



TREASURING  
*Michael*

RS McKenzie

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# Chapter 1

## Damon

“**F**ALLON! CONRAD!” I HEAR my stepfather yelling as I step inside the house. It’s not overly large, but big enough that I shouldn’t hear his shouting from the front door. I don’t walk further inside right way. I need to enjoy the last few moments I get to myself before I’m bombarded by my “family.”

I use that term loosely. These are just three men I share a home with. I have no blood ties to them. Just the love for my mother and the sense of obligation I have to her memory. I really hate being so sentimental.

Counting backwards from ten, I pull in a lungful of air. I wait for my family to realize I’m here—I only get to five. I’m hit with a cacophony of words, each man shouting different things at me.

My stepfather, James, ends up being the one to shout his demand at me first. “You need to go to the boutique and grab

our suits for the ball. They close soon, so you need to get going.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to ask what he’s done all day besides staying holed up in his office, acting important. Okay, he *is* important. As the top litigator at the biggest law firm in the state of California, he is a pretty big deal.

To everyone but me.

To me, he’s one of the men that makes my life insufferable. But a promise to my long dead mother and the fear I feel keeps me deeply rooted where I am. In the deepest pits of hell with no escape anytime soon.

With nothing else to say, I nod and drop my messenger bag beside the door. No need to put it in my room or lug it back to my car. I want to separate from the workday, even if it’s just leaving my bag behind.

I turn to leave, but my oldest stepbrother, Fallon, grabs my bicep. It would be stupid to try to shake him off. That would only earn me a bruise and a week or so of his small taunts and endless tasks. Endless tasks from Fallon are constant, but the ones he gives me when I piss him off are always hard and long.

Fallon’s fingers dig into the soft flesh of my arm, and I fight not to wince. He loves inflicting pain on me. Any sign of weakness and I’m in for a world of hurt. “You need to cook dinner. I’ve been waiting for you to get back all day. There’s beef in the fridge for you to make whatever you made the other week.” He lets me go and walks off.

I glance up at James and he gives me a smirk and leaves as well. I'm not sure if I'm supposed to get the suits now and face Fallon's wrath later or make dinner and hope James is too pleased with a full belly to give me shit. The lesser of those evils is making dinner. At least James doesn't hit me.

Last but not least, Conrad corners me. I back up to the door until I'm almost flush against it, the bun in my hair the only thing that's keeping me from pasting myself to the surface. It's times like this that I consider cutting my hair.

He cages me in with his arms and leans to my ear. I fight not to shiver in disgust, holding perfectly still so he won't get any ideas.

What he's doing is in no way sexual in nature. He's just an asshole that knows I'm disgusted with him and his family and does everything he can to make me uncomfortable.

When he has me visibly riled up, he whispers, "You fucked up my new sweater when you did the laundry the other day. There are white stains all over it. You owe me \$650 for a new one." He pushes off the door and roughly pats my shoulder, sending me into the wall beside me.

After he saunters off, I lean back against the door and close my eyes. Why is this my life? Why do all these men hate me?

I've wanted to leave for years, but the voice of my mother before she died, telling me to take care of her new favorite men always holds me back. I thought I could get away once. I thought I had a friend that could possibly help me out.



Abel had come into my life like a whirlwind, blowing through and showing me that there were people that liked me for *me*, not for who my stepfather is. In fact, Abel didn't even know who he was when we met. He treated me like a real friend and I valued that more than I could say. The day before I found out about his tragic demise, I planned to call him to ask if he could possibly let me crash with him and his boyfriend for a bit. I had finally gotten up the courage to pack some things to leave, going somewhere even James couldn't get to me—into the home of the biggest drug and arms dealer in California.

Probably not the smartest move, but it would have given me time to get out of the clutches of James—to get stronger so I wouldn't come back—even though there is nothing keeping me here but fear. Abel would have been able to help me untangle everything and stay away from a place I wasn't wanted.

But I chickened out that night, saying I would call him the next morning when I was thinking clearly, when I had some time to sit on it and decide if it was the right move.

Even if I had texted Abel the night I wanted to leave, it would have been too late. The next morning, the identity of the bodies found in a warehouse that had exploded was released and one of them was Abel Reynolds. Along with him were his boyfriend and bodyguards, and a slew of Russian and Irish drug dealers.

After reading the article, I felt like it was a sign that this is where I belong. I'm too much of a coward to go anywhere on my own. And if I did, what would I do? Where would I go?

No, this is obviously where I belong and I'll have to make the most of it.

Shaking those depressing thoughts away, I make my way to the kitchen, pull the beef out of the fridge and get started on dinner.

While I'm cooking, my stepbrothers and James make their way to the kitchen, speaking animatedly about a charity ball. Fallon's voice booms out, making me jump when he walks behind me to get to the refrigerator. "There's supposed to be some guy there that has his foot in the door for senator. Didn't your boss tell you he would throw support your way?" he asks his father.

James sounds smug and I have to clamp my muscles down so I don't cringe. He sounds so slimy when he talks like this. "Yeah, well, I think I have that figured out. Let's just say, after the ball, he won't be an issue."

Conrad speaks up. "What do you mean? Is he dropping out of the race?"

James laughs and pushes past me, using a fork to taste the shaved beef I have cooking for the steak quesadillas. "No," he says to Conrad, then turns his ire on me. "Hurry this up. The store closes in an hour and I want our shit tonight." He tosses the fork on the counter—even though the sink is right beside it—and walks back to the kitchen island. "I'll tell you more

after the ball. For now, just know that soon, your dad will be a senator of this great state.”

The brothers whoop and laugh, and I shake my head. He has to be voted in and he’s doing nothing that resembles a campaign. I wonder what his plan is.

I don’t know what comes over me, what compels me to ask, but I do. “Can I go?”

It’s like the needle on the record stops. They all stop talking and I feel three sets of eyes on the back of my head. The silence lasts a while and I move around the kitchen, gathering the rest of the supplies so I can make their dinner, all while keeping my eyes averted.

Then James laughs. Long and hard, and eventually, Fallon and Conrad join in. My shoulders slump and tears prick my eyes, even though I knew he would say no. Why wouldn’t he? They don’t like me in private, so why would they pretend we’re one big happy family in public?

I successfully blink back the tears when James says, “The invitation is for family only. You are not my family. You’re lucky to still have a roof over your head and that job at Velli Corp. If you keep pushing my buttons, you’ll have neither. Stop asking dumb fucking questions and appreciate that you have somewhere to stay while I make my senatorial bid.” He dismisses me with a tsk and I nod, even though I don’t think he’s looking at me anymore.

Dinner is ready a few minutes later and I rush out the door, hoping traffic doesn’t hold me up from the high-end boutique

they got their suits from. Luck is smiling down on me, because I get there ten minutes before it closes. The manager chides me, telling me I'm cutting it close. I hunch my shoulders and I nod, embarrassment for being chided washing over me..

Handing over James's ticket, I keep my eyes lowered, hoping to be out of here soon so I can get home and lie down to shake this dark mood.

"Here you are," the manager says, opening the garment bags for me to see the suits. I'm not sure what I'm looking at, so I nod, hoping that's sufficient. "You're all paid up. Do come back, Mr. Cambridge." I wince, hating that name. I still have my mother's name, thankful she didn't ask me to change it after she and James got married. Gathering up the suits, I thank the manager quietly and head for the door.

I'm about to leave the store when I see a suit by the window, with a tag that says, "fifteen percent off, sold as is." My feet move on their own accord, and I stand before it, lightly brushing my fingers over the lapel.

"Nice cut, right?" I hear behind me, and I jump a foot off the ground, whirling around quickly. A brown skinned man with a low-cut fade and pretty smile holds his hands up. "Sorry, my man. I thought you heard me."

"It's okay," I mumble, taking a step around him to leave the store.

"Hey," he yells before I can push the door open. He closes the distance between us, looking over my body with a practiced eye. "That suit looks like it would fit you perfectly.

With your thin frame and longer legs, I think it would look really good on you. Do you need a suit for any reason?" He steps closer and lowers his voice. "I can get the commission off that if I can get rid of it. We need to make room for new stock."

Glancing around him, I eye the suit again. It's a nice, slim fit dark blue jacket with black lapels and black pants to match. There's a corresponding double-breasted vest that looks like it would be a great addition, even though I've never worn a vest and don't know shit about fashion. It's a really nice suit, but is it ball worthy?

Wait, why am I thinking about the ball? James already said I couldn't go. I shouldn't even have thoughts of the ball in my head, or I'll hurt my own feelings.

I know I should tell him a suit would be wasted on me, but instead, I nod. The smile spreads across his face and he reaches out to me. I flinch and he immediately drops his hand, but his smile remains. "Great! You got an event coming up? You know, this would be perfect for that function they have coming up at city hall. More and more people are getting away from the penguin suits and wearing bolder colors, even though the black and white is a classic."

My head whips in his direction. Is this a sign? The city hall event he's talking about is the ball James is invited to, with his family. "Oh," is all I say.

The salesman—Kirk is what his nametag says—carefully removes the suit from the mannequin and puts it in a new

garment bag. “I’ll throw the bag in for free, since you just got me a good commission. I’ve been trying to get someone to buy this suit for weeks. The guy we fitted for it wanted to go with another color, but only after this one was complete.” He shakes his head in irritation, I believe. I give what I think is an understanding look, but I’m not sure I pull it off. I’m not good at talking to people. The only person I hit it off with immediately was Abel, but he was a ray of sunshine. It was hard not to want to be his friend.

After Kirk has me all set up and I pay, I fly out the door, not wanting James to give me shit about being late with his, Fallon’s, and Conrad’s suits. I put mine in the trunk of my car, hoping to be able to sneak out and get it later tonight.

Before I go inside, I lean back against the seat to take a few deep breaths. I look in the rearview mirror, taking in my features and marveling like I always do about how much I look like my mother. The same brown skin that glows under the right light, same wide, dark brown eyes—though mine are usually hidden behind my glasses—and the same round cheeks. I even have her bow shaped mouth, which is pursed in a frown right now. The only thing different is our hair—my mother kept her curls cut short where I love my long and sometimes unruly tresses. I sigh, turning away from my reflection, not wanting to be reminded of my mother and how much I miss her on days like this.

When I step inside, James is on the phone, but walks over to me and snatches the hangers from my hands. “About time.”

“Traffic,” I whisper. He grunts, buying the lie since rush hour is in full swing. I missed the worst of it and arrived in good time.

“Yeah, whatever. Go clean the kitchen. You know I hate a dirty house.” He turns on his heels and breezes away, shutting himself up in his office.

From the sound of it, no one is in the living room, no sounds coming from the television. Finally alone.

I gather the plates and silverware from the island, as well as bowls from the living room and go to wash everything. James forbade me from using the dishwasher when I was thirteen. He wants everything washed by hand, so I start the dish water and clean the counter while I wait for the sink to fill.

On the counter beside the stove is the ball invitation. I lick my lips nervously and look around, not believing what I’m seeing. The fine print at the bottom says, “must show invite at the door,” but I know James can get another one. The function is being held by his boss, so he doesn’t really need it.

Am I considering taking it? Would he find out? Would he suspect me or think he just misplaced it?

I make a deal with myself. If I’m finished with the dishes and he doesn’t come back for it, I’m taking it as a sign that I’m meant to go to this ball and I’ll take it. If he comes back for it, I’ll just hope there’s an office party at Velli Corp that I can wear the suit to. And not gain weight in the meantime.

I wash dishes as slowly as possible, alternating between talking myself out of and into taking the invitation. I'm not this bold. I don't do things like buy suits just because I see them and lift invitations because they're left on the counter. This isn't me. But dammit, I need *something*. I need to not feel like my life is a trap and all I'm meant for is to stay here with my stepfamily and be miserable.

Not only do I not have the money to leave, but I'm also afraid no one will want me. After years of hearing it from James, Fallon, and Conrad, I don't think I'm worth it. That's why they let me go out to clubs to hang with the few friends I have—they know no one will be interested in me. My stepbrothers have their friends watch me to make sure if anyone hits on me, they don't stay interested.

If I could just pluck up the courage to leave, I wouldn't look back. But I can't, no matter how much I want to.

Forty-five minutes later, the kitchen is clean and the invitation is still there. Swallowing my fear, I walk over to the invitation and take it.



# Chapter 2

## Michael

I'M NOT REALLY SURE why I get these updates. It's not like I'm going to do anything with them. But they are the only thing that keeps me connected to who I used to be and who I am now. Michael Prince and Evan Gray are the same and they are different. Michael Prince was willing to put people in the ground for fucking with his family. Evan Gray will call the Royal Canadian Mounted Police to report suspicious activity at any event he does security for. They are the same person but have different mentalities.

Which makes me wonder why I'm looking at a report on the brother I left behind—my biological half-brother, as we don't share the same dad—saying there will be an attempt on his life. The intel is good, as I got it from Quin, but there's nothing I can do about it. I have to let that side of who I am go. I have to let it die.

Except I can't. My brother is good. He's not involved in the shit I had going on. He got lucky and was adopted by people

that actually gave a fuck and instilled good values in him. He's a good person. Running for senator on a great platform and wants to make lives better. I can't let that be snuffed out, right?

But I can't go back. I can't go back to California. We ran away when my chosen family was in danger. When my brother, Abel, was kidnapped and tortured for information. When another brother, Savage, had to go rescue him. I can't leave them to save a brother I don't even know.

But something won't let me say no to saving him.

Looking at the image of the man on the screen is like looking at my mother. The only thing we have in common are our gray eyes. He's my brother, there's no denying that. And someone wants him dead.

Scrubbing my hand down my face, I look over at Quin. "How did you find this?"

He shoots me a smirk and shakes his head. "If I try to explain, you wouldn't understand a word of it. Suffice it to say that even when messages are deleted and completely wiped, there's always a little that remains. I traced the little that remained and built the message to what you see. It's legit."

I have no doubts about that. Quin, my best friend, roommate, and business partner, is the best hacker I know. He has skills I can't even fathom. He's been keeping tabs on my brother for me for years. He helped me find my birth mother, who didn't even want to see me when I contacted her. Now she's dead. After being clean and sober for ten years, she got back into drugs shortly after I found her when I was twenty-eight. It's

hard not to think that my showing up had something to do with that. She overdosed a few years later. I found out about my brother, Brent, a month or two after she died. He had been searching for her as well.

I kept an eye on him from afar and was glad to see he wasn't into the shit I was. He was on the straight and narrow, had good grades and a few college degrees. Brent was too good to know me, but I watched out for him all the same.

Brent's life being threatened pulls me in two different directions. One where I stay out of sight and live my life with my chosen family and another to protecting my biological brother.

Clearing my throat, I say, "He has a kid." Quin looks over at me with a raised eyebrow. "Brent. He has a daughter. She was just born a few weeks ago. I'm technically an uncle. I don't feel like I am, but that's what biology says. And his wife seems like she's a real nice woman."

"So, when are you leaving?" Quin asks as he turns back to his computer.

I huff a laugh. My best friend knows my mind better than I do sometimes. In this, we're on the same page. If it were his brother, who he had a good relationship with before we disappeared, he would already be gone. "In a few days. The message says to take him out during some kind of ball. I'll have this man dead before he gets the chance."

I watch Quin's lip tip up and he says casually, "You should use your tie. It won't leave a trace and you won't have blood

on your hands. You could even go back and enjoy the ball if you're smart."

My friend is a sadistic fuck. Which is why we get along so well. "My tie ... that could work." I look at his handsome profile. "You think me going is a bad idea?"

He takes a long time answering. I don't rush him—Quin will answer when he's ready. Finally, he says, "You don't know your brother, but you feel responsible for him because of your shitty mother. From what I can dig up about him, he's a good guy."

Sitting back in my chair with my hands laced behind my head, I twist my chair to Quin. "What else did you get about the hit?"

"Supposed to be at a charity masquerade ball."

"Masquerade ball?" I sit up straight and shake my head. "How the hell will I find Brent there?"

"Patience, young grasshopper," Quin says as he types quickly, eyes locked on his computer screen. "Almost ..." he mutters to himself. His voice takes on a reverent quality it does when he's having a good hack. "There." He smiles that sly smile he does when he's gotten his way. "Check your email."

I open the message he sent and find a seating chart. "You had to hack the system for this?" I joke, giving him shit.

"Hey, now. Say thank you or I'll add a virus to your computer that you can't get off."

I hold my hands up in mock surrender, chuckling as I memorize the seating chart. As a benefactor, my brother will be seated at a table in the front, close to the stage, between his personal assistant and the president of the company he works for—both women—so it'll be easy to locate him.

“Who’s doing the hit?” I ask while studying the layout of the building the ball will be held in. I need to know where there are empty rooms, offices, closets and exits. I’ll have Quin disable the cameras so that I can do a recon of the area under the cover of darkness.

Quin tsks. “This guy is supposed to be good. About thirty kills under his belt, if my intel can be trusted. Name is Mamba. Has a snake tattoo on his neck. The suit may hide it, but from what I can gather, he’s pretty proud of it and won’t let it be kept secret. Since most people will have masks on, you’ll have to keep your eyes peeled.”

Rubbing my hands together, I smirk and look over at my best friend. “Let the games begin.”



Usually, when I’m at a fancy event like this, I’m paired up with Quin or Graham and I know they have my back. Here, I’m alone and have to protect my own ass. I’m at a table in the back, in a fancy suit that makes me itch and a mask that covers

everything but my mouth. I look around, making sure there's no danger and keeping an eye out for Mamba. I discreetly search the room and haven't spotted his telltale tattoo.

Getting to California is easy, as I took Savage's private jet and I'm on the manifest under Evan Gray. No one here knows who I am. We've been gone from the area for three years and from the limited intel we get from Paddy, Savage's name rarely comes up anymore. When it does, he's spoken of reverently, like he was some great savior instead of a drug and arms dealer.

I'll have to be careful while I'm here. I don't want to run the risk of any of my old colleagues or enemies recognizing me. I'll stay until I spot Mamba, kill him, and leave before anyone knows I was here. What could possibly go wrong?

Being back in the states shows me how much I don't miss it. I fell in love with Quebec, with its large population, but small-town feel. It contrasts sharply with Northern California and it's not a bad thing. I thought I would feel a sense of longing when I got back here, but I don't consider it home anymore. Everything and everyone I love is back in Quebec. The only thing here that I don't have in Canada is a man. Specifically the person I consider *my* man.

What's crazy is, in the years I've been in Canada, dating and fucking whoever I want, I haven't found anyone that I felt a connection with. I've felt a connection with someone exactly one time and it's still baffling to me, because we didn't speak a word to each other. We made eye contact once and my world

stopped. I was building up the courage to ask Abel more about him, but we started to make plans to disappear, then Abel was kidnapped, and everything went to hell in a handbasket. Being back here makes me want to track him down, but I'm not here on personal business, so I push the thought of the man that could have been the one out of my mind.

Unfortunately, I have to sit through several boring speeches. The only good thing about this event, besides seeing my blood brother in the flesh, is the gossip that's going on at the table I'm seated at. From what I can gather, Brent has been gathering support because he's running on a social justice platform. And it's not just lip service on his part. He's an advocate for his fellow man, regardless of what their position in life. He gives back to the community by not only donating money, but his time. Not for the clout or recognition, but because he wants to. He does all that without anyone knowing because his good deeds rarely hit the news cycles. I only know all this from the background check Quin ran on him.

From the gossip, some people don't like all the support he's getting. One person, James Cambridge, has tried to garner support, but his policies aren't popular, so he may not get what he needs to even put a bid in. Whatever, that's not my business. As long as the threat against Brent is dealt with, he and James can battle it out at the ballot box.

I'm half listening when I see a man walk in the door—an elaborate mask on that covers most of his face—closing it softly behind him and slinking over to an empty chair. The

lights are soft, but I catch sight of a snake tattoo on his neck before he lifts his jacket collar to cover it up.

I smirk, knowing I have Mamba in my sights. And he has Brent in his.

After the speeches have concluded, Brent is honored with a plaque for his philanthropy and I feel something unexpected settle in my chest. I was nervous the entire time I was here, wondering if I would feel some type of way that I wasn't a part of his life, but I don't. He's a great guy, but I don't think I need to meet him. I don't need to insert myself into his world. This man is a familiar stranger and I feel good about what I'm doing for him, but I don't feel the need to be a brother he knows.

After his acceptance speech, Brent sits back down for only a moment, then exits the ballroom, probably in search of the restroom. Less than twenty seconds later, Mamba stands to follow and not even five seconds after that, I'm behind them. There is a small window for me to get to Mamba, intercept his plans and eliminate him before it looks suspicious. The good thing is no one knows either of our faces. His neck tattoo might have been visible to a few other people, but they probably won't wonder where he is, since he sat at a table labeled "Press."

On light feet, I follow behind Mamba. I shoot off a quick text to Quin, giving him the timeframe of when he needs to go back and doctor the video being captured while I follow this



man. The masks hide our identities, but there's no need to take chances.

I see my opening when Mamba walks past what I know to be a conference room. Before he can make it more than a step past it, I grab him by the collar and yank him back with me through the open doorway. I push the assassin away and kick the door shut. He whirls around, snatching his mask off so I can see the fire in his eyes. His face is sharp—a beak like nose, pointy chin, and flinty eyes. He's severe looking, probably something that shocks his marks before he kills them.

Unlucky for him that I'm not a mark.

I work my tie off, smiling at him while he sizes me up. "Mamba." He starts at his moniker and my smile grows wider. "It's great to meet you. I am a little disappointed that this won't be much of a fight. I thought you would have known I was behind you just then. So sloppy." I wrap my tie loosely around my fist, waiting for him to make a move.

He doesn't immediately speak, just looks back and forth between me, the door, and my tie. Then he says, "You're a dead man." His sneer twists his face into an even harder mask.

He reaches inside his jacket and pulls out a sharp serrated knife. I huff, knowing I'll probably be sliced at least once tonight. I hate blades.

Taking two bounding steps, Mamba swipes at my throat with the serrated edge and I lean back, dodging the edge, then throw out a fist, connecting with his jaw. He shakes it off and

moves forward again, stabbing down at me quickly. I move back until I'm against the door, then when he advances again, I grip his wrist and try to disarm him. Mamba is quick, dropping the blade from that hand and catching it in the other, stabbing at my stomach. If my body was still there, he would have really fucked me up. As it is, I twist to the side, then shoulder check him, knocking him off balance.

Righting himself, Mamba hurries back over, stabbing at me. I reach up as Mamba gets a good slice across my palm. I grab his wrist and twist, succeeding in disarming him this time. Tossing him on the ground so he lands on his stomach, I straddle his back, wrapping my tie around his neck. I put my knee in his back and pull, making his back bow while I strangle him.

It takes longer than I would have liked, but eventually Mamba stops struggling, then stops moving altogether. I'm glad Quin suggested the tie—had I used my hands, it would have taken even longer. Though I could have just broken his neck. When I'm sure he's no longer among the living, I let him drop.

I remove my mask and kneel beside him. I don't know if I should leave his body here to be found by the police or have Quin set up some cleaners. I go with cleaners. I rise from my haunches and call my best friend.

“Quin,” I say conversationally when he answers.

“Tired?” he asks with a laugh in his voice.

“You fucking asshole. I should have just shot him.” I look down at my palm where it’s bleeding. The wound isn’t deep, but it stings. “This bitch had a blade on him.” Scoffing, I tuck my hand in my pocket. “I need cleaners. I can wipe up the visible blood, but I don’t know if I’ll get it all.”

“Say less. Give me the room number and I’ll have it taken care of before the event is over. Is there somewhere to hide the body, just in case?”

I look around and see a closet labeled “Maintenance” at the back of the room. Huffing, I grab the collar of Mamba’s suit and drag him over. “Hold on. Dead weight,” I tell Quin, placing my phone on a table. It takes work, but I shove Mamba in the small space and get it closed. Then I wrap my tie around the cut in my hand and wipe up all the blood I can see. The cleaners will be able to come through and get any DNA I may have left behind.

When that’s done, I scoop up the phone. “Done. I’m going to clean my bleeding hand, then head out. I think I’ve had enough of being back in the States.”

“Cool. See you soon man. The place is too quiet without you.”

“Doubtful. Red is pretty vocal, even when I don’t want to hear him being vocal.”

I hear noise in the background, then a mock angry voice saying, “I am not that loud, Michael!”

Laughing, I shake my head and say, “I didn’t mean it, Red, I promise.”

Quin laughs, then asks, “You flying back tonight or are you going to get a room and wait ‘til morning?”

“Wait ‘til morning, The pilot and flight attendant are probably asleep. I can wait a few more hours.” We hang up and I try to fix my shirt and put my mask back on. After pulling in a deep breath and letting it out quickly, I step out of the room, heading to the restroom. I look at my watch and realize I’ve been in the conference room for twenty minutes. Brent should be back at his table, safe.

I rush to the restroom to clean some of the blood from my palm. When I push through the door, I stop dead in my tracks, not believing what I’m seeing. I press my fingers into the tie, my palm smarting with pain so I know it’s not a dream. Holy fuck. I can’t believe this. What are the odds?

# Chapter 3

## Damon

**W**HY DID I WANT to come to this ball? Masks don't allow for glasses, so I had to wear my annoying contacts. I hate contacts.

Sitting in the back with the press is also not fun. All they're doing is scribbling on their notepads, since cameras weren't allowed inside. Lucky for me someone from one of the local news stations got the stomach flu—from the small bit of chatter I found out going around the table—and his seat was empty. They just assumed I was the replacement. I was able to get a pen and jot down some random things on a napkin.

Yesterday, I stopped by a party store and found a mask that would cover my face and keep me hidden from James.

Sneaking my suit in the house and getting ready for the ball was easier than I thought it would be. James likes to be ten minutes early everywhere he goes, so they left well before I started to get dressed. They made a huge mess in their bathrooms and ordered me to clean them. I finished them

quickly and when I heard them leaving, I got dressed. After watching several YouTube videos of military women putting their hair in a sock bun, I mastered it and got it done. I usually have my hair in braids or in a ponytail at the base of my neck, so I'm hoping this will throw my family off.

It seems I don't have to worry about that. They're seated at the front of the hall, facing the stage and talking amongst themselves. They don't look to be having an especially good time and the event itself is a dud. The only good thing is listening to the man that James says is running for senate, Brent Montgomery, give a powerful acceptance speech. I can almost see the back of James's neck turn red. His light brown skin gives away his anger, even when his face doesn't. A grin spreads across my face and I inwardly rejoice at his annoyance.

After about twenty minutes, my contacts start to irritate my eyes. My glasses are tucked in my jacket pocket, but I don't want to put them on, just in case James, Fallon, or Conrad happen to look around and spot me. But these damn contacts itch.

Excusing myself, I head to the restroom to try to either fix them or take them out. I'm nearsighted, so I'll be able to see well enough to get out of here, just not well enough to identify someone twenty feet in front of me.

When I step inside the restroom, I beeline to the sink and pull my mask off. Hopefully, my step family don't walk in and see me, but there's no getting to the contacts with it on. I pull

my eyelid up to see if there is something—a speck of dust or an eyelash—stuck to the surface. I don't see anything, but it's still bothering me. Washing my hands, I dry them quickly and carefully remove the contact in my right eye. I hold it up and look at it closely and feel like an idiot. It's in backwards. My optometrist told me it needs to look like a bowl, not a valley.

This contact is a valley.

Flipping it around, I try to shove it back in, but my eye is watering so much that I can't see anything. I wipe under my eye and try again. No dice. I growl in frustration and try again, but it's like my eye refuses to accept the offending object.

While I struggle, I hear the door behind me open. I tense, then glance in the mirror and see a broad-shouldered white man with arms that look like they'll burst through his suit jacket. I sigh in relief. Both my stepfather and stepbrothers are mixed race men with either light or medium brown skin. This guy is not one of them.

I do find it weird that the man is just standing there, staring at me. It makes me squirm, wondering if it's someone James sent, but that's stupid because he doesn't know I'm here. Deciding to ignore him, I try once more to put the contact in and huff an irritated breath when I can't get it in.

“Need some help?” the man behind me asks, taking a step forward. I jump violently and whirl around. His voice is insanely deep, and I didn't expect him to speak.

When I turned, I clasped the sink's edge with the hand holding the contact and now it's gone forever. “Dammit,” I

groan, finding the contact pasted to the side of the sink. I grab a paper towel and peel it off, tossing it. I have my glasses, so when I'm driving home, I'll take the other contact out. For now, I have to leave the mask on so I'm not spotted.

"Sorry," the man says, stepping back from me.

"It's okay," I mutter, surprising myself. I don't speak to people often. If I can get away with it, I nod or shake my head and try to move around them. "It was an accident."

"Yes, it was," he says, still staring at me.

We stand there in silence for a few seconds and I squirm. He's not threatening, but the staring is unnerving. I open my mouth to say excuse me, so I can get out of here and possibly head home from this boring event, but instead I ask, "Are you enjoying the ball?"

He laughs lightly and it flows over me like a cool glass of water. I close my eyes and soak up the sound.

"No," he answers smoothly. "It's more boring than I imagined. Are you?"

"No. I don't know why I wanted to come if I'm being honest. On the bright side, I learned how to do a sock bun," I say, still wondering why I'm making conversation with this man. This is so out of character for me. My palms are sweating, and I feel moisture over my lip, but I don't feel nervous about the man or the conversation. Just a little unnerved by my boldness.



The man leans to the side a little and grins when I twist my head for him to see the bun. “Looks good.” He reaches up to touch his hair that’s hanging over his shoulders. The blonde locks are wavy and they look incredibly soft. My fingers twitch with the urge to touch. “I didn’t think about doing anything to mine. A sock bun would have been nice.”

“Maybe.” Another awkward silence descends over us and I clear my throat. “You from around here?” Okay, Damon. What the hell? I know I need to leave, but I can’t seem to get my feet to move from this spot. Not with this stranger standing in front of me, staring at me so hard and assessing.

He sighs, then takes his mask off slowly. I hold my breath, wondering what I’ll see when he reveals his face. He’s handsome, that’s for sure. I knew his lips were nice and full, but the overall package with this high cheeks, gray eyes, and heavy eyebrows takes my breath away. I’ve seen him before, I know it, but I can’t figure out where. “I’m Evan.”

“I’m—”

“Damon,” he says. I start, squinting my eyes at him. His face turns red and he looks down briefly.

“How do you know my name?”

Evan doesn’t answer. He just continues to stare at me. I know him. I’m not sure how, but I do. It’s tickling the back of my mind, but I can’t place it.

“Where are you from, Evan?” He didn’t answer me when I asked the first time. Maybe if he’s from here, I can try to place

his face.

His face falls, like my question upsets him. Clearing his throat, he says, “Umm, Quebec. Canada.”

“Never been. Though I’d like to visit Niagara Falls. How is it?”

“Average. I mean ... it’s fine. It’s okay.” He blows out a breath and chuckles. “I’ve never been.” We both laugh, but his eyes meet mine again and recognition dawns on me.

I’ve seen his smiling face before. Looking down at my best friend when we graduated college years ago. A friend that’s dead. And he’s supposed to be dead too.

With a gasp, I say, “You’re Michael.”

It’s his turn to start and his eyes grow wide. “I ... uh.” He takes a step closer to me and I flinch back.

Why is he still alive? Did he kill Abel? Am I sharing space with a killer? It’s obvious he’s a liar because he just told me he was from Canada. If I ask if he killed Abel, of course he’ll tell me no, even though he obviously did. Why is he back? Why come back if you got away scot-free?

He stops in his tracks and drops the hand that was reaching out for me. “Damon, I—”

“Just let me go, please?” I whisper, hoping the plea in my voice will make him spare me and allow me to leave. I really shouldn’t have come here. I should have stayed home. That way, I wouldn’t run into Abel’s possible killer. And my heart wouldn’t be cracking in half, thinking about my dead friend

when I've all but buried that pain. My throat closes and I fight back tears as I move away.

I see hurt cross his face, but I can't think about that right now. My safety is more important than his feelings. I take two wide steps to the left, closer to the door and out of arms reach. I inch around, keeping my eyes on him. When I feel the handle of the door behind me, I fumble with it and when I have a grip, I yank it open and run out. These shoes aren't the most comfortable to run in, but I don't care. I race to the door and burst out into the open air. I glance over my shoulder, expecting to see a hand reaching to drag me back and silence me. No one is there.

When I get to my car, I start it up and peel out before I can pull my seatbelt on. It's only when I'm more than halfway home that I realize my vision is fuzzy because I only have one contact in. And I left my mask behind.

# Chapter 4

## Michael

**N**EVER IN A MILLION years would I have thought I'd run into Damon, the one man who caught my attention all those years ago. He's just as beautiful as I remember, but I wish he'd had his glasses on instead of contacts. He's gorgeous with his glasses on. I mean, I can get used to the contacts, but his glasses are ...

I shake those thoughts away. He ran out of the restroom when he recognized me. I didn't think he would realize who I was after I removed my mask and no recognition flashed in his eyes. But the look of fear was far worse.

What was he doing here? I knew he still lived in the area—as Abel still got updates on him every now and then from a private investigator—but I didn't think I would see him while I was here on a simple mission.

Why was he afraid of me? What did he think when he looked at me? Why did he have such fear in his voice when he asked if he could go? God, what do I do?

I start to leave, but something in my peripheral catches my attention. His mask. I pick it up, running it between my fingers. Does he want it back? It seems of good quality, so he may need it. Yeah, I'd better return it to him.

My excuse to see him again sounds flimsy in my own mind but I don't think too hard about it.

Slipping out of the restroom, I make my way back to the dining hall, peeking inside to see Brent talking to the woman beside him and I smile slightly. Good. He's safe. I wonder who wanted him dead. From what Quin gathered, the person who ordered the hit used bitcoin and what he called a data worm to get the request out. Unfortunately for me, Quin couldn't access more than that without compromising our systems.

I'm glad I did what I could for the man that got a better life than me. He deserves everything good.

Quickly, but without drawing attention to myself, I slip out of the building and head to my rental to drive to my hotel. I still clutch Damon's mask in my hand, but I'm careful not to bend or mar it. I'm not sure why he'll need it, but he might.

Sitting in my hotel room is lonely, so I call Quin. He can find out where Damon lives. Or should I call Abel? Where should I go from here? I decide to call Quin and hope he can help me out.

He answers with, "This better be good for you to call me this late." in a whispered voice. "My boy is sleeping, and I hate to disturb him."

“Yeah, I’m sorry. Listen ...” I stop and blow out a breath. “You remember what I said a few months back? About someone being here that I felt a connection to?”

“This won’t be quick, will it?” he asks, still whispering.

I feel like shit that I woke him. Like me, Quin only functions on a few hours a night, owed to the years we spent on twenty-four-hour duty for Savage. “Don’t worry about it, man. I’ll call \_\_\_”

“Shut up. Let me step in the hall.” I hear rustling on the other end, but in a few seconds, Quin is back on. “Okay, what’s up?”

