I quickly undid the other side and laid his leg on the bed.

I pulled off the condom, tied it off, and tossed it into the trash, then lay next to him and gathered him in my arms. He came willingly, snuggling into my chest. His skin was cool to the touch, and I rolled onto my back so he was half on me.

“Do you need a blanket?” I kissed his neck.

“No, but I’m your blanket.” He giggled again.

I rubbed his back and chuckled.

He wiggled so he was over me, our bodies lined up. “You feel really good.”

“So do you, baby.”

I held him tight, whispering sweet nothings to him as his body regulated.

“Kai?”

“Yeah?” I lessened my hold on him so he could lift his head and look down at me.

“That was... I liked it.” His smile was shy and pushed all my buttons.

Sassy Alex, shy Alex, happy Alex, even pissed-off Alex. I was here for all of him.

“You did?”

He nodded. “It was different. The white noise kept my head clear. And not being able to see you or having to worry about holding my position was freeing. Did you like it?”

“I did. I love when you trust me enough to let me take control like that.”

“So, was that a good birthday gift?” He grinned cheekily.

“Oh yeah.”

He pressed a soft kiss against my lips. “You owe me a round two. Just saying.”

“And you’ll get it.” I shifted our body weight and rolled him under me. “I just need a few minutes to recover. Fucking you is hard work.”

Laughing, he slapped my shoulder. “I’ll bet. I mean, it’s got to be tough to get it up again, seeing as you’re already at your quarter-life crisis.”

“Brat.” I slid my hands up his arms, then gripped his wrists. “Who are you calling old?”

“You.” His eyes shone with mischief. “And what are you going to do about it?”

He wiggled under me, and my spent cock twitched as his abs rubbed against it.

“You in a mood?” I asked.

“Maybe.”

“Stoplight method?”

He nodded.

“What’s your color?”

“Green.”

“I’m not going to go easy on you,” I warned.

“Good.” He dragged his tongue over his bottom lip, staring intensely at me.

Adrenaline and need poured into my system, my body tense and ready for a fight.

“You want me? Come and take me.”

The roar that filled my ears drowned out every other sound, and my mind went blank. Alex grinned at me, the challenge in his eyes clear. Fuck yeah.

ALEX

“**Y**ou okay?”

“Huh? Nothing.”

Jax burst out laughing. “Dude, you sound so guilty right now.”

The living room was full, but I’d been so in my own little world when I’d come into the house I hadn’t noticed.

Beck and Finn were snuggled up together on the loveseat. Jax and Matt sat at opposite ends of the couch, their backs against the arms and their legs tangled together on the middle cushion. Eli was curled up on the other loveseat, the one that had a shit view of the TV, a thick book on his lap but his attention on me.

A movie or something was playing on the TV, but I barely glanced at it.

“Sorry, what?”

“I asked if you were okay. You look...” Matt studied me. “I don’t know, off?”

“He looks fucked out.” Jax pinched Matt’s thigh.

“Really?” Matt pursed his lips. “Yeah, you’re right. He totally does.”

“Are you done looking at me like I’m a science experiment?” I asked, my voice as nonchalant as I felt.

Jax was right. I was thoroughly fucked out. Kai had made good on his promise to edge the fuck out of me during round two, and by the time he’d finally let me come, I’d been a blubbering, half-crazed mess.

“You’re walking funny.” Eli scrunched up his nose.

“Probably.”

Matt and Finn gaped at me, Jax grinned, and Beck looked confused.

I laughed. "You should see your faces right now."

"Were you with Kai?" Eli asked.

"Why would you ask that?"

I didn't mind him knowing about Kai and me, but it struck me as strange he put two and two together so quickly.

He shrugged.

"Kai? Do I know her?" Matt asked.

"Kai's a he, but way to assume," Eli said.

"Shit. Sorry. I didn't know you're..." Matt bit his lip.

"You do realize that you just outed me," I said to Eli.

His eyes widened in shock. "Oh shit." He slapped his hand over his mouth. "I'm so sorry." He looked utterly stricken. "I—"

I took pity on him. "It's fine." I had no idea where my bravado was coming from, but at that moment, I really didn't care who knew I was bi.

After Brett had destroyed me, I'd spent so long hiding it and denying my attraction to men to try and protect myself. But I was over it.

One thing I admired about Kai was how he didn't give a fuck what people thought of him. His confidence was a huge turn-on, but it was also inspiring.

I liked guys. I was bisexual. Denying that felt wrong now.

Kai and I might be over, but I was done hiding my sexuality, especially from the people closest to me.

Everyone except Beck stared at me.

"And yeah. I'm bi," I said awkwardly.

Beck shot me a proud smile. "Welcome to the club."

"Cool." Matt grinned.

Jax winked, but Eli still looked like I'd just kicked his puppy.

"Eli, it's okay," I said. "I know you didn't do it on purpose."

"I still feel like shit."

"It's done. No use beating yourself up when I'm not mad."

He shrugged and dropped his eyes, looking so damn young and sad. Protectiveness rippled through me. "And yeah, I was with Kai."

He looked up at me, all big green eyes and pouty lips.

Beck untangled himself from Finn and stood. "I have a package that was delivered for you earlier."

"For me? I wasn't expecting anything."

He motioned for me to follow him, and we made our way upstairs to his room.

“You look good.” He opened the door. “Settled, if that makes sense.”

“I feel good. But that could just be the afterglow.”

Beck smirked and grabbed a small box off his desk.

I took it from him. It was from Amazon, but I didn’t remember ordering anything. Wouldn’t be the first time I’d forgotten.

“So, Kai...” He let that hang in the air.

“We had a thing.” My chest constricted, the last of the happy haze leaving me.

“Had?”

“Yeah. Tonight was kinda it.”

“Are you okay with that?”

“Not really,” I admitted. “But I get it. Remember that presentation I told you about?”

He nodded.

“We presented today, so yeah. No more reasons to get together.”

“Wait. *Kai* is your presentation partner? The one Elissa dumped you for?”

“Yup. The very same. Oh, and here’s something to break your brain. Remember I told you about that guy I was sexting with online?”

“Yeah...”

“Turns out that was Kai. I just didn’t know it.”

“Holy shit. Did he know it was you?”

“No. Neither of us had a clue.”

“How did you go from hating him in person and sexting with him online to being fuck buddies?”

I tossed the box onto the bed and sat down. Beck perched on the edge of his desk. I launched into the whole story. Well, almost the whole story. I left out the shit we did in bed because as open-minded as Beck was, I didn’t think he’d want to know the specifics.

“Wow.” He crossed his arms when I’d finished talking. “You really like him, don’t you?”

I nodded, heat creeping up my neck and over my cheeks. “Yeah. I really do.”

“Then how can you be okay with things ending?”

“Because.” I shrugged. Hopefully, the crushing disappointment I felt wasn’t written all over my face. “We started this as fuck buddies while we had the presentation to work on. Now that it’s over, that means the end of whatever we had going on.”

“You love him.”

“What?” I spluttered.

“You love him.”

I opened my mouth to deny it, but closed it before the words could form.
“Yeah. I do.”

“Does he love you?”

I snorted. “Not a chance.”

Beck pursed his lips like he was forcing himself to stay quiet.

“What?” I asked.

“How do you know that?”

“Because he spent tonight fucking me into the mattress then sent me on my merry way with a smile and nothing more?”

“So you don’t know how he feels.”

“It’s obvious he doesn’t love me.” I dropped my eyes to the floor. “No one ever will.”

“Alex.” Beck pushed off the couch and knelt in front of me. “Do you really think that?”

I shrugged. I’d never told Beck about Brett or how his taunts still haunted me.

“Why do you think no one will ever love you?”

I didn’t want to have this conversation, but Beck was reaching out and making an effort. The least I could do was talk to him.

“I had a boyfriend in high school who really messed me up. He used me, said a lot of really fucked-up stuff to me. I guess it stuck.”

“I’m sorry about your ex.” He squeezed my arm. “But you know he was talking shit, right? You’re super loveable.”

“What?”

He grinned crookedly. “I love you. And I know I’m not the only one.”

“It’s different.”

“How so?”

“Because loving someone as a friend and being *in* love with them are two different things.”

“Why do you think no one could ever be *in* love with you?”

“Because I’m me.” I stared at him. “You know better than anyone how hard it is to be my friend. Imagine me as a boyfriend. I’m impulsive and obsessive and exhausting. Why would anyone want to put up with that shit just to get some ass?”

Beck blinked. “Wow. I can’t even begin to unpack how much was wrong in that little speech.”

“Huh?”

“One, you’re not exhausting. Yes, you can be impulsive, and you get fixated on things, but that’s all part of your charm. And you’re more than just a piece of ass. You’re smart, funny, and one of the most loyal people I’ve ever known. Being your friend is easy.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. And the right person is out there. Someone who’ll appreciate all the facets that make you, you.”

I bit my lip as a wave of longing passed over me. I wanted that person to be Kai.

“You’re my best friend.” Beck squeezed my arm again, his touch soothing. “I know I’ve been distant lately, but I’m going to do better.”

“We had this conversation once already,” I whispered.

“I know, and I’m sorry I didn’t make more of an effort. Going to the gym together isn’t enough. How about we hang out next weekend? Just us.”

“Next weekend?”

This weekend was Thanksgiving, and I’d assumed I’d be going home with Beck again like I had the past few years.

“Yeah. I forgot to tell you Finn and I are flying to DC to visit his brother.”

“For Thanksgiving?” My heart dropped.

He nodded. “It’s a thing he and his brother do.”

“Are you nervous?” I pushed through the crushing disappointment.

“Little bit. I’ve never been on a plane, but Finn’s flown a lot, so at least he knows what we’re doing.”

“You’re meeting his brother? What about his parents?”

“He and his brother have no contact with their parents.”

Huh. That was something we had in common.

“But they’re super close. I want him to like me. His opinions mean a lot to Finn.”

“Just be yourself, and he’ll love you, just like everyone else who meets you does.”

He smirked and sat back on his heels. “I hope so. Want to go over the macro homework?”

It took a second for my brain to process the change in conversation.

“You want to?”

He nodded.

I took it for the olive branch it was and smiled. “Yeah. Sounds good. Let me grab my books, and I’ll be right back.”

As I made my way downstairs to get my stuff, the black cloud of Beck’s news pressed down on me.

I shouldn’t have assumed Beck would invite me home this year. It was my own stupid fault for thinking things would be the same now that he had Finn. Of course he’d be busy.

Steeling myself so I didn’t break down, I shoved all those thoughts and feelings to the back of my mind. Right now, I had homework to focus on. I’d have time to freak out later.



MY HAND SHOOK as I held the phone to my ear. I’d barely managed to keep my shit together while studying with Beck last night, and I’d spent today hiding from everyone and trying to get over myself. It hadn’t worked, and my head was a mess.