Sighing, I run my fingers through my hair, tugging at the ends. I don’t know what to say to him. How to reveal the one secret I’ve been holding on tight to. It’s not like my friend will judge me. But it’s ridiculous. I’m a forty-year-old man. I shouldn’t be harboring these unrequited—and weird—feelings about a man in his twenties that I haven’t even spoken two words to before tonight.

“Hey,” I hear Quin call. “Talk to me. You need me to come down?”

I snap out of my haze. “Nah. I’m just ... trying to figure out how to say it. It’s ... Abel’s friend.”

“What about Abel’s friend?”

“The one I told you about. It’s Abel’s friend. Damon. The one who we saw at Abel’s graduation.”

“Damn, man,” Quin comments, and I can imagine him running his hands through his long dreadlocks, pulling them to

the side like he does when he's thinking. "Why are you telling me this?"

"I saw him tonight. At the ball."

The line is quiet for a moment, then I hear, "What? It was a masked ball. How did you know it was him?"

Letting out a long breath, I tell Quin what happened after I killed Mamba. I'm not sure what I expect, but what he says is not it. "He works at Velli Corp. Why not go see him there?"

I sputter, not really knowing what to say. "Umm ... nothing stopping me from walking through the front doors? Nothing at all?" I ask sarcastically.

Three years ago, I was a permanent fixture in that building. Quin and I guarded our boss Savage—or Joseph Benavelli the third—while he worked his noncriminal job. While it's been a while, I'm sure some of the people that worked there then are still there and know I should be dead. Quin suggesting I should go there is a little insane.

He chuckles softly in my ear—probably keeping his voice down so he doesn't wake Red. "Michael, you know that place as well as I do. You know how to get in and where the cameras are. Not much has changed in three years for a place that size. I can check the blueprints to be sure, but I'm willing to bet everything is the same."

I nod, even though he can't see me. "That may be true, but he was terrified of me, Quin. You should have seen his face." I don't think I'll forget the look on his face for the rest of my

life. His fear was palpable. I loved seeing that look on the faces of my enemies, but not Damon. Not with his wide eyes and sweet face contorted with terror and apprehension.

Quin is quiet for a while and I soak up the silence, hoping he has a plan. Hoping he has something that will help, even just a little. I just want to see him one more time. To give the mask back, to explain, to talk to him, something.

It's not like I thought of Damon every day or anything. I would feel a strange sense of longing if Abel mentioned him, or when someone I tried to be with didn't measure up to how I thought Damon would be. From what Abel says about him, the stories he tells, Damon seems like a great guy. I want to know for myself.

Finally, Quin speaks up. "Call Abel. In the morning, call Abel and ask him what to do. That's his best friend who thinks he's dead. When you talk to Abel, you can go from there."

While that's a good call, I don't want to upset Abel. I told him and Savage I was coming back to California and they begged me to be careful. Well, Abel begged. Savage merely grunted and told his tiny husband I could take care of myself. I saw the look of longing in Abel's eyes. I thought it was on account of me coming back here, but maybe it was because of Damon. Maybe he wanted to see his best friend in the flesh to know he was okay.

"Yeah," I say, sliding down on the bed to get comfortable. "I'll call him in the morning. I have Damon's mask. I'd like to return it." Quin's chuckle turns into a laugh. "What?" He



doesn't answer. Just keeps laughing until he hangs up the phone.



As soon as I wake the next morning I give Abel a call. “Michael,” he singsongs in my ear. “How’s California? When will you be back?”

“Uh ... I need to tell you something.”

A pause. “I’m going to video call you.”

Before I can say anything, my phone is buzzing in my hand. I move it from my ear and press the button to add Abel on video call. His pretty face illuminates my screen. His eyebrows are dipped and scrunched in concern. “What happened? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” I tell him, nervously, tugging on my hair for a moment. “I, uh ... I saw ... Damon last night.”

Abel’s eyes grow wide, and he puts a hand to his mouth. He shakes his head back and forth and I notice tears welling. “I’m sorry, you did what?” he asks when he moves his hand.

I go through the story with him, minus killing Mamba. While Abel knows what I used to do for Savage, I don’t think telling him I killed someone will be something he wants to hear.

When I'm finished, Abel's eyes are soft and sad. "I'm sorry he was afraid of you. If it makes you feel better, I was afraid of you when we met." I give him a dry look and he laughs. "What I'm saying is, things can change. I love you like a brother. More than *my* brother, if I'm honest." Abel's eyes take on that haunted quality they usually do when he thinks about his piece of shit brother, Cris, and what he did to him. Even though it's been years, it's still hard on him.

When he shakes himself, he looks like his usual upbeat self. He narrows his eyes, then they go wide and he gasps. "Michael, is there something you're not telling me?"

I sigh and lean back in the chair I'm sitting in. "What do you think, Abel?"

Slowly, he says, "I don't think you'd be this bent out of shape if it were anyone else. I also think you would have killed anyone else who recognized you so you could protect Savage, even though you don't work for him anymore. Which leads me to believe ... Damon means something to you. Am I close?"

"Spot-on, actually," I tell him with a strained chuckle. Why is everyone around me so perceptive? "I need to know what you want me to do. How should I handle it? Damon is your friend."

"I'm not sure, Michael. Is there any way you can talk to him? Let him know I miss him?"

"He thinks you're dead Abel. How would I tell him that?"

His eyes light up. “Oh! That could be it! He probably thinks you have something to do with me being dead. Tell him I’m not. Tell him—”

“Abel, I can’t just walk into his job and tell him you’re not dead. Because *I’m* supposed to be dead.”

He deflates. “Oh, yeah. Forgot about that. Well, if you find a way to get to him, that could be what you need to make him stop being afraid. And, I don’t know, maybe you two can ... talk?”

That would be ideal—to talk to Damon. Get to know him and have him look at me with any expression other than fear. “Maybe. I just ... I don’t know, Abel.”

Abel’s smile softens. “Do you remember when I asked if you wanted me to hook you up with him all those years ago? Why didn’t you say yes? He could have come with us.”

I bark a genuine laugh. “I wasn’t ready then, Abel. But I’m ready for something real now. If it’s with Damon, all the better. If not, I at least want to ease his mind and have him know you’re okay.”

“I wish I could see him,” Abel says wistfully. “Maybe one day. If you tell him I’m alive, maybe he’ll want to visit? I can ask Savage, but I don’t think Damon would tell our secret. I trust him.” He stops talking and is thoughtful for a moment. “Well, his stepfather and stepbrothers are assholes and will give him shit, but I think it would be okay.”

“He lives with them? At home?” I’m not sure why it’s a shock. Plenty of adults live at home with their family to save money. Rent and mortgages are insane in this state.

Abel nods. “It’s not my story to tell, but yeah. Maybe if you can talk to him, he can tell you. But man ... I wish I could have taken him with me.”

That makes me wonder more about Damon. If there’s a story, I want to know it. “Okay. I’ll try to get to him. What can I tell him that will make him believe you’re really alive?”

“Here.” He pauses for a moment, then I get a text. A picture of Abel, Savage, and Pogo pops up. A noticeably bigger Pogo. So much bigger than he was the one and only time Damon saw him. If I can get close enough to him, this will definitely convince him.

“Can’t he just call you?” I ask the obvious question.

“It might take too long to get me on the line and I like this photo of my family. Look how cute Pogo is in his little sweater.”

I groan and roll my eyes. Pogo is a spoiled English bulldog that has more clothes than I do. “Yeah, he’s adorable,” I chuckle, then sober quickly. “Thanks for this, Abel. I’m not sure what will happen, but thanks for trying.”

“You’re welcome. Please tell my friend I love him and I miss him. And if he’d like to visit, I’d love to have him. Maybe he can even move here,” he quips, winking at me.

With a roll of my eyes, I hang up and shake my head. Well, I know what I have to do to get Damon to believe me. Now how do I get him to talk to me?

# Chapter 5

## Damon

I CAN'T CONCENTRATE AT work the following Monday. All I can think about is seeing Michael at the ball. Even though his hair is longer, and his body is wider and more stacked, it was him. But how?

When I got home, I scoured the internet, checking the various articles that were posted in the weeks and months following the explosion. And in every article, the names of the deceased were mentioned. Michael Prince—though I didn't know his last name at the time—was listed as being identified by DNA and dental records.

My mind drifts back to Abel telling me Michael thought I was good looking during one of our classes. I remember my face heating and thinking Abel was being his usual crazy self. That didn't stop me from fantasizing about him. Seeing us doing things like date nights and holding hands, even just talking. I never got the courage to actually speak to him. I even stopped walking Abel to his car, too afraid that I would

make a fool of myself in front of such a handsome man. Now he's back from the dead, probably a murderer who killed the best friend I've ever had.

I swipe under my eyes quickly, getting rid of the stray tear that escaped without my permission. While I've been at work, I've held it together, even though I have to think about the name of the company and who used to own it every day. I only met Savage once, but he treated Abel so well and my best friend's face used to light up every time he spoke of him. He was absolutely smitten, and it broke my heart that they couldn't explore that love. Maybe they're together beyond the grave.

I'm saved from spiraling down the rabbit hole of thinking about Abel by an email notification on my computer. When I open it, I'm puzzled when I see that there is a meeting in conference room ten in five minutes. I'm very meticulous about keeping my calendar updated, so this is a shock. There are a few people leaving their desks, so I figure they're heading to the meeting as well.

I'm even more puzzled because of where the meeting is being held. That room is only used for VIPs and incoming hires that upper management is trying to impress. I wonder who it is they're trying to secure.

I ride the elevator up to the fourteenth floor, wondering why no other software developers have gotten on with me. A few left my section from our group of offices on the fifth floor.

Why they weren't invited to this meeting is beyond me, but that's not my concern.

I juggle the folder, notepad and tablet I have in my hands and walk purposefully to the conference room. The door is slightly ajar so I push it open the rest of the way and enter, taking a seat. The table is large, with ten chairs on both sides, as well as a chair at the head of the table. That chair is occupied, but I can't see who it is because they're facing away from the door. The pretentious high-backed chair prevents me from peering around it, but I think it's the CEO. Must be a big deal if he's down here to meet someone.

Cautiously, I say, "Umm ... there's supposed to be a meeting?" My voice cracks on the last word. I'm not used to talking to people other than my small team.

A deep voice says, "Close the door and move down here." He twists slightly and taps the table beside him. He doesn't turn for me to see his face, keeping the chair facing away.

I scurry to the door to do what he says, then gather my things to move where he told me to. I look around and wonder where everyone else is and why this meeting was even called. Checking my phone, I see that the meeting should have started already. "Sir, umm ..." I don't know what to say, so I let the sentence hang in the air.

"Stay calm," he says and I'm about to ask why I need to stay calm when the chair turns and I'm staring into the gray eyes of Michael.



With my heart in my throat, I scoot my chair back and move as quickly as I can away from him. “Don’t,” I beg, trying to move around the chair. “Please don’t kill me.”

He grabs my arm and I try to pull away from him. I open my mouth to scream, but a large hand clamps over it before I can release the sound. Not like it would have made a difference since conference room ten is basically a dead zone.

“Just listen!” he says hastily. “Relax, Damon, please!”

I look at him with tears brimming in my eyes, afraid that this is it. This is the end. I haven’t done anything. I haven’t loved, I haven’t been loved, I haven’t traveled, I haven’t done ... anything. And now this man, this man with the beautiful eyes and soft looking lips and long beautiful hair will be my end.

“Nod so I know you understand,” he says in a quiet voice. I know I have no option if I have any hope of living. I nod. “Good. I’m going to let you go and move my hand. Please don’t scream. You’ll want to hear what I have to say.”

I search his eyes, hoping to see something trustworthy in them. Hoping to see *something*. His eyes just look like ... eyes. Unreadable. But again, what choice do I have?

With no other option, I sag in his arms and stop fighting against him, nodding again. As promised, he moves his hand from my mouth and sets me in the chair I vacated. He puts me in it like I’m a child and slides it closer to the table, then takes the seat he was sitting in before.

Michael doesn't start talking right away—he simply stares at me for a moment. I fidget in my chair, wanting to get away from his scrutiny but afraid if I do, he'll kill me. Finally, he exhales and reaches into his coat. I shrink back into my chair and throw my hands up, waiting for the bullet that I'm sure isn't far behind. If I'm going to die, I don't want to see it coming.

“You don't have to be afraid of me,” his soft voice cuts through my fear. “I'm just grabbing my phone. I won't hurt you. I promise.”

“That's not something you can promise,” I whisper against my better judgement.

His hand on my arm makes me jump, but he doesn't let go. His hold isn't rough, but it is firm. “Look at this, please.” His voice takes on a soothing quality and it's almost like I have to obey. I open my eyes to see a phone shoved in my face. Moving back, I blink to bring it into focus and see a photo of Abel and Savage. I blink quickly and try to push the phone away, but Michael is strong—his arm doesn't even budge. “Look, Damon. Look closely.”

Shooting a glare his way while wiping at the tears that I've kept pent up for three years, I snatch his phone—surprising myself—and look at the picture. I reach out and drag my fingers over Abel's handsome, yet beautiful face and want to collapse into tears. Then I blink. And blink again. There's something different here. Savage looks different. He looks

good. He ... doesn't have scars. But ... when I saw him for the first and only time, scars marred the right side of his face.

I look up at Michael, eyes wide and he nods back to the phone. Glancing back down, I see a chubby dog at their feet. The dog looks exactly like I remember Pogo looking, but bigger. Much bigger. Like he aged.

My hand flies to my mouth and I hungrily look at the photo. Could this be? Is Abel still alive? How?

Shaking my head, I drop the phone to the table and cover my face, hot tears leaking from my eyes. What is going on? I'm so confused. How is Abel still alive and I'm just finding out about it? What happened?

I feel an arm slip around me and I shake it off. Michael looks hurt, but he rallies and fixes his face into a mask. I don't know why that sends a pang through my heart, but I ignore it. "What is this? Did you doctor this photo? Some ... age progression thing?" I ask.

Michael's lips tip up into a quick smile. "I don't think age progression can be used on animals, Damon."

He's right. Of course, he is. But what is the explanation? I chuckle softly to myself. Who do I think I am that I deserve an explanation? Abel and I were—are?—best friends. I don't have to be privy to everything that goes on.

My head drops and another tear falls. Abel didn't trust me enough to tell me what was going on. He didn't think I could keep his secret. He left me.

Probably reading the hurt on my face, Michael rushes to reassure. “Whatever you’re thinking, don’t. He didn’t have a choice. Abel had to make a clean break to protect us and himself. Abel wanted nothing more than to tell you he was still alive.”

“Yeah?” I ask, angrier than I’ve been in my entire life. “How hard would it have been for him to tell me he was leaving? That he was faking his death to move ... god knows where? How fucking hard would it have been for my *best friend* to tell me what was going on?!” I’m shouting by the time I’m finished telling Michael how angry and betrayed I feel, but he doesn’t shrink away. He holds firm and meets my eyes steadily.

My breath is coming out in pants. I want to say more, to yell more, but I’m out of steam. I don’t yell and I rarely curse. All this is too much, so I stand and start to gather my things.

“He was kidnapped,” Michael says when I have my things straight in my arms. “He couldn’t have told you because he didn’t know before it happened. He was kidnapped and tortured and almost killed. Abel would have told you, but he didn’t know.”

Dropping into the seat behind me, I stare at Michael, mouth agape. “Kidnapped?” I whisper. “What do you mean?”

Running a hand through his blond waves, Michael meets my eyes again. “Listen, it’s too much to tell you right now.” He looks at his watch and curses. “I have a five-minute window to get out of here before Quin turns the cameras back on.” I raise

my eyebrows, but he keeps talking, more quickly now than he was before. “I want to tell you everything, Abel wants you to know everything, but I can’t talk here. If you give me your number, I can give you a call tonight so we can meet. I’ll tell you everything, I promise. Just—” he stops talking and pushes his discarded phone closer to me. “Please.”

What do I have to lose? I need to know what happened to Abel. I have to know what became of my friend. I have to know he didn’t just up and leave me. After my mother’s death I never thought I would meet anyone who would love me just for me and then I met Abel. I have to know what happened.

Without thinking further, I enter my number into his phone. I watch Michael let out a relieved breath and I feel a kinship to him. He obviously cares a lot about Abel, something we have in common. He’s the key to getting answers, to maybe actually hearing my friend’s voice or seeing his face again.

“I can call you when you get off. Maybe—”

“No. Just ...” I run my hands over my hair, probably ruining my ponytail, and shake my head. “I’ll give you my address and I can meet you down the block. You won’t ... hurt me, right?”

His eyes take on that sad look again as he stands up and straightens his hoodie. It’s straining against his chest and his arms. I have to tell myself that this man is scary, not hot. Although, yeah, he’s actually really hot. But I’m not going there with him. I need answers, then he can go on his way.

I shake myself as he starts talking again. “I won’t hurt you. Abel would kick my ass. Besides,” he says, reaching out a hand to rub my cheek before I can move back. The touch is gentle and a shiver runs through me that I fight like hell to clamp down. “I don’t want to hurt you, Damon. I would never do that.”

His strident tone startles me a little, but I don’t say anything. I just nod and take my things. “Five minutes are almost up,” I murmur, and he curses, breezing past me.

Before he leaves, he turns to look at me, assessing me in a way that’s a little uncomfortable, but not entirely unwelcome. “You look really good, Damon.” I don’t get a chance to respond. He’s out the door and in the wind before I can get my bearings from the unexpected compliment.

# Chapter 6

## Damon

**F**OR THE REST OF the day, I'm on edge. I go back and forth on whether I made a mistake or if I'm doing the right thing by trying to figure out what happened to Abel. I'm not even sure if I'm owed an explanation. People have friends they lose touch with all the time. If what Michael says is true, Abel didn't have the chance to tell me what happened, and I don't fault him for that.

Well, I do a little. I don't have any other close friends. Abel was it. The one person I thought would be in my corner. Hell, I wanted to ask if I could possibly room with him and Savage so I could get out of my living situation.

If I hear my stepfather tell me one more time that I need to repay him for all the money he forked over for my tuition, I'll lose my mind. Every paycheck, he has his hand out, taking almost all of it—only leaving me with enough for my car payment, car insurance, gas, and groceries. Which makes up about twenty-five percent of my check. I've asked him time

and again for the loan information so I can pay it on my own, but after a particular nasty yelling session, where I was almost cowering in the corner by the time he was done, I stopped asking.

I thought I had a way out. I thought I was finally done with being in that house, even though I would have cried leaving the house my mother bought for us.

My mother only asked me for two things before she went to work as a flight attendant and died in a plane crash. She asked me to watch over the house and watch out for James, Fallon, and Conrad. I've been trying to do those things but watching out for my evil stepfamily has to be the hardest promise to keep. I keep the house clean and in order, so I'm keeping my promise there.

Leaving the house would have killed me, but I thought I was ready. Then Abel dying seemed like a sign. Like my mother was telling me she was disappointed that I wanted to abandon her husband and his kids when they probably still needed my help. Three years have passed and I'm still listening to that sign, making sure my terrible family has everything they need.

"Mr. Reed," someone says behind me, making me jump so violently, my glasses almost fall off.

I look up to see my team leader standing over me.

Pushing my glasses up, I turn my chair around to face him.  
"Yes? Sorry, yes?"



He looks at me quizzically but doesn't remark on the jump scare. "I was just saying it's rare for anyone to be here after work is over. Got a project you're working on?"

Spinning back around to my computer, I see that work let out thirty minutes ago. "Shoot," I say, grabbing my things and shutting down my computer. "No. I'm all caught up. Just lost track of time. See you in the morning." Face hot, I slide past him and head to the elevator. As I'm walking, I wonder if the cameras ever got turned back on.

Then I wonder what kind of person can shut down the cameras for an entire building without anyone knowing. Especially a building the size of Velli Corp. Then I remember that Savage used to own this building. All fourteen floors of it, so I'm sure his team knows it like the backs of their hands.

That thought scares me. Michael is dangerous. Anyone who has that much power is scary. But he said he wouldn't hurt me. For some strange reason, I believe him. Call me a fool, but I do.

I don't remember the drive home, my mind consumed with what I may learn tonight. I could learn that Abel had something to do with the explosion. Maybe he was involved in something bad.

As soon as I think that, I immediately reject it. Abel was too sweet to be a part of anything criminal on purpose. Everyone knows the Benavelli family was involved in some shady dealings, but I don't think Abel would have wanted to be involved.

What am I saying? I don't know him anymore. Did I really know him then? Again, I discount that thought. I knew Abel was involved with Joseph Benavelli the third, but he assured me he had nothing to do with that part of his life. I had no reason not to believe him.

I don't think that's changed, just because he ... moved on.

I roll my eyes to myself. Moved on sounds like he died, and I just found out he didn't.

Growling in frustration because I don't know what to think and because my mind is going in one thousand directions at once, I climb out of my car and head inside the house to relax.

My key isn't even in the door before it's thrown open and I'm face to face with Conrad. His light brown face is almost red, and his nostrils are flaring. Before I can dodge him and go to my room, he grasps my arm and pulls me inside. When the door shuts, he pushes me against it, his hands on his hips.

I try to meet his eyes, but he intimidates me too much, so I look over his shoulder at the photo that's mounted over the fireplace of our family when Mom was still alive. I take solace in that, because whatever has his panties in a twist will be over and I'll be fine.

After he's stared at me for at least a minute, he huffs and says, "Well?"

Clearing my throat, I ask, "Well what?"

"Well, where the fuck were you? It's laundry day and my fucking laundry isn't done! I have a date tonight and no clean

clothes.”

“Oh, umm ...” I rack my brain to figure out what to say that won’t get me threatened or worse.

Conrad has a terrible habit of beating me, he has ever since a few months after my mother died and he realized James didn’t care. “As long as you don’t leave anymore bruises on his face,” James told him after he gave me a black eye one night because I wouldn’t give him my couch pillow. He was hoarding all of them and I wanted one while we watched some stupid movie he forced me and Fallon to watch. Since that day, I’ve been trying to watch his fists, although he lets them fly sometimes when he gets upset about anything in his life.

“Traffic,” I blurt since that’s the most believable thing. Rush hour is dying down, but you never know when there will be an influx.

His eyes bore into me, and I force myself not to fidget. I’ve learned over the years that this family can sniff out lies. I’ve been perfecting how to work around that if I ever needed to lie. Step one? No fidgeting.

A few moments later, his scowl drops, replaced by an almost breathtaking smile. If I were anyone else, I’d think he was charming. But I know that behind that mask is evil. Conrad is a psychopath. “Oh okay. Well, I left my basket by your bedroom door. Get started on it now so I can have something to wear to the club tonight. Wanna come? Herman is manning the door again, so if you come late, he’ll let you in.”

I've also learned to never turn down Conrad's invites. Ever. If he asks me to come somewhere, he's telling me to come. "Oh, yeah. Of course. I'll be there. I'll finish up your laundry and head right over."

"Good. See you there. Have the shirt I left on the top of the basket clean in two hours, yeah?"

My stepbrother is scary. He only wants me there so he can fuck with me in front of his friends. And I'm helpless to do anything about it without fearing I'll wake up to a fist in my stomach or a boot to the ass.

I nod, but he's already walking away. I think I'm in the clear before he shouts over his shoulder, "Dad wants to see you in his office."

Clamping my eyes shut, I take a few deep breaths before I go see James. If I think Conrad is scary, James is ten times worse. Because he hides his attitude and disdain behind an impenetrable mask that I can't decipher, regardless of how much I've tried over the past seventeen years. Being called to his office is like being called to the executioner's block. It doesn't bode well.

Taking small steps, I walk to James's office and knock lightly on his door. He doesn't lift his head from the papers he's reading, just beckons me forward with two fingers. I step inside, sliding into the chair in front of his desk. He doesn't speak immediately, just lets me sit there to wonder what's going on.

James does this often. He'll leave me to wonder what he wants to say, having me walking on eggshells until he feels like he wants to speak.

I look at James and really take him in. I can see why my mom was so smitten with him. He's a handsome man, his brown skin looking like it was kissed by the sun. He's always been bald—I've never seen him with hair since I've known him—but he really pulls it off. Not many men have the head shape to be bald. James's dark brown eyes shine with emotion when he speaks, though the emotion is dependent upon who he's talking to. When it's his sons, it's pride and adoration. With my mom, it was love and happiness. With me, it's a little like loathing.

My mom and James had a whirlwind relationship, him being a baggage handler for a while during his college years—he started later than most because he was a single father—and he and mom hit it off. They only dated for three months before they got married. When mom introduced us, James seemed happy. He was excited that he had two other boys I can run and play with, he said. I was excited too. Being an only child was fine, but the thought of having brothers? I was over the moon.

Look how that turned out.

I sit there for almost ten minutes, looking around the office while James makes me wait. I'm getting antsy because I have to have that shirt washed for Conrad. I know better than to try

to rush James, but I'm not too thrilled about having a bruise somewhere.

Just as I'm trying to figure out if I should get his attention, James raises his eyes to meet mine so fast that I cringe. He scoffs and shakes his head, turning to his computer. "So, the ball last weekend."

Oh hell. Does he know? Did he see me? Did someone see me and tell James? Did Conrad or Fallon see me? Well, if Conrad saw me, he would have beat my ass, then told James I was there so James could sanction another whooping.

Clearing my throat, I ask, "What about it?" I'm thankful my voice stays steady, even though I feel sweat dripping down my back.

"There was a speech given by someone that throws a monkey wrench in my plan to start campaigning. Good speech too. People were really impressed." He turns from the computer to look at me and brushes his fingers down his goatee, then taps two fingers against his lips. "To that end, we may have to move to another district so I can get what I want. I need a seat on the senate, do you understand?"

I nod, though I don't understand. I don't know why it's so important. "Yeah, okay."

"Your mother left you this house in her will, so when you came of age, the deed transferred to your name. I can't sell it without your notarized signature."

My breath catches in my throat. My mom did what? And why am I just finding out about this? How dare he not tell me? How dare he tell me this now and not when I turned eighteen? My mother left me something and he ... didn't tell me.

I open my mouth to say no, that I'm not selling my house, that this is all my mother left for me, but he cuts me off. "Look, this place is too big for you. You need me and the boys to help you out. I'll have my lawyer draw up the papers and we'll get them signed. Next month should be enough time to have the contract drawn up, then we'll put it on the market. Should be good to stage and sell in three months." He turns back to the computer and starts typing an email.

When he realizes I haven't moved yet, he glares at me and says, "You can go."

Too stunned to speak, I do what he says, dragging my feet to my room. I see the basket by my door and numbly grab it to go to the laundry room and start the first load.

As I'm loading the washer, I think about how nonchalantly James just told me I have a house. This place is mine! Why didn't he tell me? Why wasn't there anyone to tell me before this? When I became an adult?

With the laundry loaded, I go to my room and flop on the bed. I can't figure out what to do with this information. Not right now. I have a month to figure things out, to try to stop this and keep my house. We can all stay here, or I can myself. If he wasn't being such a dick about me paying him most of

my salary for college, I could handle paying the mortgage myself.

If only he would let me pay the loan payments on my own.

Ugh! Even knowing it's my house, I don't think I'm strong enough to try to get rid of them. It would be the best thing to do, but what if they don't leave? What if they beat me? What if—

My phone vibrating in my bag is the only thing that pulls me out of my spiraling thoughts. Pulling it out, I see an unknown number, but the message lets me know who it is.

**Unknown: What time can we talk?**

My heart skips a beat, then I think about what my plans for the night are. I have to meet Conrad at the club, or I'll end up a bloody mess in my bathroom. Thinking quickly, I text him back.

**Me: Eleven thirty. Can you drop me off at the club down by the docks after we talk?**

I know it's stupid to ask. Conrad will find out that I didn't drive. But I need answers. I need to know what happened to Abel.

Before I can think better of it, I get a text back.



**Unknown: Okay. Eleven thirty it is.**

# Chapter 7

## Michael

I 'VE CHECKED MY OUTFIT in the mirror a dozen times before I realize I'm being an idiot. Damon asked me to drop him off at the club, not *join* him in the club. I'm also forty. What kind of man my age would go to a club to watch over his twenty-four-year-old crush?

Idiot me, that's who.

Even though he didn't ask, I dress nicely, just in case he does. The dress pants and shirt I have on don't look too dressy, and I wouldn't embarrass him if we were seen together.

I. Am. An. Idiot.

Huffing, I turn away from the mirror and check the time. It will take me at least twenty minutes to get to his area of town without traffic. At this time of night, there shouldn't be much.

I figure I can show him the video message Abel sent for him—since Abel said he would be asleep by the time I met up with Damon—and I can tell him what happened. From the

beginning. Abel said he would answer any questions Damon might have after he hears everything, but gave me permission to start from the beginning, from the very first time I met Abel.

That was an adventure. I chuckle, thinking back on how fearless Abel was when Quin had a gun pointed at him. Anyone else would have been pissing themselves, especially since Quin and I towered over Abel by almost a foot, but Abel never showed any fear. You have to admire someone like that.

It's eleven twenty-seven when I pull up to the corner of the block Damon lives on. He asked me to park in front of a house two doors down. He said the occupants have left the country for a few months, but not to worry about anyone seeing me parked there and thinking it suspicious. I see why. The circular driveway is hidden behind a concrete barrier that has a large tree in front of it. We'll have privacy.

When I park and cut the lights, I send Damon a text, letting him know I'm here. It takes only a minute for me to see his slight figure make his way to the passenger door. He hesitates for a moment, then opens the door and slides inside.

I inhale inaudibly, catching the scent of his body wash and a hint of cologne. He smells amazing. I want to bury my face in his neck.

Shaking myself, I turn in my seat and stare at him for a moment. He's taking deep breaths and his hands are balled into fists on his thighs. I move closer to the door, trying to give

him more space. I'm a big guy, so it's not really possible, but I try.

When the silence gets to be too much, I ask, "Do you want me to drive and we can talk or sit here and talk?"

Damon clamps his eyes shut, takes a shuddering breath, then looks over at me. "We can talk here if you don't mind. What ... uh ... what do you have to say? I mean ... is Abel okay? Is he safe?" He finally turns towards me, leaning a little over the center console.

Nodding, I pull my phone from my pocket and pull up the video Abel sent me. "He's doing great. He, Savage, and Pogo are doing good. They're thinking about adopting." His eyes grow wide, and I shake my head. "Here, let him tell you."

I hand my phone over and motion for him to press play when he just stares at it. With a shaking hand, Damon presses the play icon on the center of the screen and the sound of Abel's sweet voice fills the car.

*"Damon! Hi! Oh god, there's so much to tell you. Let me start by apologizing. I'm so so sorry. There was no way I could tell you without risking all our lives. I thought it was for the best if I made a clean break so my family would be okay. I shouldn't have. I trust you as much as I trust these guys. You would have kept my secret. Just know that it had nothing to do with me not trusting you. I just wanted to guarantee my family's safety. How are you? God, I wish I could see you. But the time zones are a pain in the ass and Savage is an old man that needs his sleep."*

Damon barks an unexpected laugh at that, and I look at his face to see tears leaking from the corner of his eye. I have to fist my hands in my lap so I don't reach over to wipe them away. The video continues with Abel on the verge of tears himself.

*“Damon, I miss you. I’ve missed you all these years. Please, call me when you have some time to wrap your mind around this revelation.”* Abel stops talking when Pogo starts barking. *“This little guy says hello. Do you remember that question you asked at graduation? About Savage having a brother that can buy you a puppy?”* Abel pauses dramatically and I wish I could disappear with what he says next. *“Michael likes puppies. Here’s my number. Call me soon. I love you.”*

Abel rattles off his number quickly before the video stops playing. Damon makes no move to hand it back. He just sits there with his eyes locked on the screen, staring at a smiling Abel with a chunky Pogo in his arms. Damon touches the screen and snuffles, nodding his head like he's decided something.

“Thank you for that.” Damon finally looks me in the eyes, and I can't look away. There's something behind his eyes, something that speaks to me on a deep level. A level I don't even understand, but I want to.

I want to know everything about Damon. I want to know why he looks so sad, why his eyes don't shine like they did the first time I saw him. Then something catches my attention. “Your glasses.”

Damon's hand goes to the bridge of his nose as if to push his glasses up, then drops his hand quickly. "Oh, yeah. I don't ... I can see without them. Everything far away is just a little blurry. So, when I have to go out, I don't wear them."

"Have to go out?" I ask, wondering at that statement.

He waves me off and asks, "Can you tell me what happened, please? I want to understand so I'm not bombarding Abel with questions when I call him."

"You're going to call?" I ask, feeling hopeful for Abel's friendship. Abel is my brother and if he can get his friend back, that would make me happy.

Damon nods slowly. "I am. I know I was pissed about it earlier today, but I get it. I think I knew deep down that he trusted me. It's just ... I'll tell Abel." I wish he trusted *me* to tell me what he's thinking, but I haven't earned his trust yet. Maybe one day. "Tell me what happened please?"

Nodding, I tell him the story from start to finish. I begin with Abel's brother breaking into Savage's house and how Quin and I interrogated him. Then Abel had shown up just as we finished setting up the security system and how Savage demanded we bring him to the office. I laugh as I tell Damon about how fearless Abel was in front of Savage, even though he was so much bigger than him.

I continue with Savage wanting to get out of guns and drug running, not sugar coating anything, so I won't run the risk of lying to him later. Tell the truth now and I won't have to worry

about keeping any lies straight. Damon's eyes grow wide, but he doesn't interrupt.

Instead of focusing on Abel and Savage's growing—and very physical—relationship, I jump to the end, where Savage knew he wanted to spend his life with Abel, taking him with us when Savage decided to leave. “We were going to just leave. There would have been no reason to pretend we didn't exist. Just fake our deaths and leave, our enemies being none the wiser. But ...”

Damon finishes the sentence. “But Abel got kidnapped.”

Sighing and pulling my lips in, I nod. “Yeah. He got kidnapped. Because of me.” I close my eyes and shake my head, trying to stop the overwhelming guilt from dragging me down.

Had I walked in that hospital with Abel, made sure he didn't sneak off, away from my protection, he would have been fine. He wouldn't have gotten beaten to within an inch of his life, his battered body black and blue for weeks.

I jump when Damon places a soft hand on my wrist. When our eyes meet, his are pleading. “What did you do? Did you ... hurt him?”

Even though I want to hold it in, I scoff. “No, Damon. I didn't hurt Abel, not now or in the future. He's my brother. I wouldn't hurt my brother. I don't know what I have to do to get you to believe me, but no. I did not hurt Abel.”