“Hello, Alex,” Grandma answered, her familiar voice wrapping around me like a blanket.

“Hi. How have you been?” I settled against my pillows.

“As good as I was a few days ago when I talked to you. But something tells me you called for a reason.”

“Maybe,” I admitted.

“What’s going on?”

“I... I have some news.” I swallowed the lump in my throat.

Nerves exploded in my stomach, but I pushed through them. I was tired of hiding the truth from her. She was the only family I had, and I hated that I’d been lying to her for all these years.

“What is it?” she prompted.

“I’m... I’m bisexual.”

“Thank you for telling me, sweetheart.”

“You’re not surprised?”

“I had... an inkling that you were interested in boys too.”

“How?”

“Brett.”

A crush of hurt replaced the nerves. “Was it that obvious?”

“To me, it was,” she said gently. “But I also know he wasn’t good to you.”

“No, he wasn’t.” I sighed.

“Are you interested in someone now?”

“Kind of.”

“Are they good to you?”

“He is.”

Even just confirming that Kai was a man made me feel lighter, like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders. Everyone who mattered to me knew I liked guys, and the world hadn’t ended.

“I’m not sure what’s going on between us, but yeah, I really like him. Can I come home this weekend?” I asked in a rush, the words blending together.

“This weekend?” she asked carefully.

“Yeah. I know it’s a long way to fly just for a few days, but I could use a break from the house and school and everything.”

“I wish you’d asked last time we spoke.”

“Why?”

“Your aunt Rebecca invited me to visit for a week. I’m leaving tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?”

“I was going to call you tonight to tell you. It was a last-minute thing. I haven’t seen her or the kids in over a year.”

“I’m glad you’re going,” I said. Hopefully, my voice sounded neutral because my mind was spinning. “It’ll be nice for you to see everyone.”

My aunt and cousins lived in Atlanta, and Gran only got to see them every couple of years. I knew it was hard on her to miss so much of their lives, but the timing of this visit sucked.

“Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Fine. It’s just been a tough semester.”

“Are you not going to your friend’s house this year?”

“Not this year. He’s going to visit his boyfriend’s brother.”

“What about your other roommates?”

“I have no clue. Eli is local, so he’ll probably be around. But Matt’s from Arizona, so I don’t know if he’ll be going anywhere.”

“It might be nice to have a weekend at the house, maybe spend time with

your roommates?”

She was trying to give me something positive to focus on, but it didn't work. I liked Matt and Eli, but I needed a break from the house. I wanted to spend the weekend in my bedroom, hiding from the world and trying to get over my stupid broken heart.

The fucked-up part was that I wasn't even mad at Kai. He'd told me exactly what this was and wasn't. I'd gone ahead and changed the rules. It wasn't his fault I couldn't let him go.

“You're right.” I played along, not wanting her to worry about me while she was away. “Maybe that's what I need. Just a quiet weekend, hanging out with my friends.”

“I'm happy you're making friends. And I hope your man can see how amazing you are.”

“Thanks, Gran, but you have to say that.”

“Maybe, but that doesn't make it any less true. Are you going to be okay? Ida's picking me up for bridge club in a few minutes.”

“I'm fine.” I swallowed hard. Thank fuck Gran was a bit hard of hearing so she wouldn't be able to tell how not okay I was. “Have fun at bridge club.”

“Talk soon.”

The call ended, and I shoved my phone into my hoodie pocket.

Fuck. The mess of emotions swirling through me made my stomach clench and tears prickle my eyes.

Shit. I was being dramatic. So what if Beck was busy and Gran had other plans? It was just Thanksgiving. A holiday I didn't give a shit about. I could hide my room at the house just as well as I could at Gran's place.

The world wasn't ending just because I didn't have plans for a weekend. I kept repeating that to myself as waves of loneliness and despair washed over me in equal parts. It was too much. Too fucking much. I was spiraling. The shitty thing was that while I could recognize it, I wasn't able to stop it.

After weeks of being silent, the little voice in my head was back.

Worthless.

Fuck, I needed to get out of here.

Unwanted.

I jumped up.

Too much.

Not bothering to lock my door, I raced out of the house.

Exhausting.

I took off down the sidewalk, heading away from school.

Forever alone.

I had no idea where the fuck I was going, but I needed to move. Maybe I could shut my brain up if I kept my body busy.

Unlovable.

Jamming my hands into my pockets, I quickened my pace. It was dark and cold, but I barely noticed either as I hurried away from the house and school and everything else that reminded me of just how alone I was.

KAI

Knock, knock.

I looked up from my textbook. Who was knocking at this hour?

I closed the book with a *snap* and tossed it onto the couch. I strode toward the door, unlocked it, and pulled it open.

“Alex?”

He stood in front of me, his eyes on the floor and his shoulders stooped. He looked utterly defeated.

“What’s wrong?” I took his elbow and steered him inside, then closed and locked the door.

He shook his head and tried to pull out of my grasp.

“Alex.” I tightened my grip. “What happened?”

“It’s just too much,” he whispered, the fight leaving him.

“What’s too much?” I kept my voice soft and loosened my hold on him.

“Everything.” He looked up, his eyes shiny with unshed tears.

“What happened?” There had to be a trigger. Something had set him off.

“It’s all falling apart.” His lower lip quivered.

“What’s falling apart?”

“My life.” His face crumpled into a scowl. “Everyone always leaves me.”

“What happened?” I repeated.

“My grandmother is going away for Thanksgiving. I thought Beck would invite me to spend the weekend at his parents’, but he and Finn are going to visit Finn’s brother.”

“Is this something you usually do?” I asked carefully, biting back the invite that had been on the tip of my tongue for days. Now wasn’t the time to

“solve” his problem. Alex needed to process what he was feeling before he’d be open to solutions.

“Yeah. It’s too expensive for me to fly home for a weekend, so Beck usually invites me to go with him. He’s from Seattle. He has a huge family, and his parents never minded having an extra person around. But he told me he’s not going home. I called my grandmother, but she made plans to visit my aunt and cousins.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.” He sniffled.

“Are you in love with Beck?”

His eyes widened, all traces of sadness replaced with shock. It would have been funny if the situation weren’t so serious. “What?”

“Are you in love with him? It’s just that sometimes, the way you talk about him makes me wonder.”

Anger flashed in his eyes, but he didn’t pull away or tell me to go fuck myself.

“No.” He looked at the floor, his shoulders slumped. “He’s my best friend. Pretty much my only *actual* friend. I love him, but I’m not in love with him.”

I wanted to ask if he was sure but held back. The possessive asshole in me liked his answer.

“I had a bit of a crush on him when we first met, but he’s not my type.” He snorted and met my eyes. “And I’m definitely not his. I know I sound like I’m obsessed with him, but I’m not. I’m happy for him. I just hate that I can’t let him go.”

“Can’t let him go?” I dropped my arms now that he wasn’t a flight risk.

“It’s my stupid brain.” He growled and crossed his arms over his chest. “I fixate on people. I don’t mean to, but I’m just so used to everyone leaving me, of getting sick of me, that I latch on to the ones who stick around. Beck is the one person who never seemed to care about how much work it is to be my friend. I thought we’d be close forever, but it’s not his fault I’m an asshole who can’t share.”

“I’m an asshole who can’t share either.”

He gave me a surprised look. “But you hook up with your friends. Being a third is the definition of sharing.”

“That’s because they’re friends. When someone is mine, they’re *mine*.”

Alex’s pupils dilated.

“I like that you fixate. That you put all your focus on things that matter to you. But you know what I don’t like?”

I was taking a chance and showing all my cards. But I was sick of pretending like Alex was just a... whatever we were. He *felt* like mine, and my hindbrain was done pretending otherwise.

“What?”

“That you’re not fixated on me the way I am with you.”

He parted his lips like he was going to say something, then closed them again.

“I haven’t been able to think of anyone else since that first night on the phone. Do you remember?”

“Yes,” he whispered.

“You fucked me up. Then we got paired up in class, and even though you hated me, I was still drawn to you. It confused the fuck out of me how I could be into two guys at the same time, but once I learned it was you on the other end of the line. I knew for sure that you were supposed to be mine.”

“I...” He licked his lips. “I was confused too. I hated you because I wanted you. And I wanted him.”

“And now that you know it was me all along?”

“I still want you.” He swallowed and dropped his gaze to my mouth. “But you’re going to get sick of me too.”

“No.”

“You will.”

“I won’t.”

“You can’t promise that.” He swiped at his eyes with the back of his hand. “You don’t understand how hard it is to be my friend. I’m needy and high maintenance. I’m impulsive, and my moods are all over the place. I’m exhausting.”

“Not to me.”

The hope shining in his eyes, along with the utter devastation, broke my heart. He’d been hurt, that much was obvious, and I hated that he thought he was a burden.

“I like how needy you are. And you’re not high maintenance.”

“Aren’t I? It’s not like I’m normal.”

“What’s normal? There’s no such thing. Especially when it comes to sex and sexuality. And there’s nothing wrong with the way you are.”

“Normal is not needing someone to tie me down to make my head shut

up. Normal is not getting off pretending I'm being forced or fantasizing about being used by strangers."

"Everyone has kinks. Even the most vanilla, boring people have something that gets them hot and bothered. You think I'm messed up because I like tying you up? Or that I got off on pretending to force you?"

"No." His voice was soft, seeking.

"So why would you be messed up because you like it too?"

"Because..."

"Do you want to be mine?" I took a step closer.

"Yes," he whispered.

"Do you want me to be yours?"

His nostrils flared, and heat filled his eyes. "Yes."

"Do you want me to help you get out of your head for a while?"

As much as I wanted to focus on the fact that he'd agreed to be mine, he wasn't in the right headspace for that conversation.

He nodded.

"Come to my room. We're going to do something different."

He took my offered hand and allowed me to lead him down the hall.

When we were beside my bed, I gripped the back of his neck and crushed our mouths together. He whimpered and melted against me. I kept the kiss soft and sweet, teasing his lower lip with my tongue as I held him close.

Kissing Alex felt right. Like coming home.

I'd always felt a disconnect with my partners. It was one of the reasons I was so good at reading people and playing the part they wanted. Slipping into a role was comfortable, and it allowed me to keep a distance between myself and whatever was going on.

I couldn't do that with Alex, and more than that, I didn't *want* to. I wanted him as focused on me as I was on him.

He was mine, and I was his.

Alex's soft whimper went right to my dick, and I was hard and leaking in only seconds. He pushed his erection against mine, his lips eager as I swiped my tongue against his, then sucked it into my mouth. He moaned and shuddered in my arms.

Taking care to move slowly, I kept kissing him deep and wet as I gently peeled his sweater off. When it was on the floor, I focused on stripping him of his T-shirt. Alex let me undress him, his kiss hungry and his moans loud.

When he was naked, I tugged him against me and ran my hands over his

skin. I teased his back, his sides, and the swell of his ass, worshiping his body as I ravaged his mouth.