I shouldn't take my frustration out on him, but he's walking on eggshells around me, thinking I would dream of hurting Abel. I would have if Savage asked me to *before* we got to know him. That would have been my job. Now? I couldn't bring myself to lay a finger on him.

Even if I wanted to, Savage would kill me if I did.

Pulling his hand back, Damon purses his lips and nods. "I'm sorry. I just ... when I saw you alive, I thought Abel was dead. I saw him with my own eyes, so I know that's not the case. I'm sorry."

"It's okay. Just don't accuse me of hurting Abel again." Damon gives me a jerky nod. "Like I said, it was my fault because I was supposed to be protecting Abel, but he gave me the slip and went back to his apartment. His brother, Cris, betrayed him to Savage's enemies. They're the ones who kidnapped him."

Hand flying to his mouth, Damon's wide eyes are full of shock. "He told me his brother wasn't the nicest, but I didn't think— that's awful. That's something we bonded over, terrible brothers." I open my mouth to ask what he means, but he talks over me. "Tell me the rest."

From there, I tell Damon how Savage, Quin, and I had papers drawn up for us to have new identities, as well as a way for us to disappear. I tell him how we sped up the timeline so we could get Abel back and be in the wind as soon as he was free.



“It was a close thing,” I say, remembering how the Russians outnumbered us two to one, but we didn’t let them get the best of us. “But Savage was able to get him out and we blew up the warehouse. After that, we got out of there, hiding out until we could leave the country. So yeah, we had to lay low, leaving our entire life behind. That’s why Abel couldn’t contact you.”

Damon is silent for a few moments, searching my face. I’m not sure what he can see in the dark, but I don’t shy from his gaze. When he finds what he’s looking for, he nods. Then he grabs my hand, squeezing it. “You didn’t do anything wrong. It’s not your fault what happened to Abel. It’s his brother’s.”

Abel, Quin, and Savage have been trying to tell me for years that what happened to him wasn’t my fault. And for years, I’ve been brushing them off, telling them I knew that. I did know, but it didn’t make it any easier, the burden I carried was heavy. But with Damon telling me—a complete stranger, an outsider, someone that has no reason to tell me that—it means the world to me.

It’s like there was a band around my heart and it releases with Damon’s words. I feel free. I feel like I’m still a protector and I can keep someone safe. I feel ... almost whole.

“Thank you, Damon,” I say around a lump in my throat. “So, where am I taking you?”

“Juke’s Bar. It’s on—”

“I know where it is, Damon. I did use to live here.” I shoot him a wink and watch his cheeks turn red. He reaches up as if

to push his glasses higher on his nose and I think it's fucking adorable.

“Do you have any questions I can answer?” I ask as I pull out of the driveway and onto the street. The drive to the club will take about twenty minutes in the opposite direction of my hotel, so we have some time to talk.

“Umm ... yeah. Where do you guys live?”

“Quebec.”

“Canada?” he asks incredulously.

“Yes, Canada. That's where Abel and Savage chose. Quin and I just wanted to go with our family, so we went too. It's great there, honestly. We all love it.”

“I want to go to Canada one day,” Damon says wistfully. “My mother was flying to Canada when ... she died ... in a plane crash.”

Damn, that has to suck. Having a family member taken from you in an accident that horrible is rough. “I'm sorry to hear about your mom.”

He sends a small smile my way that I catch since we're sitting at a red light. “Thank you. It's been seventeen years, but it still hurts.”

“I'll take you,” I say when I drive at the green light.

“To see Abel?” he asks excitedly, and I feel my heart squeeze. I was thinking I could take him to show him around, so he could be with me, but I can see why he would ask about

Abel. That's his best friend. Doesn't stop my feelings from being a little hurt..

Pushing the sting away, I smile over at him. "Yeah, sure. Whenever you want."

"Thank you, Michael."

We spend the rest of the ride in silence. I hoped Damon would have more questions for me, but I guess he's saving them up for Abel.

Pulling into a parking lot across from the club, I turn to Damon. "You gonna be safe in there?"

He gives me a sad smile and nods. "Yeah. I'll be with my stepbrother. He'll make sure no one bothers me." I raise an eyebrow at his tone. He sounds exasperated and a little fearful. He doesn't look at me when he says it, so I'm not sure of his expression.

"Can you text me when you get home, please?" I have no right to ask, as Damon and I are not friends. Not even acquaintances. But I want to make sure he's really safe.

Damon meets my eyes and gives me another penetrating gaze. "Um ... yeah. Yes. I'll text you."

Before he gets out of the car, I grab his hand. When he turns to me with a quizzical expression, I let my eyes rake over his body. He has on a pair of fitted black jeans and an almost baggy royal blue shirt. He looks absolutely stunning to me. "You look good tonight, Damon," I mutter, running my thumb over the back of his hand.

I hear Damon's breath catch and he nods before exiting the car. I watch him hurriedly walk across the street, straight up to the bouncer and is granted entry into the club. Sighing, I put the car in drive and turn in the direction of the hotel.

Where I'll wait for Damon's text.

# Chapter 8

## Damon

**T**HE CLUB WASN'T THAT bad last night. Conrad didn't have time to give me shit because the girl he brought with him kept his attention. I think he might have wanted to impress her, because when she told him to stop making me fetch them drinks, he did and let me leave the VIP section where he was sitting. I thought I saw Michael by the emergency exit, but when I moved around the people crowding the bar, the man I thought was him was gone.

I spend most of the morning yawning, upset that Conrad made me go out with him. From an outside perspective, it would be easy to say I should have told him no, tell him I had work and couldn't go out, but Conrad isn't one you say no to. I might have gotten away with it with Fallon, but he's a sneaky son of a bitch too. Conrad probably would have called in the middle of the night to pick him up, then have me take him and his friends to a diner for a meal before we went home. Which would have taken at least three hours. So, I would have been out anyway.

God, I hate my family. I didn't use to. I thought, maybe it's because I'm not blood related. That after a few years, after they got used to me, they would see me differently. I thought, eventually, they'd love me. The last person—besides Abel—to love me unconditionally was my mother. I haven't had a decent hug, conversation, or had the feeling that someone wanted something more with me in years.

Besides Michael.

I shiver at that thought. Michael frightens me as much as he makes me a bundle of nerves. I feel ... unsettled around him. My fear is unfounded, so taking its place is interest. That frightens me even more.

Pulling my phone out, I open the video from Abel that Michael sent me shortly after I went inside the club. When I had snuck off to the bar, I watched it again. I couldn't hear the words, but seeing Abel's mouth moving, telling me he missed me, and he loved me was enough.

Now, I play it again, listening to what he says more carefully. I feel my face heat when he says Michael likes dogs. I didn't catch it the first time, but now, my mind is running away with me. God, why does Michael have to be so freaking scary?

“Reed.” I jump when I hear my name called from the other side of the office. My boss beckons me and nervously, I head to his office. I'm not sure what I did, and I think back over my projects to see what could have possibly gone wrong.

Sliding into the chair in front of his desk when he gestures to it, I cross my arms in front of my body, trying to protect

myself against whatever bad news he may be giving me. I'm not expecting what he says next.

Mr. Archer nods, like he's made a decision, then says, "Mr. Reed, I've been quite impressed with your work here. Really impressed." I squeak out a thank you, preparing myself for the inevitable *I'm sorry we have to let you go* part of this conversation. "I'd like to send you to our newest sister company. The CEO needs someone to train his employees on how we run things here. I think you're the best fit."

While I know how things work around here and I'm probably the best on my team, I don't think I'm a good fit to teach anyone anything. I barely like talking in front of people I don't know. Hell, I don't even know how I got this job. My interview was subpar at best—I was almost too nervous for words, knowing that this was the company that Savage founded. When I set the interview up, Savage was still alive, and I hoped he would put in a good word in my department.

My boss continues speaking like I'm not completely losing my mind over the possibility of training people. "If you accept, next week we can fly you to Nevada and have you there for a minimum of two weeks. We'll put you up in an apartment and pay you standard per diem for your time. Is that agreeable?"

I almost swallow my tongue. I'm already getting paid a good sum now—money I don't really see—so per diem on top of that for two weeks would be amazing.

But how do I tell James? I'm grown, but he doesn't like the idea of me going off without him, Fallon, or Conrad able to keep an eye on me. Even something as mundane as celebrating my graduation, Fallon was in the corner like a weirdo. I may not be able to get away with going.

Then I think, I'm an adult. I don't need his permission. I can tell him I'm going, pack my things for the trip, and leave. Just like that.

I'm going for it. "Yes, it's agreeable. Thank you for the opportunity."

Smiling at me, Mr. Archer slides a packet of papers my way. "This will be what you'll be teaching. Go through it, familiarize yourself with the protocols if you aren't already, and feel free to add any additional comments. Return any notes you have, and we'll update everything for the trainees there."

Agreeing, I scoop up the paperwork and start to stand when Mr. Archer holds his hand up. "Wait, we have to sign your agreement and get you down to payroll to adjust your pay. We also may need you to stay an extra week, depending on how the training is going. We'll set you up for two weeks now, then add a week when you return if necessary."

We get my paperwork finished up here, then I go down to payroll and get my pay adjusted to start in a week.

God, what did I do?





I'm shaking by the time I get home. I had so much bravado sitting at my desk, hyping myself up, and having imaginary conversations with James, all of which had me telling him I could do what the fuck I wanted, and he can't make me stay. It's obvious they were imaginary conversations because I rarely curse and I wouldn't even let a curse word pass my lips in a conversation with James, let alone be directed at him.

Usually when I get home, someone is waiting at the door to order me about, telling me what chores to do or what they want cooked for dinner, or to use as a punching bag. But no one throws the door open. When I push inside, no one is waiting for me. I wonder if anyone is even home.

As it is, the house is almost silent. I hear James talking in his office, so I inch toward it, wanting to rip the band aid off now. He'll have a week to get used to the idea of me leaving for a little while. He and the boys will just have to get along without me.

When I round to his open office door, I hesitate. What if he says no? What if he calls my boss and says I have to stay here? James is a very important lawyer, and most people know that to deny him would be like asking to fail.

But Velli Corp is a large company. No way could James take them down. Even with help, it would be hard.

That thought gives me the push I need to knock on the door. James's head snaps up and he narrows his eyes when he sees me. "What?" His voice is frosty, and I shiver at the tone.

"Can I talk to you?" I ask softly.

James dramatically lets out a breath and waves me in. Before I can sit in the chair in front of his desk, he holds his hand up and says, "This won't take long. Stand."

I halt where I am and wrap my arms around my middle. In as strong a voice as I can muster, I tell James, "My boss offered me a position as a trainer for the new acquisition starting next week. It's in Nevada."

Without looking up at me, James laughs. "You're not good enough or knowledgeable enough to be a trainer. Why you?"

The blow to my feelings is unexpected. I was sure there was nothing James could have said that could hurt after all these years.

Blinking back tears, I say, "I'm not sure. But I'm ... uh ... I'm going."

"No."

It takes effort—massive effort—to stand my ground and not scurry away to curl into a ball to cry. I have to at least try to fight for myself. "If I umm ... do this training ... I can ... get promoted faster. Team leader is ... a ... um ... pay ... pay bump."

James finally looks at me. "How much of a bump? When would you know if you are being looked at for promotion?"

I pat myself on the back for that lie as well as not letting slip I'm getting paid extra for this job.

Shrugging, I try to keep the triumph from my tone. "My next review maybe?"

James sits back in his chair, those two fingers tapping against his lips. He sits for so long, I think he'll leave me standing there forever, waiting for his verdict. Finally, he says, "Okay, I'll allow it."

My eyes nearly bug out. "Yeah?" I ask, knowing it's pitiful that I'm getting permission as a twenty-four-year-old man from my stepfather.

"Yeah. The more you're paid, the faster you can pay me back for your student loans."

It's on the tip of my tongue to ask to see the information myself, so I can figure out a better payment plan to move out, but it's not worth the fight when I just got the okay to go. "Thanks."

I turn to leave when he says, "I'll get Fallon or Conrad to accompany you. Keep an eye on you. Let your boss know."

Before I can talk myself out of it, I say, "I have to pay for my own lodging. Will you pay for an upgrade if one of the boys comes with me? I can only afford a rundown motel at the edge of town."

If there's one thing about James, he hates spending unnecessary money on things that don't make him look good. Keeping me in check doesn't make him look good. It makes

him look crazy that he has a tight leash on his adult stepson for no other reason than he likes control. He knows how much money I end up with after my paycheck, so he knows what I can afford. Conrad and Fallon are also on an allowance. If he pays for a room for them for two to three weeks, he'll also have to shell out money for their allowance to live it up while they're there.

Those two can spend money, that's for sure.

He seems to think it over, then shakes his head. "That won't do." He sighs. "Okay, I'm trusting you to not do anything stupid." Like I ever do anything stupid. "The only reason I'm not sending one of the boys with you is I don't have that kind of money to spare." If I were bold, I'd roll my eyes at that outright lie. "Don't embarrass me or I'll send them anyway."

I nod, not wanting to say anything that will make him change his mind. When he says nothing more and doesn't seem to want me in his presence, I spin on my heels and beat feet from his office.

It's not until I'm in my room that the enormity of the situation hits me. I'll be gone. Away from home. Alone.

I'm afraid.

# Chapter 9

## Michael

**A**FTER TWO DAYS, I can't take it anymore and text Damon. I haven't heard from him since the night he told me he got home from the club safely. I wanted to give him some space, since he had a lot to digest from seeing me, then the video from Abel.

When he texted me and told me he was home, instead of hounding him with how he was doing, or tell him to sleep well or some insane shit like that, I just sent him a simple goodnight text.

Besides, I didn't need to know if he was okay. I watched over him while he was in the club to make sure he was. Some douchebag kept sending him to the bar to cart back trays of drinks, but that stopped after a while and he just sat there, looking sad and dejected. I could tell he didn't want to be there. So why did he go?

It took everything in me not to go and, keep him company. Something held me back, so I sat and watched him until last

call. I thought he spotted me once when he was going to the bar, so I moved closer to the DJ booth—my ears paying the price for a few hours after leaving.

Today, I can't wait. I have to check on him. I'll be leaving tomorrow and want to see him once more before I go.

Reaching for my phone on the nightstand, I shoot off a text before I lose my nerve.

**Me: How are you?**

The three dots pop up at the bottom of the screen, then disappear, then start up again. My heart pounds, wondering if he's sending a long message or if he's wondering if he should be texting me at all. I get my answer a few minutes later and I'm glad it's the former.

**Damon: I'm good, I think. Still a little confused, but not in a bad way. I'm trying to wrap my head around the fact that my best friend is still alive and thriving. I'm also trying to figure out where you fit into all this. I'm trying to change my mind about you, mostly. You didn't hurt Abel and I know that. I have to give my mind time to catch up to that.**

My finger hovers over the keyboard, wondering what to send back, when Damon sends another message.

**Damon: How are you?**

Just those three little words make my heart soar. I know it's a standard question, one most people ask when you ask them. But to me, it says Damon cares. At least, that's what I'm telling myself.

**Me: I'm okay. I leave tomorrow. Can we have lunch before I go? We can talk more and I can answer some questions.**

The reply comes quickly and my heart leaps.

**Damon: I have lunch in an hour. Can you meet me somewhere?**

Just as soon as it leapt, my heart plummets to my stomach. I can't. I can't meet him in public here. Not when I'm supposed to be dead.

**Me: I'm sorry, Damon. I can't.**

I don't send more. I don't know what else to say. He messages me back after a few minutes.

**Damon: I'm an idiot. Where are you? I'll come to you.**

**Me: Are you sure?**

**Damon: Yes. If Abel is safe with you, I will be too. Tell me where you are.**

I shoot off the hotel name and my room number. I hope it's not too forward, thinking he'll meet me upstairs, but it's the only place where I know there aren't cameras. Velli Corp is only a few minutes away, within walking distance of the hotel.

Having already showered, I put on a pair of jeans instead of keeping on the gray sweatpants I had on. I want to be comfortable, but not too comfortable.

A little over an hour later, a soft knock sounds at my door. Pulling in a deep breath, I open it and drink in the sight of Damon. He's so pretty. It's a little hot out, so his brown skin gleams with perspiration, but it just makes him look radiant. He has his hair in two braids on either side of his head today, giving me an unobstructed view of his face. His glasses take up a lot of his face, but there's no denying how attractive he is, with or without them. His bottom lip is pulled between his teeth, and my eyes keep getting drawn to his plump mouth.

"Umm ... can I ...?" Damon gestures inside and I shake myself, then move out of the way so he can slide in.

He looks around and sees the covered dishes on the table, then turns and raises an eyebrow at me. Shrugging, I slide past him and take off the lids. "I'm afraid it's nothing fancy." The burger and fries on the dish are fine fair for me, but I had no



idea what he normally ate for lunch, so I went with an American classic.

For the first time since I've talked to him, Damon smiles widely and I find myself struck stupid. God, having that smile aimed at me is one of the best things I've experienced. It's so bright and unguarded, lighting up his face. His eyes even crinkle at the edges, like he's genuinely impressed with me.

Damon takes his messenger bag from his shoulders and puts it on the back of the chair. He palms a bottle of water and opens it, taking a few swallows. I just watch him, mesmerized that he seems so at ease around me. Maybe he finally believes that I'm not a danger to him, after all.

Wiping his mouth after drinking his water, he looks up at me with a blush. "What?"

"Nothing." I sit at the table across from him, popping a few fries into my mouth. "I'm glad you came. I didn't think I would see you before I left."

He eats a few fries and takes a bite of his burger before he says anything further. "Well, I want to apologize. I was wrong for thinking you did something violent to Abel. It was all I could think, and it was unfair." He looks me in the eyes and I'm helpless to look away. "I'm sorry, Michael. I trust Abel. He says you're a good guy, so I believe him."

Chuckling, I shake my head and eat a few more fries. "I'm good to the people I love. But I don't think I would call myself a good guy. I can't get into it now," I tell him when he opens

his mouth, probably to ask what I mean, “but I won’t hurt you. I can promise you that.”

Damon opens and closes his mouth once, then nods. “Yeah. Okay. Can I ask you about Canada?”

“Yeah, go ahead.” I push my nearly empty plate away and give him my undivided attention.

“What’s it like? I always wanted to go, but I’m afraid.”

I smile, hoping to put him at ease. “It’s amazing. It was a bit of a culture shock, but the people are friendly, the weather is nice.” I laugh when his eyes nearly pop out of his head. “I mean, it snows a lot in the winter, but I don’t know. It’s nice. There are actually four seasons there, not just hot and cold.” That pulls a sweet giggle from Damon, and it washes over me like cold water on a warm day. “I enjoy it. Wouldn’t want to live anywhere else.”

“Not even here?” he asks quietly.

“Not even here.” Tilting my head to the side, I study his face. Under his passive expression is a shadow of pain. “Why are you afraid to go to Canada?”

Damon pushes his glasses up with a shaky hand. “I told you my mom died in a plane crash on an international flight to Toronto. There was a mechanical failure or something. Everyone on board was killed, except a nine-month-old baby who was shielded by his mother.”

“God, Damon. I’m sorry. That had to be awful. How old were you?”

“Eight. I’ve been with my stepfather and stepbrothers since then.”

“That’s good,” I say in relief. “At least you’re not alone.”

For a moment, a shadow crosses Damon’s face, but he gives me a shy grin and I almost feel like I imagined it. “Yeah. At least I’m not alone. So, going back home tomorrow?”

“I am,” I say, anticipation and dread filling my gut. While I want to be back at home in my own bed, I don’t want to be done with Damon just yet. He’s just opening up to me, coming to my hotel room, smiling at me, and apologizing. Asking me questions. I want more of this.

He dips his head, then drops his eyes to his plate, using a fry to move around some of the crumbs that are left. “I’ll be going to Nevada soon for work. My boss is sending me to teach new training protocols to an acquired company they have there.”

“That’s great!” I exclaim with a grin. “You must be a great employee. And it’s a little weird to hear that the CEO is branching out to another state. I’ll have to tell Savage.” When Savage was CEO, he wanted to expand, but his other dealings prevented him from doing so without drawing attention to himself and his name.

Shrugging, Damon’s cheeks turn red under his brown skin and I am addicted to the sight. I want to see his face flushed more. I wondered if his face will flush like that if I kiss him. If I touch him. If I take his dick in my mouth and suck it so good he can’t breathe.

Shifting in my chair, I try to alleviate the erection that's starting to crop up at just the thought of his dick in my mouth. We're just getting to know each other. None of that is going to happen right now. Probably not ever since I'm going home and he's going to Nevada.

"Excited?" I ask, wanting to change the subject and get the conversation back on neutral territory.

Damon pulls in a shaky breath. "Scared." He meets my eyes and it feels like it's not something he's used to doing. His eyes dart to the left every now and then, but they always come back to mine. Then he gets a determined look on his face. "I've never been anywhere by myself. My stepbrothers are usually ... with me. It'll be the first time I'm alone. I thought it was what I wanted, but now I'm not so sure." He seems to deflate right before my eyes. "I'm a twenty-four-year-old man and I don't think I can be alone in a big city like that. I'm not brave enough."

"Oh sweetie," I say, and feel my face heat when his eyes widen. "Sorry." Clearing my throat, I reach across the table and grasp his hand. "You can do this. You *are* brave. You met up with me twice when you weren't sure if you could trust me. You are very brave. I think you can do it."

Again, he flashes that radiant smile and it punches me in the gut. He's so fucking pretty and his smile disarms me every time.

Giving my hand a squeeze, Damon says, "I guess you're right. But ... I don't know. I don't want my first time alone to

be in Nevada. Maybe if it was a smaller city here in California. And if I didn't have so much riding on it." Damon slaps a hand over his mouth, and I raise an eyebrow at him. "I'm sorry. I don't normally talk this much. This is the most I've said to anyone in a while."

"I'm glad," I say, smiling at him. "I like to hear you talk."

His eyes grow wide. "Me? Why?"

How much do I tell him? Do I tell him everything or hold some things back? I just got him here, just got him to trust me. Maybe a little. And maybe I'll have time to tell him the rest later.

"I like you." That's the short answer, but also leaves so much unsaid.

Again, that beautiful redness crosses his cheeks.

He searches my face for a while and I let him. I want him to see how much I like him.

I'm not sure what he sees, but it must be good, because he gives me a half smile. "Okay. I just ... no one really does. I only have a few friends."

"I can be your friend, Damon."

He nods, that half smile still in place. He raises his wrist to look at his watch and curses. "I have ten minutes to get back and it's almost a ten-minute walk. I have to go. Can I see you tomorrow?"

"I leave tomorrow, Damon."

His smile falls and he drops his eyes. “Yeah, I forgot. Oh, um ... okay. Well, you can ... text me?”

“Or I can come with you.”

It was a thought as soon as he said he was going to Nevada. An even more urgent thought when he said he was afraid to be there on his own. He’ll be there for two weeks, he said. Two weeks is a long time when you’re afraid of your surroundings.

A sweet, timid man like Damon would be the perfect target for someone who means him harm. He said he’s used to counting on his stepbrothers to keep him safe any other time, and if they’re not going, who will protect him?

Who better than me? I can keep him safe.

And I don’t trust anyone else to keep him safe. He’s mine. I will protect him until he thinks he’s brave enough to do it on his own. Even then, I’ll be there to make sure he’s protected.

Damon gasps, then shakes his head vigorously. “No, you can’t.”

I raise an eyebrow at him. “Why not?”

“Well ... you’re um ... going home. Don’t you have to work? Don’t you have a ... umm ... girlfriend to get back to? Someone waiting?”

Is he fishing or just being considerate of my life at home? Either way, I humor him. “No boyfriend or girlfriend at home. I also co-own the company where I work, so I can do what I want. I just need to call my business partner and let him know. But it’s fine. We have a team that can do my job.”

“What do you do?”

My smile broadens. “Security.”

A bark of laughter leaves Damon and I feel warm all over. I heard his soft giggle, but nothing so robust coming from his small body. I like it a lot.

I head over to the nightstand where I have the keys to my rental and a light hoodie. It’s eighty-five degrees outside, but I can’t be seen. “Here, let me give you a ride back to your office. You can think about it on the way. Do you ... mind meeting me out front? I have to take the stairs to avoid cameras.”

“O-okay.” Damon’s shaky hands push his glasses up and I grab and kiss the back of his hand quickly before he can drop it. I’m not really sure what compelled me since Damon is skittish. I’m not sure how he’ll receive that brief show of affection. Or it could show him how much I like him or *how* I like him.

His eyes widen and his lips part. His eyes dart to my lips then he shakes himself. “On second thought, if it’s okay, I want to walk. And think.”

A little dejected, I drop my things beside the door and nod. I won’t try to force him to let me drive him. He’ll be fine. It’s not dark out and there are plenty of cameras between the hotel and Velli Corp. I can always ask Quin to review the footage to make sure he arrived safely.

Damon turns to the door, then stops. Turning to face me, his deep, innocent eyes seem to see right through me to my emotions. He bites his bottom lip and asks, “Can I ... hug you?”

Instead of answering, I open my arms and Damon takes a step to sink into them. He wraps his arms around my waist and melts into my chest. I put my arms around him, breathing him in, not wanting to let him go.

We talked a lot in this hour. Enough to where I know that Damon is who I want. Everything about him makes me want more. His shy smiles, his sudden laughs, his faint blush. His radiant grins, his trembling hands, and his demure words. Everything about Damon speaks to me, making me want to hold him and cherish him until the end of my life. Then try like hell to do it from beyond the grave.

“You smell good,” Damon whispers against my chest. It’s not even sexual and his words have my dick thickening behind my zipper. I’m thankful I have jeans on, so it’ll be harder for him to feel my erection. Still, I move my hips back a fraction so I’m not rubbing against him.

Breathing in one more time, Damon steps back and smiles at me. I can’t help it. I rub a thumb over his cheeks, gently brushing the blush that’s still there. I feel the heat under my finger and I want to feel it under my lips. But that would be too much, too soon, so I give him a few more gentle strokes before I drop my hand. “Thank you. Think about what I said please. I can keep you safe. I promise.”



He murmurs, "I know." Stepping away from me, he reaches back and fumbles with the doorknob, but doesn't take his eyes off me. I don't mind his fumbling. I like how he doesn't seem to want to stop looking at me, just as I don't want to stop looking at him. "I'll let you know before you leave tomorrow. What time is your flight?"

"Eight a.m."

"I'll let you know by six." Before we can say more, he slips out of the door and I'm left standing there, looking where he just stood and holding the scent of his cologne in my lungs.

After a few seconds, I force myself to move. Sitting on the edge of the bed, I grab my phone and FaceTime Savage and Quin. I'm sure Abel and Red will be with them, so there's no reason to call either one of them so they can be a part of this conversation.

I need to talk to my family. Figure out what I can do if Damon decides he wants to be brave and go to Nevada alone. While I want to be there for him more than I care to say, I want him to feel like he can do things like that on his own. Damon is braver than he thinks. He just has to put himself out there.

But I want to go with him. More than anything. While I'm here, I won't be able to do more than sneak around until I head home. Then I'll wait for calls or texts from him while being on different coasts. I'd rather be out of this town, where no one knows Michael Prince or Damon Reed. Where we can be

different people if we want. Where we won't be spotted doing ... anything. We could do what we want.

“Earth to Michael,” Savage’s gruff voice says, and I snap back in to see him waving a hand in front of the camera. I almost forgot I called them. “Where did you go there?”

I shrug. “Just thinking.”

“Ooh! About Damon?” Abel’s voice drifts over and Savage cants his phone to include him.

Smiling, I say, “Yeah, thinking about Damon.”

“Who’s Damon?” Red asks. He and Quin are in the bottom square on my phone, Red in his ever-present spot on Quin’s lap.

Quickly, Abel tells Red about Damon and I see his eyes soften when he hears how Abel talks about his friend. Red really is the best person for Quin. He couldn’t have found a better boy.

Red smiles and says, “So I’ll get to meet him one day?”

“Yeah,” I answer. “He wants to come visit Abel and see Canada.”

Abel gives me a dry look. “That’s not what Red means and you know it. What were you thinking about?” He lowers his voice and I see the gleam in his eyes. “Is it not suitable for work?”

An unexpected laugh drifts from my throat. “It’s suitable, you weirdo.”

“Don’t tease him,” Savage growls and I put my hand up. “Anyway, I take it everything went well at the ball? You take care of things?”

Red and Abel know all about our pasts, but we try to keep them as separate as possible from everything. Quin took Red along a few months back when Quin went to avenge Red, but other than that, Red has nothing to do with anything.

“I did,” I answer Savage. “I want to stay, to be with Damon. He has an assignment out of town, and he’s never been away for long. Says he’s afraid. But I don’t want to force anything on him.”

Quin shifts, moving Red into a different position on his lap. “Nothing wrong with that.” I frown, making Quin add, “Unless he said no.”

“He didn’t say anything. He said he’ll let me know before my flight leaves in the morning.”

I check the time on my phone screen and see that Damon’s lunch break is over and he should have gotten back to work by now. I curse, upset with myself that I didn’t ask him to text me when he got there. Guess I’ll have to ask Quin to check those cameras after all.

“Look guys, I only called to let you know that—”

Whatever I was going to say is cut off when I get a text from Damon that has me grinning from ear to ear.

**Damon: If the offer is still on the table, I would like it if you came to Nevada with me.**

“I want to let you know I’ll be going to Nevada with Damon,” I tell them, seeing everyone but Savage give me a toothy grin. Savage still saves most of his grins for his husband. The half smile he gives me now is miles better than his old stoic expression. “I’m staying. I’ll keep you all updated. But I’m staying.”

# Chapter 10

## Damon

**T**HE NEXT FEW DAYS are spent getting ready to leave, doing extra training at work, and trying to stay out of my family's way. I succeed for the most part, only having to do small chores and cook dinner when Fallon ordered me to. I decided to make some meals and freeze them, so they would have something to eat. Knowing James, he would try to call my boss to get me back home just because they didn't want to cook for themselves. At least this way, they'll survive.

I'm putting the last of the meals in a container, labeling it with Fallon's name when he walks into the kitchen. Fallon narrows his eyes at me, and I curl in on myself, trying to make myself smaller so he won't do anything.

When he just stares, I clear my throat and ask, "Are you hungry?" I just made dinner for the night about an hour before, but my stepbrothers are big guys. They can really put it away.

"You think you're hot shit, huh?" He asks with a sneer, and I wince. I'm not sure what he's referring to, but I shake my

head. “Think you’re some big deal because you’re going out of town.” He moves around the island to stand beside me, and I lean away from him subtly. He’s not as violent as Conrad, but I wouldn’t put it past him to try to put his hands on me, just because he can.

Instead of answering, I shake my head again. Not just because I want him to leave me alone, but because I don’t understand why Mr. Archer chose me. I’ve been wracking my brain all week to try to figure it out. If it weren’t for me going down to payroll and watching them adjust my current pay to include my new per diem, I would think it was an elaborate hoax that my family set up, further crushing me when I think my work is recognized.

But no, none of that happened. Mr. Archer checked over my notes that I added and gave me his seal of approval and commended me on catching some of the things he missed. He even told me that he knew he chose the right person to do the training.

However, with Fallon talking to me like this, I’m inclined to believe that Mr. Archer is lying to me. My stepbrother knows me better than Mr. Archer. He knows that I have no reason to think I’m as good as Mr. Archer thinks I am.

“I don’t,” I murmur, turning to put his Tupperware in the freezer. “I don’t know why he chose me. My review is coming up, so—”

He cuts me off by slamming the freezer door just as I pull my hands free. I jump and huddle back to the corner, holding

still and dropping my eyes. I don't know what issue any of them have with me. I haven't done anything to them. I'm always out of the way and try to keep to myself.

I watch his feet as he walks closer to me and I flinch back, hoping I won't have to go to work tomorrow with bruises. He grabs my arm and yanks me forward. Luckily, his grip isn't too tight. "I don't give a fuck about that. You need to hurry back so you can take care of this house. What are we supposed to do while you go off doing fuck all? Starve?"

Pushing my glasses up, I draw in a deep breath and look up at him. His face is impassive, like he's not scaring the shit out of me. "I ... uh ... there's food, Fallon. I made enough for three weeks, just in case. And ... there's a cleaner—cleaning service," I correct myself. "I hired them to come twice a week."

James chooses that moment to come into the kitchen. "And who's paying for that service?"

Swallowing thickly, I gently try to pull my arm free from Fallon's grip. With a quick, hard squeeze, he lets me go. I take a few steps away, then grab the dish cloth to wipe the counters to give myself something to do. "I paid for it already. The company will ... take care of my food while I'm there. I used my grocery money. It covers two and a half weeks."

Instead of the ire I'm expecting for being presumptuous, James smirks. "See there, Fallon? He's not as stupid as he looks." They laugh and pull a beer out of the fridge. They both look at me, then back at each other and laugh again, their

mirth trailing behind them and grating on my ears and self-esteem.

Blinking back tears, I drop the cloth and go to my room. It's a waste of tears to let them bother me, but I've spent the week trying to figure out if I'm good enough and my family reminds me that I'm not. Only one more night and I'm on my own.

Well, not on my own. Michael will be with me.

I'm still surprised that I got up the nerve to invite him. Hell, I'm surprised I asked if I could hug him. An even bigger surprise? I went to his hotel room. I've never done anything like that. I wanted to talk and ask questions, but I also wanted to get to know him. There's something about him that makes me want ... more. More of him, more of our conversations, more of him looking at me like he wants to eat me alive.

Laying back on my bed, I adjust my dick behind the zipper of my fitted jeans. Growling in frustration, I sit up and pull my pants off, having a bit of an issue because of the massive erection I have thinking about how Michael looks at me. I don't miss it whenever his eyes land on me. It's hard to believe that someone is looking at me like that when no one else has.

Tossing my pants in my hamper, I glare at them in annoyance. I'm not sure why I keep buying them loosely fitted, knowing I don't feel like myself in those clothes. I feel like a fraud, someone pretending to be this caricature of what's expected of me. That deflates my cock.

What I wouldn't give to dress the way I want. To do the things I want. To be who I see myself as—a young, queer man,



exploring the world and how I fit into it. I want to fit into it as the real me. But as long as I'm here with this family, I'll never know what that feels like.

The one time I tried, with a pair of leggings a few years back, I was teased and laughed at by my family so badly, I burned them in the backyard, the heat from the fire drying my tears. When I used to see Abel wearing the things he wanted—crop tops, leggings, tight jeans, make up—with no regard to what anyone else thought, I was always jealous. Not of him, but of his carefree attitude. I want that.

Maybe in Nevada ...

No, that would just be a waste of time. I wouldn't want to seem like I was playing dress-up while I was supposed to be working. Although ...

Would it be dress-up? I'm playing dress-up *now*. Wearing clothes that make me invisible. Probably why I *feel* invisible.

The text alert from my phone pulls me from my confusing thoughts and I scoop it up, flopping back on the bed. I see a text from Abel and I smile widely.

**Abel: Hey. Michael says he's going to Nevada with you.**

Abel and I have been texting back and forth for the past few days, and it's like we never lost time together at all. Our friendship picks up where it left off and I'm glad for that.

He asked if he could FaceTime me, but after hearing everything they went through and trying to keep their false demise a secret, I'd rather wait until I get to Nevada to talk to him, knowing no one there will think Abel on my phone screen is suspicious. He understands and is more than happy to wait a few days.

**Me: He is. I'm glad. I don't know if I would be comfortable going alone.**

**Abel: I can imagine. You plan to see the sights? You could drive to the Grand Canyon.**

**Me: Probably not. Just going to work and enjoy not being around James, Fallon, and Conrad.**

Abel knows about my shitty home life. It was something we bonded over when we started getting to know each other. Where Abel loved his brother and wanted to do anything to get his approval, I've given up on that. It would be nice, no doubt, but I know what the three of them are capable of and it's not love for me. As soon as I pay James back the money I owe him for my tuition, I want to wash my hands of them. If I didn't think he'd come after me with all his lawyer buddies in tow and sue the shit out of me, I'd leave now.

After a moment, Abel messages me back.

**Abel: Hear that! Try to do something fun. Michael will be there to protect you, so don't worry about your safety. I trust him with my life. I've never felt safer than when I was with Michael. Except with Savage, of course.**

I know the whole story behind Abel's kidnapping. He told me he still feels like shit for making Michael believe that he was going to see his brother when all he planned to do was give him the slip. That's another reason I wanted to apologize to him. Looking at him, with his big body and his intimidating face—when he's not undressing me with his eyes—the first impression anyone would get is he's a man that shouldn't be messed with. But Abel told me he always went out of his way to be good to him and wanted to give him one last chance to say goodbye to his brother.

Abel trusts him, so I do too. Michael hasn't made me feel like he wouldn't be good to me too.

**Me: We'll see. I'll call you as soon as I get the chance.**

**Abel: Looking forward to it.**

I lay my phone on my chest, unable to stop the smile stretching my face. I have my friend back.



I don't recall falling asleep. One moment I was smiling, thinking about Abel, the next, there's banging on my room door. Startled, I sit up in bed, looking around frantically. Before I can stand to answer it, Conrad opens the door wide and strides in. Seriously, I don't know why he even wasted the time to knock in the first place.

He sits on my bed and lies back, hands behind his head. I slide over to give him room, like I'm the intrusive one. He doesn't say a word, just lies there for an untold amount of time while I sit there and look at him.

Finally, he looks over at me and grins. If I didn't know him, I'd think it was friendly, but I know he's up to something. I brace myself for his crap.

I'm not disappointed. "I need clothes for the next few weeks. I have my baskets already in the laundry room. Have them done by the time I get back from the club. Washed and folded."

Keeping my groan to myself, I pick up my phone and check the time. It's almost ten thirty. I'll be up all night if I have to do his laundry. Knowing Conrad, he saved it all up just for this. If I tell him I can't because I have to wake up early, he either won't care or he'll beat me for saying no.

Luckily, we have a heavy-duty front load washing machine and dryer.

Brushing the hair that escaped my ponytail out of my face—I took my braids out so I could redo them before my flight—I rub the remaining sleep from my eyes. Looks like I won't be getting much more sleep. I'm glad training won't start until the following day.

“Okay, I got it,” I tell Conrad.

“You'd make a good wife, you know that?” He barks a laugh as he leaves my room, not bothering to shut the door.

That's what I feel like here. A 1950s housewife. Thankfully, all I have to worry about is chores and not warming someone's bed.

Figuring I'd better get started now, I swing my legs off the bed, put on some pajama pants, and head to the laundry room.

It's close to three in the morning when I'm finished. Conrad still isn't back, so I'm in the clear and don't fear him bursting in my room to wake me up. I left his clean clothes in his room, folded like he requested and put a note on his door. I'm gambling with how he'll take the note, but I hope he'll be so blitzed he won't be able to come in my room to start shit.

I pick up my phone to set my alarm for a few hours from now, when I see I have a message from Michael waiting for me. Even though I'm dog tired, I can't help but smile.

**Michael: I'm really excited about taking the trip with you tomorrow. It can be fun if you want it to be.**

Without thinking about the time, I shoot him a message back.

**Me: We can have fun.**

My phone buzzes in my hand only a few seconds after I hit send.

**Michael: Why are you awake?**

I skip telling him the whole truth. I give him a bit of it so it can at least give me an excuse, but my gut clenches at even that small lie.

**Me: I had to do some laundry. You?**

**Michael: I don't sleep much. Are you going to bed soon?**

**Me: I'm not sure. I'm tired, but I'm full of energy because of tomorrow. My flight leaves at ten, so I have to be up in a few hours.**

**Michael: Wanna fly with me?**

Fly with him? Huh? Before I can ask what he means, I get another message.

**Michael: Is your bedroom the last room on the left?**

I scrunch my face at the phone but answer anyway.

**Me: Yes. Why?**

I don't get a message back. There are no little dots that pop up at the bottom or any indication that he saw my message at all. It is three in the morning, so maybe he passed out in the middle of our conversation. Oh, well.

Plugging my phone into the charger, I head to the bathroom to do my hair. Might as well get it out of the way and put a bonnet on to protect my hairstyle. I can always redo it when I get settled in the apartment the company has for me.

I have one braid done and am detangling my hair on the other side when I hear a tapping noise. I go to the bedroom door, thinking it's Conrad asking about his laundry. Sighing, I pull the door open to find the hallway empty. I look left and right, but there's no one. Eyebrows knitted in confusion, I close the door and head back to my bathroom when I hear it again. My head snaps to the window where I see a large shadow hovering.

Slowly and quietly, I grab my phone to call 911 to report an intruder. I look down to unlock it and see a message from Michael.

**Michael: Open your window.**

“What the hell?” I mutter and cautiously walk to the window. I peek out of my blinds and see a handsome man with gray eyes staring back at me. Unbidden, a smile breaks across my face and I pull up my blinds and push the window up, popping out the screen.

“Step back,” he whispers, and I do, watching him climb inside. He’s so big, I almost think he’ll get stuck, but he makes it look effortless. When he has both feet planted on the floor, he looks at me with a grin. Still whispering, he says, “I didn’t think your stepfather would appreciate me knocking this late.”

Shaking my head, I move around him to close and lock the window, then pull him into the bathroom. Shutting the door, I lean against it and just stare at him. He eases onto the bathroom counter and looks around. When his eyes land back on me, he raises an eyebrow.

Taking a breath that sounds rough to even my ears, I ask, “What are you doing here, Michael?”

Looking handsome and carefree, his lips curve up and he answers simply with, “I wanted to see you.”

Just those simple words make my head spin and my belly flutter. I don’t think anyone has told me they wanted to see me



just because before. And certainly, no one has gone out of their way to come see me in the middle of the night. In this era of technology, he could have FaceTimed me. But he chose to come to my window—a little creepily—to sneak in to see me.

The feeling in my belly spurs me on and I muster all the bravery and strength I have. I make my way over to him, standing between his legs. Placing my trembling hands on his thighs, I feel them tense under my touch. On a whisper, I say, “I’m going to kiss you now.”

“Please,” he murmurs back, and I stand on tiptoe to touch my lips to his.

My first kiss and it’s as good as I hoped it would be. It’s slow, tender, and soft. It’s lovely. It’s everything.

Michael’s hands glide around my back and he pulls me close as he slides off the counter. Without breaking the kiss, he spins me around, lifting me onto the counter, his big body sliding between my legs. I whimper against his lips, wrapping my hands around him to feel the hard muscles of his back.

Tilting my head up, Michael digs his fingers into the loose hair at the nape of my neck then licks his way into my mouth. A startled groan leaves my lips, but I don’t let it stop me from tangling my tongue with his. Michael’s other hand squeezes my hip and I feel his hard dick against my leg. I’ve never felt one before—other than my own—and it should scare me, but I want more.

I’ve never been with a man before, even though I’ve known I’m gay since I was young. I just never wanted anyone before.

I didn't have the term to define it. I knew I wasn't asexual, and demi wasn't quite right, even though I didn't want to just sleep with anyone. Now, I know it was because I was waiting ... for him.

Michael pulls away before I do, breathing heavily. He presses his forehead against mine, still squeezing my hip.

When he catches his breath, he meets my eyes. "I didn't come here for this." He rubs his thumb over my bottom lip, then leans forward to suck it gently into his mouth. When I moan, he lets it go and gives me a quick peck. "But I'm glad I got it."

"It was ... my ... first."

Michael's eyes grow wide. "Your first kiss?" I nod. "Why?"

Shrugging and feeling a little inadequate, I remove my arms from around his back and wrap them around my middle. "I don't know."

I drop my head, wondering if something is wrong with me that I waited until I'm twenty-four to kiss someone. Most people get it out of the way in their teens. I didn't plan to wait—it sort of happened that way. Factor in that I can't really do anything on my own without my family finding out, I didn't think it was worth the headache.

"There's nothing wrong with that, Damon. I asked because I'm curious. Not because I'm judging you. I'm honored that I was your first kiss. Did you enjoy it?"

“So much,” I answer quickly. “I have nothing to compare it to, but it felt so good.” I feel my face heat and know that, even under my brown skin, the red blooms show.

With a finger under my chin, Michael tips my head up until I’m looking at him once more. “I’m glad.” He pecks me once more on the lips then tugs my arms from around myself to put them back around him. “That’s better,” he says when I run my hands up and down the muscles of his back. “Were you asleep when I knocked? Took you a while to open the window.”

“No, I was doing my hair.” I bury my face in his chest and breathe in. “God, you smell good.”

“So do you. Your scent is intoxicating.”

If my face heats anymore, it will be on fire. “Thank you.”

“Can I watch?”

“Huh?” What were we talking about?

“I take it from you only having one braid done that you have to finish the other. Can I watch?”

No one has watched me do my hair before. No one has seen me this ... naked.

“Oh ... um ... yeah. Okay. Yeah.”

Michael steps back and allows me to slide off the counter. I don’t miss the massive erection straining against his pants, which means mine won’t be flagging anytime soon.

“Your hair grew a lot in the last few years.” He reaches out but pulls his hand back. “Can I touch it? It looks soft.”

I shake it over my shoulder, and he thrusts his fingers into it, rubbing his fingers along my scalp. I moan, moving closer to him so he can rub more. “That feels amazing,” I say. I’m not sure if it’s the scalp massage or just because Michael’s hands are on me.

By the time he releases me, I’m standing against him, one hand on his chest and the other gripping his bicep. Chuckling, Michael kisses my forehead and moves me back a step. “Go on, do your hair.” When I look up at him, he groans and drags me back to him, kissing me long and deep. This kiss sets my soul on fire, and I find myself trying to climb Michael like a tree.

He snatches his mouth from mine and steps away, sitting on the closed toilet seat. With a wry grin, he says, “You’re trouble when you look at me like that. I’m going to stay over here and watch you do your hair. If I move any closer, my mouth will be all over you.”

With quivering hands, I pick up my paddle brush and finish detangling my hair. Then I start the braid, stopping every so often to add a bit of product so it’ll stay. When I’m finished and have a rubber band tied to the end, I turn to face Michael, who watched me work in silence.

“It looks really good.” He stands and moves behind me. He tugs on one of the braids and I smile at him in the mirror. He smiles back and leans forward, kissing the back of my neck. “Can you teach me?”

Surprised, I face him with a raised eyebrow. “How to do my hair?”

“Well, yeah,” he shrugs. “I’ll be with you for two weeks. Maybe I can do your braids for you.”

Grinning, I nod and kiss him quickly. This whole encounter with Michael has been a surprise. I haven’t thought about being my usual shy, reserved self. I just do what feels right, and that’s being more uninhibited when I’m with him. I like this me.

Taking his hand, I pull him out of the bathroom and lead him to my bed. I tiptoe over to the door and lock it, knowing I’ll get shit if anyone tries to burst in. I learned years ago not to lock my door. Tiptoeing back over, I sit beside Michael on the bed.

He laces his fingers through mine and whispers, “You didn’t answer my question earlier.”

“What question?” I whisper back.

“Do you want to fly with me?”

“Yes. Is it too late to get a ticket?”

He shakes his head. “You have your things packed already?”

I incline my head to the door. “Yes. I was going to pack it in my car earlier, but I got ... busy.” I don’t want to tell him that I was supposed to do it earlier, but took a nap, then started Conrad’s laundry. “I’ll do it when I’m ready to drive to the airport.”

“We can go now. Or do you need to say goodbye to your family?”

I shake my head. That’s a definite no. James even told me not to wake him before I left because he needed his rest.

Michael stands, pulling me by the hand. “Get dressed and get your things together. I’ll be at your neighbor’s house. You can sleep on the flight.”

Nodding, I stifle a yawn and reluctantly pull my hand from his. He backs away from me, pulling the blinds up, then the window. “Lock this behind me.” I do what he says when he lands on the other side, adjusts the screen and I watch him jog away on light feet.

Sighing, I walk over to my closet and take out the clothes I picked out last night. I look them over and realize I really hate them. If I didn’t think James would try to have a search party out for me, thinking I’m ducking out on paying him back for my education, I’d leave my suitcase here and start from scratch for the two weeks I’m gone.

As it is, I don’t have the money for a new wardrobe. So, I pull on the loose-fitting shirt and fitted jeans, feeling like I’m suffocating. Suffocating the real me. I’m not sure how much longer I can live like this.

When I have my hair bag and toiletries packed, I drag my suitcase to the door, stepping out into the dawn. Feeling like I’m leaving my old life behind and starting something new. Something fun. Something with Michael.

# Chapter 11

## Michael

LOOKING DOWN AT DAMON'S head on my lap, his glasses askew and light snores cropping up, it makes me happy Savage insisted on keeping the private jet, even though we don't use it often. Damon was afraid initially, saying he hasn't gotten on a plane since he was a kid. Remembering how his mother died, I told Damon we could drive instead. I wouldn't mind being in a car with him for almost nine hours.

But Damon kicked up his chin and climbed on board. He said he would have had to swallow his fear anyway if he took the flight the company bought for him. I admire his bravery.

For the first fifteen minutes, Damon's hands gripped the arm rests and he trembled when we hit turbulence. Reaching across the aisle, I held out my hand and he slapped his into it quickly. I held tight to his sweaty palm, talking to him and letting him know I was there and it would be okay. He kept his eyes on me the whole time, lip trembling, but not letting any tears fall.

When the Fasten Your Seatbelt sign was turned off, I pulled him to me, holding him until he stopped shaking and the sweat on his hands dried. We sat like that for a few minutes until Damon moved his head from my shoulder and smiled at me softly. “Sorry I fell apart like that.” His voice was so gentle, so soft that it made my heart almost crack in half.

I moved to the bench seat that is behind us and beckoned Damon to me. “You want to lay here?” I asked, patting my thigh. “We can talk. It’ll take your mind off things.”

He nodded, laying his head on my thigh. He laughed, and said, “Your muscular thighs make terrible pillows.”

Laughing, I shook my head and started asking him about his work. From there, we talked for about thirty minutes. His answers got longer and longer in coming until finally, he didn’t answer at all, and a small snore left his lips.

Looking down now, I rub a hand over his braid, careful not to ruin the beautiful work of art. Watching his delicate, thin fingers working all that thick hair was oddly mesmerizing. How he was able to tame all his hair with such ease was arousing for some reason I can’t explain. Thinking of those same fingers in my hair, pulling me closer to him while I ravaged his mouth had me studying his hands harder than I would if anyone else was braiding their hair.

I’ve seen Quin braid a few of his locs when he would forget a hair tie and I *never* thought the act was arousing. It’s just Damon.



I glance down at his body and it hits me then just how small he is. A little taller than Abel, but not by much. Where Abel is a little curvy with the bubble butt he likes to keep on display and bring attention to at *any* time, Damon is just thin. I'm sure he looks different without clothes on, but with his larger shirt and fitted jeans, I can't really tell his exact size. It doesn't matter either way. I like how he looks.

A door in front of the plane opens and the flight attendant makes his way back to us. "It's almost time for landing. The pilot will have the fasten your seatbelt sign on soon."

I thank him and he sashays back to the front of the plane. Gently, I shake Damon's shoulder and he comes awake slowly. When he looks up at me, he grins sleepily and stretches like a cat.

He sits up and slides his glasses up to rub his eyes. "Are we there yet?"

"Almost. Have to get back in our seats for landing. There will be turbulence. Do you want me to hold your hand again?"

"Yes, please."

I would never deny Damon anything.

Getting him settled in his seat, I buckle his seatbelt, making sure it's tightened. I get myself belted in just as the sign comes on. Damon's hand is already out, and I engulf his smaller hand in mine. It's so dainty.

"Your hands are small," I comment, squeezing gently. I'm hoping to keep his mind off the descent and whatever

turbulence might happen while we land.

He gives me the driest look I've ever seen from him, and I can't help the hearty laugh that leaves my throat. "My body is small, Michael. It would be weird if my hands *weren't* small." Then he gets cheeky and adds, "We all can't be behemoths like you."

Again, a laugh bursts from my chest. While I like my shy Damon, this one is nice too. "I'm just the right size, baby."

Damon doesn't comment on the pet name and I'm glad he let it slide. I didn't mean it, but I also did. I want to call him baby, babe, love, handsome, mine. All of it.

"If you say so. Is your dad tall? Or your mom?"

The smile drops from my face and I turn to the window, watching the ground move closer and closer. I don't tell anyone about my past. I told Savage because he was my boss and he had to know everything there was about me. Quin already knew because he was the one that vetted me and he's a whiz with background checks, getting deeper than most military organizations to find out your secrets.

No one else has stuck around long enough for me to get there. While we were with Savage, I wanted someone to get to that point, wanted to find someone that was mine. But as more and more years passed, the less likely it was to happen. Then Abel came along and gave Savage the extra push to get out of the game and take us with him.

When we settled in Canada, men and women were never hard to pick up, but there was always something missing. They weren't Damon, a man I didn't even know, but knew belonged to me.

I never had the opportunity to tell anyone about my past. Damon's guileless questions have me wanting to tell him everything. He deserves nothing less.

Dragging in a breath, I say, "I don't know. I never met my father, and my mother didn't disclose his name."

"Oh," Damon says. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean—"

"No, it's okay. You couldn't have known. And my mother was maybe your height. Not a very big woman at all. Could have been because of the drugs, but I have no way of knowing. She gave me up shortly after I was born. So, I don't know much about my family outside of that."

Damon looks sad for me, but not pitying. Thank god. I don't think I could have handled pity for something neither of us could change. "That's awful. Do you know if you have any family? Or are Abel, Savage, and Quin your family now?"

I smile at that. "Both. I have a brother. He was actually at the ball. Brent Montgomery?" Damon's eyes grow wide. "Do you know him?"

"No, but he's running for like, senator or something, right?" I nod. "My stepfather is thinking about a run."

I raise an eyebrow. "Weird coincidence."

"Yeah."

Turbulence picks up a little and Damon grips my hand tightly, his lips pressed in a thin line. To get his mind off what's going on with the plane, I talk about my family. "You forgot Red."

"Huh?" Damon asks, looking at me with knitted eyebrows.

"My family. You forgot Red. But you don't know him. He's Quin's boy. Nice guy, really tough. Quin met him a little while ago after a job and they've been pretty much inseparable ever since. He's the newest addition to our family, but he fits in well. I think you'd like him."

Damon's expression softens and he murmurs, "I would like to meet him. If I ever visit Canada."

"Baby, if I have my way, you will."

The pilot comes over the speaker to tell us we'll be landing soon and no less than two minutes later, we're bumping along the tarmac. Damon has a death grip on my hand, but I don't mind. Whatever gets him through this flight.

Shortly after, the pilot shuts down the engines and comes back to speak to me. "Enjoy your stay, Evan."

"Thanks, Floyd. I'll be here for a few weeks. I'll let you know a few days in advance when I'm due to head back to California. You can head back to Quebec."

"Appreciate that. Have a great trip." Floyd dips his head to Damon and heads back to the cockpit to do whatever it is he does.

The flight attendant bids us goodbye and opens the door and lowers the flight of stairs for us. On the tarmac, a car is waiting for us, a driver exiting and opening the door when he sees us exit the jet.

When I have our bags in the trunk and we're settled into the back, I give the driver the address and sit back, sliding a possessive arm around Damon. He lets out a long breath and snuggles into me. After a few minutes, he's asleep again. My poor baby. He got very little sleep last night, from what he told me. Luckily, the drive there will take about forty-five minutes, so he will have some uninterrupted sleep.

Slouching down in the seat, I adjust myself so he can lie more comfortably against me. Damon's arm tightens around my waist and he mumbles something before he settles and goes back to sleep. Kissing his hair, I hold him close while he sleeps.

I hate to wake Damon when we pull up at the address, but I have to. Again, I shake him lightly, but this time, he grumbles. "Ugh. I got no sleep last night. I'm exhausted, Michael." He doesn't sound whiny—just really tired.

"I know, baby. Let me get you upstairs and we can take a nap."

"You'll take one with me?" He pulls his glasses up to rub his eyes and I think he's the most adorable thing I've ever seen.

"If that's what you want."

"I take it back; your muscles do make a good pillow."

“Good,” I say before I kiss him quickly. Damon moans and melts into me. Thankfully, we’re at our destination, so I can get him upstairs and we can have some privacy.

I’m sure things won’t go further than kissing though. If I had to guess, Damon is a virgin. I doubt he had sex with someone and didn’t kiss them. He’s so innocent, I’m almost sure he’s done nothing past kissing. And his first kiss was with me.

Damon gets the key from the guy sitting behind the desk of the apartment lobby and we head upstairs to the second floor. I make sure to check all the exits and locate the stairwell before we open the apartment door. When Damon steps inside, I hold up a hand and position him beside the door. I shut and lock it then move him to stand in front of it.

He gives me a questioning look, but I shake my head. On silent feet, I make my way through the apartment, checking all the doors and windows, locking the one I find unlocked. When I’m certain it’s all clear, I walk back over to him and, on a whim, pick him up and press his back to the door.

After a shocked yelp, he laughs, wrapping his legs around my waist and his arms around my neck. “Were you doing, like, a perimeter search?”

I nuzzle into his neck, breathing in his natural scent. “Old habit.”

“I like it. Makes me feel important,” he says huskily.

Pulling back from him, I frame his face and kiss him gently. “You are important. Nothing will happen to you while I’m

around.”

I watch the blush bloom across his cheeks, and I absolutely love it.

It still hasn't sunk in that I have Damon in my arms. I think it'll take a while for me to think this isn't a dream. I feel his warm weight against me and know no dream could feel this good. After three years of waiting and fantasizing, the reality feels better than I imagined.

He wiggles in my arms and I set him on his feet. Grabbing his suitcase handle, Damon drags it into the master bedroom and sits on the bed. He runs his hand over the blanket and gazes around the room, pushing his glasses up on his nose. I lean against the door frame and watch him, taking in the wonder in his expression.

Looking over at me, he slides back until his back hits the pillow. Then he pats the bed beside him. I take off my shoes and crawl into bed with him. I raise my arm and he lays his head on my chest. Sighing, Damon throws a leg over me, then moves it quickly.

“Sorry. That was ... presumptuous.”

Reaching down, I drag his leg back over my lap. “Always presume with me, Damon. I'll never tell you no.”

“Who's Evan?” he asks randomly.

What? “Why do you ask that?”

“You told me that was your name in the restroom at the ball. Then the pilot called you Evan. Is that ... you now?”

I nod and kiss the top of his head. “Yep. We changed our names before we left. We’d already decided we didn’t want to be in California anymore, so we were getting prepared.”

“What’s Abel’s name?”

Chuckling, I pull Damon’s leg higher on me. “Noah. Ask him the story behind it. It’s ... cute.”

Damon looks up at me, scrunching his nose. “His name change is cute?”

“Yeah. You’ll see.”

He opens his mouth to say something, but a yawn escapes instead.

“Come on,” I tell him. “Let’s get you down for a nap.”

“Let me take off these jeans,” Damon says in a scornful tone that surprises me. I’m used to him sounding shy, unsure, and sometimes confident, but never this irritated tone. I wonder about it, but I decide to ask him when he’s finished with his nap.

While he takes his bag to the bathroom, I walk back to the entryway to grab mine. I put on some sleep pants and take my bag into the second room. Damon and I never discussed sharing a room and I don’t want to assume.

All changed and with my things settled, I go back to the main room just as Damon is coming out in a pair of ... shorts. Short shorts. His legs are on display, more toned and muscular than I would have thought. His shirt barely covers his torso, a



strip of skin showing as he every time he moves. I can't stop looking at him.

He glances up at me shyly, then pulls his suitcase into the room. I try not to look, but when he turns his back to slide under the blankets, my eyes drop to his ass. It's a nice, tight ass peeking from the bottom of those shorts. My eyes snap back up when he turns suddenly, having caught me ogling him. As I thought, he turns red, and pulls the blanket over his body.

“These are the only things I own like this. I wanted to be ... more me.”

“What do you mean?”

He yawns again—this one looking like it hurts his jaw with how wide it is—and pulls his glasses off. “Can we talk when we wake up? I can't keep my eyes open long enough to get into that conversation.”

Nodding, I sit beside him on the edge of the bed and rub a thumb over his cheek. “Anything you want, Damon. I'll set an alarm for you. And watch over you while you rest.”

His eyes are already drifting shut. I stand to go to the living room to keep watch—even though there's no danger here—when his slim fingers close around my wrist. “Hold me, please? I thought we were napping together.”

It seems like his words activated something in me and my eyes suddenly feel heavy. I'm also very aware of the fact that I'll be holding Damon, his body against mine, while he's

wearing the small scraps of clothes. I will my dick to not get hard when all I want him to do is get some rest. My blue balls will be fine. I can take care of myself in the shower later.

“Yeah, okay, baby.”

Damon smiles up at me, making me feel like I won a million bucks. Climbing over him, I tuck myself under the blanket, then Damon pastes himself to my chest. I reach over and grab my phone, setting an alarm for two hours. That should be enough time for us to rest and still be able to sleep tonight.

“I’m glad you’re here, Michael.” Before I can respond, I hear his light snores.

Kissing his forehead gently, I settle him better against my chest and close my eyes, sleep claiming me.



I’m awake before the alarm sounds, but I let Damon sleep. I spend the time running my hand up and down his back, looking at his braids and trying to visualize how he did them. I know it’ll be hard to learn in two weeks, but I’m excited for him to show me something new. Something that will help us bond, maybe.

The smile stretching across my face because I woke with Damon in my arms will probably be a permanent fixture. The reality is so much better than the fantasy. The warmth of his

skin against mine is comforting and puts me more at ease than I knew I needed to be.

I kiss his hair, pulling him closer until he's almost on top of me. He stirs, then blinks open his eyes slowly. His sleepy grin warms my chest and I can't help bringing him closer, kissing him. Damon moans into my mouth and opens for me without prompting. Sliding my hands down to his thighs, I pull him up my body so he can straddle my lap. There, I hold him close and kiss him slowly and thoroughly.

We've only kissed a few times, but I know I'll never get tired of it. Even though he's inexperienced, his mouth is eager, and he doesn't hesitate to follow my lead.

It's hard, but I keep my hands on his thighs, though I'm itching to squeeze the tight globes of his ass. I don't want to rush him into anything though. His first kiss was last night. I'm sure he's not ready to take things further just yet.

The blaring of my alarm has Damon jumping, breaking our kiss.

I run my hand down his face, his wide eyes endearing me to him. "Did you get enough sleep?"

"Yes. You're my favorite pillow now. That's three times I've fallen asleep on you."

"I think I like that."

Rolling off me, Damon sits up and stretches and I appreciate the way his body curves and flexes. Everything about Damon

is mesmerizing and I could watch him eating cereal and not get tired of it.

Following his lead, I sit up and stretch as well, then throw my legs over the side of the bed. “What do you want to do now?” I ask him.

“Right now, or while we’re here?” Damon asks.

I glance over my shoulder and see he’s facing away from me. I don’t like it. Spinning around on the bed, I move behind him and pull him back until he’s leaning against my chest. Damon sighs, resting his hands atop mine.

Kissing his neck, I nuzzle against him and say, “Both.”

I feel Damon tense up. “Anything cheap or free, honestly. I only have about two hundred bucks until I get paid in two weeks.”

“Why?” I ask before I can think better of it.

Velli Corp is a lucrative business. Even an entry level developer brings in high five figures a year. Even if the new CEO changed things up, the pay cut wouldn’t be so much that he would be without money when I’m sure he just got paid.

Voice trembling, Damon says, “I have to pay my stepfather back for my tuition. So, most of my money goes to that. I keep enough to make my car payment, car insurance payment, and anything else I might need.”

That’s fucked up. What kind of parent makes their kid pay them back for college? Even if a parent *did* require it, taking

most of their paycheck and leaving them with barely enough to survive? That's fucking brutal.

“Damon—”

“Don't.” He turns around in my arms and puts a hand on my face. “It's alright. I've learned to budget these past few years. I just have to adjust what I do and how I spend. It's alright.”

I don't like it, but I nod. “Okay, baby.” I kiss his hand. “If money wasn't an issue, what would you want to do?”

Damon's eyes glaze over and he tilts his head. “I would go shopping. I ... hate my clothes.”

“Then let's go shopping.”

A smile brightens his face, then drops just as fast. “I can't. The company is reimbursing me for groceries, but I'll need to hang on to my money in case of an emergency.”

Framing his face between my hands, I gaze into his eyes, hoping to impress upon him I mean what I'm saying. “We can do whatever you want to do. For these two or three weeks, it's *whatever* you want to do. Let me take care of you for a little while. Let me show you what it's like to have someone do everything for you. Let me pamper you, baby. I'll show you the fucking world if you let me. Two weeks won't be enough, but in that time, I can show you everything you want to see.”

Tears brim his eyes and a shaky smile crosses his lips. “No one has ... wanted me. Anything with me ... I don't know how to say yes. It's so much, Michael.”

“It’s not enough. Will you let me take care of you? Until we get back on that plane, can I take care of you?”

After a few moments of peering into my eyes, Damon nods and I feel my chest puff up. *Yes*. I can finally take care of him. Something I’ve wanted since the first time I saw him. I’ll make sure he doesn’t regret it.

# Chapter 12

## Michael

**W**E SHOWER IN SEPARATE bathrooms and get dressed. Damon called his point of contact for work to let her know he arrived, and they don't require him to start work until the following afternoon. We have at least twelve hours of free time to do what we want.

I can tell by the look on Damon's face that he really hates what he's wearing. He looks good to me—he always looks good to me—but I want him happy when he looks in the mirror.

I called a rideshare after my shower and it should be downstairs waiting for us by now.

When we're settled in the backseat, I ask Damon, "What do you hate about your clothes?"

"They're not me," he says in a quiet voice.

"Then why buy them?"

Sighing, he leans closer to my ear and I bend so he can whisper to me. The driver has the music up, but I don't want him to feel embarrassed. "When I was seventeen, I bought a pair of leggings. They were really cute. Black, but they had these emojis on them. I saw them and fell in love. I put them on, not thinking anyone was home and walked into the kitchen. My family was home and they ... weren't nice about it. So, I stopped trying to wear things I really wanted. I dressed like this to stay invisible."

Abel mentioned once that Damon's family weren't the best, but he didn't elaborate. I wonder what they're like. They can't be good if they make Damon want to change himself in such a drastic way.

"What's the deal with your family?" I inquire, wanting to know everything, but willing to wait until he's ready to tell me.

"Later, please."

I agree ... for now.

We arrive at the mall a few minutes later and I help Damon out of the car. "After you," I say, waving my hand dramatically so he can walk ahead of me. He smiles at me—a smile that makes my knees weak—and we walk inside.

Even though it's the middle of the workday, it's busy. People move to and fro, talking, laughing, and browsing around. Damon's small hand threads through mine and I try to stop my heart from stuttering at him taking the initiative again. Damon might be shy by nature—from what I've seen and what Abel



told me—but he’s definitely taking the lead with me and I think it’s hot as fuck. If I’m the one that can get him out of his shell, I can die a happy man.

Behind his glasses, I see Damon’s eyes widen as he looks around. We take slow steps inside, passing by the food court to get to the mall proper. “I don’t know what to buy.”

I give his hand a squeeze. “Whatever you want.” He looks up at me quickly and starts shaking his head. Putting a hand on his chin, I stop the refusal in its tracks. “You said I can take care of you. This is just the start. Whatever. You. Want.”

He pulls his bottom lip between his teeth, glancing around at all the stores. I try to keep the smile off my face when I see his eyes land on a store window with leggings on display. They have different colors and some have designs on them. When he looks back at me, I incline my head to the store and he grins, pulling me over so we can go inside and check out the display.

Once inside, Damon picks up a few pairs of leggings after he finds his size and holds them against his body. His grin stays in place as he looks at all the options. He only picks out three and I want to push him to buy them all, but I want him to do what he wants.

Just as Damon is putting a pair back to check out another, a store employee walks over. “Can I help you?” she asks, smiling at Damon.

He tenses and goes to put the leggings back, but I stay his hand. “Yeah, we’ll take these. And any others he might want.”

The store employee gives Damon an appraising look and I see it makes Damon uneasy. I think he might bolt, but she says, “I think these will be really cute on you. With your smaller frame, you can really pull them off. Here, let me show you some shirts that can go with them. You can mix and match so you’ll have more outfits.” With that, she moves to the back of the store to the shirt racks.

“You heard her,” I tease, and Damon gives me a dry look before he follows.

We leave that store with three complete outfits and the store associate showed Damon how to mix them up so all of the shirts can go with different leggings.

From there, Damon is more confident as he shops. He picks out a few pairs of tighter jeans, some with rips from the upper thigh to the knees. As we shop, he gets bolder with his choices, and I can’t erase my lingering smile. I love how he’s moving around, pulling things down and looking excited about the prospect of a bunch of new clothes that fit who he wants to be.

I’m pissed at his family for making him feel like he couldn’t be himself. Damon shouldn’t feel bad about wanting to dress more fem. There’s nothing wrong with him expressing himself through his clothes.

Now that we’re shopping and Damon knows he won’t be stuck in the clothes he hates, I can tell it’s like a weight lifted from his shoulders. His eyes are bright, and he beams at me whenever he picks up something he likes. He fidgets every

time we get to the register, but I just kiss him and tell him not to stress. I also remind him that I'm taking care of him for these two weeks so he needs to get used to it.

I see we'll have a battle when I have him in my life for good.