By the time I pulled away for some much-needed air, Alex was panting and shivering under my touch.

“Lie down,” I said through ragged breaths.

He did, his eyes never leaving mine.

I stripped off my clothes and tossed them aside, raking my gaze over his incredible body.

He smiled coyly. “You like what you see?”

“I do.” I crawled over him and draped my body over his. “You like what you feel?”

“I do.” He swallowed. “I like everything about you.”

“You do?” Fuck, could I sound any more insecure?

“Yeah. I didn’t want to, but I do.”

“I like everything about you too.” I pecked a kiss against his lips. “And I’m going to show you exactly how much.”

“Yeah?” he asked breathlessly.

“Yeah. Do you like being on top?”

He blinked. “Oh, um. Sure?”

“You don’t sound sure.”

“I don’t hate it, but that usually means I’m the one doing all the work.”

I grinned. “Yeah, that won’t be happening.”

His answering smile was so bright and genuine it stole my breath. Pissing him off was fun, but making him happy, seeing that smile, and knowing it was because of me, did things to my insides.

I was falling for Alex. Fuck, who was I kidding? I was already there. But he wasn’t ready to hear that. Who knew if he would ever be?

Rather than focus on that grim thought, I gently rolled us over so I was on my back and against my pillows and Alex lay over me. I shifted one of my legs under him so he was straddling my thigh, then slid my other knee up the bed to create space for him to spread his legs. He did, his hard cock nestled against my skin.

“Hold me tight,” I whispered. “And let me take care of you.”

He moaned and relaxed on top of me, his body limp and heavy. Perfect.

I pressed my lips against his neck, kissing and nibbling the sensitive skin, and ran my hands over every part of him I could reach. I moved slowly, sensually. This wasn’t foreplay. This was me showing Alex how much I

cared about him.

All our encounters had been hot as fuck, but they'd lacked tenderness. He needed that tonight, and more than that, *I* needed it. I wanted to worship him. And I did.

Time and space ceased to exist as I focused on Alex, loving how much trust he was showing me by allowing me to hold and tease him. We were both hard, but the urgency and desperation that was usually between us weren't there this time.

I'd never been one for slowing things down. Even with the partners I'd had regular things with, the sex had always been about getting off. I couldn't be sure, but I had a feeling Alex had never had this kind of sex either, and the part of me that had claimed him loved how *I* got to be the one to make him feel worshiped and, hopefully, loved.

"Kai," he breathed against my neck.

"Yeah, baby?" I kissed just under his ear and gently squeezed his ass.

"This feels so good."

He sounded pleasure-drunk, like he was already deep in subspace. The possessive asshole in me was pleased.

"You feel good," I whispered. "You're so beautiful."

He made a noise that sounded like he didn't believe me.

"You are." I swirled my hands over his back. "Do you know what I thought when you bumped into me that day in class?"

"What?" he mumbled.

"I thought you were so damn pretty. Even when you were glaring at me, I couldn't stop thinking about how hot you were."

He moaned and nuzzled into my neck.

"But you're not just beautiful on the outside."

He tensed. "Kai." His tone held a note of warning.

"Shhhhh, baby. Just relax and listen to my voice."

He did, his body once again growing heavy on mine.

"You're kind." I kissed his neck. "And sweet." Another kiss. "And funny." Two kisses. "And you fit with me."

He sighed.

I kept whispering to him, telling him all the things about him that I liked. I wasn't sure he was listening, but I kept talking as I slid one hand over the swell of his ass, then pressed my finger over his hole. He moaned and spread his legs wider.

Shit, I should have gotten the lube before we'd started. Oh well, time to improvise. I sucked my finger into my mouth, getting it nice and slick, then returned it to his hole. Still talking to him, I gently rubbed my finger over it, then dipped the tip inside.

Alex was moaning up a storm, his body lax and his breathing slow and labored. Switching between whispering sweet nothings to him and kissing his neck, I teased his hole with my finger. I took my time, not wanting to rush things. This wasn't about prepping him. Not yet.

"Kai." He groaned low in his throat and spread his legs wider.

"I love when you say my name." I dragged my tongue over his neck. "I love knowing I make you feel good."

"You do," he mumbled, a dreamy quality to his voice. "No one else ever has."

I wanted to ask him to elaborate so the possessive asshole in me could hear all about how I gave him what no one else had, but I held back. Now wasn't the time for a discussion.

"You make me feel good too." I gently sucked on his neck.

Alex whined and tilted his head, silently asking for more.

I pressed my lips to his skin and sucked harder. He moaned and pushed closer, his breath hot against my neck. Adding the slightest bit of pressure to his hole, I rubbed slow circles over it, making sure not to push in.

"Kai, please," he mumbled. His hole clenched, and I dipped my fingertips inside. "Yes." He nibbled on my neck, gently worrying the skin between his teeth.

"That feels good, baby," I rubbed my free hand over his ass, kneading and squeezing the full globes.

He bit harder, and I didn't bother holding back my groan of pleasure.

"Can I suck you?" he mumbled.

"You want to?"

"Mmmm-hmmmm." He nuzzled into my neck.

I pulled my fingers away from his hole and let go of him, waiting to see what he would do.

Alex wiggled down my body, his hard cock dragging over my skin and leaving a trail of precum in its wake. He kissed and licked my body as he made his way down my chest, across my stomach, then over my hip. He settled with his cheek on the spot between my hip and my dick.

"Shit, baby." I ran my fingers through his hair.

He hummed and gripped my base with his hand, then tilted my cock toward him. He licked around the head, his pace slow and languid.

“Fuck,” I whispered.

“Mmmmm.” He wrapped his lips around the head and suckled it, making little happy sounds deep in his throat.

No one had ever just teased and tasted me, and somehow it was even more intense than deep throating. His movements were gentle and soft, like he was drawing comfort out of them.

“That feels so good, baby,” I whispered, brushing his hair back from his face.

His eyes were closed, and his grip on my cock was light as he sucked a little harder. The pull felt amazing, and little pulses of pleasure shot up my spine.

“I love your mouth.” I made sure to keep my voice low and soft. “I love how good you make me feel.”

He made a little sound of encouragement and sucked harder.

“I love sliding inside your tight hole. You’re so hot, and you grip me so perfectly. But you know what I like more than that?”

He made a curious noise and drew half of my dick into his mouth.

“I love seeing your face as I take you apart. I love when you beg and when you tease. I love bringing you right to the edge and not letting you tip over.”

“Mmmmm.” He shifted so he was able to bob over my dick. His movements were slow and shallow, but his suction was tight and incredible.

“I love when you fight back and when you submit. You’re so beautiful when you let go, baby. And I love that *I’m* the one who makes you feel good.”

He opened his eyes, sucked me all the way down to the back of his throat, and swallowed around my head.

“Holy shit.” I resisted the urge to grab his hair and keep him there.

He slowly pulled almost all the way off my dick. His glazed and blissed-out expression was affecting me almost as much as the blow job itself.

“Have you ever been able to do this?” I smoothed his hair back from his face. “Just take your time and play?”

A little niggle of... something, shot through me. Alex wore his hair long enough it brushed his earlobes and covered his eyes when it fell forward. He looked completely different when it was pushed back.

Shaking off whatever that was, I cupped his cheek and let his hair fall over his face.

He pulled off my dick and shook his head.

“You can do whatever you want to me.” I brushed my thumb over his cheekbone. “Explore, tease, taste. Whatever you want, baby.”

He licked his lips, his eyes flashing with something dark. “Really?”

I nodded.

“I wanna rim you.”

The little smile that tilted one side of his mouth was playful and mischievous and so damn sexy it sent a flutter of affection through my chest.

I let go of his cheek. “How do you want me?”

“On your stomach.”

I waited as he slid off my leg, then flipped over. Alex didn’t move, so I ended up with my legs spread wide to accommodate his shoulders as he lay between them.

The position was foreign. I felt exposed and vulnerable, but knowing Alex was behind me helped me relax.

“Wanna see your cock too.”

Groaning, I reached under my body and pushed my dick so it was angled down and pointing toward him.

I’d only ever been rimmed once, and that was by a girl I’d had a casual thing with. It had felt okay, not especially great, and I hadn’t been inclined to do it again.

Alex wiggled closer and split me open with his hands. He slowly swirled his tongue over my rim.

A zing of pleasure shot through me.

“Shit,” I mumbled.

“Mmmmm,” he moaned and pressed his tongue over my hole, then lapped at it.

The contact was incredible. Little pulses of electricity danced on my skin as nerves deep in my abdomen sparked to life. Shit, it hadn’t felt this good last time.

Alex took his time exploring my ass. I buried my face in my arms, not bothering to keep quiet. I wanted to let him know how much I was enjoying it.

No one had ever taken the time to tease me. Mostly because I was a bossy fucker and took charge before the other person could do more than give me

consent to keep going.

I hadn't always been like this, though. Back when I'd been younger and experimenting, I'd hooked up with both guys and girls, and none of them had wanted to do more than suck my dick and enjoy getting fucked.

I'd never realized just how amazing it felt to have someone *want* to please me. To make me and my pleasure their entire focus.

Alex pulled his tongue away from my hole, then licked the seam of my sac.

"Shit." I lifted my hips the slightest bit and pushed back against his tongue.

He did it again, then pressed a line of openmouthed kisses down my dick.

"Jesus fuck," I muttered.

My body tightened as he toyed with me, raining kisses and licks all over my dick, balls, and hole. I'd never felt anything like this, and while it wasn't enough to get me close, the constant teasing was driving me crazy with desire.

"Have you ever bottomed?" Alex pressed a kiss against my taint.

"No."

"Have you ever tried with toys or anything?"

"I used a plug a few times, a small one."

"Did you like it?"

"It was okay."

That was mostly the truth. Putting it in had been awkward and weird, and I hadn't liked that part at all. Same with pulling it out. But it hadn't been terrible while it had been in.

"We should put a plug in you one day while you're fucking me." He licked a stripe down my dick.

He dipped the tip of his tongue into my slit, and I jumped. "I'd be down for that as long as you're the one to put it in."

"You'd let me?"

"I'd let you do anything to me."

"Would you let me top you?"

"Yes."

I'd never once considered letting anyone fuck me. I couldn't promise I'd enjoy it, but if Alex wanted a turn at my ass, I'd let him.

"Do you want to?" When he didn't move or say anything, I looked over my shoulder.

“No. But it means a lot that you’d let me.”

“Like I said, you can do whatever you want to me.”

He grinned and lowered his mouth to my ass.

“Shit, baby.” I buried my face in my arms and lifted my hips to push back against his incredible mouth.

He pressed the tip of his tongue inside me, and the sound I let out was inhuman and way too fucking loud.

Alex chuckled, his hot breath tickling my thighs. His strong hands pulled my ass cheeks as far apart as they could go. Then he went to town on me. His tongue was hot and slick and so fucking perfect as he ate me out. He licked and lapped and speared inside me.