Banking on Damon wanting more from me after these two weeks are over is probably foolhardy, but I can't stop thinking that he's it for me. How he felt in my arms when we napped, how he seems to be more emboldened around me, how he seems to be trusting me more, that's what gives me hope. Every time he smiles at me, I realize I want to find ways to make him smile like that forever. Damon belongs with me.

He is mine.

By the time Damon has visited all the stores he wanted, we're laden with bags. Well, I'm laden with bags. I wouldn't allow Damon to carry any and he doesn't seem to mind. He's almost skipping by the time we step outside to get into the ride share I ordered.

After I have the bags packed in the trunk, I slide in beside Damon and he immediately pastes himself to me. I sigh, loving that he's way over being afraid of me.

"Thank you," he murmurs into my chest. "That was ... thank you."

"Anytime, baby."

Damon looks up at me and opens his mouth, but before he can speak, his phone rings. He pulls it out of his pocket, and I watch his face pale. He moves away from me quickly, putting

his back against the door. Raising a shaky finger to his lips, he gestures for me to be quiet. If it weren't for the frightened look on his face, I would have snatched the phone to see who the fuck has him so afraid.

Sliding his finger across the screen, Damon answers with a meek, "Hey, James."

I hear a man's strong and stern voice coming through the speakers and the idea of snatching the phone comes back over me. It's only with a lot of restraint and the pleading look from Damon that holds me in place.

*"You've been gone for less than six hours and I already see I should have sent one of the boys with you. Did you forget that I told you to check in?"*

"James, you told me not to bother you, so—"

*"I told you not to bother me when you left. But you should have told me you arrived. I swear you're so fucking worthless. Won't listen to what the fuck I tell you. Don't make me tell you again. Check in with me every day or I will send Conrad there."*

Damon winces and I ball my hands into fists on my lap, face burning with the urge to tell whoever the fuck is on the phone to go fuck themselves and no one needs to come for Damon because he's with me.

"Okay," is all Damon says, then the phone beeps, this James having hung up.

Sagging against the seat, Damon's lip trembles and he pulls his glasses up to wipe his eyes. "I'm sorry about that," he tells me in a small voice.

My blood boils with the need to fuck up whoever made him feel this way. My palm itches with the need to stab or shoot or just beat the shit out of the person that was on the other end of the phone. It takes massive effort to keep that away from Damon.

Dragging him over to me, I pull him onto my lap and Damon breaks down. I didn't expect him to cry, but he does, shoulders heaving and breathing uneven. Our driver has the good grace to only glance in the rearview mirror once before their eyes go back to the road.

By the time we get back to the apartment, Damon is mostly hiccupping and taking deep breaths. I tell Damon to go upstairs while I get the bags. He drags his feet, shoulders slumped and head down. James is a fucking dead man, I don't give a fuck if he's his family or not. No one has the right to make Damon feel like shit from one conversation.

Setting everything down inside the door, I sit on the couch and pat my lap. Damon curls up to me and tucks his head into my neck. I don't ask him anything just yet. I let him hold on to me and get himself together.

After we sit for a few minutes, I nudge him and ask, "Who was that?"

Blowing out a shuddering breath, he says, "My stepfather."

“Tell me what’s going on with your family. You’ve mentioned your family isn’t kind. How bad is it?”

Again, his bottom lip trembles and a few tears escape his eyes. He takes off his glasses and sets them on the coffee table. After he’s wiped his face and calmed himself, he starts to tell me about his family.

I’m fucking livid.

Since his mother died, Damon has been living a life of hell. Used for manual labor, talked down to, making him feel like he didn’t belong in his own home. I fucking hate it. I hate hearing it. I hate that I can’t do anything about it while I’m here. It would be too easy to call Quin and Savage and have them take care of it. I want to fucking kill them all myself for what they did to him.

“Michael?” Damon calls me when he finishes talking.

Swallowing my anger, I answer, “Yeah?”

“You’re hurting me.”

“I’m sorry,” I say, then loosen my arms from around him.

“It’s okay. I don’t tell anyone this. I told Abel, but that’s only because he told me about his brother. I don’t ... trust anyone. They wouldn’t understand.”

“Oh, baby,” I mutter, kissing his forehead. “I grew up in foster care. I understand better than you know. Do you want out? Do you need help to leave?” I stop short of asking if he wants me to put a bullet in their brains.

Damon starts to cry again, and I feel like shit, even though I don't know why he's crying. "I'm sorry. It's just ... I want to leave. I do. But I keep hearing my mother's voice, telling me to take care of her new favorite men. That's one of the last things she said to me before she left on that flight that took her life. It's like I hear her voice and I can't ignore it. It's like she wants me to stay and be there for them, even when they don't appreciate me. Whenever I get the courage to go, something happens, and I know it's because I'm supposed to stay. I want to leave, but I don't think I can."

God, I hurt for him. I didn't have the best upbringing, being in and out of foster homes and sent to a group home from thirteen to eighteen, but I learned to take care of myself. I turned my shitty younger years into anger that carried me far until my body caught up with how big my rage was. Then my fists and size helped me further.

Damon has none of that. He's so shy and gentle and sweet and innocent. He's been beat down so much that he believes what he hears. He doesn't fight back. I want to help him do that. He deserves the world, as well as to feel like he's worthy. He's more than worthy.

Tipping his chin up so he meets my eyes, I say, "If you want to leave, say the word. I'll help. I'll do everything I can for you. Just say the word."

Damon slams his eyes shut and he burrows into me again. "I ... not right now, Michael. I can barely go to another state myself. I don't think I can move out on my own. Not yet."

I grit my teeth, wanting to tell him he's being abused. That no one there will treat him as well as I can, but he doesn't need that right now. He needs to make up his mind himself. But he'll always have me. Even if I have to hide out in California until he's ready, I will.

The ringing of his phone snaps us out of our thoughts and Damon bites his lip but pulls it from his pocket. A grin lights up his face when he sees the name on the screen. This time, he stays right where he, head on my chest.

"Hey, Abel," Damon practically sings and I'm happy he's in better spirits.

"Damon! Oh my god! It's so good to see your face again!" Abel exclaims, eyes welling immediately. "I've missed you, my friend."

"I missed you too." The line is silent for a beat, then both Abel and Damon burst into tears and start trying to talk over one another. I rock Damon, rubbing his back to comfort him, even though I know these are happy tears.

They talk for about thirty minutes, their tears drying up at around the five minute mark. They both catch each other up on their lives and I tune them out while I continue to hold Damon. He doesn't make a move to climb from my lap, and I don't ask him to. I like him right where he is.

My name being used catches my attention and I turn to the phone to see Abel's cheeky grin. "Did you hear me?" he asks.

"Can't say I did," I say dryly, making Abel laugh.



“I said you two look cozy.”

Looking down at Damon, I see his cheeks are red, but his smile is wide. “Michael is my new favorite muscle pillow.”

Rolling my eyes, I pull him higher so his head is on my shoulder. “Yeah, well, I like being your muscle pillow.”

He ducks his head and peeks at Abel, who’s trying to hold his laughter in. “I won’t hold you two up. Call me later, Damon. You too, Michael. Or you two can call me together. Oh yes! Together!”

I grin at Abel’s exuberance. Damon says he will call and hangs up.

“Feeling better?” I ask.

“Much. Abel used to always make me feel better when I told him about the stuff going on at home. He’s really good at that.”

Leaning away from me, Damon stretches and slides off my lap. “I want to try these on,” he says, pointing to his bags. “I was going to in the stores, but I didn’t want other people laughing at me if I looked ridiculous.”

Sliding to the end of the cushion, I pull Damon to me, burying my face in his belly. “You could never look ridiculous. If you want to show me, I’d love a fashion show.” I waggle my eyebrows, making Damon laugh and shake his head before he pulls away from me.

Grabbing the bags, he makes his way down the hall, and I wonder if he’ll actually show me how the clothes fit or if he’s

going to change in the room and figure out if he likes them for himself.

My question is answered a few minutes later when Damon comes out with a pair of leggings on with a loose-fitting shirt that rides up a little and shows me a strip of brown flesh. I sit up on the couch and slide to the end, mouth gone dry with how fucking good he looks. This is Damon. This is the real him. I'm looking at the raw version of him, the version he wants to be. I can't say I'm disappointed.

He stands at the end of the hall, hands clasped in front of him, a nervous look on his face. I beckon and he walks over slowly. When he's standing before me, I gently unclasp his hands and lean back. I motion for him to spin around and after a second he does, giving me a nice view of his ass. It's tight and pert, perfectly matching his body and looking delicious in these pants.

When he's facing me again, he has a small smirk on his lips. "Well?"

"If I tell you what I'm thinking, you'll think I'm a pervert."

The bark of laughter he releases warms me and I take a risk. Reaching around, I pat him on the ass, and he yelps, but smiles down at me. "Let me try something else."

He walks away, then glances over his shoulder before he disappears down the hallway, sending me a flirty look. Oh fuck, I'm in trouble.

Every article of clothing has me wanting to rip those clothes off him. Damon looks fucking good. And after every change, he comes back looking more and more confident. When he comes back with the ripped jeans on, I know these are my favorite things on him. His waist is small, so they hang a little off him, but in that sexy way that makes me want to lick at his hip bone. He has on the only crop top he purchased and damn. Fucking damn.

Damon doesn't wait for me to say it, he just spins around, doing a little dance as he does. I smile, then reach out and pull him close. Again, I take a risk. I kiss along his belly, squeezing his hips. Damon's hands tangle in my hair and I feel my dick thickening.

Snaking out my tongue, I lick along his belly. Damon's hand tightens in my hair, and he lets out a low moan. But before I can taste him more, he steps back, dropping his hands from my hair.

"I'm sorry if that was too much," I mutter, not knowing why he moved, hoping I didn't make him uncomfortable.

"No," he tells me, holding up his hands, backing away slowly. "I just ... I have one more thing to try on. Then we can ... do ... whatever you want." He hustles off, but not before I see the outline of his erection through the tight denim.

Blowing out a breath, I lean back on the couch. What other outfit does he have? I run through them in my mind and the jeans were the last thing we picked out.

My brain shorts and I sit up quickly when Damon comes around the corner with a pair of pink lace panties on, showing the bulge of his cock—a very decently sized bulge that looks like it belongs on a much larger man. Unlike before, he doesn't inch over to me. He walks with confidence, and I track his movements the whole way.

When he's standing before me, he runs a hand through my hair. "What do you think of these?" Then he turns around slowly, giving me a good look at his entire body. His ass looks so good that I stop him from spinning around just so I can stare at it. The lacy cut of the underwear shows off the bottom half of his ass, a bow at the top completing the package. His ass looks so fucking delicious. I can imagine how good my dick would look buried inside it.

"Where did you get these?" I whisper, running a finger up and down his right ass cheek.

He shivers, then looks over his shoulder. "I ... um ... got them a while ago. I was ..." he swallows thickly when I palm his ass, gripping firmly. "I was afraid to wear them at home. But ... here ... I can. What do you think?"

"How much do you like them?" I ask huskily.

"Umm ... a lot."

"Pity. I guess I'll let them stay intact." I really want to rip them from his body, but they're his only pair. Guess I'll have to buy him more in case I feel the urge again. "May I?" I ask, fingers hooked in the seam of his panties.

Damon pulls in a deep breath and nods. I place a reverent kiss on each of his cheeks, making Damon hiss and squirm. With care, I ease the material down his legs, loving how he shudders as the lace brushes against his skin.

The underwear drops to the floor and Damon looks at me with trepidation, covering himself. “Hey, hey.” I reach around and move his hand from his cock. “Don’t cover yourself ... unless you don’t want me to see you.”

He looks down at me with wide eyes. “I do.” With a deep breath, he moves his hand, even though his back is to me. “I do want you to see me. I’m just ... I’m scared Michael.”

Nodding, I slide back on the couch and pull him back until he’s sitting on my lap. “I can look this way. You won’t see my face, so you won’t feel uncomfortable. How does that sound?”

His breath is choppy, back ramrod straight, but he nods.

Wrapping a hand around his chest, I pull him back until his back meets my front. “Spread your legs over mine.” Hesitantly, he does what I say, spreading his legs wide. This is good. Better than good. This is ... everything.

I look down at him and all his beautiful brown skin is on display for me. His dark nipples are pebbled and ready for my mouth. The rise and fall of his chest shows me how nervous he is, but his hard dick tells me he’s turned on. Because of me.

“Michael? Say something.”

I drag my eyes away from his dick and kiss his neck. “You’re fucking beautiful, Damon. I’ve never seen anything

more gorgeous in my life.”

“Are you teasing me?” I hate the uncertainty in his voice.

Kissing his neck more gently, I shake my head against him. “No, baby. You’re ... I don’t have words. Fucking gorgeous.” I drag my hands up and down his sides, making Damon squirm on my lap. I grab his hip and hold him in place. “You can’t do that. You have to be still or ...”

Damon grinds his ass on my dick and my breath bursts from my lungs as I continue to kiss him. “Or what?” His hips roll and I bite down on his neck softly, making him moan.

“Feel that?” I ask, thrusting up so he feels my hard length pushing against him. “This is how beautiful I think you are. Don’t ever second guess that. I’ll never lie to you.”

“Thank you,” he breathes, grinding a little faster.

“Can I touch you more?”

“Anywhere you want.” His voice is shaky, but firm.

I start at his nipples. I’m dying to put them in my mouth, but I don’t want to risk him getting skittish if he can see my face. Licking my finger, I circle his nipple, the hard peak feeling so good under me. Damon’s back arches, moaning softly. I tug it, then move to the other.

Seeing him come apart under my hands turns me on more than I could imagine. His breathy moans force me to concentrate on what I’m doing to him and not what’s going on in my pants. If I think about my dick, I’ll come in my pants because of who’s on top of me. “Tell me how it feels, baby.”

He pulls in a deep breath, then shakes his head. “Don’t be shy, Damon. It’s just us. Tell me.” I trail more kisses along his neck, down to his shoulder. “I want to know what you’re feeling.”

Rubbing his nipples between my fingers with one hand, I trail the other hand down his belly, grazing just above his cock, but not touching him there. “Feels ... like ... your fingers are ... magic. They make me ... feel ... hot ... and ... hard. I ...” Damon breaks off with a moan. “Touch me ... lower.”

“How much lower?” My voice is deep and guttural. I almost don’t recognize it as my own.

To my surprise, Damon drags my hand to his dick. We both moan when my fingers close around him. “Oh god yes. Right there.”

I give him a few firm tugs, but I know touching him dry like this can’t feel good. I let him go and bring my hand to his mouth. “Lick.”

Damon grabs my hand and drags his tongue over my palm. Feeling the wet strokes has my cock hard as granite and I can imagine how he would feel lapping at my dick.

With my palm sufficiently wet, I grip his cock once more and stroke him. This time, the glide is easier and Damon almost bows off me. “Yes. Michael. Feels ... you make me feel ... so good.”

I go back to kissing his neck, jerking him off while he thrusts into my palm. His warm erection feels good in my hand and his precome drips down the side, slicking the way as I stroke him. I pick up the pace, twisting when I get to the top and rubbing my thumb over the head of his dick.

“Can I ... Michael ... I’ll come ... let me ... uhm ... let me touch you too.”

Slowing down my strokes, I lean over so I can kind of take a look at him. “You sure?” Damon is not experienced. I want to make him feel good, I’m not worried about me.

“Please. I ... want to see you too.”

I give him one more stroke from base to tip before I let go. “You’re really good at that. I’ve never ... had anyone touch me before. I’ve been missing out.”

I bark a laugh and turn his face to mine, taking his lips in a deep kiss. He opens automatically and I slide my tongue into him, groaning when he turns to straddle me, his hard dick poking me in the belly.

He breaks the kiss, then with shaky hands, lifts my shirt. After he rips it from my body, he tosses it to the floor and looks down at my chest. “Oh fuck.” He claps a hand over his mouth and starts to giggle. “I’m sorry. I don’t really curse, but your body. God, it’s ... I’ve never seen anything like this.” He places his hands flat on my pecs. “You’re so hard and warm.”

Cracking a smile, I move my hands around to his ass. “Someone is vocal. I like it. Keep talking to me, baby.”



“Take your clothes off.”

Grinning at his forwardness, I lift him off my lap and set him on the couch beside me. Then I stand and step back, watching how greedily he devours me with his eyes. He follows my hand as I unbutton my jeans and drag the zipper down. Damon licks his lips as I thumb my fingers in the band of my jeans and my briefs. When I start to inch them down my legs, he pulls in a breath.

I push them off and kick them away, standing before him with nothing on.

“Oh ... you’re ... can ... can I touch you?” Damon drags his eyes from my dick long enough to meet my eyes, pleading with me to let him do what he asked.

“Do what you want to me, baby.”

“Come sit down?”

I sit. Damon straddles me again and his cock bumps against mine. He looks down and licks his lips again. “You’re big.”

Looking down between us, I see that Damon isn’t as thick and long as me, but he’s got a good-sized dick. One that will probably stretch my mouth when I suck him off. I will have his dick in my mouth at some point in these two weeks. Lots of times in these two weeks.

“How do you want to touch me?”

“Um ... your dick. Can I—?”

“Yes, please, touch my dick.”

Not wasting time, Damon wraps his hand not just around my cock, but his own. “Oh fuck, baby,” I groan. “Are you sure about this? Oh fuck.” I thrust into his hand and Damon curses.

We both start to move, thrusting into Damon’s small hand. He can’t wrap it around both of us, so I take over, giving us both a squeeze. “Wrap your arms around me,” I tell him. When he does, I lean forward and kiss him, jerking us in tandem. The mixture of our precome gives me some moisture.

Our kiss is messy and a little frantic. I try to slow it down, wanting him to enjoy his first time frotting, but I can’t. I need him. I need to feel his come all over me, soaking my chest and dripping down my cock. With my other hand on his hip, I move him in time with my stroking.

“Michael,” Damon says, snatching his mouth from mine. “I’m going to come. I’m so sorry ... I’m ...”

Before he finishes his sentence, I feel his hot release on my abs, some running down my hand.

“Fuck, baby,” I mutter, my orgasm overwhelming me, my come joining his, a mess between our bodies. I bury my face in Damon’s chest, where he’s lazily thrusting against me, moaning softly.

His hips finally still, then he collapses on top of me, breathing heavily into my neck. I peel my hand from his hip and rub it gently over one of his braids. His hair is so soft. I’d love to feel it between my fingers while he’s sucking my dick. My cock tries to rally at that thought.

Damon lifts his head, smiling at me dreamily. “Michael. That was ... I ... what *was* that?”

Smiling, I pull Damon closer to me—keeping my messy hand away from him—and explain the beauty that is frotting.

# Chapter 13

## Damon

**T**HE NEXT MORNING, I walk around the apartment, making sure I have everything. I'm a nervous wreck. I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do or say when I get to the new Velli Corp. I'm not sure how I'm supposed to train people when we went to college for the same thing. I mean, I'm there to help train them up on the company's protocols, but do I really know what I'm doing?

I think I do, since I'm the type of weird person that likes to read the work manuals so I don't have to ask people questions, but can I explain the things that are written? I don't like talking to people most of the time, so am I capable of training them?

"Hell. Hell, hell, hell," I chant, pulling up the couch cushion to look for my glasses.

"Thought you didn't curse," Michael says from behind me, making me jump. I whirl around, hand on my chest and look him over. He's dressed in a white t-shirt and gray sweatpants.

My eyes immediately drop to his dick print. Even when he's not hard, it's impressive. I wet my lips, thinking about how big he is and how he felt in my hand. How his cock looked next to mine, so big and an angry red, the tip leaking because of me.

“My eyes are up here,” he jokes, and I dart my eyes to his grinning face.

I roll my eyes playfully and go back to what I was doing. I lift the cushions and pat around, then put them back when I don't find what I need. Then I get down on all fours, checking under the couch, but not finding them.

“What are you looking for?”

Standing, I give a frustrated growl and stalk past him to the room. He catches my arm and spins me around. Sighing, I say, “I can't find my glasses. I don't remember what I did with them yesterday after ... we ... after ...”

Michael raises an eyebrow and reaches for my face, sliding my glasses off. “You mean these?”

My face heats and I duck my head, reaching up blindly—I should have known my glasses were on my face because I could see clearly—to grab them back.

When I have them back on, I look up at Michael to see that he doesn't look amused anymore. He looks concerned.

“What's the matter?” he asks.

Throwing my arms up, I brush past him to sit on the couch. “I can't do this, Michael. I'm not smart enough or outgoing enough. I'm just ... not enough.”

The words sting as they make their way past my lips, but they're true. I've never been good enough for anything. I'm still not sure how I got the job at Velli Corp since my interview was crap. I'm not sure why Mr. Archer picked me for this job and I'm certainly not sure why Michael wants me. I'm not enough and the sooner everyone sees that, the better for me. Then they'll leave me alone and not expect much.

My family doesn't expect much. They expect me to do what I'm told and that's it. I can follow directions. I'm not sure what made me think I can put myself out there and do something like this. James is right—I'm worthless.

Kneeling in front of me, Michael takes my hands. "Tell me what you're thinking. And don't say 'nothing,'" he says quickly when I open my mouth. "I know it's something. Please, Damon. Please trust me and tell me what's wrong. I can help. Or at least try. I'm here to take care of you. Let me do that."

He keeps saying that he wants to take care of me. No one wants to take care of me. I'm the one that takes care of people. My family, at least. I'm at their beck and call—no one is at mine. I don't deserve it. I don't deserve anything.

I feel the tears try to form and I blink quickly. "Michael, I ..."

"Damon, I don't want to pressure you to tell me anything. I want you to know I'm here for you and you can *always* talk to me. About anything. If you want to tell me, I'm here. If not, I'll do what I can to take your mind off it.."

God, how can I not tell him what's going on? With him being so open and trying to be so helpful, I find myself telling him what I'm thinking. As I talk, I see Michael's face set in a mask, but I'm not sure what it means.

"I've never ... felt good enough. You heard James yesterday. He said I'm worthless. And I am. I forget simple things like to check in with him. How can I remember all the things in the manuals to teach twenty people? I'm not smart enough for that. I can't imagine why Mr. Archer thought it was a good idea to send me. I'm still waiting for the camera to pop out, telling me this is a prank."

Sighing, Michael sits down on the floor in front of me. "What can I say to get you to believe that none of that is true? I don't know you well—I can admit that—but Damon, I can see you're smart. Abel talks about how smart you are. Quin vetted you when Abel said you were his friend and we've seen your transcripts." My eyebrows raise at that admission and Michael has the good grace to look sheepish. "We had to make sure you weren't affiliated with our enemies. It was a long time ago, but necessary."

"Okay, that's book stuff. I can remember to do my class assignments. That's not the same."

"No? Tell me something. If there was an event where all the computers shut down and the generators kicked on, how would you go about recovering all your missing work, according to your manuals?"

Almost immediately, I spout the protocol, telling him how to recover lost work that isn't automatically saved through our frequent saves, which happen every three to five minutes.

“Okay, and what would you do in the event of a data breach, if someone were to steal what you're working on that isn't ready for copyright?”

Again, I give the answer. “Go to legal, show the steps the developer was taking and explain the work leading up to the breach. There are codes we submit that can be pulled from—” I stop talking and my eyes grow wide. “You did that on purpose.”

I'm not mad at him. Just surprised that he would take this route.

He shrugs and stands up. Holding his hands out to me, he pulls me flush against his body. “I did. You know this stuff. You know the manual. You're smart. You just had to hear it for yourself.”

“How do you know I'm right, though?” I ask, my brain wanting so badly to believe him, but something in me is making me feel like it's not true and I really am stupid.

Michael brushes a soft kiss across my lips. “I helped write the manuals, baby. Not much has changed since Velli Corp was transferred to the new CEO. Savage may have been a mafia boss, but he wasn't stupid. He wanted Quin and I to know the company, in and out, just in case he needed us to take over one day.”



The breath I was holding whooshes out of me and I hug him tight. The feeling of worthlessness starts to disintegrate, just a little and I feel a weight I don't even know I was carrying lift from my body.

Because of Michael and his pop quiz.

“Thank you,” I whisper against his chest.

“Anything for you, Damon. Now, let's get you some breakfast. You have to be at work in an hour.”

Michael quickly makes me a fried egg and bacon sandwich, making sure I eat the whole thing before he lets me leave. Before I step out of the door, he pulls me close to him and kisses me softly and sweetly, making me smile the whole way to Velli Corp.

When I arrive at the building, I'm impressed. It's smaller than the Velli Corp office in California, but it's more modern, made up of sleek silver panels and large open windows. The lobby is decorated with futuristic furniture that looks made more for aesthetic purposes than comfort, but it fits the vibe of the building.

I give the receptionist at the desk my name and she makes me a visitor's badge. By the time she's finished, my contact, Mrs. Caulder, is downstairs waiting for me. She's an older Black woman with a motherly face and a plump build. I like her immediately. She makes me think of a mother I lost too young.

“Mr. Reed. So great to meet you. Come, let’s introduce you to the team.”

The rest of the day is a whirlwind of names, software, and training schedules. Everyone here is really nice and welcoming, not really minding that I’m not that talkative. When I do speak, letting them know what we’ll be covering, I have everyone’s undivided attention and what looks like trust. Maybe not in me as a person, but in the knowledge I will impart to them. It makes me feel good and that little part inside of me that says I’m not good enough fades just a bit more.

The workday is short, since there isn’t much set up and I’m here to get things off the ground. Mrs. Caulder walks me to the lobby, smiling gently at me. “You did really well today, Mr. Reed.”

“Damon, please.”

“Well, Damon, I’m Brenda. You really know your stuff. I’ve read those manuals and can’t get a handle on half of the things I read. The way you explained some things really helped me understand what we need to do to make this a good secondary location for Velli Corp. I’m glad Mr. Archer sent you.”

My face heats and I nod, waving to her as I get in the car waiting for me to get back to Michael.

I rush up the stairs, not bothering with the elevator, excited to tell him about my day. Bursting through the door, I find Michael in the living room, a tablet in his hand. He immediately tosses it on the couch next to him and meets me

halfway. He opens his arms and I rush into them, hugging him tight.

Michael kisses my hair, whispering, “How did it go?”

After taking a deep inhale of his intoxicating scent, I answer. “Really good. They ... I think they liked what I had to say. They listened and I saw some people taking notes. Notes, Michael! Because I was speaking to them.” I pull a hand from behind him and rub over one of my braids. “I just ... it’s never happened to me before.”

“Is this a good time to say I told you so?” he asks with a grin, and I playfully slap his arm. “Come on. Let’s go out for dinner. You can wear one of your outfits.”

That threatens to deflate me. “In public? I don’t know, Michael.”

“It’s okay if you don’t. We can still go out. To celebrate your first day.”

Blowing out a breath, I nod. “Yes, that works. Thank you.”

Stepping past him, I let out a soft yelp when Michael’s hand connects with my butt. I don’t think I’ll get tired of that. Someone wanting to touch me like that because they can’t keep their hands off me is ... arousing.

I shower, making sure to keep my hair dry with a shower cap. I’ll take it out tomorrow or the day after so I can show Michael how to do it. That makes me smile. It’s only been a few days, but Michael is making me think of the future. He

said he could help me leave, help me get away from my crappy family, and I want that.

I'm afraid that if I do claim it, though, something will happen, and I'll be stuck. My mother died when we were supposed to be a big, happy family. She brought in the demons that have terrorized my life. I don't blame her because she didn't know. That's the first thing that went wrong since James, Fallon, and Conrad came into my life. Then when I finally got fed up with all the abuse, I was going to ask Abel to help me leave. Then he "died."

I'm afraid to let myself hope.

So maybe I should just enjoy the time we have. But I want more. So much more.

Stepping out of the shower, I resolve to at least try to have what I want during the two weeks we'll be here. Brenda told me, with the way I have the training schedule lined up, it would only take two weeks to get things off the ground. So, I have fourteen days to take and get what I can from this experience. From Michael.

When I walk into the room, a pair of beautiful black lace panties are laid out beside the clothes I set out for myself. Sighing, I sit down on the bed, and pick up the panties, bringing them to my chest.

Yeah, I'll do what I want while I'm here. Starting with wearing the clothes I want to wear.

After I get dressed in a pair of black leggings and a loose, cropped t-shirt, I take a deep breath and walk into the living room, feeling a boost of confidence from the lace hugging my body under my clothes. Michael is dressed in a pair of dark jeans and gray shirt that nearly match the color of his eyes. When he sees me, his eyes grow wide, and he whistles.

“Fuck. Damon, you look fucking amazing.”

“Yeah?” I ask shyly.

“Fuck yeah. I really like how comfortable you look. Relaxed.”

I *feel* relaxed. I feel like I want to be seen and Michael sees me.

“We’re wasting money on ride shares,” Michael comments when we get inside the car he called for us. “I’m going to call Quin to have a rental waiting for us in the morning. That way, I can take you to work.”

My cheeks hurt from the smile on my face and I nod. It would feel like a relationship if Michael took me to work every day. When this job is done and I go back home, I’ll probably never know what that feels like, so I’m taking it now.

When we get to the restaurant—a cute family-owned burger place I picked out—I’m starved. We order quickly, then hand the menus back to our server.

All alone, I can only look at Michael, staring at this fine man across from me. I’m still not sure what I did to have this man notice me, but I’m glad I did.

“What are you thinking?” I ask, wondering why he’s looking at me the way he is. The heat in his eyes almost sets me on fire.

He licks his lips, then leans closer to me. “I can’t tell. I might scare you.”

Now I’m intrigued. “Why not?” I ask, moving close too.

“Can I ask you a personal question first?” I dip my chin. “Are you a virgin?”

My cheeks flush, but I answer. “Yes. You’ve been my first ... everything so far.”

“That’s why I can’t tell you.”

Before I can ask what that means, our server drops our food off, and we dig into our food. It’s really good, the burgers juicy and the fries crispy.

When my plate is almost clear, I ask, “Where did you grow up? I know you said foster care, but was it in California?”

Michael nods, dipping his fries in ketchup and mayo. “A few miles from where you went to school, actually. The group home I spent the last few years in is closed down now. It was fucked up when I lived there and got even worse after I aged out. I was placed in a few homes, but they were terrible. I didn’t have a good time as a kid.” He balls up his napkin and tosses it on his plate, sitting back with his arms crossed.

“Terrible?”

He runs a hand down his face. “A lot of abuse, both physical and mental. When I was younger, it was bad. Really bad. I didn’t know how to defend myself, but I knew I had to. So, I got tough. It wasn’t easy, but I managed to harden myself enough that the stuff my foster parents said and did to me had no effect. Then I got big. By the time I was thirteen, I was only about thirty pounds lighter than I am now. I bulked up. Beat the shit out of my last foster dad when he got drunk and swung on me. Got sent back to the group home and had to fight almost every day for the first few months being there.” His face screws up and I feel terrible.

I drop my hands in my lap. “I’m sorry if I brought up bad memories.”

“What? No. Damon ...” Michael sighs and reaches across the table. I put my hand in his and he rubs a thumb over the back of my hand. “Damon, you didn’t. My childhood was shitty, but I’m glad you asked. No one asks me about my past. No one really cares. I’ve told exactly three people about my past. Quin and Savage. Now you. You deserve to know everything. I want to tell you everything. Ask me anything, baby. I’ll always be honest with you.”

“So, you really do know what it’s like?”

“Yeah, I really do,” he says, confirming what he told me about knowing what it’s like to grow up in a bad environment. That makes me feel a lot better. Like he won’t feel sorry for me. Makes me feel like if it came down to it, I could tell him anything and he wouldn’t judge me for how I handle it. Like

how I handle getting beat by my stepbrothers and my stepfather talking down to me. I take it. Because I don't know what else to do.

We sit in silence for a bit, then I whisper, "I wish I could be tough like you were. Then I wouldn't feel dread whenever I go home."

Michael's eyes flash before he comes to sit beside me, pulling me against him. "You are tough, baby. You're surviving. You're brave because you go back every day. You're trying. That's enough. You hear me? That's enough."

There's no way I'm going to cry in this restaurant. As I blink back tears, I realize just how long it's been since someone has touched me as much as Michael does and it feels good. His hands on me are ... indescribable.

Instead of crying, I tuck myself closer to him. "Have I told you how good you feel?"

He kisses my hair, something I'm getting used to. "You haven't. You feel good too. When you touch me, it's like ... I feel complete."

Is that a line or does he mean it?

"What were you thinking when I asked?"

He chuckles, kissing my head again. Bending close to my ear, he says something that sets my nerve endings on fire and has all the blood in my body rushing to my dick. "I was thinking how good you look in your outfit. And how I want to



swallow your dick whole when we get home. I want to suck you until you explode.”

A shiver runs down my spine and my dick plumps up as I peer up at him. I can see why he didn't tell me earlier, but I wish he had. We could have skipped dinner and went right back to the apartment.

Swallowing my nerves, I say, “So what are you waiting for?”

The slow, salacious smile that crosses his face is so worth it. “Are you ready for that?”

I shake my head and then nod as I feel myself flush. “I—you'll be good to me, right?”

“Always, baby.” Michael takes my chin in his hand and kisses me slowly, my already hard dick not flagging at all. I don't know how I'll cover myself with these pants on. “See how brave you are,” he mutters, his fingers drifting down my torso to the prominent imprint of my cock. “Letting me do what I want to your body.”

I fight to keep the moan to myself, looking around at the other people here. The tablecloth covers my lower half and if you didn't know what he was doing, no one would guess Michael's hand was stroking my cock over my pants.

This is so out of the ordinary for me that I can't even fathom it's real. And the strangest thing? I'm doing nothing to stop him. Am I crazy? Out of my mind? Or am I just high on how Michael is making me feel? Wanted. Appreciated. Loved.

That has to be it. But I also love how I feel. Empowered. Strong. In charge. If I say stop, he will stop. He won't try to talk me into it or make me feel like I should keep going to make him happy. He would respect me.

I squeeze his thigh, wanting him to stop so we can leave, but I don't want him to move his hand. "I uh ... I ... Michael ... I can't come in my pants in here."

Giving my cock one more squeeze, he lets go, kissing my cheek. "Let's get you home. I have plans for you and your come."

Leaving the restaurant with a hard-on isn't easy, but I walk behind Michael's larger body. As soon as we get into the apartment, Michael pushes me against the door and kisses me like I've never been kissed before. Well, that's not saying much since he's the only one to kiss me, but this one is different than the others.

My arms go around his neck and I tangle my hands in his hair, keeping his mouth against mine. I moan, loving how his wet tongue strokes against mine. He pushes me flush against the door, thrusting his hips so I can feel his hard dick against me. It's so big, so thick and hard. I want to ask if I can put it in my mouth. If I can taste him too like he said he would to me. Maybe we can do it to each other?

After he kisses me breathless, he lowers his head and trails his lips down my neck. "Augh. Michael."