A constant stream of sounds fell from my lips as I rocked my hips. The friction from the comforter paired with his incredible tongue was overwhelming, and I had to fight the urge to flip over and get him under me so I could fuck him until we both came.

“Baby.” I panted.

“HMMMMMM?” He pulled his tongue out of me and kissed my rim.

“That feels so good. Do you want to make me come, or do you want me to fuck you?”

“Fuck me.”

I looked over my shoulder, and our gazes locked.

His eyes were glassy and bright, his expression blissed out, and his cheeks flushed.

“Get the lube and sit on my face so I can prep you.”

KAI

His eyes blazed with desire, and he got up on his knees to reach into my bedside table. I flipped over as he grabbed the lube, then tossed it to me. I caught it with one hand and motioned for him to get into position with the other.

“Face my feet,” I said as he went to throw his leg over me.

I waited as he flipped around and straddled my chest. Using my hands, I tugged him back until his ass was hovering over my mouth.

“Sit back and relax, baby.” I smoothed one hand over the swell of his ass.

“I don’t want to crush you.”

“I’m not some dainty thing. I can handle your weight. Now sit back and put your hands on my chest.”

He did, and I immediately speared my tongue into his hole.

“Holy fuck!” he gasped and settled his weight on me.

I tilted my head back to make sure I could still breathe, then went to town on him. Normally, I would have taken my time and edged him until he was begging, but I was too impatient and turned on by his teasing.

“Oh fuck, holy shit.” He panted and moaned.

One hand lifted from my chest, and I pulled my tongue out of his ass.

“Not yet, baby.” I gently gripped his forearm and pulled his hand off his cock.

“I wanna come,” he pleaded.

“You will, but not yet.”

He made a little huffing noise and put his hand back on my chest.

I resumed licking and stabbing at his hole and quickly slicked up my

fingers.

When I pressed the tip of one against his hole, Alex bore down. He breathed out, and I pushed in.

“Fuuuuuuck,” he moaned and lay on my body, his head on my thigh.

I prepped him with one, then two fingers, stretching him. “Do you need three?”

“No. Gimme your cock. Want it so bad.”

Fuck, his voice was utterly wrecked, breathy, and low. He was deep in it.

“Get that ass over my dick.”

He sat up, crawled down my body, and positioned himself over me.

Shit, I’d forgotten a condom. “Hold tight. Just gotta get protection.”

“Don’t need it.” He grabbed the lube from the bed.

“Baby, this isn’t the time to be making that decision.”

“I’m negative. I got tested after Elissa.” He gripped my cock, his fist slick, and pumped it up and down my shaft. “Are you?”

“Yeah. I haven’t been with anyone else since my last round of tests. But this is a big deal. I don’t want you to regret this.”

“I won’t.” He rubbed my cockhead over his hole. “Please, Kai. I want to feel you fill me. I want you to be the first to come in me.”

“Fuck.” A wave of possessive desire rolled through me. I bit my lip. I’d never gone bare with anyone, and I wanted Alex to be my first too.

“Please.” He pressed back against my cock so the tip breached him. “Please, Kai.”

“Go slow, baby. I don’t want you to hurt yourself.”

He mumbled something I couldn’t make out, and sank down on me.

The moan he let out was loud and so damn needy I had to pull in a deep breath so I didn’t lose it right there. The difference without a condom was intense, and my eyes rolled back as he clenched around me.

“You’re so tight,” I gritted out when he was all the way down. “Take what you need. Make yourself feel good.”

He rocked over my dick, his head thrown back, and the sexiest sounds fell from his lips. I held his hips and watched my cock disappear inside him. The view was incredible. As he ground down on me, his strong back and full ass flexed.

His rhythm stuttered, and he went still, his muscles tense. He must have gotten distracted.

“Put your feet on the bed next to my thighs.” I rubbed my hand down his

spine. “Keep yourself nice and spread for me. Can you do that, baby?”

“Yeah.” He shifted so he was in position.

“Lean back and put your hands on my chest. I’ll keep you steady.”

“Are you sure I’m not too heavy?”

“Lean back and trust me.”

He did, and a little thrill went through me at the show of trust.

I slid my hands under his ass and lifted him so he was half off my dick.

“Ready?”

“Yeah.”

Holding him in place, I thrust up into him. My pace slow and steady. He was so tight and hot, his inner walls rippling as he clenched around me.

“Fuck, keep doing that,” I growled, snapping my hips up hard and fast.

“Yes yes yes yes yes.” He panted in time with my thrusts. “Fuck, so good, Kai. So fucking good.”

“You look so hot like this, baby. My dick splitting you open, with nothing between us. You’re going to make me come so hard.”

“I need to jerk off,” he begged.

“Not yet. That’s my job. *I’m* the one who gets you off.”

“You do. It’s so good.” He threw his head back and leaned more heavily on me.

I fucked him as fast and hard as I dared, steeling myself against my orgasm, and watched his ass swallowing my cock.

One of his arms gave out, and he let out a surprised cry.

I caught him and wrapped my arm around his middle. “Lie back on me.”

“Kay.”

I loved how he trusted me enough to obey without asking questions or worrying about being too heavy.

“All the way.” I pushed him down my body so I wouldn’t slip out of him.

He put his head on the pillow next to mine.

“Lift your legs for me.”

I gripped him behind his knees and held his legs up and spread wide. When he was settled, I planted my feet on the bed and thrust into him.

“Fuck,” he moaned and relaxed, his body heavy and limp on mine.

“That’s it, baby, just like that,” I whispered in his ear as I fucked him slowly and steadily, sliding in and out of his perfect hole.

“I need more,” he begged.

“You can touch yourself, but no coming. Not yet.”

He made a relieved sound and lifted one hand.

“That’s it. Stroke that big dick and get yourself nice and close for me.”

“You feel so good.”

“So do you.” I kissed his ear. “You’re going to make me come so hard.”

“Wanna come now.”

“Not yet, unless you think you have two in there.”

The thought of fucking him into two orgasms was so hot I had to slow my hips so I didn’t get too close.

“I’ve never done it before, but I want to try.”

“Keep stroking yourself and let go, Alex. I’ve got you. You’re safe.”

He moaned and sped up his strokes. His inner walls rippled around my shaft.

“That’s it, baby.” I let out a shuddering breath. “Come all over my cock. Make yourself feel good.”

“Kai,” he cried, his body tensing over mine.

“You close?” I moved faster, ignoring the burn in my abs as I fucked him. In that moment, the only thing that mattered was making Alex feel good.

“I’m so close,” he sobbed.

I let go of one of his knees and gripped the arm he was jerking off with. “Let go, baby. I’ve got you.”

With a strangled cry, he did. The angle was off, but I managed to grab his cock and squeeze tight. He was hard and hot and slick in my hand. He fell back against me, boneless and making the sexiest little sounds.

Holding one of his knees up, I made sure to stroke on every other thrust. Alex’s cock pulsed in my hand, and I slammed into him hard, then swirled my hips and ground my cock inside him.

He let out a choked scream and shuddered and shook over me. His ass clenched tight around my shaft, cum splashed onto my hand.

“Fuck,” I grunted. My orgasm hovered right there under the surface.

I was close, but I wasn’t ready for it to be over yet.

When he was finished shooting, I let go of his knee. He was lying over me, his legs spread wide and his body boneless and limp.

“So hot.” I loosened my grip on his shaft.

“Fuck.”

I shifted him so he was on an angle and lying against my shoulder. I wanted to be able to see him for this round. He turned to face me and slicked his tongue over my lower lip. I leaned in and kissed him. He opened to me. I

swept my tongue inside his waiting mouth.

I stroked my hands over his beautiful body, teasing and feeling every part of him I could reach, and poured all the emotions he wasn't ready to hear into my kiss.

We moved in tandem, rolling our hips so my cock swirled and ground into him. The new pace was exactly what I needed to calm down and get my center back, but more than that, I wanted to worship him as I slowly brought him back to the edge.

Alex moaned and sighed against my mouth. Our pace was slow and languid and so fucking perfect my chest swelled. I pulled away to draw in a deep breath.

"You feel so good in me," he whispered.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." He arched his back and forced my cock even deeper inside him. "Love your cock. Love how good you feel. Love you."

I lost my rhythm, and my brain zeroed in on what he'd said.

Alex didn't seem to notice his words or my pause, and I shook my head to clear it. Who knew if he'd meant it? It could just be sex talk. Tamping down my disappointment, I focused on Alex, on making him feel good.

I trailed one finger up his chest, over his throat, and across his lips. He opened for me, and I pushed it inside. He sucked on it, moaning around my digit. I wrapped my other hand around his cock. He was fully hard again, his shaft wet and a bit tacky from his orgasm. He sucked harder, his moans growing in volume.

"There you go, baby. So hard and perfect for me." I licked just under his ear, knowing that was one of his hot spots, and slowly stroked him.

He shuddered and rolled his hips. I moved a bit faster.

"You going to come again for me? Shoot all over yourself again?"

He bit my finger hard enough to sting.

"Yeah, you are. You're going to be good for me and come on my cock. Then I'm going to fill you with my load."

He moaned and sped up his hips.

"You want me to fill you? You wanna feel me come deep inside you?"

"Mmmm-hmmm." He let go of my finger with his teeth and resumed sucking me hard.

"I can't wait to see my cum dripping out of your perfect hole. Knowing I'm the only one who's ever going to mark you like that. You know why?"

“Wengh,” he moaned around my finger.

“Because you’re mine.” I bit his earlobe, and he jerked against me.

He trembled and shook over me, his cock pulsing in my hand. He was close.

“You’re mine, Alex. Your ass, your cock, your orgasm. It all belongs to me.”

He whined, and I pulled my finger out of his mouth.

“Say it. Say you’re mine,” I growled, unable to hold back any longer.

I was so fucking close it hurt. My balls were drawn up tight, my cock was so damn sensitive, and the pressure deep in my body coiled tight, like a snake about to strike.

“I’m yours.” He looked at me, his eyes bright but still focused. “Only yours,” he whispered.

My orgasm tore out of me so fast and hard it stole my breath. Pleasure spiraled through me, my entire body tightening and relaxing with dizzying speed.

Alex shook and tensed as I shot deep inside him, his ass gripping me in the most perfect way as he came for a second time with my name on his lips.

The waves of pleasure finally subsided, and I let go of Alex’s dick. He moaned softly as my cock fell out of him.

“I’ve got you,” I whispered and gently moved him so he was beside me on the bed. “Roll over, baby. Just for a second.”

He did, sighing happily, and buried his face in my other pillow.

I leaned up on one elbow and used my other hand to split his ass open. His hole was relaxed and shiny. A little bit of cum spilled out of him.

“Come here.” I rolled him onto his side and pulled him against my chest.

Alex nuzzled into me. His breathing was fast, and his skin was cool. I wrapped myself around him, sharing my body heat with him. He sighed happily, and I slid one hand down his back and gently pressed my finger inside him.

“I want to keep my load inside you for as long as possible. I want you to feel me for days so you remember exactly who you belong to.”

“You,” he said dreamily and clenched around my finger.

“Are you mine?” I asked softly.

“Yes.”

“Am I yours?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me. I want to hear the words.”

“You’re mine. Only mine.”

My heart fluttered in my chest as love and affection rolled over me in waves.

I held Alex in my arms, whispering sweet nothings as he slowly came back to reality.

“Kai?” he asked, his voice low but clear.

“Yeah?” I loosened my hold on him and carefully pulled my finger out of him.

“Did you mean it?”

“Mean what?”

“That I’m yours?”

I pulled far enough away so he could see my face.

His eyes were clear. He was fully present again.

“Yes.”

“What does that mean? Are we...”

“Are we together?”

“Yeah.”

“Yes, we are.”

“We are?” he asked hopefully.

“We are.” I kissed his lips, just a quick peck. “Do you want that?”

“I do. I’ve never had a boyfriend.” He smiled shyly. “Not a real one.”

“Me either.”

He opened his mouth, then closed it again, his expression shifting to one of indecision.

“What is it?”

“Can I have your real number? I only have your burner one.”

“Yeah. Of course.” I reached over and grabbed my phone from where it was plugged in on my bedside table.

“What’s yours?” I asked when I had my contacts lined up. “I’ll text you.”

He rattled off the digits, but when I was only four numbers in, the autofill showed up with “Lex kappa sig” as the contact name.

A memory hit out of nowhere. Alex and I sitting in a quiet corner of the party, joking and laughing and sipping our drinks. It had been one of the best conversations I’d ever had.

I looked up from my phone. “The stoplight party at Kappa Sigma. That’s where we met.”

He widened his eyes. "You remember?"

"Yeah. You had your hair slicked back, right?"

He flushed pink. "Yeah. I went through a phase for a few weeks after a bad haircut."

"That's why I didn't recognize you. That, and I got your name wrong. I put you in my phone as Lex. You look a lot different with your hair back."

"Why didn't you text?" he asked, his voice small.

"I planned to," I said softly. "Rain broke her arm the next day, and I spent the next few weeks helping my mom take care of her."

His eyes softened. "Poor kid."

"I remember the party. You were wearing a shirt that said 'I'm more confused than a chameleon in a bowl of Skittles.' I commented on it. That's how we got to talking."

"You do remember."

"I'm so sorry I didn't text. I meant to, but things just got crazy."

"I get it." He smiled, a real one that reached his eyes.

"I remember how much I wanted to kiss you but didn't want to make a move when there were so many people around."

He blew out a shaky breath. "You did?"

"I did. And I thought about you that night when I went to bed. I jerked off picturing you."

His eyes sparkled, and a big grin split his lips. "I jerked off thinking about you too."

"What did you think about?"

"I thought about how good it would feel to ride you." His cheeks flushed red. "I fantasized that you pulled me on your lap and ripped open the back of my pants so we could fuck right there while the party was going on around us."

"Fuck, baby. That's hot." I pushed my hips against his so he could feel my half-hard cock. "Want to know what I thought about?"

"What?"

"I thought about how hot you'd look spread out on my bed as I fucked you."

His eyes darkened.

"And I thought about how hot you'd look tied to my bedframe so I could edge the fuck out of you while you begged me to let you come."

"Jesus." He licked his bottom lip. "Have you done that a lot?"

“Done what a lot?”

“Tie people down.”

“Not really. I’ve used handcuffs a few times, and one time I used a belt.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“But you said tying people up is one of your kinks.”

“It is. But I never found someone I wanted to do more than that with. Bondage is intimate, at least for me. Having someone put all their trust in me and allow me to make them completely helpless and at my mercy isn’t something I can do with just anyone. People have asked, but I didn’t feel that connection with them, so I stuck to simple things like handcuffs or just using my weight to pin them down.”

“But you’ve used straps on me more than once.”

“I did. I’ve never held back with you, not on the phone and not in person. Our connection was strong right from the beginning, so even though we weren’t anything or even exclusive, I wanted to share that with you.”

“I knew you’d be my first for a lot of things, but I never thought I’d be yours,” he said softly.

“You’re my first in the ways that matter. Not just my first boyfriend, but my first partner. The first person I’ve taken complete control over. First one I’ve slept with after, who I can’t get enough of. And the first one I’ve ever gone bare with.”

“You never did before?”

“Nope. Not until you.”

He smiled and pecked a kiss against my lips. “I like that we get to share these firsts.”

“Me too. Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“How many girls have you hooked up with?”

“A bunch.” He bit his lip. “I didn’t sleep with most of them, but I’ve messed around with a lot. Why?”

“I’m not judging. I’m just curious.”

“Remember how I told you I get into these self-destructive spirals where I do impulsive shit?”

I nodded.

“That’s usually when I hooked up. I guess it was a way to feel wanted. To feel like I wasn’t alone. The sex or whatever we ended up doing was never

satisfying because I wasn't in the right headspace, but I kept trying, hoping I'd feel that spark or maybe I'd be able to come without struggling."

"It never worked?"

"Not until you." He sighed and let go of me.

I pulled my arms away so we were facing each other but not touching.

"I was looking for the wrong thing. Or rather I was looking for it in the wrong place. You're the only person I've ever been able to let go with. To just feel and enjoy. Sex before was meh. But with you... it's everything."

Pride and joy swelled in my chest, and I fought the urge to pull him back into my arms. He'd wanted distance for a reason. I would respect his boundaries.

"I've never connected with anyone the way I do with you," I said. "Usually, I play a part. I fall into the role my partner wants me to play. But with you, it's different. I don't think or plan. I just act and react. I'm fully present with you, and I've never had that before."

"Do you think things would have worked out if you'd texted me last year?" he asked softly.

"Honestly, I don't think so. I wasn't in a good place back then. I was struggling for money and working late nights. I barely managed to keep my grades up and was running on fumes. Then Rain got hurt, and I fell even more behind. I burned out hard. My only focus was taking care of her, getting my grades up, and making money."

"Then I guess it's a good thing you didn't text. And that I was late for class that day. This wouldn't have happened if my asshole neighbor hadn't blocked my car in. I should send them a thank-you note."

"I'm still sorry I hurt you, but I'm glad we can move past it."

He pressed our foreheads together, his hot breath ghosting over my cheek. "Me too. I'm really glad we ended up here."

"Same, baby." I kissed his full lips. "Want to come to family dinner on Thursday?"

"What?" He blinked like a confused owl.

"We don't do anything fancy, but you're welcome to come to my mom's for Thanksgiving."

"She'd be okay with that?"

"She suggested that I invite you."

"So you're doing it because your mom told you to?" He grinned.

I lightly punched his arm.

“Brat. I’m asking because I want you there, and my family does too.”

“I’d like that.” He flushed.

“Good. Want to stay tonight?”

“Yeah.”

“Let me go get a cloth to clean you up. Do I need to change the sheets?”

He shook his head, a playful smile on his lips. “Most of you is still in me. I like it. Makes me feel like yours.”

“You are mine.” I rolled on top of him and pressed him into the mattress with my bigger body. “From now on.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

He leaned up and kissed me. The sweet slide of his lips against mine sent another flutter of love through me.

As much as I wanted to ask if he’d meant it when he’d said he loved me, now wasn’t the time. I wanted him to feel comfortable enough to tell me when he wasn’t vulnerable or confronted so the words would mean more.

I could wait. Even if he never got there, that wouldn’t change anything. Alex was mine. And I was never letting him go.

ALEX

I was nervous as fuck as I knocked on the door to Kai's mom's apartment. Her building was in the same area as Kai's but was better cared for. Her security door worked, unlike the one in Kai's building, and the lobby and hallways looked freshly painted. The carpets were worn and disgusting, but the bright hallways made the building feel warm and welcoming.

"Hey." Kai pulled the door open, his smile big and happy. "Found it okay?"

"Yeah."

He leaned in and pecked a kiss against my lips, then moved aside so I could come in.

"Alex!" Rain ran up and flung herself at me.

I caught her in a hug, and she clung to me like a spider monkey. "Hi, Rain. How are you?"

"I'm great. Do you like pumpkin pie?"

"I do."

"Me too." She untangled herself from me and grabbed my hand. "Kai and Mommy don't like it, but I do. So Kai bought me a *whole pie*."

"It's a half pie, but yes. You're the only one who likes it." Kai ruffled her hair.

"You can have some too." She pushed her hair back from her face. "Do you like whipped cream?"

"Big fan."

"Me too! And ice cream?"

"Love ice cream."

She tugged me into the living room and right over to the sectional sofa. “Sit.”

I sat.

“Kai? Is Alex here?” Cassie’s voice came out of the kitchen.

“Yeah,” he called back. “You two good here while I help her finish up?”

“Do you need another set of hands?” I asked.

“Nope, we’re good.” He winked and swept out of the room.

“Want to see my room?” Rain asked.

“Sure, I’d love to.”

She jumped up and held out her hand. I took it and followed her down the hall. Her room was painted a soft yellow, and she had the same canopy curtain over her bed as she had at Kai’s place. The sheets had fish on them, and the blanket was covered with cartoon puppies.

Rain sat me down on her bed, then introduced me to her toys and showed me her artwork. I had no idea what the average six-year-old could draw like, but she seemed to have a talent for it.

“Dinner time.”

We looked up from the notebook we’d been flipping through. Kai stood in the doorway, an affectionate smile on his perfect lips.

“Food time!” Rain jumped up, her notebook forgotten. “Come on, Alex.”

She grabbed my hand, and I followed her out of her room.

As we passed Kai, he gave me a quick kiss, and heat spread throughout my chest. I wanted to roll my eyes at myself. God, could I be any more of a sap?

Dinner was fun. Cassie had put a lot of effort into the meal, and everything was delicious. Rain dominated most of the conversation, but it wasn’t annoying or weird. I liked it. It felt like a normal family dinner filled with laughs and jokes and a six-year-old babbling about every topic under the sun. It made me feel like I belonged.

Rain and I both had our pumpkin pie with a crap ton of ice cream and whipped cream for dessert, while Kai and his mother had apple pie.

When we’d finished, Kai and I cleaned up while Cassie and Rain hung out in the living room. Something about clearing the table and washing dishes side by side at the sink was so utterly domestic I smiled from ear to ear. Who knew cleaning could be fun when you did it with someone you loved?

After we had put everything away, we made coffee, and the four of us sat in the living room. Rain was more subdued, content with sipping on her hot

chocolate and playing on Cassie's phone as the three of us talked.

Cassie told me stories about when Kai was young and asked lots of questions about school. Had Kai told her about my family situation? She didn't ask anything personal, which made me think he had.