"I love it when you say my name," he mutters against my neck. "Hope you'll say it when I'm inside you." I moan again,

loving the idea. I don't know what that will be like, but I like the idea of him on top of me, his body taking mine. I'm not sure how much I can take, but I want it all.

Michael chuckles against my skin. "You like that?"

"Yes. So much."

"You'll like this more," he says, dropping to his knees, pulling down my pants as he goes. "Tell me if you want me to stop."

Yeah, like that will happen.

Michael takes my shaft in his hand, jerking me slowly. "Glasses."

"Huh?"

"Take your glasses off," he says with a dark chuckle, kissing along my cock.

How the hell am I supposed to do anything when his soft lips are on me like this?

With shaky hands and a loud moan—Michael licking the underside of my length—I snatch my glasses off and drop them to the floor. I have my contacts in case those break, but right now, fuck those glasses.

"Try to relax," Michael whispers, then takes my dick into his warm mouth.

"Ah, fuck!" I shout, not expecting it to feel this good so fast. I throw my head back, trying to catch my breath and keep from blowing my load too soon.

Looking down, I watch Michael as he bobs his head up and down, taking most of my dick into his mouth. His pink lips wrapped around my dick looks obscene and I can't help thrusting into his mouth. His eyes bounce up to mine and I get lost in them, in his hot mouth, in his energy.

I feel like I'm going to explode. This is by far the best thing I've ever felt. When Michael reaches up and tugs on my balls, I moan low and long, threading my fingers in his hair, thrusting with abandon.

"I'm close," I moan, my knees growing weak and my heart hammering in my chest.

That seems to spur him on. He sucks me hard and fast, a strong hand gripping my ass, pulling me in. "Holy shit. Oh god. Michael ... Michael please!"

He sucks me and jerks me, making me feel so good I can't think straight. "Baby, I'm going to come," I announce seconds before I'm exploding, my body shuddering with my release. "Oh, god. Oh...fuck."

While I'm trying to catch my breath and stop the quaking of my body, Michael licks my cock clean. "You taste good."

"Can I ... do you want me to ... do you?"

"No, baby. That was more than enough. You don't have to return any favors. That's not what this was about. I wanted to taste you, so I did." Michael pulls me down and I settle in his lap.

I nuzzle into him, my pants around my ankles, but feeling content. Michael wraps his arms around me, kissing my hair and drifting down to my neck. Surprising myself, I ask, “Can I do it anyway?”

“You don’t have—”

“I know I don’t have to. I really ... really want to. Show me?”

“Yes, baby. I’ll show you.”

I move off his lap and watch him fiddle with his pants. “Can I be honest with you?” I nod. “I want to wait, to let you undress me, but the thought of your mouth on me is driving me insane. Next time, yeah?”

I nod again, eager to have him in my mouth. Saliva pools as I watch him pull his hard cock from his pants. “Definitely next time. What should I do first?”

Moving between his legs, I replace his hand with mine and stroke him slowly. “Like this?”

He groans, leaning back on his hands, watching me stroke him. “Yes. Like that. Twist your hand when you get to the head of my dick.” I do what he says, and he bites his lip, eyes hooded.

Feeling emboldened, I lean forward, wrapping my lips around the head of his dick. “Yes, Damon. God, yes.”

Remembering what he did to me, I slide my mouth down his cock. When I get to where my hand is, I pull back. Then I do it again and again. Moving my hand, I take more of his cock into

my mouth. Just like Michael did, I reach up to grab his balls, rubbing and rolling them in my palm.

“Damon, your mouth. How do you ... oh fuck yes. Fuck yes.”

Michael palms the back of my head and shoves up, making me gag. I pull off, coughing and wiping tears from my eyes. “Sorry. I’m sorry,” Michael says.

Shaking my head, I move back, taking his cock into my mouth. That was so fucking hot. I’ve never felt this turned on in my life, knowing he can’t control himself because of my mouth.

Patting around, I find his hand and put it back on my head, wanting him to do what he just did again. He does and I moan, my cock twitching. I feel energized, so turned on I think I’ll come again.

“You wanna swallow baby? Or I can ... oh fuck. God dammit. I can come on your face.”

I don’t answer, just suck harder, opening wide to get more of him in. My first time sucking cock and I’m addicted. Or I may just be addicted to Michael’s cock. I want to swallow. I want to taste him like he did me.

“Damon, you’re so good. How are you so good? Fuck, I’m coming.”

Closing my eyes, nervousness swirling in my belly, I suck hard, anticipating how he’ll taste and if I’ll be able to take it all. His cock swells in my mouth and then his hot come pulses

over my tongue and down my throat. I moan, swallowing as much as I can. I'm addicted to his taste.

Some of his come dribbles from the side of my mouth onto his shaft and I lap it up quickly.

Michael collapses back on the floor, an arm over his eyes while he breathes heavily. I sit on my butt to take off my pants that are still around my ankles. I toss them to the side and crawl over to Michael, moving his hand. His smile is breathtaking.

He pulls me down for a kiss, thrusting his tongue into my mouth. "You alright?" he asks. "Was that too much?"

"No," I answer with a shake of my head. "Did I do it right?"

Barking a laugh, Michael pulls me on top of him. "Baby, that was amazing. You're a natural. Did I hurt you?"

"Not at all. It was so good. I didn't think I would like you ... fucking my mouth,"—my cheeks catch fire as I say it—"but it was ... I loved it. Can we do it again?"

Michael's laugh warms me. "Yeah, we can. Anything you want. Shower with me?"

I nod. "Can you help me take my braids out after?"

He leans back so he can look at me. "You gonna show me how to do them tonight?"

"Mhm."

Twenty minutes later, we're all cleaned up, my hair is out, and I'm showing Michael how to detangle it.

“So, you have to wet it, then brush it?” he asks while he sprays water on my hair.

“Yes, so I can get the knots out.”

“Okay, what else?”

From there, I show him how I braid it and give him the chance to do the other side. Surprisingly, his first attempt isn't bad. A little loose and crooked, but not bad. He'll get better with practice.

I hope he's around long enough to master it.



# Chapter 14

## Michael

**D**AMON SUCKS MY DICK like a pro. It's all I can think about over the next few days. It's like he can't get enough. We've exchanged blow jobs every day and every day he gets better and better. His mouth is always soaking wet, and his tongue is eager to lap at me.

Just as he can't get enough, neither can I. I love making him feel good, whether it's fucking his mouth or him fucking mine. How he tangles his fingers in my hair, using my mouth to get his pleasure is like nothing I've ever experienced. Damon was meant for me.

A week has passed since we've been here and we've gone out to dinner a few times, but mostly, we sit around and talk. I take him to work every day and I love how he leans over and gives me a long kiss before he gets out of the car.

He also kept in a braid I did for him. The first time, he took it out and fixed it, telling me next time it'll be easier. This one, he left it in. I know it's a little wonky, but he touches it and

tells me he loves it often. It makes my heart swell and I can't stop my eyes from drifting over to it, loving that I was able to help him.

Damon and I spend a lot of time talking. And the more he tells me about his home life, the more I want to fly back and put his family in the fucking ground. He told me about his stepfather making him pay him back for his tuition but won't let him take over his payments. It sounds a little fishy to me, so I have Quin looking into it. It sounds like serious financial abuse, but I won't say anything until Quin tells me if my assumptions are correct.

We only have a week left, so I want to plan things for us to do. With it being a Friday night, I figure we can go to Vegas, do some gambling, maybe go to a club. I know Damon has been to clubs before—he told me his stepbrother makes him go so he can order him about and humiliate him.

God, Damon has gone through a lot of shit. A weaker man would have folded by now. He's so strong. He didn't let what he's going through break him. He's still such a sweet man.

After I left the group home, I floated around, getting into trouble and fights, almost landing myself in jail more than once. I got lucky the night I met Savage.

Well, not lucky. I could have died. I was on a collision course with destruction, saying fuck the world and everyone in it. But that night, as Savage stepped out of his car to walk into a nightclub, I saw a man behind him reach into his jacket. I didn't think—I just acted. I tackled the man to the ground,

pummeling him until Quin and Savage's other bodyguard, Ted, pulled me off his would-be assassin. The gun that was in his coat pocket was stripped immediately and the man was dragged away.

I was thrown into the back of the limo Savage stepped out of and thought I was going to die. It's scary to remember that I didn't care. Everyone knew who Joseph Benavelli the third was, so I thought I did something wrong. But no. I didn't see it for months after that first night, but Savage smiled at me. This was before he was scarred, when the Russians were trying at every turn to kill him. He told me I did well and offered me money as a reward for saving his life. I didn't expect to open my mouth and ask for a job. I also didn't expect him to agree. His father's primary bodyguard had just been killed, so he told his father he found his replacement.

The rest was history.

Damon isn't like me. He doesn't have a big body and strength to fall back on. All he has is his inner strength. And that has kept him alive so I could find him. I'll protect him from now on.

God, I am falling in love with him.

Only a week and I know this is the man I want to spend the rest of my life with. I've never met someone so different than me but sharing a similar past. Because of that, I know I can protect him. I can be the man that saves him if he lets me. I can take him away from his fucked-up life and give him more.

I can give him everything. I want to give him the world. I just have to convince him to let me.

I'm waiting outside baby Velli Corp to pick him up, not able to keep the smile off my face, thinking about seeing him again. It's like every day, I feel giddy seeing his face.

When he steps out of the door, glancing around with the sun reflected off his glasses, I swear I've never seen a man so fucking beautiful. Everything about him screams that he's mine.

Hopping out of the car, I stalk over to him and watch the smile light up his face. Not giving a fuck who's looking, I wrap him in my arms and spin him around.

His carefree laugh is like a balm to my soul and I kiss his cheeks. "I missed you today," I mutter against his neck. "How do you smell like heaven after a long day of work?"

"Do I?" he asks as I set him back on his feet. "I used your cologne. I wanted to smell like you today." He blushes and I grin down at him. Could he be more perfect?

Grabbing his hand, I lead him back to the car, opening the door for him to slide in. When I lean in to put on his seatbelt, he kisses me soundly. Cupping the back of his head, I slip him my tongue and kiss him right back.

He sighs in my mouth, then sits back in the seat. "I'll never get tired of that."

Me either. I shut the door and jog around to the front, sliding behind the wheel. "You want to go to Vegas tonight?"

“Vegas? To do what?”

I look at him with a confused look. “What do you mean? To gamble? Maybe go dancing?”

Honestly, I thought he would shrink in on himself when I said we could go dancing, but Damon turns to me quickly, a big grin on his face. “Yes! Yes! Let’s do it. I’ve only ever danced with Abel the one time we went out. It’ll be fun.”

The way his face is lit up, man. This man is my dream. If something as simple as me taking him dancing makes him this happy, I can only imagine how he’d feel if I were to tell him all I want to do for him.

“We can pack a bag and stay in a suite this weekend. See some sights in the morning. Vegas is an hour away, so that would make sense.”

“I’d love that,” he says, kissing me on the cheek before I point us in the direction of the apartment.

It takes us no time to get packed and ready to go to Vegas. While we’re driving, Damon takes his hair out, saying he wants to have it in a ponytail tonight. Seeing all his lush hair makes me think of the one time he had it out when he sucked my dick. I reach over and thread my fingers through his hair, pulling his mouth to mine while I keep my eyes on the road.

Damon moans, his tongue dancing with mine. He sucks on my bottom lip, taking it into his mouth and I take a second to close my eyes, absorbing the feeling. I open them quickly to

make sure we stay on the road. There aren't many cars out, but his safety is important to me.

This man of mine seems to be pushing that shell he was in the fuck out of his way, because instead of him sitting back in his seat, he lowers his head to mouth at my cock over my pants. "Damon!" I almost shout, stunned by his actions.

He moves back quickly, face red and his head down. "I'm sorry."

"Baby, no. Listen." I grab his hand and pull him back over. "I told you before, you can do whatever you want to me. I was surprised, that's all. Don't feel bad about taking what you want from me. I love it all. Especially what you were just doing."

His expression turns a little dirty and I know I have him back, out of his head. "Will you be able to keep your eyes on the road?"

Swallowing a groan, I nod, sliding back so he can get to my pants. His hands are steady as he undoes my pants and frees my erection. "God, Michael. I love your dick."

I groan, pushing up into his hand. I keep my eyes peeled. The road is still fairly empty, so I'm not worried about hitting someone. I just have to keep the wheel straight so we stay between the lines.

Without teasing me, Damon puts me into his mouth. "Mmm ..." he moans around a mouthful of my dick. His small hand jerks me, wrapped tight around my cock. "Fuck my mouth, baby," he murmurs, then wraps his lips back around me.

I set the cruise control to the exact speed limit and move to the right lane.

Then I thread my hand in his hair and push his head down while I thrust up. I think he's used to it by now because he barely gags. His mouth gets wetter as I shove up.

“Ah, fuck. Baby. Suck me deeper. Take more in your mouth.”

Damon is great at taking direction. He tightens his lips around my dick and sucks me hard and I grip his hair harder. Damon swirls his tongue around the head of my cock, then slides his mouth down my straining length. I feel the head of my cock hit the back of his throat, and I groan, loving how it feels when his throat contracts around my dick.

With strong thrusts, I fuck his mouth, going as deep as I can without gagging him. He bobs his head, slurping noisily and messily around me. I glance down to see my lap full of Damon and his soft and beautiful hair, my hand tangled in the strands and I lose it. “I'm going to come. Fuck ... Damon.”

With that, I blow my load down his throat, his swallowing motions prolonging my orgasm.

When he pulls off my dick, I drag him up to me, kissing him deep, taking some of my orgasm into my mouth, rolling it around, then giving it back to him. I'm careful to keep one eye on the road, but I devour his mouth.

I let him up for air and he grins at me, biting his bottom lip. “I didn't think I would do something like that. What are you

doing to me, Michael Prince?”

“Trying to rescue you, if you let me.” I don’t mean to say it, but it slips out.

He sits back in his seat and doesn’t speak for a while. I almost wish I didn’t say anything and ruin what we just had, but he needs to know my plans.

Blowing out a breath, he mutters, “I want you to. I’m scared, but I think I’m ready.”

Jerking the wheel, I pull over to the side of the road. When I’m parked, I turn to him and frame his face in my hands. “Yeah? You want to come back with me?”

“I ... uh ... I think so. Yeah. I think I need to. It’s only been a week, but you make me feel safe. You make me feel loved. You make me feel like I’m important.”

“You’re all those things, baby. I will always keep you safe.”

“I know. That’s why I think I’m ready. If my family tries ... anything, you’ll be there. Right?”

“Of course. Always.”

“Then ... yeah. I want to go with you. I’m not sure what I’ll do about my job or anything. Like, maybe I’ll need a few months to figure it out.”

“Months?”

“Yes, months. Long enough for me to get my passport, try to save some money ... make sure this is what we want. Give us time to be sure.”



“Are you sure? About us?” I ask, moving my hands from his face to clasp his hands.

He removes his glasses, looking me in the eye when he says, “I’m surer about you than I have been about anything in my life. But I’m ... me. I’m not ... I’m not ...”

Gripping his chin, I force him maintain eye contact. “Don’t do that. I think you’re amazing, Damon. You’re handsome, you have a beautiful soul, you’re smart, you’re ... you’re everything I’ve ever wanted. Don’t ever doubt that. No matter what anyone told you in the past, you’re not that. Do you understand?”

Tears spill over his lashes, but he nods. “I know all that, but it’s hard. Michael, I’ve been hearing those things since my mother died. I can’t shake it off. But you’re doing a great job in helping. That ... weird space inside me that stored all those insults, it’s breaking down. You’re ... making me whole again.” His shiny eyes meet mine and he smiles. “So yeah, I’m so sure about you Michael. I’m sure.”



After getting checked into the hotel, we shower and Damon washes his hair. After he unwraps it from his towel, I help him detangle it. He smiles at me in the mirror, giving me some encouragement as I do it.

I love this. I want to do this for the rest of our lives. As long as he has hair, that is.

We finish his hair and get dressed—Damon in those fucking sexy black jeans that hug his thighs and tight ass. His cropped shirt shows off a strip of skin and the hem of his pretty purple lace panties peeks from the waist of his pants. I start to head for the door when Damon says, “Wait.”

I turn to him and he has something in his hand. “I want ... to try this tonight. See how it looks on me?” I walk to him and see that he has eyeliner. “You think I should?”

“I think you should try anything you want to, baby. I think you’ll be beautiful either way.”

He’s wearing contacts today, so I get a good look at his gorgeous deep brown eyes. They sparkle when I call him beautiful and he turns to the mirror with a grin, applying the eyeliner. It’s a little shaky, but he looks good. It makes his eyes pop, and he looks far happier than I’ve ever seen him.

Stepping behind him, I wrap my arms around his waist and kiss his neck. “Hello, Damon. It’s nice to meet you.”

With a wide smile, he says, “It’s nice to meet me too.” He turns to face me, wrapping his arms around my neck. “I think ... this is me.”

“I’m glad to know you like this. And before. I like every facet of you.”

“If I want to always dress like this? And wear more make up? And wear ... lacy underwear?”

“You look good in all of that. You’re not less than because of it. I think you’re brave for being your true self. If this is what you want.”

He looks down at himself, his face alit with happiness. “It is. I’ll go back to pretending when I get back home, but this is what I want when I finally leave with you.”

My heart rate picks up as I think about all this could mean. Damon, finally mine, letting me take care of him. Being my person. My love. My everything.

I nod, sealing my lips on his. Then we head out to have some fun.

We hit the casino up for a few hours, gambling away more money than we should. We get lucky at the end. At the roulette table, I finally coax Damon to pick a number. He chooses twenty-two and I lay all of our chips on it. The wheel spins and we actually win.

Wrapping him in my arms, I kiss him thoroughly and ask, “Where did that number come from?”

Smiling sadly, he says, “My mother’s birthday is September twenty second. Maybe this is a sign from her. That I’m making the right decision about leaving? Or is that stupid? That’s stupid right?”

“No. I think that’s what it means. And just because it’s your sign, the money is yours.”

Damon’s eyes bug out. “What? No. That’s too much.”

“It’s enough to get your passport, buy a new car, get an apartment when you get to Canada,” I rattle off. Yeah, we bet with a lot of money and the payout for winning in roulette when you land on a number is thirty-five to one. He has enough to start a life.

A sign from his mother.

He pouts, and turns to collect his chips, everyone at the table congratulating us. When he turns to me, his frown is still in place. “What is it, baby?”

“You want me to get a new apartment in Canada?”

“What? No. I want you with me.”

He throws his arm around my waist. “Then why did you mention a new apartment?”

“You’re starting over. I didn’t know if you wanted to move in with me, Quin, and Red. I live with them. They’re my family. I didn’t know if you wanted that as soon as you left your home.”

We walk to the money cages and cash out, Damon getting a special bag to hold his winnings. His mouth drops open when he sees it all. I chuckle, taking the bag from his hand so I can twine my fingers with his.

Damon picks the conversation back up. “I don’t want to live alone. I don’t want to be anywhere but where you are. I don’t mind living with your family. I’m sure they’re miles better than mine.”

He smiles up at me and I grin back, kissing his nose. “They’re amazing. They’ll love you as ... they’ll love you.”

“As what?” he asks, catching my slip.

“Nothing, baby.” I twirl him around, making him laugh, carefree and happy. I love to hear it. Hell, I love him.

Who falls in love in a week? Me and my sappy heart, that’s who. But that’s okay. I know Damon is it for me. He’s my soul mate.

After three years, I never stopped thinking about him. When I finally saw him again, all rationale went out the window. I was willing to risk my death—so to speak—so I could be with him.

Now that he’s talking about leaving his life behind and being with me, I’ve fallen more in love with him. In only a few hours, I fell even more helplessly in love with him. I don’t care that he might not feel the same right now or he thinks it might be too soon.

I love him.

After we stash the money in the hotel room safe, we decide to go to the club. Damon is practically vibrating in the passenger seat, looking at the lights of Vegas. I put a hand on his thigh and squeeze, keeping him in place so he doesn’t fly out of the sunroof.

The club has a line wrapped around the corner. I hand the valet the keys, grab Damon’s hand, and pull him to the front of

the line. I slide the doorman a thousand bucks and he moves the rope, letting us in with a smile.

Damon looks around in stunned silence, taking in the scene. He pulls my arm and I bend down so my ear is level with his mouth. "I've never been inside a club besides the one Conrad makes me go to." When I pull back, his grin is so wide, it looks like it might split his cheeks.

Taking his hand, I pull him to the dance floor. He's frozen for a bit, looking around at everyone else. I slide my hand around him and pull him closer to me. Then I start to dance. The song is a reggae song, perfect for grinding and moving while we're pelvis to pelvis.

After a moment, Damon gets with it and moves slowly, twisting his hips in an obscene way. He rolls against me, making me think of getting him naked. His hand lands on top of mine and he does this belly roll thing that makes me groan. I bend to kiss him hard and long.

Breaking the kiss, and with a flirty smile, Damon turns around and moves against me. His ass right on my dick has me rock hard in less time than it takes me to wrap an arm around him.

His high ponytail brushes my face as I duck down to kiss his neck. His flat belly flexes under my hand and I love the fact I get to be with Damon while he's feeling free like this.

The way he's been coming around and learning who he is, it lets me know that the only thing he needed was space and support. Time to learn and grow on his own.

I'm enjoying the front row seat to his growth.

The song changes to some kind of dance beat and Damon spins around with a smile, hands thrown in the air and I watch the beauty before me. This man is glorious in his delight. I stand back and allow him to let loose for probably the first time in his life.

Grabbing his hand, I spin him, then pull him to my chest. "You look happy," I shout.

"I am!"

We dance to a few more songs, then go to the bar for a drink. A man next to Damon taps him on the shoulder and says something in his ear that makes him blush. I put a possessive arm around Damon's waist and pull him close to me, glaring at the man beside him. The man shrinks away, grabbing his drink and moving to the other side of the bar.

Damon releases a peal of laughter and pats my chest. After I finish staring the man down, I glance down at Damon, who's smiling widely at me. He beckons me closer and I bend to hear what he has to say. "He only told me my hair was pretty. He wasn't hitting on me."

"Doesn't matter. I'm the only one that gets to tell you your hair is pretty." Damon laughs again, shaking his head. I know I sound ridiculous, and I know that man was no threat to me, but even so. Yeah, I sound batshit crazy. What is Damon doing to me?

“I’m ready to go back to our room. I want to cuddle with you,” Damon shouts in my ear.

Great idea. I take his hand and we leave the club. I had such a good time. It’s been years since I’ve been in a club to enjoy myself, not just with Savage when he had to make an appearance. I had the best time with him. Especially seeing him be so loose and uninhibited. I want more of this from him.

When we get to our room, Damon starts stripping immediately, leaving a trail of clothes in his wake. He sends a flirty glance over his shoulder and asks, “Coming?”

I’ve never taken clothes off faster.

I have his back against the wall of the shower and my mouth on his before he finishes laughing at my exuberance. Though I want to devour him, I take my time, enjoying the feel of his lips on mine. His much smaller body slots well with mine and I will never get enough of him.

He chuckles in my mouth and pushes me away. “I said shower, baby. Let’s get you cleaned up. We got really sweaty dancing.”

Stepping back, I pull down our body wash and pump some into his washcloth. Turning him around to face the wall, I push his hands up so they’re on the wall. Then I proceed to make sure he’s nice and clean. No nook or cranny is left unwashed.

I drop to my knees behind him, letting the washcloth flop beside me. “I want to taste you, baby. Is that okay?”



“God, please,” he groans, pushing back so his ass is closer to my face.

Spreading his cheeks, I stare at his tight hole and groan. It looks so good. So tasty. I rub a thumb over him, watching his hole flutter and hearing Damon’s soft exhale. Pulling my thumb from him, I lick it, taking his taste down my throat.

“Fuck, baby,” I mutter, moving closer and taking a long lick at him. Damon moans reverberate off the wall, high and sweet.

Leaning forward, I swipe my tongue over his hole, but only just. The tip of my tongue brushes against his opening and I feel it contract. Moaning, I close my lips around his pucker and suck. Damon cries out, bucking back against my mouth. I hold his hips steady and dine on him as he writhes in pleasure.

I take lazy laps at him, sliding my tongue from the top of his crease down to his taint, savoring his flavor. I collect the small noises he makes and commit them to memory. His tiny, tight entrance contracts and I lick it lovingly, coaxing it open so I can fuck him with my tongue.

“Michael ... I want you ... fuck me please.”

I groan against his hole, wanting that too, but not wanting to stop eating him out. He tastes so good and the noises—god the noises he’s making have my dick so hard it hurts.

“Now, Michael!” Damon shouts uncharacteristically.

I pull my tongue from his hole and stand up, crowding his body. “Baby, that’s a big step.”

“Let’s take it. I trust you. I know you’ll take care of me. I’m ready.”

Shutting off the water, I dry him off quickly, but gently. Then I scoop him off his feet, taking him to bed, where I lay him out. Stepping back, I look down at him. His beautiful, slim body is absolutely perfect.

“Baby ...” I breathe out. I cross the room to my bag and get the lube and fish out a condom. I had no plans to be inside him, but I was hopeful.

When I have the supplies, I go back to bed, lying beside him. “Put your leg over me. I want to see your face while I make love to you.”

“Make ... love?”

I put my hand on his face. “Yes, baby. I’ve fallen in love with you.”

Not giving him time to answer, trip over his words, or lie, I kiss him hard, taking his lips in an almost bruising kiss. I pull his hair tie out and bury my hand in his hair, pulling him closer to me so I can taste his moans.

After I stop kissing him, I reach for the lube, dripping some on my fingers. With them slicked, I trace around his hole as I slide closer to him, our dicks brushing against each other.

“You ready?” I ask gruffly. I need to make this good for him, so I fight to get myself under control.

“I’m ready,” he answers softly.

As gently as I can, I slide one finger inside him. His ass clamps down on that digit and my head drops to his shoulder. If he's this tight around my finger, I can only imagine how he'll feel around my dick.

Damon squirms as I pump in and out of him slowly, nudging his prostate. He gasps loudly, mouth open in a silent cry. "Another," he says on a breath, circling his hips.

I add another finger. Damon throws his head back, his mouth forming words, but no sound coming out.

"Want me to stop?" I ask, worried I may be hurting him.

"Please don't. I want it so bad, Michael." My dick twitches at his needy voice and how my name sounds leaving his lips.

"What do you want, baby?" I kiss softly over his shoulder, his neck, his cheeks. My fingers continue to pump in and out of him slowly, curling them to give him a jolt of pleasure.

After a sharp cry, he bows his back and whimpers. "I want you. Please."

"I'm yours," I whisper against his neck before I pull back to peer at his face. He looks gorgeous, face relaxed and his mouth open while he takes panting breaths. "You have me."

He opens his eyes and looks at me, unshed tears brimming. Damon reaches down and grips my wrist, guiding my fingers in and out of his hole. "Do you promise?" he whispers back, and I want to gather him in my arms and hold him until he understands that I'm not going anywhere. I want him to know

that I want him under me, on top of me, beside me and with me is where I want him. Always.

“I promise, baby. I would never lie to you. You’re mine, Damon.”

I slam my mouth down on his, speeding up the thrusts of my fingers and fucking his mouth with my tongue. Damon moans over and over while I kiss and finger fuck him.

Snatching his mouth away, he says, “I need you, baby. Inside me. I think I can take it.”

“Let me prep you more. It’s your first time. You need to be ready.”

I add another finger, stretching him out. I spread my fingers inside him to loosen his channel, wanting there to be as little pain as possible.

When I think he’s ready and my fingers glide in and out effortlessly, I remove them. Rolling over and resting between his spread legs, I lick into his mouth, gliding my tongue against his. I’ll never tire of kissing Damon.

Breaking the kiss, I reach to grab the condom, sitting back to roll it on. After I drizzle lube over my cock, I settle back between his legs.

“Let me know if it hurts and I’ll stop immediately,” I tell him.

Damon nods and wraps his legs around me. “I know. I trust you.”

I lean down to kiss him, putting my dick to his hole.  
“Ready?”

“Yes, baby.”

“Bear down when I push inside. It’ll be less painful that way.” He nods, sending me a shaky smile.

Wasting no more time, I start to push inside him. Damon shouts, face screwed up in a mask of pain. “I’m sorry. I’ll stop.”

“No, keep going,” he says in a tight voice.

I do what he wants, pushing past that tight ring of muscles. I inch inside, watching his face to make sure he’s not in pain. When my hips are flush with his ass, Damon lets out a hard breath.

“You okay?”

“Yes.” He squirms a little, then gasps. “That’s ... oh god ...” He squirms again and moans. “Is that it? Is that how it’s supposed to feel?”

“Feels better if I move,” I grit out, the tightness of his ass making me feel like I’m on the verge of coming.

“Yes, do that. Move. Show me what it’s like.”

Pulling my hips back, I let my cock tug the edge of his hole before I push back in. “Holy fuck,” I groan. I’ve never been with a virgin, but if I had, I doubt they’d feel as good as Damon.

Everything about this experience has me on a high. His moans are music to my ears, since I was afraid I was going to hurt him. His first time should be perfect.

I snap my hips into him, watching his hard cock bounce against his belly. I grip his waist, fucking him slow and easy. Reaching down, I palm his erection, jerking him in time with my thrusts.

“Oh God. Michael. This ... feels ... so ...” Damon moves his hips back against me and I curse under my breath, knowing if he keeps that up, I’ll come way too soon.

I keep the pace slow, making love to him with deliberate strokes. One hand on his cock, the other on his waist, I give him my dick leisurely, glancing down to watch my cock enter his tight body. His hole clenches tight, hugging my dick like it wants me to live inside him forever.

“Michael,” Damon gasps, reaching down to clasp the wrist of the hand that’s beating him off. He moves it faster, controlling my movements. “Faster. I think ... I need it faster.”

Giving him what he wants, but not being too rough, I thrust as fast as he’s moving my hand. I watch Damon’s face, seeing the pleasure he feels marked on his expression. His eyes are glazed and heavy lidded, lips swollen from my kisses and his mouth open, releasing the most beautiful noises I’ve ever heard.

“God, this is ... so ... good. Kiss me.”

Bowing over him so I can keep jerking his cock, I kiss him until I'm dizzy. My head floats as I fuck into him and stroke him, feeling his walls put my dick in a chokehold.

Then Damon shouts in my mouth and I feel his warm come on my hand. His release is long, his body shaking as he orgasms hard.

It doesn't take me long to reach the point of no return. Letting go of his cock, I grab his waist in both hands and thrust into him, his hole so tight I have a hard time pulling back.

"I'm there, baby," I groan as I come. "Fuck yes. Fuck ..."

After I finish releasing into Damon, I still, breathing in raggedly. Pushing his hair from his forehead, I kiss him there, then down his nose, on both cheeks, his chin, then finally, I kiss his lips slowly and with every ounce of love I feel for him. When I'm satisfied, I release his lips so we can catch our breaths.

"Fuck, Damon," I say, rubbing his cheek with my thumb, loving the blissed out look on his face. "I never knew I could feel like this." I kiss his lips once more, gentler than before.

"Me either," he mutters, smiling lazily.

I kiss him again then pull out of Damon, taking the condom off and tying it, dropping it to the floor. Then I roll back over to him, rubbing his belly, making a mess of him. "How do you feel?"

Eyes closed, he swallows roughly, letting out a brief chuckle. “I feel amazing. I didn’t know ... Abel told me it was good. He told me, but I thought he was exaggerating. But Michael —” He turns to me with a wince, but a smile still on his face. “That was amazing. When can we do it again?”

Barking a laugh, I wrap an arm around him and pull him to my chest. “When you’re not sore.”

“Michael?”

“Yeah, baby?”

He takes a deep breath, nuzzles into my chest and says, “I love you too.”



# Chapter 15

## Damon

**I**T'S SO FREEING TO finally decide that I'm done with my family. I've checked in with James every day like he told me, but more and more, I'm seeing that I hate him. He's a bully. He's an asshole, and I can't wait to be free of him. I'll put up the pretenses and pretend to be broken and messed up when I'm there for the next few months, but I know Michael will be waiting for me. The man I fell in love with.

Then, when I have my hands on that passport, I'll leave and not look back. I'm so ready to start over somewhere new with people who actually care about me.

I'm not magically fixed after just a week of my man telling me how smart and nice and handsome I am. I know I have a lot of work to do on myself to undo the years of torment and ridicule I went through, but I have Michael at my side, and he'll do what he can to help me. And I need help. I want to be stronger. For myself, so I can go forward in the world the man I want to be.

“*Damon!*” I hear shouted at me through the phone. I fight to keep the scowl off my face, but it’s a near thing. I didn’t think I would get this fed up as soon as I decided I didn’t want to be there, but here we are. Even though I’m irritated, I still jump at his shout. He smiles and I know it’s because he enjoys scaring me.

How did I not notice that for all these years? I mean, I knew Conrad enjoyed it because he’s a crazy man, but I didn’t think James cared either way. Guess the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.

“Yes? Sorry. I ... sorry.”

“*Fucking idiot. Can’t even pay attention to a simple conversation,*” he scoffs, and I get that familiar feeling in my gut that eats at me when any of those three talk down to me. I fight it, I really do, but it settles there and my eyes well up. Not from him saying I’m an idiot, but because I didn’t think it would affect me.

“I’ll be home in a few days,” I mutter, changing the conversation so I can figure out why two words break me down.

“*Good. That cleaner you hired will come by every day this week since you left us high and dry. I told them to charge your card since you paid for it last week.*”

My stomach plummets. I have the money from the casino, but I didn’t deposit it into my account. My car payment and insurance haven’t cleared yet, so if they aren’t already paid, they’ll either be sent back, or my account will be overdrawn. I

haven't ever missed a car payment and don't want that ding on my credit.

Why couldn't he just pay for it himself? I did my part. I got the service to come by and clean up after three grown ass men, two of whom don't have jobs and should be able to clean up on their own. And all I could afford were those few days. My car payments take time to process with my bank and I thought I gave myself that time.

James and his lazy sons.

Michael walks in from his own phone call and hears what James says. I shake my head imperceptibly when I see how his jaw clenches. We need to plan my escape. Michael flying off the handle and maybe cursing James out right now is not a good plan. At least I don't think so.

Sighing, I pull a braid over my shoulder and play with the end. "Okay."

*"The lawyer will be by next week with the paperwork so you can sign over the deed. Your mother's will is ironclad and won't allow me rights to this house, even though I was her fucking husband."*

My head snaps back with how he's blaming my mother for trying to take care of me. I'm her only child. Why wouldn't she leave me the house I grew up in? The one she worked her ass off to buy, sometimes back-to-back flights so she could own her home. Why should he, the man that only spent eight months as her husband, be entitled to what is rightfully mine and my mother's?