A few hours later, Rain fell asleep on Kai's lap. He carried her into her bedroom, leaving me alone with Cassie.

"I'm really glad you came over," Cassie said.

"Me too. Thanks for inviting me."

"You're welcome any time. I mean that." She had a faraway look in her eyes. "I haven't seen Kai this relaxed in years. You make him happy. It's been a long time since anything has made him smile like you do."

I flushed hot, and a thrill shot through my chest. I made him happy?

"He's always been an old soul. Even when he was a kid, he took the weight of the world onto himself. He's a fixer, always has been, and he works too hard. I was worried about him."

"You were?"

She nodded. "He was so stressed about everything. Work, school, us. It was too much for him. But now he's laughing and smiling and happy again."

I bit my lip. Was that because of me?

She patted my arm, her touch warm and soothing. "I'm glad you're in his life."

"I'm glad he's in mine," I said around the lump in my throat.

"I'm tapping out." Kai came out of Rain's room with her on his heels.

She'd changed into a set of Spider-Man pajamas and was clutching a stuffed cat.

"Did you brush your teeth?" Cassie asked.

Rain shook her head.

"Alex and I have to go, pumpkin." Kai knelt and gave her a hug. "I'll see you on Tuesday after school, okay?"

She mumbled something into his neck. When she let go, she rushed over and grabbed me around the waist.

"Bye, Alex." She squeezed tight. "Will you be there on Tuesday too?"

I glanced at Kai. He nodded in an "if you'd like" way.

"I'll have to check my schedule. But if I'm free, I'll be there."

"Yay." She let go of me and held up her stuffie. "Lucy says have a good night."

"You too, Lucy."

“Are you a hugger?” Cassie asked.

“Um, sure.”

I wasn't a hugger, but Kai's family was, and being part of their casual affection touched me in ways I wasn't ready to examine.

She folded me into a hug, her grip tight and her embrace warm and filled with affection. I closed my eyes, giving in to the peacefulness swirling around me. She held me for a few beats longer than was strictly polite, then let go. As we headed out, she and Rain waved, her smile full and genuine.

“You okay?” Kai took my hand in his and led me down the hallway.

“Yeah. Just haven't gotten a mom hug in a long time.” I cleared my throat. “That was fun. I like your family.”

“They like you too.”

We stopped in front of the elevator, and Kai lifted our joined hands to his mouth. He brushed a kiss against my knuckles, and I nearly swooned.

“Want to come to my place?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you want to spend the weekend with me?”

“Really?”

He shot me a sidelong look. “Yeah. I have to work tomorrow and Saturday. You can go home if you want or just hang out until I get home.”

“I'd like to stay.”

“Want to stop by your place so you can grab some stuff?”

The elevator door opened, and we stepped inside.

“Sure.”

He pushed the button for the lobby and leaned against the wall.

When we were on the ground floor, he held my hand all the way into the parking lot, then kissed me right there in front of my car.

I was floating as I drove to the house.

Both Matt and Eli were staying in town, but Matt was spending the weekend at Jax's place, since his roommates had left. Eli had said he'd be around most of the weekend, but as I let myself in, the main floor was quiet.

It didn't take long for me to gather a couple of days' worth of clothes and some toiletries. The fact that Kai wanted me to bring my stuff over to his place made everything feel real.



THE WEEKEND PASSED in a blur of hanging out half-naked and making love. We had sex more times than I could count, but each time had been slow and sweet and so damn hot. Kai had been as attentive as ever, but the urgency and desperation had been replaced with tenderness.

He'd slowed things down, and while it had been as explosive as always, the sweetness had added layers to my pleasure that I'd never experienced before.

Being with Kai was easy. And by some miracle of miracles, he seemed to enjoy spending time with me too. A part of me had been waiting for him to take it back. To decide he was done with me and I wasn't worth putting up with anymore. But today had changed things. Maybe one day he could love me like I loved him.

KAI

Having a boyfriend wasn't weird. I'd been worried that making things official with Alex might take some getting used to. I wasn't one for casual affection, and I liked my alone time.

Alex was the first person I *wanted* to spend all my free time with. Usually, I was happy to let whoever I was in an arrangement with do whatever they wanted and we met up when the urge to fuck got strong enough. But this was different. Before, all my arrangements had been casual. More of a "you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours" type of thing.

I hadn't been sure if Alex would be okay with public displays of affection. Hell, I hadn't been sure *I'd* be okay with them. But Alex was mine, and the possessive bastard in me loved claiming him in public. I was proud to hold his hand, to show everyone that we were together. Alex was ridiculously hot and got looks everywhere he went. He didn't notice them, but I sure as hell did.

We didn't cuddle a lot in bed. Right after sex, sure, but we lay side by side and talked about everything and nothing for hours. And we always fell asleep on our own sides of the bed. Between Alex's sensory issues and me being an incredibly light sleeper, it was best we didn't touch at night, but I loved how Alex always wanted sleepy kisses and to snuggle into my chest when we woke up. He was touch starved, and apparently, so was I.

We fell into a nice routine almost by accident. We met up on our longer breaks at school and tried to spend a little bit of time together each evening. When I babysat Rain, he came over to hang out with us, and she adored him. The fact that my boyfriend and my little sister had bonded meant a lot to me.

Family was everything, and Alex had seamlessly become one of us.

Usually, I went over to his house when my classes were done. I hadn't been able to stack mine and make a decent schedule like he had, and I always finished later than him.

I liked his roommates, and we spent a fair bit of time in the living room watching movies or shows with Beck and Finn and also with Matt and his shadow/bestie Jax. Eli didn't spend a lot of time with the group, but I was used to his hermit tendencies.

Alex had told me how Eli had accidentally outed him the night after our presentation. I was glad Alex was okay with his sexuality being out there, but I also knew Eli would be beating himself up over that for a long-ass time. If Alex thought he fixated on unpleasant or painful events, he had nothing on Eli. That kid never let anything go, and considering how his mind worked, that wasn't surprising.

Our sex life was as good as it had always been. We still experimented and pushed boundaries, especially when Alex needed to get out of his head, but that wasn't the only kind of sex we had. Not anymore. Slow, tender sex, quickies, or full-on scenes, it didn't matter. Every time with Alex was just as good as the last.

We fit together, and I'd also learned I had a caretaker kink. Cooking for him, bringing him food during the day, and even texting him reminders to drink water made me feel good. I loved knowing that I was helping him and giving him something he'd never had.

But it wasn't all one-sided. Alex did just as much for me as I did for him. Before we'd gotten together, my life had been a revolving door of working, helping my mom, and keeping my grades up. I hadn't had the time or the desire to do anything fun.

Now I found myself laughing with abandon and constantly smiling when Alex was around. Being with him made me happy, but it was more than that. Like we fed off each other's energy. Him being happy made me happy. I'd never had that kind of connection with anyone before.

Beck had also started putting more effort into their friendship. They went to the gym together and made a point to hang out a couple of times a week. That had helped settle a lot of Alex's inner turmoil.

A part of me wished I could give him everything he needed, but I knew that was unrealistic. We both needed friendships and connections outside our relationship. Otherwise, our tendencies toward codependency and obsessive

attention could easily turn toxic.

“No way.” Jax shook his head at the screen. “No fucking way that’s possible.”

Matt smirked and elbowed Jax in the side. “Just ‘cause you can’t wrap your brain around it doesn’t mean it’s not possible.”

“Dude held his breath for, like, five minutes.” Jax turned to the loveseat where Beck and Finn were sitting. “Finn, you’re smart. Can humans hold their breath for that long?”

“I have no idea. I’m a physics major.”

“Eli.” Jax turned his attention to the other side of the couch, where Eli was curled up. “You’re super smart. Is that possible?”

“Depends. Some people can hold their breath for five minutes or more. But is it the norm? No. And the odds of a middle-aged dude being able to after getting his ass kicked in a ten-minute fight are low.”

“Ha!” Jax jabbed Matt in the side with his finger.

Matt slapped his hand away and grabbed Jax by the back of the neck. Jax didn’t fight as Matt dragged him closer and messed up his hair.

“There’s something off about them,” I whispered to Alex as Jax sat back on the couch like nothing had happened.

“Totally,” he whispered back. “I can’t tell if they’re fucking or not.”

I snickered. Thankfully a loud explosion on the screen covered the sound. “Yeah, I can’t tell either.”

“Matt said he’s straight, but Jax is gay...”

“You don’t think a straight guy and a gay guy can be that close and it be completely platonic?”

“No, I’m sure they can. But those two don’t give off ‘just friends’ vibes.”

He wasn’t wrong. I didn’t know either guy well, but in all the times I’d been at the house, I’d never seen Matt there without Jax. They were attached at the hip.

They reminded me of golden retrievers, except when they played video games together. Then they were brutal. The trash-talking and taunting were next level, and they got so into it the rest of the world melted away. But whatever. Not my circus, not my monkey.

When the movie was done, Alex walked me to the front door.

“Have a good night.” I drew him close and pressed a kiss against his lips.

“You too.” He kissed me again. Then we both stepped back.

“You heading out?” Jax came down the hall.

“Yup.” I turned back to Alex. “See you in the morning.”

He nodded, a happy smile tilting his full lips.

“Later, Alex.” Jax waved as Alex stepped aside.

“Later.”

I gave Alex one last look, then followed Jax out of the house. As much as I wanted to drag him upstairs and bury myself in his tight body, I had an early class in the morning.

“You need a ride?” I asked Jax when we’d reached the sidewalk.

“Nah, I don’t mind walking. Gets the blood pumping.”

“How far do you live?”

“Only about a mile that way.” He motioned to the left.

Jax was a big guy. We were the same height, but his wide shoulders and thick legs made him look huge. My body had been achieved in a gym. His came from being an elite athlete. Any idiot who dared mess with him would most likely get their face rearranged.

“See ya.” He waved, then trotted down the street, his pace fast and his strides long.

The drive home took just under twenty minutes, and I was climbing out of my car when a text came through.

Alex: I need help

I’d barely finished reading the text when I hit Call.

“Hello?” His reedy voice came over the line after two rings.

“What’s wrong? Are you in danger? Are you hurt?”

“No, nothing like that. I’m sorry. I’m being dramatic.”

“Are you at the house?”

“Yeah. I just... I—”

“I’ll be there in less than twenty minutes.”

“You don’t have to come.”

“I’m coming. Make sure the main door is unlocked, then stay in your room. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“I’m sorry,” he whispered.

“Don’t be sorry.” I folded myself into my car and pulled the door shut. “Just get comfortable and wait for me. I’m on my way.”

“Thanks.”

The call ended. I tossed my phone onto the passenger’s seat and started the car. On my way back to the house, I broke more than a few traffic laws and managed to get there in under fifteen minutes. Thank fuck the cops didn’t

patrol student housing.

The door was unlocked, and I hurried into the house. The main floor was empty. I took the stairs two at a time and rushed over to his door.

“Alex?” I said softly as I pushed it open.

He was curled up on his bed, his back against the wall and his arms around his knees. He’d put on one of the hoodies I’d given him, but it was his eyes that drew my attention. They were red-rimmed and staring blankly at the wall. His dissociative stare.

“Baby?” I gently closed the door behind me and walked into the room.

He slid his gaze to me, but that unseeing, unfocused look was still there.

“Alex, look at me.”

He blinked and shook his head slightly. “Kai?”

“What happened?” I sat on the bed in front of him, not wanting to spook him by crowding him.

“I just... my brain started going, and I started thinking all these horrible things and...” He rubbed his hand over his face.

“I’m glad you reached out.” I slid just close enough that our knees touched. “That you let me come and take care of you.”

“You’re going to get sick of me,” he whispered.

Fuck. Something had to have triggered this. Alex still struggled with his dark thoughts, but this kind of breakdown had to be in response to something.

“No, I’m not.”

“You are.” He picked up his phone and tapped on the screen a few times. “Everyone always does.”

He handed me the phone. I looked at the screen.

hewhoshallnotbenamed: bet he doesn’t fuck you as good as I did

hewhoshallnotbenamed: I give it a week before he dumps your ass

hewhoshallnotbenamed: maybe a month if you keep your mouth shut unless his dick is in it

hewhoshallnotbenamed: he looks a lot like me

hewhoshallnotbenamed: bet you think about me when he fucks you

hewhoshallnotbenamed: bet he thinks about anyone else but you when he does

hewhoshallnotbenamed: I did

hewhoshallnotbenamed: only way I could keep it up for you

hewhoshallnotbenamed: have fun dying alone

Anger flared in my chest. “Is this who I think it is?” I asked, making sure

to keep my voice even.

He nodded.

“Why did he send these tonight?”

He put his chin on his knees. “I kinda did a thing.”

“What?”

“Check my Insta.”

I exited out of his texts, opened the app, and looked at his profile. He’d uploaded a selfie of the two of us he’d taken earlier that evening when we’d been sitting on the couch together. The caption simply said “Boyfriends.”

“Is this the first time you’ve posted about us?”

He nodded.

“That was very brave.”

He snapped his eyes to mine. Confusion clouded them.

“I know it wasn’t easy to put that out there, especially to people in your past.”

He gripped his hair and tugged on the strands. “I still hear his stupid voice. I hate that he has this kind of power over me.”

“It’s hard to get over that kind of betrayal and hurt.”

“I don’t want to keep feeling like this.” He looked up at me with watery eyes.

“I know, baby.” I opened my arms, and Alex melted into my embrace. He snuggled into my chest and gripped me tight. “It’s going to take time to heal, but that’s why I’m here. Whenever you feel overwhelmed or his voice comes back or the doubts hit, call, text, whatever you need. I’ll be here.”

“For how long?” His voice was miserable. “How long before you get sick of my issues?”

“Never.”

“Liar.”

“Nope. Not lying.” I kissed his hair.

“I told you being with me is a lot of work.”

“You keep saying that, but it’s really not.” I pulled him off my chest so I could look into his eyes. “Being with you is the easiest thing I’ve ever done. All the *issues* you keep freaking out over aren’t even issues to me. You’ve been hurt, and you’ve spent a lot of time protecting yourself. You never actually healed from the trauma, did you?”

“Not really. I kind of just tried to pretend it didn’t happen.”

“Now you have me to lean on, to help you. I *want* to be there for you.

And I'm so proud of you for reaching out and not trying to deal with this alone."

The corners of his mouth lifted in a barely there smile.

"I think you need to do something proactive."

"Block him?"

I nodded.

"I know I should have. I don't even know why I didn't."

"You weren't ready before. Are you ready now?"

"Yeah. I'm ready."

I sat with him as he went through all his social media and blocked Brett's profiles. Then he did the same with his phone number.

"How do you feel?"

"Better." He tossed his phone aside.

"Good."

"I'm sorry you had to come all the way back here because of some stupid texts."

"I'm not." I sat next to him on the bed. "I'm happy you did. It shows me that you trust me."

"I do." He leaned his head against my shoulder. "I always have. Even when I didn't like you, I still trusted you."

"So trust me when I say that I'll always be here for you."

"There you go being annoyingly perfect again," he grumbled.

"What can I say? I'm amazing."

"And so modest." He poked me in the side playfully. "Let me guess. Modesty is for the mediocre?"

"It really is."

We sat in silence.

"Has anyone ever spoken to you about ADHD?"

Alex shifted off me and sat up straight. "Why?"

"I've noticed that a lot of what you struggle with are symptoms of ADHD."

I expected him to get angry, but he chewed on his lip.

"Everyone presents differently, but you check a lot of the boxes."

"No one ever said anything." He picked at the skin around his thumbnail.

"They just said I needed to learn to apply myself. That I had potential. I just needed to learn to focus or concentrate."

"Teachers?" I asked.

“Yeah.” He snorted. “My entire life, I’ve been told I’m lazy or unfocused or irresponsible.”

“I’m obviously not a professional, but I think it would be worth getting an assessment done.”

“You think?”

“I do. Maybe I’m totally wrong, but maybe I’m right.”

“But if you are, that means I struggled every damn day for twenty-one years, feeling like my brain is my enemy when I didn’t have to.”

“A late diagnosis can be hard, but it could also help you understand *why* your mind works the way it does.”

“So I’m needy, high maintenance, into some kinky-ass stuff, and now I might have ADHD. Jesus. I wouldn’t blame you for walking away.”

“You’re going to have to cut that shit out.”

“What shit?”

I gently gripped his chin and held his head in place. “I’m not walking away. I love you just the way you are.”

His eyes widened to a point it was almost comical. “What?” he breathed.

“I love you.” I let go of his chin. “I’m *in* love with you.”

“You are?”

“I am.”

“But...”

“I love you, Alex,” I repeated, my voice firm.

“I... I love you too.”

The punch to my gut took me by surprise. “Oof.”

“Even if you are annoying as fuck.” He grinned mischievously.

“Oh, you think so.” I grabbed him around the waist and threw him onto the bed.

He landed on the mattress with a laugh that turned into a gasp when I lay over him. “I do.”

“Maybe I should find something else for you to do with that mouth.”

“Maybe you should.” He dragged his tongue over his bottom lip.

“Say sorry to your roommates for me.” I straddled his stomach.

“Huh?” He blinked up at me.

“Because we’re about to get really loud.”

“Consider it payback for all the times I had to listen to them getting it on.”

I ripped my pants open and pulled out my rock-hard dick. “Open your

mouth, princess.”

“Make me.”

“Oh, I will.”

I grabbed his wrists in my hand and pinned them to the bed. “Stoplight method.”

He nodded.

“What’s your color?”

“Green.”

“Fuck, yeah.”

I knelt over his chest and angled my dick toward his mouth. Alex let out a little squeal and rolled his lips inward, his eyes flashing with challenge.

Life with Alex was everything I’d thought I’d never want but was so happy I had. He was my everything. The person who not only mattered the most but who also loved me as much as I loved him.

I knew things wouldn’t magically get better just because we loved each other. We both still had issues to work on, and Alex had a long road of healing ahead of him. But we’d face all that together, just like we’d face everything from now on.

Alex was my everything, and I was so thankful he was mine.

EPILOGUE

Alex
Seven years later

“So, what do you think?”

Rain looked around the living room critically. “I think you did good. I can’t wait to see his face when he comes home.”

“Is Mom on her way?”

The front door swung open, and Cassie rushed inside.

“I’m here! Am I late?”

I hurried over and took the bags she was holding. “You’re good.”

“The lineup at the store was crazy.” She followed me into the kitchen with Rain on her heels.

“How was class?” I pulled out the supplies I’d ordered.

“Good.” Cassie leaned against the wall. “Busy, but it’s that time of year.”

It was a running joke in the family that everyone except me was a student. Rain was going into high school next year, and both Kai and Cassie attended the same college. Well, they did for the next week, since Kai was graduating from his program.

I was ridiculously proud of him and of his family.

After we’d graduated from Rutherford, Kai and I had both been accepted into our master’s programs at the University of Washington. We’d moved to Seattle that summer, and a year later, we’d been able to move Cassie and

Rain to the city.

Thanks to some connections Kai had made, he'd been able to hook Cassie up with a job at the school. That had helped her start her nursing degree part time, and she was set to graduate next year.

Rain was thriving in the city and was on scholarship at one of the best private schools in the area.

After finishing my MBA, I'd gotten a job at an import-export company and now worked as their financial manager. Kai had graduated with his master's the same year and had started his PhD program.

I liked my job, and I was proud of how quickly I'd moved up to a management position, but the real joy in my life was watching my boyfriend working his ass off to get his doctorate.

The long nights doing research and endless days he'd spent holed away in his office as he'd worked on his dissertation had paid off, and my man had fulfilled his dreams. And more than that, one of his professors had offered him a position on her research team starting in the summer.

Things hadn't been all smooth sailing. We'd struggled a lot in those first few years. Seattle was an expensive city, and while we'd both managed to snag scholarships, and Cassie's job had helped offset Kai's tuition, money had been tight.

When we'd moved, Kai had stopped stripping because the late hours were too hard to maintain while doing such a rigorous academic program, and there had been months when we'd barely managed to scrape enough together to pay our bills and put food on the table.

Things had gotten better when I'd graduated and had started working full-time. Now that Kai was done with school and had a job lined up, we were finally living comfortably and able to help set Cassie and Rain up for the future they deserved.

I'd gotten assessed for ADHD, and Kai had been right. A late diagnosis was hard to come to terms with, but finally understanding why my brain worked the way it did had helped me learn how to manage my symptoms. I'd always struggle with them, but now they didn't rule my life the way they had for so long.

The only part of our lives that hadn't been a struggle was our relationship. Kai's unwavering support hadn't solved my issues, but knowing he loved me just as I was and would always be there for me had done wonders for not only my sense of self-worth but also in helping me work through the traumas

in my past.

Kai was my everything—my best friend, my confidant, and my biggest cheerleader. Every night I got to sleep next to him was a gift, and seeing him first thing in the morning, when he was all sleepy and soft, was my favorite part of the day.

After nearly eight years together, I still got butterflies when he walked into the room, and his sexy smirk still brought me to my knees. Our sex life was as varied as it was exciting, and exploring our fantasies together never got old.

Being with him was easy, but staying together wasn't something we took for granted. We worked on our relationship and made a point to put each other first. Seeing Kai happy was my greatest joy, just like my happiness was his.

“Can you put these out on the table?” I handed the pile of supplies to Rain.

She took them and scurried out of the kitchen.

“What can I do to help?” Cassie asked.

I checked the time and handed her the box I'd picked up that afternoon. Kai would be home any minute. “Can you put these on the table?”