Instead of answering, I just nod. My head is reeling with what he said. It reinforces that it's time for me to go. I'll have to get my own lawyer to stop this. Or sell the house and take the money that is mine. Or kick them out and live how my mother wanted me to.

No, I can't kick them out and stay there. I want to be with Michael. I want to be where he is. Where my best friend is. Where there might be a family that actually loves me and wants me around. A family that won't talk down to me, beat me, or disrespect me. I don't want to be in California. I want to be in Canada.

*“As soon as you sign the papers, we can find a realtor. If things go well, we can sell quickly. Or, if my other plan works out, you'll just transfer the deed over to me. I'm already paying the bills. It's basically my house anyway.”*

Again, I just nod.

James says nothing more, just hangs up. I flop back on the couch and toss my phone on the coffee table. Michael sits beside me and grabs my hand, rubbing it gently.

“You okay?” he asks, gently turning my chin to look at him.

Instead of my usual nod, I shake my head no. “He's ... so awful,” is all I manage to say. There are so many more words I want to say, but no sentence is coming together to describe just how awful he is.

“I know you've just had a terrible conversation, but I need to tell you something. I just got off the phone with Quin. Have I

told you what he does?”

“No. Just that he does security with you.”

He nods and folds one leg under him so he can face me. “He does cyber security. He’s also the best hacker I’ve ever met. He can find anything digital and most things that aren’t. And he found something. About you and your mom.”

My heart rate picks up and I face him as well, placing both hands in his. “What is it? What happened?”

He smiles sadly, tugging on one of my braids. “Your mother had a provision in her will. Her lawyer got correspondence with any college you applied to and funds would be released when you got accepted. Baby, your college tuition has been paid for. Since before you even had college dreams.”

The wind whooshes out of me. What? For *years*, I’ve been handing over more than half of my paycheck. For *years* he’s been telling me he’s out thousands of dollars a month because he’s had the burden of paying my college tuition.

I always thought it was odd that my mother didn’t have something lined up for me in her will. Even at my young age, she always told me she valued education, and I could be whatever I wanted to be. She had a degree in business administration, but she wanted to be a flight attendant. She loved to travel and the new experiences she had.

What I’m kicking myself about is that I should have known there were no loans. I didn’t even fill out the forms on my own. James told me he would take care of it and all I had to do

was get my degree. It was one time in my life that I thought he was on my side. That he really cared about me. But it just appears he wanted my money. Damn, he really played the long game here. He counted on me graduating, since he knows how studious I am, so he could keep me financially dependent on him.

Why? Why would he want to keep me around? He hates me.

Looking up at Michael with wet eyes, I ask, “What do I do?”

“You have a lot of options, baby. I can take care of him if you want.”

“Take ... care ...” My eyes grow wide. “You mean kill him?”

Michael tilts his head to the side and gently pulls his hands from mine. “Does that bother you?”

Does it bother me that he wants to kill James because he’s been taking money from me? A little. Money is replaceable. I’m not sure I want James dead because of it. I want him in prison, not in the grave. “Umm ... can you ... not bring that up again? I just ... can we call the police?”

I hold myself still when Michael slides over to me. I’m not afraid of him because I know he won’t hurt me. He loves me and has been nothing but gentle and good to me. I don’t worry about my safety. Despite how stupid it is, I don’t think I want James dead. He deserves to know that I know, and he deserves to be in prison for stealing from me.

Shaking his head, Michael says, “We can, but he probably won’t go to prison. He’s an attorney, Damon. He could find a legal loophole to say that you gave him that money because you wanted to. You didn’t move out, so he can say you were paying your share of the bills. There are a number of things he can say and reasons why.”

Grumbling, I lean back against the couch, crossing my arms over my chest. “What can I do? Should I even say anything?”

“You can come with me. I can take you away from that shit. All of it. You can leave them, and I can make it so they never find you. Quin is that good.”

“I need to wait for my passport.” We went to the passport office two days ago to fill out paperwork and get my picture taken. I expedited the process, so in seven to twelve weeks, I will have it.

“Damon, I can get it as soon as three weeks. It will be a legit passport, nothing illegal, but I can have Quin work his magic and have it in your hands in exactly twenty-one days. Then you can come with me. I’ll come get you in the middle of the night and spirit you away,” he says, making me giggle. “I can get you out of there. I’d rather you didn’t go back at all, but I can’t stop you, huh?” I shake my head. “I’ll do what I can to help you get ready to come with me.”

When I open my mouth, I think I’m going to say no, we can wait, but I close it and think about it. Three weeks. Three weeks to pretend that I’m okay with what’s going on and to ignore what they put me through as opposed to seven to

twelve. Three weeks to make a plan with my casino winnings in case things in Canada go south. Three weeks to build up the strength to stop being afraid and take the leap. Less than a month compared to two to three.

Looking into his gray eyes, I see all his love shining back at me. I think about the conversations I've had with Abel and how he keeps saying he can't wait until I visit. I think about him waving Pogo's fat paw at me every night when we get off the phone. Three weeks is way better than seven.

Nodding, I say, "Yeah. I want that. Ask Quin. I can ... pay. From the money we won."

Michael scoffs. "You don't pay for anything. Quin knows a guy and can get things done quickly. No more talk about spending that money on anything but yourself."

With the back of my hand, I knock myself on the head. "Shoot. I need to deposit that money. James charged that cleaning service to my card and I might miss my car payment. I've never missed a car payment. Michael, this could ruin my credit."

Pulling my hands in his, Michael squeezes. "I'll take care of it."

"No, I can do it."

"Damon." He doesn't shout, but he puts some authority in his tone. I fight to suppress a shiver. "I said I'll take care of it. Let me, please." He pulls me on his lap and rubs his thumb over my cheek. "I've been waiting on you for years. I want to



make your life as easy as possible. If it starts with me making sure your car payment clears, I'll do that. And if it's me buying you a brand-new car so you *won't* have a payment, I'll do that instead. If I get you a driver so you don't have to drive anywhere, I'll do that. I have enough money for more lifetimes than I can count. I'll take care of you how I see fit."

God, I love this man. Not because of what he can do for me, but because he cares enough to want to do it. Who knew I could fall for a man I was afraid of just a few weeks ago? He's the only one that wanted to take care of me in a long time.

I kiss him passionately, parting my lips so he can give me his tongue. "I don't need all that," I say when we separate. "All I need is you. But that car payment might help."

Michael laughs, then rolls me onto my back. "I can give you everything you want, Damon. Just say the word."

With a shuddering breath, I murmur, "The word."

The kiss he gives me curls my toes and almost immediately, my cock grows hard. I wrap my legs around him and pull him down, feeling how hard he is for me. God, I want him again. We had sex for the first time two days ago and I'm a little sore, but I need to feel him inside me again. I can push through the pain.

To let him know what I want, I slide my hands into his pants, cupping his naked ass and raking my nails over it. Then I thrust up and rub my dick against his.

"Tell me what you want," he whispers.

“I want you to fuck me again. Please?”

“You never have to beg for my dick, baby.”

Michael kisses down my neck, sucking hard. Then he runs his tongue up and down the spot on my neck that has me writhing. My legs saw under him, and I don't know if I want to get closer to his mouth to get more of this delicious feeling or move away because it's too intense.

He moves down my body and thrusts my shirt up, licking around my nipple until it's a hard peak in his mouth. Then he switches to the other and makes it just as erect. I try as hard as I can, but I can't keep still. His mouth feels too good.

The slow descent down my body is torture, but Michael's mouth is magic. It's warm and soft, his plump lips driving me crazy. As he goes lower, he drags my sweatpants down until my cock pops out, slapping against my belly.

“Mmm,” Michael moans, stroking my cock while I look at him, wide eyed. “Your cock is weeping for me.” He licks the drop of precome that's running down my shaft and I buck up to his mouth. “Want me to taste you, baby?”

“Yes. Please yes.”

“I told you. You don't have to beg. I'll always take care of you.”

With that, he swallows my cock down to the base. “Fuck!” I shout, thrusting into his mouth. He gags around me but doesn't release the vice grip he has on my dick. I push my fingers into his hair, holding on while he bobs up and down.

Pulling back, Michael wraps his hand around my dick and strokes me. His gray eyes land on me, hot and hooded, before he slowly slides me back into his mouth, sucking me in unhurried pulls. Every time he moves up, he strokes with his hand, twisting when he gets to my cockhead.

His tongue drags up the underside of my dick and I lose it. As soon as he puts me back in his mouth, I shove in. I watch his eyes water as he gags and it's the biggest turn on. Something I didn't know *would* turn me on.

Tangling my hands in his hair, I thrust into his mouth, moaning wildly. "Oh God. Michael. I'm going to come."

He pops off my dick, stroking me slowly. Slowly enough that my orgasm recedes. "Not until I'm inside you. You come when I'm fucking you."

"Hard?" Do I want it hard? When he took me for the first time, it was gentle and sweet. Exactly what I needed. Now, I want to see what the other way is like.

Michael surges up to kiss me, then says, "As hard as you want it."

Taking me in his arms, he lifts me from the couch and walks me to the master bedroom. We've been sharing this room since our first day here. He lays me out on the bed and moves quickly to get the condom and lube from his bag.

The prep this time hurts far less than the first time. I guess because I know what to expect, so when he slides up to three lubed fingers inside me, I can feel the pleasure almost

immediately. I don't feel the initial overwhelming pain I felt before. This time, I feel a pinch for a bit, then it's euphoric.

He scissers me open, making sure I can take his fat cock. Michael is definitely blessed in that department, stretching me to the limit.

After I'm stretched and ready for him, Michael drizzles more lube to my hole, then slides the condom on, lubing himself as well. When he's ready, he rolls on his back, bringing me on top.

"If you want hard, I can fuck you hard like this. Set the pace, baby. I'll follow you."

Nervously, I straddle him, rubbing against his cock. "What if I don't do it right?"

"Whatever you do is right, baby. I'll help if you want me to."

"Okay."

Rising up on my knees, I stand Michael's dick up and put it against my hole. Like he told me the last time, I bear down while I lower myself. His fingers are far smaller than his dick and the stretch is painful. My body protests the invasion, but I force myself to relax and take him.

Inch by inch, I take him in and watch his face as I take shallow breaths. He's watching me just as intently and that spurs me on. I drop down quickly, taking the last inch or two inside me.

I hiss and Michael groans, hands clamped down on my thighs. The fullness is almost overwhelming, but I don't want

to stop. So I don't.

Tentatively, I roll my hips and feel pleasure over the pain of his large dick impaled inside me. Putting my hands on his chest, I use it as leverage while I move up and down on him slowly.

Holy fuck. God, this is good. Michael's strong hands move around to my ass and he grips me as I ride him. Michael thrusts up gently, pushing inside as I drop down. He grunts every time my ass meets his thighs and the sounds he makes turns me on.

"You feel ... so fucking good ..." Michael tells me, those gray eyes dark with desire. "Want me to take over?"

Words fail me, so I just nod.

Raising his knees, he plants his feet and pulls me down until I'm lying against his chest. With his arms wrapped around me, Michael fucks into me quickly and sets my nerve endings ablaze.

"Fuck, yes. Again," I groan when he slows down. "Just like ... hard ... like that."

Michael does what I ask. He fucks me hard, his thrusts strong and sure while he holds me steady. His hold on me makes me take every thrust of his hard cock, every slam inside me pegging my prostate. My dick rubs against his abs and the friction has me on the edge of losing control.

Then Michael bites me on my neck and I can't stop the orgasm if I tried. That bit of pain and the immense pleasure

he's giving me pushes me over the edge and I explode hands free against his stomach. I curse and shout, writhing on top of him, pushing back on his cock as much as I can.

When my release has rolled through me, Michael rolls me over and throws my legs over his shoulders. "This won't take long." he says while he fucks me fast, his hand gripped around my waist, pulling me into his thrusts. "Your ass was made for my dick."

He bends forward, taking my mouth in a bruising kiss. I moan in his mouth, my oversensitive prostate screaming but it feels so fucking good.

"I'm ... fuck ... fuck ..." Michael mutters against my lips as his strokes falter and his cock swells inside me. "Fuck, Damon." He stills, hands holding my hips tight.

Then he collapses on top of me, kissing me slow and sweet.

"I take it you get turned on at the thought of taking care of me," I whisper when we stop kissing.

His laugh is warm and full, just how I feel. "I do. I love that you'll let me."

I hiss when Michael pulls out, and I watch him walk to the bathroom to discard the condom. Michael is ... god, he's like an Adonis with his big, hard, body and handsome face. Like a Greek God come to earth to tempt me. To take care of me.

Yes, I will allow him to take care of me. I want it. I can make my own money as a software developer, but I want someone to finally take care of me the way I deserve. After years of taking

care of everyone else, I want to know what it's like. I won't take advantage. I'll take care of him too.

After cleaning me up, Michael crawls into bed with me. "Did I hurt you? I know you said hard but—"

I put my fingers to his lips. "You didn't. It was great. So great. I loved it."

"So did I. I need you back on top of me. Watching you up there ..." Michael gets a faraway look in his eyes and a filthy smile on his face. "When you're not sore."

I nod enthusiastically. I want to have Michel filling me up all the time. Is it possible for a virgin to turn into a cock hungry whore as soon as they get some? Because I think that's what I am. But only for Michael. When Michael walks around in front of me, all I can think about is how his dick feels in my mouth or how good he feels inside me.

Cuddling closer to him, I sigh when Michael kisses my forehead. "So, you're coming to Canada?" he asks.

"Yes. You want me there?"

"More than you know." He kisses my forehead again. "It's going to be great. I can't wait. What do you want to do while you're there?"

I shrug. "Not sure. I want you to show me around. Maybe find a job if I can get a visa. I can work, right?"

He pulls back from me and tips my chin up. "Of course. You can do what you want. Why would I stop you from working?"

“You said you wanted to take care of me.”

Sitting up, Michael turns me until we’re facing each other. “Baby, when I say I want to take care of you, I mean I want to make sure you’re okay. Make you feel good mentally, physically, and emotionally. If you’re having a bad day, I want to be the one that comforts you. Taking care of you means more than financially. It means everything.” I nod and smile. “And yeah, I want to spend money on you. I want to give you the finer things in life. But I don’t want to hold you hostage. You’re your own man. If you want to work, you can.”

My lip trembles as I say, “Michael, I want that.” I wipe the tear from under my eye, overwhelmed that this is my life. My life so far has been trials and abuse of all kinds and waiting for something better.

Maybe Michael was right. Maybe my mom has been giving me signs this whole time, telling me who I should be with and where I should go. I should go with Michael and be with him. For as long as he’ll have me.

My shoulders sag and I chuckle. “You know, Abel tried to set us up years ago.”

Our eyes meet and he smiles. “I know. He tried hard that first day I saw you two walking out to the car. I was interested then. But I was focused on my work with Savage and knew there was no room for anything real. Quin had two boys and those relationships crashed and burned because of our job. Before Abel, Savage had a man and that didn’t work. I thought I’d be stringing someone along. I didn’t want that.”



“I understand.” I do. It would have sucked to get a taste of Michael and have it snatched away.

“I was going to tell Abel I wanted you.”

“Yeah?” I ask, excited that I wasn’t the only one thinking and pining.

“Yeah. Then things went down, and we had to move fast.” He sighs, pushing his fingers through his hair. “I was going to ask Abel that weekend while we were at the penthouse we were going to visit.” Michael drags me to his lap, and I wrap my legs around him, our half hard cocks brushing against each other. “I didn’t think I’d see you again. When I saw you in that bathroom ... Man. It was like Christmas. I’m glad you took a chance to listen to me, get to know me. I’m glad we’re here.”

“Me too, Michael.”

We kiss and I think, yes, this was better than being with him three years ago. This ... is everything.

# Chapter 16

## Damon

**O**N MY LAST DAY working at the new Velli Corp, I find I don't want to leave. These people made me feel so welcome and they have been so kind. It still blows my mind that they came up to me repeatedly after our scheduled training classes to ask me questions and really listened.

After I give my last class, I actually get a legit standing ovation. I didn't think people clapped, much less stand to clap for a class on training manuals. I'm sure my face was a flaming mess, but I gave a nod and did a weird kind of bow to Brenda when she claps with everyone else.

She's been so good to me while I was here, helping me get my notes in order and asking me questions at the beginning of every class to pull me out of the shell I put back up every morning. She was really good at that, and I owe her a lot.

Not as much as I owe Michael.

God, that man. Instead of getting fed up and tired of me retreating back into myself whenever I talked to James or tell

him something about my stepsiblings, he's patient with me. He would gently coax me out of my slump, and I felt like I was getting stronger every time it happened.

Brenda walks up to me, breaking me out of my thoughts of my Greek god that's waiting for me. "Thank you for everything, Damon. Please come back and visit sometime. Say in another year or so? I'd like to show you what we accomplished because of your help. Here," she says, handing me her card. "Give me a call anytime. Or you can come work with me, and we could grow this company by leaps and bounds." She winks at me and walks away, allowing the other employees to swarm me with their kind words and praise.

It warms my heart that everyone thinks so highly of me. Their compliments make my head all fuzzy and even that annoying part inside of me can't talk me out of believing them. Even James's bullshit can't dampen my spirit while the people of this class have been complimenting my teaching skills and knowledge.

And while it was great to be here with people that appreciate me and with a boss that actually wants me to work with her, I won't be moving here or staying in California. I'll be going home with Michael.

Canada will be my home and Velli Corp isn't there. The good thing is, if I can get a work visa before I become a permanent citizen, I can start over. I can be the man I've always wanted to be while learning who I am.

Before I leave, one of the guys that was very eager while I was teaching grabs my arm. I turn around, a little nervous that he has a few questions that I didn't answer during class.

Boy, am I wrong.

“Hey, Mr. Reed—”

“Damon,” I correct. I asked everyone to call me Damon after our first class, but most people have stuck to calling me Mr. Reed. It's not as flattering as I thought it would be. It makes me feel old, since most of the employees here were hired right out of college. They can't be more than two years younger than me.

He nods, smiling widely at me. “Right. Damon. I'm Luke. Are you leaving town tonight?”

“Um ...”

“I was wondering if you wanted to have a drink with me. You know, a thanks for all of your help.”

I nod, a little nervous, but wanting to put myself out there one more time. “Yeah, sure. Who else is going? Is this like a weekend thing?”

Luke chuckles lightly, then steps closer to me. “No, I mean, would you like to go out with *me*? For a drink, then we can go back to mine and ...”

Oh hell. He's asking me out? What a turn of events from what would have happened two weeks ago. As in, two weeks ago that wouldn't have happened. I would have been a wallflower, pasted to the back, hoping no one noticed me.

Now, I'm standing in front of a class full of people, teaching them how things at Velli Corp work.

Smiling despite myself, I drop my head and laugh, rubbing the bridge of my nose where my glasses would usually be. "Umm ... I'm sorry Luke. I ... uh ... I have a boyfriend."

"Dammit," he says with a laugh. "I've been working up the courage for two weeks, just to find out you're taken. I should have known someone as smart and handsome as you wouldn't be single. Here, let me walk you out."

I thought it would be awkward after I turned him down, but he's smiling and talking to me about what he hopes to do in the future. He wants to do what I did, moving from his company to another to teach. I'm not sure if there will be another large buy like Velli Corp in California did, but I wish him the best.

When we step outside, I see Michael leaning against the car parked against the curb and I can't stop the goofy smile that spreads across my face. He smiles back, waving a little then starts towards me.

"That's your boyfriend huh?" Luke asks beside me, watching Michael make his way over to me.

"Yeah, that's him."

"You two look good together. Thank you for everything." He pats me on the back and nods at Michael when he gets within arm's reach of me.

My boyfriend pulls me in for a hug, kissing me lightly on the lips when I tip my head back. “Who was that?” he asks with an edge of possession in his voice that makes me smile wider.

“Luke. He asked me out for drinks. But,” I say when Michael snaps his head over and narrows his eyes at Luke’s back, “I told him I have a boyfriend. He said we look good together.”

Michael looks down at me with a grin. “Yeah? A boyfriend?”

“Yeah. Is that okay?” I ask nervously.

“More than okay. I’m glad you told him that.”

“Me too.”

Throwing his arm around me, Michael leads me to the car. “We have a few hours before your flight leaves. Is there something you want to do before we go?”

“Let’s have one last lunch. Then we can go.”

Lunch is back at the same burger place we went to the first time. We don’t do anything but eat and talk this time, no getting handsy.

After stuffing a fry into my mouth, I ask, “So, when are you going back home?” I lower my voice. “I know you can’t be seen around California, especially around my area. And I would hate for you to be cooped up in a hotel room for weeks on end.”

He rubs his mouth with a napkin, tossing it on his empty plate. “I planned to stay. When I leave, I want to take you with me. And,” he leans forward and drops his voice as well, “I like the idea of sneaking in your window, fucking you so good that you’ll want to shout, but you can’t because your family is there.”

I feel a shiver run down my spine as I narrow my eyes at him. “You did that on purpose because you know we have to leave to catch our flight. Didn’t you?”

He doesn’t answer, just winks at me. Oh ... two can play that game.

Packing sucks. Getting our things together so we can leave our little slice of heaven physically hurts my heart. Michael comes over to me and takes my bag from my hand, tossing it on the bed.

Turning me in his arms, he kisses me sweetly and I want to weep. When he lets me up for air, he says, “I’ll sneak in your room in a few days. You’ve been able to be as loud as you want here. We’ll test to see if you can keep your voice down while I deep throat you.”

I groan. “You’re the worst.”

Laughing, he smacks my ass and scoops up my bag. “I know, baby. I’m counting down the minutes until I’m inside you again.” Quickly, he kisses my cheek, then tugs me out of the apartment.

I'm nervous on the plane this time too, but for another reason. I have something planned, but I'm not sure if I can pull it off or how Michael will react.

I still grip the edge of the seats when the pilot starts the ascent, but when we level off, the ride is really smooth. We have about an hour and a half before the flight attendant comes back to check on us. Michael checked the weather and asked the pilot and he said he didn't foresee any turbulence for the first hour of the trip. Bad weather is up ahead in California, so if we're to do what I want, I need to get started now.

Unbuckling my seat belt, I motion to the restroom when Michael raises an eyebrow. As soon as I'm shut in, I shimmy my pants down and slide my new lace thong to the side so I can work myself open.

Michael bought me loads of new panties, but this was the only thong and I adore it.

I've been doing some research on how to prep myself. I've never even used toys on myself before Michael, so I had to make sure I was doing it right. I take the lube packet from my pocket and drizzle some on my fingers. They shake slightly, but I push the nervousness away and slide my fingers inside, fighting a moan when I realize how good it feels. I didn't think it would feel this good with my own fingers.

I want to continue since my cock is rock hard, but I remove my fingers when I think I'm stretched enough. I toss the lube packet, then move the thong back to where it was. It's a little strange, wearing a thong, especially with these crappy clothes



on, but I love the feeling of my jeans against the bare skin of my ass.

When I leave the bathroom, Michael is sitting in his seat, his ankle crossed across his knee, typing away on his phone. His eyes sparkle when he says, “Hey, Quin said your passport should be ready in about two weeks. He had his guy speed up ... your ...”

His voice trails off as he watches me pull the hoodie over my head, then slide my pants down. When I have them off and kicked to the side, I pull my shirt over my head, standing before him in my lacy thong. My cock strains against the fabric, precome already spotting the lace.

“Did you count down the minutes or were you just saying that?” I ask breathily when I see how he’s drinking me in. I would feel self-conscious if I didn’t recognize the look of desire he gives me.

“Come here, baby,” he says in a gravelly voice.

Shaking my head, I back over to where the bench seat is. I put my knees on the cushion and bend over, pushing my ass out to him. My thong glides against my wet hole and I shudder in anticipation.

Looking over my shoulder, I watch Michael get to his feet and my gaze drops to his dick tenting his pants.

When he’s behind me, he moves the string of my thong to the side, groaning when he thumbs my hole. “You got yourself ready for me?”

Moaning, I nod while I push back against his thumb. “Yes. So I can practice keeping quiet.” Don’t want the flight attendant to come back here to see what all the screaming is about.

Michael bends to kiss my ass cheeks, one at a time. His fingers slide into my hole without warning and I shout before I can think better of it.

He leans over me and says in my ear, “Shh. You don’t want to give yourself away, now do you?”

Quickly, I shake my head. I push back against his fingers, loving the feeling. It’s so much better when he does it.

“I don’t have more condoms. I’m going to make you come like this. Okay?”

I shake my head again. “No. Inside. I trust you.”

He wraps his arm around me, pulling me up so my back is against his front, fingers still moving in and out of me. “Thank you for trusting me, baby. I was tested two months ago and haven’t been with anyone since.” I nod quickly. Micheal kisses my back softly. “I’ll take care of you.”

“You always do,” I mutter, rubbing my ass against him. “Now fuck me please.”

Chuckling in my ear, Michael pushes me down until my chest is against the cushion of the seat, removing his slick fingers.

He plays with the string of my thong, then pulls them down to my thighs. “I want to fuck you with these on, but I need to

touch your dick. I can always edge you some other time.”

Groaning, I rotate my hips so he can hurry.

He slaps my ass and I yelp and moan, my cock so hard it hurts. “That felt good.”

“Yeah?” he asks, then spanks me again. When I bite my lip, but don’t let a sound escape, Michael gives me a hum of approval, then starts to undo his pants. “This will be fast, baby. Hard?”

“Yes. Hard. Come in me.”

“Fuck, Damon.”

I brace myself and it’s just as well, because as soon as his zipper is down and his pants are lowered, Michael enters me in one long stroke.

My mouth cranks open in a silent cry, but I only let out a huff of air.

He twists his hips and thrusts into me and I hold in the moan I want to let free. I fist as much of the cushion as I can, biting my lip hard to keep quiet.

“Mmm ...” Michael moans, fucking me with deliberate strokes. “Your ass feels so good. I could fuck you all day,” he whispers.

“Please,” I beg, hoping he understands what I need.

He does. Michael grabs my hips and thrusts into me hard. “Fuck,” we both whisper. Trying not to be vocal is difficult.

Michael starts to hammer into me, hard and fast. I grind my ass back, meeting his strokes while I lose my mind. My dick bounces against my stomach, leaking precome.

Michael's cock bumps against my prostate and I want to cry out so bad. It doesn't help when Michael pulls me up so he can whisper in my ear.

“How does it feel ... to join the mile high club?”

“Good ... since I'm with ... you ...”

I reach up, twisting my fingers in his lush hair. His lips make a trail down my throat. The soft kisses he plants on my neck is in direct contrast to how hard he's fucking me.

He reaches around to grasp my cock, pumping me off to the pace of his strokes. He pounds into me, grunting against my skin, breath fanning over me. A moan slips from me and Michael places a large hand over my mouth. I see no need to keep quiet when he muffles my moans, so I groan and babble behind his hand, telling him words he can't hear.

“Come for me, baby. Come on. Let me feel it.”

Pushing my ass back while he's jerking me makes me come undone and I explode on the bench seat. I feel my hole contract around Michael and he bites down on my shoulder, his grunts muffled against my skin as he announces his own orgasm.

We catch our breaths, my spent cock dripping my release while Michael's grows soft inside me.

He kisses my neck, nuzzling against me. “*Now*, I’m counting down the minutes.” Chuckling, I hold still while Michael pulls out of me. “Come on, let me get you cleaned up. There’s a shower in there.”

Nodding, I go to stand, but Michael stops me, a hand on my lower back. He pushes me down until my chest is back on the bench seat. “What are you doing?” I ask.

“I want to see my come leak out of you.” He slides his fingers into me slowly, pushing it back inside. “God, that looks fucking obscene. Hold still.”

Before I can ask what for, I feel his tongue replace his fingers and I moan loudly. I want to try to keep the sounds in, but his licking his release from my ass is both filthy and feels like heaven.

“Can you come for me again?” Michael asks as he laps at me.

Going without sex for twenty-four years must have had me backed up because my dick is hard again. He licks at me, humming his approval against my hole. God, the thought of him tasting himself while he’s tonguing me feels too good for words. “Yes, baby. Yes. Fingers. Use your fingers and kiss me.”

“No, you’ll take my dick again.”

Again, Michael surges up and slides into me on one stroke. This time, I don’t try to keep my cry in. I’m sore and sensitive, but damn, Michael feels exquisite. He’s relentless as he

hammers into me, pulling me up to kiss him. I taste his come on his mouth and almost lose it.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” I chant against his lips, loving the feel of his fingers digging into my flesh.

“Baby ... feels so good.” We kiss again, our mouths messy against each other as we try to keep our lips connected while he fucks me thoroughly.

When Michael moves his hand to my throat and squeezes, I come hard. I don't expect it, it just explodes out of me. Not as much as the first time but enough to know we have to really clean the bench seat.

“I'm coming, Damon. God ... baby ...” Michael stills behind me, pushing in as far as he can go.

This time, we topple forward, landing right in my release. Glad this jet has a shower.

We breath heavily, Michael's arms tighten around me. “I'm sorry about that,” he says his breath coming out hard.

“It's okay. We gotta get showered. Gotta ... get changed.”

Michael pulls out of me and I turn to face him so he doesn't start eating me out again. I won't be able to leave him if he does me that good again.

Brushing some of the stray hairs back from my face, he says, “I'm going to miss you. So much.”

Trying not to get down and cry after such a wonderful experience, I reach for his hand and kiss it. “You're going to

sneak in my window, so you won't miss me too much." I try to make light of what seems like a goodbye and Michael actually smiles a genuine smile.

"I will. Two days from now. I'll give you a day to rest since I just fucked you so hard. You need to rest my hole," he tells me sternly, rubbing against my rim.

Barking a laugh, I kiss him quickly. "Yeah, it's your hole. Now come on. Let's shower before the flight attendant comes back here."

"Just a second." Michael reaches down and slides my thong off my legs. Then he brings them to his nose and sniffs audibly. My mouth drops open when he says, "I'll need these for the next two days."

While I'm still staring at him in disbelief at him sniffing my panties, he pulls me off the seat and marches me into the bathroom. After he starts the shower, he goes back into the cabin and drags over my suitcase. When he squeezes it into the bathroom, he slides his hands inside, pulls out my boring briefs, a pair of loose jeans and an oversized shirt. I stare at them in disdain, not loving that after two weeks of being free, I have to go back to being the Damon that's been teased, repressed, and ridiculed. I don't want to be that guy anymore.

So I wouldn't be tempted to wear the clothes we bought at the mall out of spite, Michael and I agreed to send them on to Canada so they'll be there when I move in. He said he talked to Quin and he would take the packages and put them in his

room so I can unpack them when I arrive. I'm so excited about unboxing those.

Michael sees my face and gives me a sad smile, then gets in the shower and holds me. "Two weeks, baby. Two weeks, then we'll be together and you can be you again. Can you hold on for two weeks?"

I nod, sad that I have to, but I can do it.

"I'm going to be honest," he says in a serious voice, looking me in the eye. "It's torture letting you go back now that I know how they treat you. The only reason I don't walk in and slit their throats while they sleep is because I don't want you involved in any way." My breath catches and my heart rate speeds up. I need to remember Michael is a killer. I'm not afraid he'll harm me, but I don't want the deaths of James, Fallon, and Conrad on my conscience.

"I know," I murmur.

"Good. They better consider themselves lucky on that account. But make no mistake, if I find out they hurt you in any way over these two weeks, I *will* kill them." Michael's gray eyes bore into me, and I nod again, feeling my cock stir. Who knew Michael being protective would turn me on?

Michael washes me, taking great care with my body. I can't wait until we can have this every day. We rinse off and towel dry, getting dressed in a hurry. We're out and in our seats about ten minutes later.



Just as Michael finishes cleaning the bench seat, the flight attendant comes back to tell us to buckle our seat belts for the final descent. If I'm not mistaken the flight attendant's cheeks are pink, making me believe he might have heard us. Or maybe he smells the sex in the air. My cheeks heat thinking about it.

Michael and I discussed it and we agreed that I should sit in the back seat of the rental he has, just in case one of my family members are outside. They'd think it strange if I sat in the front seat of a rideshare.

But I don't move into the back seat until he pulls into the neighbor's driveway to make out for a few minutes. I won't see him for another two days, so I need to get my fill of him.

"Okay," I say, pushing against his chest after we make out like horny teenagers. "My lips can't look swollen when I go inside." I kiss him once more, then hop into the back seat.

Meeting my eyes in the rearview mirror, he says, "Two days. And not a day more. Understand?"

"Understood, baby," I reply with a smile.

He makes the short drive to my house and it's a fight not to lean over the seat to kiss him again. "Two days, Michael Prince."

"Do you really have to go?" His eyes are pleading and it's a fight not to fall into them. "We can leave. Just drive away and Quin can find a way to get you a passport. Or we can skip customs altogether. Just ... come with me."

Sighing, I rub a hand over his face. “I have to finish this, Michael. I have to see it through so I can get all my mom left for me. I owe it to her memory to set everything in order. Does that make sense?”

He makes a frustrated noise, but I know it’s not aimed at me. “It does. And I hate it. But I’ll do what you want, baby. If you change your mind, say the word and I’ll come for you.”

“I will. I’ll see you in two days.” I kiss him quickly and climb out of the car.

As I drag my suitcase up the driveway, I start to get pissed. I’m back, but I feel like a different person than the scared Damon I was when I left. The last two weeks changed me in ways I hadn’t anticipated. I’m nervous about being back because I fear in these two weeks they’ll pull me back to where I was mentally. If I put my foot down, that might cause Conrad—or Conrad and Fallon both—to beat me. Then I know I’ll go back to who I was before I left.

How can I pretend I’m not different? How can I pretend that I don’t know what kind of people they really are? I don’t think I can face them down—I’m not strong enough for that—and I might get into crap if I try.

I sigh heavily as I shove my key into the lock. I don’t try to sneak in quietly like I usually do. My keys jingle as I pull my bag into the house, shutting and locking the door.

“About time!” I hear Fallon say behind me. Rolling my eyes before I face him, I turn and push the handle of my suitcase down.

“What?” My voice is almost frosty, sterner than I planned for it to be. Guess I’ll be facing them down after all. Oh well. I don’t back down or apologize. I just stare at my oldest stepbrother, already tired of his shit and he only said two words.

“What do you mean, what?” he asks incredulously. “Dad said your flight was supposed to be in an hour ago. Where have you been?”

Looking down at my watch, I see that he’s an idiot. “My flight landed an hour ago,” I lie. “Did you take baggage claim and drive time into account?”

I never give them attitude. Never. I know I need to dial it back, bide my time until my passport arrives at Velli Corp, but I can’t help it. After what Quin found out about James, I’m done. I’m over it. They’ve run all over me for years and I let them. I cooked, I cleaned, I ran errands, I made myself small for these ungrateful bastards.

And now, I’m done.