I grabbed the bottle of sparkling juice out of the fridge and hurried into the dining area to set it with the rest of the stuff.

Kai had been adamant that he didn't want anything fancy for graduation. He'd requested we all go out to a nice restaurant after his commencement ceremony. I'd already made a reservation at a sushi restaurant we'd always wanted to try, but no way in hell was that all we were doing to celebrate.

Rain shooed me away from the table and hurried around it, adjusting the champagne glasses I'd put out and moving the plates of his favorite snacks until the table was up to her standards. She stepped back, a pleased smile on her face

“Seal of approval?” I asked.

“Approved.”

She came around the table and gave me a quick hug. “He's going to lose his mind.”

“I hope so.” I hugged her back.

“We're down to the wire, kids.” Cassie tapped her wrist.

Rain let out a little squeal, ran over to the couch, and grabbed the bag of confetti she'd insisted on buying. She handed some out. Then the three of us

waited for Kai to come home.

A few minutes later, the lock turned, and the door swung open.

“Happy graduation!” we shouted, letting loose our handfuls of confetti.

Kai stood in the doorway, a shocked expression on his handsome face as colorful bits of paper rained down around him. Seconds later, the shock melted away and was replaced by a shy smile as he stepped into the apartment.

“You guys.” He flushed pink. “You didn’t have to do this.”

The living room looked like the graduation section at Target had exploded in it. The decorations were recycled from the various graduation celebrations we’d done over the years, and I loved how we had family traditions like this.

I’d never understood the true meaning of family until Rain and Cassie had accepted me as one of their own. Cassie was just as mothering and amazing to me as she was with Kai and Rain, and Rain always introduced me as her bonus brother. They’d also adopted my grandmother, and we flew her to town as often as we could for the holidays.

“Of course we did, Dr. Alexander.” I grinned as his blush deepened. “We’re so proud of you.”

“Get your asses in here.” Kai held his arms out, and the three of us rushed into them, nearly knocking him over in our haste to hug mug him.

“I’m so proud of you,” Cassie said, her voice thick when we’d stepped back.

“I couldn’t have done it without you.” Kai folded her into a hug and held her tight as a few tears slid down her cheeks. “All of this is because you believed in me. Never forget that, okay? I never will.”

I watched them, my throat tight. Cassie had sacrificed so much for her kids, and I would be forever grateful we could help her not only see her kids have the life she’d always wanted for them but also for her to finally realize her own dreams.

“Congratulations!” When he and Cassie broke apart, Rain flew into Kai’s arms.

Laughing, Kai hugged her tight. “Thanks, pumpkin.”

Rain stepped back, and Kai tugged me into his arms. His big body trembled slightly.

“You okay?” I asked.

“Yeah. It’s just all hitting me at once. It’s finally over. After all those

years of struggling, of working ourselves to the bone, we did it.”

“You did it.” I kissed his neck. “This is because of you, babe. Your hard work, your determination. You earned this, and I’m so fucking proud of you.”

“Um, baby?” he asked a few moments later.

“Yeah?”

“Why is there a pile of pet stuff on our dining room table?” He chuckled and pressed his lips into my neck. “If that’s your hint that you want to try puppy play, I’m game. But maybe next time, you can save that for when we’re alone and can do something about it.”

“HMMMM, I’d never say no to trying that. But that’s not what those are for.”

He pulled away and gave me a questioning look. “You don’t have to do that now,” he said when he noticed Rain had grabbed a broom and was sweeping up the confetti.

“Yeah, I do.”

He blinked like a confused owl and looked between us. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing.” Cassie smiled serenely, and Rain giggled.

“Okaaaay.” He slung his arm over my shoulder and pressed a kiss against my hair.

Cassie went to the table and grabbed the bottle of sparkling juice. “Time for a toast.”

Kai grinned at her and took the bottle, a calculating gleam in his eyes. What was going on? Kai winked at me and focused on opening the bottle.

When Kai popped the cork, we cheered. Thankfully, he kept hold of it so it didn’t dent the wall like had happened the first time we’d made a sparkling juice toast. He poured out four glasses.

“To Kai,” I held my glass up. “For all the years of hard work, but for also being the backbone of this family. We love you, and we’re so proud of you. Congratulations, Dr. Alexander.”

Rain, Cassie, and I took sips of our juice, but Kai held still, his eyes dark and intense.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“I also have a toast I want to make. But I don’t know who to make it out to.”

“I don’t get it.”

“Well, I could toast Alex, my boyfriend. Or I could toast Alex, my fiancée.”

My brain stuttered as I tried to compute his words.

“But we’re not—” I clamped my mouth shut. “Really?”

He leaned in and pressed a soft kiss against my lips. “I love you, Alex, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you by my side. So my question to you is, will you marry me?”

Adrenaline and love poured into my system. He wanted to marry me?

Kai and I had talked about marriage, and we’d agreed we’d take that step eventually. We already shared every aspect of our lives, and neither of us felt like something was missing, so we’d always made marriage more of an abstract idea than a plan.

“Yes, I’ll marry you,” I said when my brain and mouth were once again connected.

Cassie and Rain cheered as Kai swept me up in a crushing one-armed hug. “I love you,” he whispered into my ear.

“I love you too.” I chuckled.

“What’s funny?” He pulled away, his eyes soft and a fond smile on his lips.

“Just you being annoyingly perfect again. Did you plan this?”

“Sort of.” He stepped back and took a sip of his drink. “I was going to ask you after our celebration dinner, but the moment was too perfect to pass up.”

“Do you have a ring?” Rain asked. “You can’t propose without a ring.”

“I thought it would be better if we went shopping for our rings together. That way we could get exactly what we want.”

My cheeks hurt from how wide my smile was. Kai knew me so well. As much as being surprised with a ring would have been fun, I’d rather pick them out together.

“I do have something for you.” I put my glass down on the table. “Open that.” I pointed to the white box next to the supplies.

Kai put his drink down and carefully pulled the box open. “Are these what I think they are? You drove all the way to Welsh’s to get cinnamon rolls for us?”

Every year on our anniversary, we made the drive down to Welsh’s and picked up a box of cinnamon rolls to celebrate. Eating them always reminded me of those early days in class when we’d been getting to know each other, and I still got a stiffy watching him lick icing off his fingers.

I grinned. “Yup. And that’s not all.” I took his hand and tugged him toward our bedroom.

“Where are we going?” he asked. “What’s going on?”

“You’ll see.” I stopped in front of our door. “Go ahead.”

Kai pushed the door open and peeked inside. “Oh my god!” he exclaimed and rushed into the room.

Rain and Cassie crowded behind me. Kai knelt next to the bed. “Hi, buddy. Aren’t you beautiful?” He gently stroked his hand down the puppy’s soft red fur.

The puppy rolled onto his back, his tongue hanging out as he demanded belly rubs.

Laughing, Kai did as the puppy demanded.

“This is Cinnamon,” I said. “He’s a Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever and Border Collie mix. He’s ten weeks old, and he’s our new forever friend.”

“Hi, Cinnamon,” Kai said to the puppy. “Who’s a good boy? Are you a good boy?”

Cinnamon scrambled up and leaned his body against Kai’s chest. Kai gently scooped him up and held him as he stood.

Kai had wanted a dog since he was little, but it had never been an option. A few weeks ago, a local shelter had posted about how he and his littermates had been surrendered to them. Something about his little face and big blue eyes had called to me, and Rain, Cassie, and I had gone to the shelter the next day to meet him.

I’d fallen in love with his goofy personality, and he’d taken to all of us instantly. Leaving him there for the past few weeks so he could be properly weaned from his brothers and sisters had been a struggle, and we’d purposely planned the celebration for the day I’d been allowed to bring Cinnamon home.

“Thank you.” Kai pressed a kiss against my lips, mindful of the wiggly puppy in his arms.

Cinnamon licked the side of Kai’s face, then wriggled until Kai handed him to me so he could give me a slobbery kiss too.

“You like him?” I put him on the ground, but rather than run around or explore his surroundings, Cinnamon plopped down on Kai’s foot and leaned against his leg.

It had been a risk to bring home a dog Kai had never met, and I’d gone back and forth on whether or not giving a puppy as a gift was a good idea.

But I'd known that Cinnamon was meant to be ours, and by the looks of it, I'd been right.

"I love him." He bent down and petted his new friend. "Now it looks like we have no choice but to bump up our moving timeline."

I grinned and knelt next to him. Cinnamon jumped up and bounced between us excitedly. "Looks like."

Kai and I had been living in our apartment for the past five years. Cassie and Rain lived in the building too, but we'd been talking about moving into a house. The plan had been to start looking after Kai was settled in his job, but having an energetic puppy was definitely a motivator to start sooner.

"So, Alex, how does it feel to know that your name is going to be Alex Alexander?" Rain teased.

"Better than if it was going to be Alexander Alexander." I grinned at her.

My legal name was Alex, not Alexander, and the irony of falling in love with someone with the same surname was a running joke in the family.

We'd already decided that professionally I'd continue to use Ellis as my last name, but I would take Kai's name after we eventually got married.

When I was sixteen, I'd changed my last name to Ellis—my grandmother's maiden name—to distance myself from my parents and their legacy of bullshit. The move had been good for my mental health, and it had also stopped people from linking me with my parents' crimes if they googled me. But not having anyone with the same name as me had been isolating and made me feel like I didn't belong anywhere.

I wanted to share Kai's name. Family was everything to us, and taking that last step to legally be one of them was a no-brainer, even if it would make things confusing. I was exactly where I was meant to be, and I finally had the family I'd only dreamed of.

The last eight years had been the best years of my life, and I couldn't wait to see what the future had in store for us. And to marry the man who'd not only shown me what unconditional love was but who loved me as much as I loved him.

I'd found not only my person but also my family when I'd met Kai, and I was so thankful he was mine.



INTERESTED IN READING a bonus chapter where Alex and Kai have some fun with toys? Click [here](#) to be taken to Prolific Works and claim your copy. What happens when Alex and Kai have some fun with Derek and Jake? Click [here](#) to claim a special bonus chapter where the boys have an explosive night in together.

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ABOUT ME

What can I say about myself? It's kind of like being the new kid in school and being asked to tell everyone a bit about yourself. Anyone else forget everything they've ever liked, thought of, and even their name in those moments?

A few facts about me; I'm Canadian, and I love books! I've been writing my own stories since I was eight and wrote my first novel at sixteen. I'm the first to admit those attempts weren't my best work, but they started me on a journey of creating stories that has led me to fulfilling my dream of becoming an author, and I'm so happy to be able to share my stories with people today.

I currently live on Canada's east coast with my kiddo and my cats. I have a shoe collecting addiction, and I enjoy taking long walks, discussions with friends, and reading anything and everything I can get my hands on.



If you're interested in connecting with me, you can do so at the following links.

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My website - www.willowdixon.com

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