Fallon balks at my tone. “Apparently not. Dad, your charity case is back.”

I wince at that. Fallon smirks evilly, seeing that he got to me.

Instead of James coming out to bum rush me, Conrad comes down the hallway. “Well, well, well. It’s about time.”

I let him see me roll my eyes, pull my handle up from my suitcase and step around him, dragging it towards my room.

Conrad's arm snaps out and he stops me. "Where do you think you're going? I'm talking to you."

I snatch my arm away and glare at him. For years, he's made me afraid of him. For years, I haven't been able to stand up for myself. Hell, I might fail now. But I'm not doing this anymore.

"I'm going to my room," I almost growl, tired from the flight, fed up with this shit and missing Michael. "I had a long flight and a longer two weeks. At work. Something you don't know about." Conrad steps into my space and I back up, but I don't back down. "Whatever you need done can wait until I'm off work tomorrow. I don't have the energy to deal with it today."

Conrad balls his fists and I smirk, thinking that if he lays a hand on me, Michael will literally kill him. It feels good to finally say what I've wanted to say. It's a risk and a gamble, but I figure why not? I have back up now.

"Let him go," James says from his office door. "Tomorrow, he'll get this house in order and everything will go back to normal. Damon, the lawyer will drop off the contract in three days. Be ready to sign *my* house over to me." He scoffs, shakes his head, and looks at his sons. "Conrad, Fallon. Go do what we discussed."

I walk past Conrad and before I walk into my room, I hear James say in a low voice, "Be discreet." I blend into the wall like I usually do, wanting to catch more of what James is saying. I'm not sure why, but it seems important and like it's

super conspiratorial. “This can’t come back on me, understand?”

What can’t come back on him? What are they doing? I need to know what kind of mess they’re about to make. I don’t want to be tangled up in it. Hopefully, whatever crap they have going on can wait until after I’m gone. I don’t want to be here while they get caught up in something that could be dangerous.

This is not my family. I don’t belong here, in trouble with them.

I can’t think about that now. I have to find a place to stash the money from our casino trip. I couldn’t deposit it while I was there, since there wasn’t a bank branch I used nearby. With my thieving stepfather around, I have to be careful. He might find a reason to say that money belongs to him for my college fees.

Fucking liar.

My chest still hurts, thinking about how he purposely made me broke so I would be stuck here. There’s no other explanation. He wanted me to be dependent on him so I wouldn’t dream of leaving, taking away their free maid.

Frustrated, I stalk over to the bed as quickly as my sore ass would let me. Sitting down, I wince, then I smile, thinking about why I’m sore.

I miss Michael.

Flopping back on the bed, I blow out a hard breath. I hate being here. When we talked about me trying to act normal and keep my head down, I didn't think it would be this hard. I've only been back for ten minutes and I'm already wanting to be in Canada, a country I've never been to. I'm ready to leave.

Sliding my suitcase over, I open it and pull the money out. I count it out and sigh, knowing this money is life changing for me, but not while I don't have a passport. As soon as I have that passport in my hands, I'm gone. I'll quit Velli Corp that day, no two weeks, no letter of recommendation, no cleaning out my desk. Just an email, saying I'm out.

Two weeks. Only two weeks until I start my new life.

Two weeks.

# Chapter 17

## Damon

**W**ORK THE NEXT DAY is boring. I never thought I would imagine my dream job as boring, but after spending two weeks teaching and working one on one with other people, I find no excitement here. Who would have thought me of all people needed excitement?

It isn't the excitement I crave when I really think about it. It's feeling like I have something to offer, and the people I offered it to appreciated it. When I'm at home, I cook, clean, and take care of the house for the three men that lived there to mess it up and not care. When I was at the second Velli Corp, my time and knowledge was valued, and the men and women there wanted me to share what I knew.

Being back here, sitting at my tiny desk with my assignments for the week, I feel like I don't belong here. Before I left, I felt like I didn't belong because I still didn't know how I got the job in the first place. Now, since I'm aware I know this job and this company well, that's not where

my feeling of discontent is coming from. I think it's because I feel like I've run my course here.

Since I made up my mind to go to Canada, this place doesn't feel like home to me. My job doesn't feel like it's mine because I think I can—no, I *know* I can do better. I took a chance, put myself out there and got stronger along the way.

Two weeks really made a big difference.

I gave Mr. Archer my report on what went on while I was in Nevada. I talked for about twenty minutes and when I was finished, Mr. Archer was giving me an appraising look.

“Is there something the matter?” I ask quietly. I'm not sure if I messed up or forgot to tell him anything.

He shakes his head. “No. I just ... I don't think I've heard you say that many words at one time before.” He chuckles softly, then says, “I knew I sent the right person. You did well. Brenda called and told me how much they enjoyed having you there and how much they learned. If ever we need someone to visit that branch, I hope you'll consider going back.”

Instead of nodding and saying yes, I tell him, “No. Thank you so much for the opportunity and trusting me with the training job, but I need to put in my two weeks.”

Mr. Archer looks taken aback. “Mr. Reed, you're leaving? Is it because of the trip? Did we not compensate you fairly?”

“Oh no,” I say, hoping to assuage his fear. “I'm moving soon.”



“Well, okay.” He looks around, seeming a little lost. “I can’t say I’m happy to hear that news. Are you going to a competitor? If you need more money—”

“No.” I raise my hands to stop him from thinking he can get me to stay. “I actually don’t have anything lined up. I planned to take a few months off to get my bearings. I’m going to move with my boyfriend out of state.” Out of the country, more like, but Mr. Archer doesn’t need to know all my business. Hell, saying Michael is my boyfriend is the first time I revealed my sexuality to anyone at work.

He sits straight up, looking taken aback. “Oh. I didn’t know you were involved.”

Smiling, I ask almost shyly, “Why would you?”

Huffing a laugh, Mr. Archer says, “Yeah, you got me there. Well, that’s great, Mr. Reed. I hope things work out for you in the future. You’re a great employee and I hate losing you. If you ever need a letter of recommendation or if you ever want to come back, the job is yours.”

I don’t plan to ever come back here, but I nod. “Thank you.”

“When is your last day?”

I give Mr. Archer a date eighteen days from now. That should buy myself some time just in case my passport comes in fourteen business days, not fourteen calendar days.

After that, Mr. Archer shakes my hand and I go back to my desk. I didn’t plan to say anything about not working here anymore. I honestly planned to just leave when I got my

passport. This is better though. Unlike Michael and the others, I don't plan to fake my death and get a new identity. I plan to be Damon Reed forever. If something were to happen with me and Michael, I could have something to fall back on with Velli Corp. Or if I find some place I want to work in Canada, it couldn't hurt to have Mr. Archer email me a letter of recommendation.

Looks like I'm more serious about Michael than I thought. I was serious when I told him I wanted to be with him, but I thought I would get cold feet and not go through with it right away or at the very least, want to take more than two weeks to think about it.

Whirlwind is not the word I'd use when I think about Michael and me. More like a hurricane with gale force winds with how fast we developed feelings for each other. I know it's fast and people may not understand, but I love him and want to be with him. I need to start taking a chance on myself and get out of my own way. If it means moving to Canada without a plan, I'll do that.

Besides, if something were to go wrong, I have the large amount of money he gave me from the casino to fall back on. I'm depositing it today after work, then I'll be set for at least a year if I'm smart about how I spend my money.

Betting five grand on one number with thirty-five to one payout is definitely worth it.

I start to work on my team's assignments for the week when I get a text. Pulling my phone from my pocket, I look down

and feel butterflies dance in my stomach when I see Michael's name pop up.

**Michael: Meet me in conference room ten.**

Looking around, I see most of my team is working and Mr. Archer's door is closed. No matter. I'll be leaving here soon anyway. Without a word, I turn off my computer and make my way to the elevator to head to the fourteenth floor.

When the elevator doors open, I make a beeline to the back conference room, remembering how I met Michael in that very same room just a few weeks ago.

I was so frightened of him, it's a wonder I didn't pee my pants. I thought for sure he would kill me. Now look at me. Head over heels in love with him. What a difference a conversation can make.

When I open the door, I'm pulled in immediately, my back is pressed to the wall and Michael's mouth is on mine. I let out a startled yelp into his mouth, then relax into the kiss. God, I missed him and it's only been a night. Wrapping my arms around his neck, I stand on tiptoe, tangling my hands in his hair so I can pull him closer to me.

We kiss like this, Michael devouring my mouth and touching me all over, until his hands go down my pants. Then he pulls away sharply, mouth agape.

He cups my ass, the lace rubbing against my skin feeling delicious and foreign. Michael hums his appreciation, his eyes

going hooded. “You have on your panties. I didn’t think you would until you left.”

Honestly, I didn’t either. But when I showered this morning, I knew I couldn’t go back to wearing briefs. I had to wear something that felt like the real me. No one at home sees my underwear and I do my own laundry. I should have been wearing them for years.

“Me neither. I’m glad I did today.”

He groans, hugging me close. “If I had more than ten minutes, I would fuck you on this table.” He meets my eyes and shakes his head. “Fuck, it’s so fucking sexy knowing what you have under those clothes.”

I smile up at him. “Yeah? I’m glad you approve.”

Sliding his fingers into my underwear, he grazes a finger over my hole. Michael bites his lip, then cups my chin with the other hand, holding me so he can kiss me hard. When I’m breathless, he pulls away. “I can’t wait until tomorrow. I need to be with you tonight.”

I’m nodding frantically before he can even finish his sentence. “Yes. Please.”

“Good. I’ll be there at midnight. Have my hole ready for me.” I grin up at him and nod again.

He plants another desperate kiss on my lips, then breezes out. I sag against the wall, anxious and ready for midnight.



I deposit my casino winnings as soon as I get off work. The bank teller gives me an odd look since I came in with a bag full of cash. She gets the manager and I have to show them the slip I had to fill out in Vegas and the receipt so they don't think I'm trying to deposit any illegal money.

“That's a hell of a win,” the teller says with a grin. “Tell me your secrets. I want to visit Vegas with my friends one day.”

With a soft smile, I tell her, “My mom gave me a sign and I listened.”

“Always listen to momma.”

The manager gives me a deposit receipt and tells me the funds will be available in twenty- four hours.

With that done, I breathe a sigh of relief. James won't be able to access this money. I set up a direct deposit for him to get the money he says I owe him. I count my lucky stars that I told him I wouldn't give him access to my account. I got a long, stern talking to about that one and I almost cracked, but I'm glad I stuck to my guns. Now he won't know I had this windfall and try to take that too.

Walking through the door at home, I groan in frustration when I see the mess in the hallway. Boxes everywhere. I'm not sure where they came from, but I already know it's something James will have me clean up because of how I spoke to Fallon and Conrad yesterday. And I'm right.

He, Fallon, and Conrad pulled things out of the attic, but abandoned the task and told me to put it all back. I'm sure they didn't plan on looking for anything. Just wanted to give me work to do.

Instead of arguing and sulking, I get started. I figure it will keep me busy for a few hours, so I'm not losing my patience waiting for Michael.

While I work, I let my mind wander. Only a few short weeks of this. I actually have a date when I'll be away from here. Michael promised me that my passport would be ready by that time. I would leave now, but I know James would come find me at work. If he tried that, Mr. Archer may let slip that I plan to leave and that will mess everything up.

I know I have to stay put. It'll be hard, but I want to find a way to keep my house. The hardest part isn't staying here but being away from Michael. I got spoiled in those two weeks we were together. After I fell asleep in his arms that first day, I knew I was hooked. That's where I want to sleep every night. My pillows here feel nothing like the hard muscles of my boyfriend.

The attic space is stuffy and I'm almost sure I have cobwebs in my hair. If it weren't for the instability of the floorboards and James not wanting to spend money to fix the ceiling if I fell through, I'm sure he would have tried to stick me up here instead of letting me keep my old childhood bedroom. As it is, I have the smallest room. I'm thankful my mother had the forethought to have a house built with a bathroom in every

room. “I don’t want guests having to roam out of their rooms to go to the bathroom,” she told me once when I asked why we had more bathrooms than bedrooms. I’m thankful for that. Means I don’t have to share my space with anyone.

I still have to clean up their bathrooms, so I’m not too thankful. But having my own bathroom comes in handy when I want to beat off in the shower without worry someone will barge in on me.

By the time I finish putting things away, have dinner cooked and the house clean, it’s almost ten forty-five at night. I growl in frustration when I enter my room, since I have to wash my hair to get the cobwebs out. Since I have to wash my hair, that means detangling, moisturizing, and braiding it. I probably won’t be done by the time Michael gets here.

Knowing I have to get to it, I gather my things and start my process. I make sure to prep while I’m in the shower, making sure Michael’s hole is ready for him.

I probably should feel like I’m being used for sex and find it demeaning that Michael said it was his hole, but I like it. I like thinking that Michael sees me as his personal sex toy and will do with me what he wants. I know I mean more to him than that, but that thought gets me so hot I have to fight to keep my erection under control.

I’m putting a rubber band at the end of my braid when I hear the familiar tapping on my window. Picking up my phone, I see it’s exactly midnight.

With a bright smile, I practically skip to the window. When I look through the blinds and see that it's Michael, I rush to let him in.

"Baby," he breathes, then scoops me up, kissing me so thoroughly, I forget my own name. "Your hair smells good," he whispers when he kisses down my neck. "You smell good."

"Clothes. Off."

Laughing, Michael sets me on my feet. While I go to lock the door, he sheds his clothes. After he's naked, he strips me of my clothes, has me on my back with his dick inside me before I can form another thought.

He strokes me thoroughly but slowly, his pace languid so I won't risk crying out. It's a challenge, but Michael kisses me to keep me silent. While he drags his cock in and out in an almost painfully slow cadence, I wrap my legs around him, trying to meet his thrusts.

Michael interlaces the fingers of both my hands in one of his, holding them down above my head while he fucks me good. With his other hand, he holds my hip steady, keeping me in place so he can fuck me how he wants. I whine in his mouth, and he nips my bottom lip, smiling against my flesh.

"Let me make you feel good, baby," he mutters, kissing my chin and down to my neck.

"I can't—stop kissing me like that or I'll get loud," I whisper desperately. I'm trying too hard to keep quiet and I think I'm



doing okay. But his talented lips on the sensitive skin of my neck and ear is pushing me over the edge.

Taking pity on me, he stops teasing me with his mouth. He raises up, moving the hand planted on my hip to beside my head. Then he picks up the pace. “Keep quiet, Damon,” he whispers as he starts to hammer into me. “Fuck, you feel like heaven. You belong to me. Right, baby?”

Whimpering, I nod, biting my lip so hard, I think I’ll break skin. My orgasm is building and if I’m not careful, I’ll shout my release.

Michael lets my hands go, then strokes me off quickly.

“Fuuuuck ...” I groan, voice just above a whisper. I’m about wake up the entire house when I blow.

Thankfully, Michael kisses me just as the first spurt of come erupts out of me. My body convulses as Michael drains me dry, getting out every last drop.

As soon as I come down from my high, I feel Michael’s dick kicking inside me and feel the rush of his release coating me.

Collapsing on top of me, Michael kisses me soundly, making my head spin. He pulls out and lies beside me, pulling me into his arms. I go eagerly, loving how my muscle pillow feels, already used to the hard contours of his body, and wanting them always.

“You did good,” he whispers, making me giggle.

“I thought I was going to lose it for a second.”

“Nah, I knew you could do it.” He kisses my forehead and rubs down one of my braids. “How was your day?”

Nervously, I say, “I told my boss I was putting in my two weeks today. And I deposited the casino winnings.”

Michael pulls back from me. “You did? Your two weeks?”

“Yeah. It kinda just ... blurted out of my mouth. I planned to just leave, you know? But we were talking and he asked me to go out for another teaching opportunity and I told him I couldn't because I was leaving with my boyfriend.”

He makes an appreciative noise in his throat. “I like the sound of you calling me your boyfriend. You don't know how long I've wanted you to say that.”

“How long?”

“About three years.”

Sitting up, I look at him incredulously. “You were serious about that?”

“Well, yeah. I told you I wanted Abel to introduce us and why it didn't happen. I haven't been able to think about anyone but you. No one held my attention for longer than a fuck.” My face turns sour and he winces, rubbing my cheek. “I'm sorry. I didn't think I'd see you again, so I was trying to move on. But I never forgot about you. Being with you at all is more than I could have hoped for.”

I can't be upset with him for doing what he wanted while he wasn't with me. Hell, I didn't know he was alive a few weeks

ago, so I have no right to be upset that he slept with other people. Doesn't mean I have to like it.

“I know. I don't mean to be jealous.”

He smirks wickedly. “I like you jealous.” I roll my eyes and he kisses me quickly. “You know, it's really hard being in here with you when I know three people who abuse you are right outside your door. It's taking a lot not to go out there and ...” He stops talking, but I can guess what he wants to say.

While I don't like this family, I don't want Michael to go to prison for killing them either. My stance might have changed on if I want them dead or not. The jury is still out on that one, I think.

“It's fine. I'm almost out of here and with you forever. They'll have to find a new maid.” I lie back down, snuggled up to him. “It can't come soon enough. I heard my stepfather tell my stepbrothers to go handle something last night and he doesn't want it to blow back on him. I'm not sure what it is, but I don't want to be around if things hit the fan. Hopefully, whatever it is can wait for two more weeks.”

“Sound suspicious. Are they dealing drugs?”

I think about it. While James is greedy—judging by his years of using me for money and how he has designs on my house and keeping all the money for himself—I don't think he'd risk his reputation and the possibility of getting elected to the senate for a quick buck. He's the type to play the long game.

“Doubt it. If he was, I don’t think he’d involve Fallon and Conrad. He actually loves them and wouldn’t want them to be locked up if he could help it.”

“Yeah, we need you out of here. I don’t want them to try to blame you for whatever shit they get into.”

“He has the lawyer coming in two days. How do I stall him so I don’t have to sign those papers? I don’t think I’m ready to stand up to him just yet.”

I feel tremors run through Michael, as if he’s physically holding himself back from charging into James’s room. I place a hand on his chest, trying to bring him back to me. Looking down, he smiles slightly and kisses me. “He can’t coerce you. So just tell the attorney you want your attorney to look over the documents. He’s legally required to have them sent to your legal representation. That should hold him for a few weeks.”

Chuckling, I whisper, “I don’t have an attorney.”

“Doesn’t matter. You can get one. I’ll pay for it. Let me do some research.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“I know,” he mutters, kissing my hair. “But this comes with me taking care of you, since I can’t take care of them.” His voice is contemptuous and I can see why people would have feared him while he was guarding Savage.

“Okay, baby.”

We lie there for a moment and I’m afraid what we were talking about has put him in a sour mood. Scrambling around

for something to talk about, I ask, “What’s your house like in Canada?”

I hear the smile in his voice. “It’s nice. Two floors. Two master suites. Our kitchen is huge. Quin and Red cook, I eat.” I giggle at that. “We have a nice backyard. Quin and I keep Pogo sometimes, and we wanted something large so we could run and play with him. We have cookouts back there too.”

“Sounds nice,” I muse, trying to imagine his home.

“Want to know the best part?” he murmurs, and I nod against his chest. “We’re four doors down from Abel.” I laugh almost silently. That makes me happy. I can go see Abel whenever he’s free and he can walk over to see me when I get there.

“I like the sound of that. Being able to hang out with him will be nice.”

“Yeah, I think—” I never hear what he’s thinking. His phone starts to vibrate, and he lurches off the bed for it. “If Quin or Savage is calling, it’s an emergency. I told them I’m with you and not to contact me if they didn’t have to.”

His face is a mask of confusion as he answers and heads to the bathroom. I throw my legs off the bed and drag on my pajama pants, hoping it’s not something bad about anyone back in Canada. About his family.

Michael is in the bathroom for about two minutes, then he comes storming out, almost stomping over to his clothes. I don’t tell him to keep quiet, since it’s clearly an emergency.

My door is locked, so if someone hears, I just won't open my door until he's gone.

“What happened?” I ask, abandoning all pretense of whispering.

“Remember I told you I have a half-brother?” I nod, helping him pick up his clothes from the floor so he can get dressed faster. “He was attacked last night. Quin just found out when his name popped up in hospital records. I need to go and figure out what happened.”

“Yeah, go. I'm so sorry.” He told me he and his brother have never met, but his well-being obviously means a lot to Michael.

When he's fully dressed, he drags me to him, hugging me tightly. His body seems to be trembling. “Hey, it's okay,” I say, trying to soothe him.

“I thought I got the guy that tried to kill him. I thought I protected him. I can't fail him too.”

Pulling back, I cup his face and rub a thumb over his cheek. “You're not failing. You didn't fail Abel and you won't fail your brother. You've protected him and he didn't even know it. You're not a failure.”

His big body shudders and he kisses me hungrily. “Thank you, baby,” he mutters against my mouth when we part. “I needed to hear that.” He kisses me once more, then hurries to the window. “Lock this behind me, yeah?” I nod and he slides

through easily, puts the screen back in place and darts off into the night.

I watch him, my heart breaking for him. I hope he finds who did this. They need to pay for making him feel like he's inadequate.

# Chapter 18

## Michael

**T**HE LAST THING I wanted to do was leave Damon's arms. Even though we had to keep quiet because of his piece of shit family, I was enjoying the time we were spending. Feeling his head on my chest and his small hands soothing me was more than perfect.

But finding out that Brent was admitted to the hospital sent me out into the night to try to figure out what the fuck was going on.

It's strange. I have no relationship with this man, but I feel oddly protective of him as his big brother. I don't want him to die before he can realize his full potential. I want him to, like me, reach the age of forty. I can't explain why I feel protective of him—I just do.

I'll never tell him who I am or what I did for him, but I need to keep him alive. I need to feel like I haven't failed.

After I pull out of Damon's neighbor's driveway, I speed to the hotel to get changed. I want to try to get into Brent's



hospital room so I can talk to him. I need to find out if he knows who did this to him so I can bury them.

My phone rings and I answer quickly, connecting it to the car's Bluetooth. "Tell me what you know."

Quin's booming voice fills the car and I start seeing red the more he speaks. "I got his medical records. The people that got to him fucked him up. Orbital fracture, hairline fracture in his collarbone, three broken ribs, shattered elbow, and his CT scans show he had a ruptured spleen. He's just out of surgery. That's why I just got his name. Someone saw the attack and when the assailants ran off, drove him to the hospital. Good thing he didn't have a spinal injury or moving him might have paralyzed him."

"Did the police talk to him yet?" I ask through gritted teeth.

"Not yet. He's been out of surgery for about thirty minutes. Anesthesia is probably still wearing off."

"Good. I need to get in there and talk to him. Figure out what happened."

Quin sighs through the phone. "Has to be the same person that tried to kill him before. I don't think one person has this much shitty luck."

I nod, even though he can't see me. "Call me if you find out anything else before I get to the hospital."

Rushing into my hotel room—but still careful to avoid cameras—I get changed into a dress shirt and slacks, trying to look as much like a detective as I can. I bring my Canadian

security credentials, hoping that will pass as a badge if I flash it quickly enough. I try to calm myself, try to get my head together, but I don't know how. Then I think of Damon and I smile, knowing that just listening to him breathe will make me feel a million times better. But I don't want to wake him if he's getting his rest. He has to work in the morning.

But when I park at the hospital, I can't help myself. I text him to see if he's awake.

**Me: Are you asleep?**

He doesn't answer me by text, he calls. I answer immediately. "Did I wake you?"

"No. I've been waiting for you to call. You okay?" he asks in a whisper.

"Fine. Just need to figure out what happened. The funny thing is, I'm not sure why I even care so much. We're strangers. He wouldn't be able to pick me out on the street as his brother."

"It doesn't have to make sense to anyone but you," he says in a normal tone. There's a slight echo, so he must have stepped into his bathroom.

I breath out heavily. "Can I come back to you after I leave the hospital? Just to sleep. Unless you think—"

"Yeah. Come back. It's fine. I don't ... I don't care if someone walks in. I'm ready to leave and they can't tell me I

can't have visitors."

A soft smile plays against my lips. This is a different Damon than the one I met weeks ago. This Damon is bold, confident, and knows what he wants. I love it. I love *him*. "I'll try to be back in a few hours. Try to sleep for me, hmm?"

"Yes, baby. Call when you're on the way. I'll have my ringer on."

"Love you," I whisper, loving how the words feel on my tongue.

"Love you back."

With a sigh, I hang up and lean against the headrest. I take a few deep breaths and then get out of the car, hoping to get some information.

"I'm here to talk to Brent Montgomery," I say with authority to the nurse at the desk, flashing my security badge.

She nods, then types on the computer. "It's terrible what happened to him. I plan to vote for him if he stays in the race." That makes my heart happy for a reason I can't explain. "He's in room 3631. Third floor. I'll call up to the desk and let them know the police are here to question him."

I thank her, happy she's cooperative without me having to ask.

The elevator is slow, but it gives me time to think of what I want to say to my brother. I thought I would go my whole life without talking to him, even though I kept tabs on him from afar. I figured he would never know I existed and if he looked

for me later, he would see that I was dead and there was no reason to continue the search.

Talking to him this once won't hurt. He won't even recognize me. If we stood side by side, you would never be able to tell we were related. He looks just like our mother, so I'm guessing I look like my dad, whoever that is. So I'm not worried someone would recognize me as family when I talk to him.

After flashing my badge at the nurse at the desk on this floor, I take the directions she gives me and go to the door at the end of the hall. There's a security guard standing outside the door. I don't get nervous, some people sniff that shit out. I approach and reach out a hand, shaking his in that manner that cops do.

Inclining my head, I ask, "Is it okay if I speak to him? Won't take but a minute."

"Yeah, sure," he says, and I get a flash of irritation that he doesn't even try to ask for my credentials, even though I don't want him to. Anyone can come up here and finish Brent off with this guy at the door. I'm going to get Quin to put some people on him. "We're waiting for some of his people now to take over for me. Figured you were him."

No, dumbass, but you should be more careful. I don't speak the words, just give him a look before I knock lightly on the door and squeeze inside when I hear a voice tell me to come in. Pulling in a deep breath, I step around the curtain and come face to face with my younger brother.

It takes me a moment to collect myself. We just stare at each other. I'm sure he's wondering why I'm being weird and staring at him. I didn't think I'd ever be face to face with him like this.

He looks terrible. One eye is swollen shut and his lips are swollen as well. He has a trail of stitches across his forehead and another on his cheek. His arm is in a sling and one leg is raised in the air, a cast encasing it. His one good eye bores into me and he looks on edge, not that I can blame him.

“Umm ... officer?” His voice is unsure.

“Detective,” I correct smoothly with a lie. It would explain my street clothes. “Harris.” I give him Quin's last name because I can't think of another.

“Detective Harris. I don't know much. Whoever it was attacked me from behind. I only saw their boots.”

Grabbing the stool in the corner, I roll it over and sit down. “Walk me through it. Where were you when the attack occurred?” I have to remember to thank Abel for making me watch all those true crime shows so I can at least sound like a cop, even though I detest them. Rich for someone that went into security, one step away from being in the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

Clearing his throat, he winces when he tries to sit up. I forgot he just got out of surgery. “You can relax,” I tell him.

He ignores me and sits up until he's leaning back on the pillows. He takes a deep breath, then holds his ribs at the

movement.

After he's gotten himself under control, he tells me about his night. "I had just gotten out of a campaign meeting. I usually go straight home since I have a daughter and like helping my wife at the end of the day. But before I could leave, I got a phone call from a possible donor. I was on the phone for about an hour and a half, so by the time I got off the call, it was after dark and I was the last one from my campaign team around. I packed up my things and exited the building. The parking lot was empty except for my car. When I was halfway across the parking lot, I heard footsteps behind me. Before I could turn around to see what was going on, I was knocked down and then I was getting the shit kicked out of me."

My hands clench as he talks. He's harmless. A harmless man wanting to do good for the people he represents and wanting to go home every night to his family.

Tamping down my anger, I ask, "How many were there?"

"Two. That much I could tell." He cocks his head and his eyes rake over me. "Aren't you going to write this down?"

Shit, I forgot about that. Thinking quickly, I shake my head. "Nah. This interview is a formality. The lead detective assigned to your case will take notes. I'm here to check out your security detail."

He gulps. "Do I need that?"

"Maybe," I answer him honestly. "We don't know if whoever came after you wants to finish the job. How were you

found?”

Brent tries to smile, but he winces instead, touching his fat lip. “One of my volunteers saw my car in the parking lot while he and a few friends were on their way to dinner. He thought he’d check on me, to see if I wanted a to-go plate. Had they not shown up ...” He trails off, shaking his head and running a trembling hand through his hair.

“Are you okay?” I ask, no longer in character as a detective, but as myself—a concerned older brother.

The laugh Brent huffs sounds like it hurts, both physically and mentally. “I don’t think I’ll be okay for a while. If this is tied to my campaign ... I might not run. Whoever did this could come after my family. I’ll do anything to keep them safe, even giving up on my dream.”

He has nothing to worry about. Whoever did this to him will be buried. I will stop at nothing to make them pay. I got rid of an assassin with my bare hands—and a necktie, thanks to Quin’s suggestion—so I can dispatch two people who can’t even finish the job they started.

My career with Savage trained me well.

Cocking my head to the side, I ask, “Is that what you want?”

He sighs again. “No. But I have to protect my family. If it was a random attack, I’ll stay in the race and continue to campaign, but if it was because of the race for senate, I’m out.”

Could his running for senate have anything to do with his attack? From my perspective, it can. He doesn't know it, but a hit man—a skilled one based on what Quin was able to dig up—was sent after him. Then he's attacked outside of his campaign headquarters? It has to be connected.

“Why do you think they're connected?” I ask, wanting to see what he's thinking.

“For a while, I was getting these ominous letters, saying that I need to give up my senate aspirations, but they dried up about three months ago. It was only a few and they didn't say anything threatening, but my campaign manager said I might have an enemy.”

That's news. He must not have reported those to the authorities.

Nodding, I stand up and say, “That's a great start, Mr. Montgomery. Be sure to mention that to my colleagues when they interview you. They'll be able to follow up on that.” Reaching out for his hand, I add, “It was a pleasure speaking to you, but I wish it were under different circumstances.” He meets my hand in a firm shake.

If I weren't such a coward, I would have met him years ago. Maybe I could have made sure this didn't happen.

Shaking my brother's hand is a novel experience, but it's one that I will remember for the rest of my life. Touching my brother for the first and only time and he doesn't even know who I am.



When he drops my hand, I step back slowly, looking at him a moment more before I spin on my heels and exit the room.

Before I head to the elevator, I stop by the security guard, who's slouching against the wall. "This man was just beaten badly enough that he had to have surgery and you're not doing your fucking job," I say through clenched teeth.

He stands up straight, face turning red. "I'm sorry, I didn't —"

"Yeah, you're right you didn't. You didn't check my credentials to see if I was really an officer or ask what my business was with him. You did nothing."

My tone must frighten him because he flinches back from me. "Okay, I get it. I'll ... I'll do better. I'm sorry, officer."

Scoffing, I glare at him before I walk away. Pulling out my phone, I call Quin. It's late where he is, but he'll answer. I'll have to apologize to Red for asking him to work when he's supposed to be asleep.

He answers on the first ring. "How did it go?"

I give him the rundown on everything Brent told me, keeping my voice low so I'm not overheard. When I finish I say, "I need you to find some guys to put on Brent's room. The hospital security is shit."

"Already done," Quin says. "They should be there in five minutes."

I sit in my car on the phone with Quin until I see three men dressed in black suits walk inside. Quin tells me to hold and I

hear him making another call. One of the men in black suits answers the phone and I know they're the ones that are here for my brother.

Feeling better about leaving him, I thank Quin and drive away from the hospital.

Then I call Damon. "Can I still come by?" I ask when he answers the phone.

"Of course. I'll be waiting by the window."

We hang up and I breathe easier. There are people there to protect Brent and now I can go back to my man, so I can hold him in my arms.

# Chapter 19

## Damon

**O**VER THE NEXT WEEK, Michael comes over every night at eleven and leaves every morning at around six am. While it's great because I can see him and hold him, I hate it because he has to leave. I want to wake up with him every morning, not have him sneaking off like a thief in the night. But James usually wakes up around seven, so it's best Michael is gone before then.

He's humoring me by leaving, but I'm getting sick of it. I'm a grown man. My boyfriend shouldn't have to sneak into a house that belongs to me.

James was pissed when I told his lawyer that I needed to have my own attorney go over the contract for the deed transfer. I was extremely proud of myself because no matter how much he tried to bully me, I said no, I needed to have my own people look over it.

"How the hell are you going to pay an attorney for their time when you can't even pay me back for your college tuition?" he

sneered at me, face red and a vein throbbing in his forehead.

It took everything not to tell him that I know he hasn't been paying for anything but the regular household bills. I wanted to blurt out that I knew he was lying, but I needed to keep up this charade for another week. Just one more week.

When we stepped back into the room with the attorney, he was packing up, saying that he couldn't have me sign anything since it could be considered under duress—he probably heard James shouting. Then he chided James, saying that, as an attorney, he should know better. He told me to contact him with my attorney's information and he would send the contract over.

The next day, I got a lawyer who was able to review my deed almost immediately.

Today, I got a call around lunchtime, asking me to come in. Instead of waiting until I got off, I told Mr. Archer I needed to finish some things, put in six hours of paid time off and left for the day.

The attorney I chose, Foster Marks, was a young, smart attorney that was said to be very tenacious and knowledgeable in his field. His reviews said he was extremely fast when he worked with someone, and I can see that's accurate. It's only been a few days and he's already read through the contract for sale. It was a thick document with small print, so that couldn't have been easy.

I step into the office and the receptionist smiles warmly at me. "May I help you, sir?" she asks.

Smiling back—something I wouldn't have done mere weeks ago to someone I didn't know, not even to be polite—I give her my name and what I'm there for. She tells me to have a seat, then picks up her phone to let Mr. Marks know I've arrived.

A few minutes later, her phone rings. After speaking into the receiver for a moment, she tells me I can go on back.

Mr. Marks is a handsome man. Not my type, as he's almost as small as me, but I can appreciate a good-looking man. He's a Black man with wide brown eyes, a broad nose, and nice thick lips. His eyes look innocent, but sharp and I can see how he might be underestimated for his looks. I like him, even though we've only spoken once.

He stands and holds a hand out to me. "Mr. Reed. Great to meet you. Please sit." I do and he rubs the back of his neck, shaking his head. "This contract is a little ... skewed. Do you know the contents of it?"

I shake my head. "No. Just that my stepfather wants the deed transferred over to him so he can sell the house."

"Yes, that's in there. It also states that, even though the house will be in his name, you will be responsible for all property taxes until it sells. It also states that you will not receive any of the proceeds from the sale."

I knew the last part, but not the first. I would be responsible for the taxes? How would he even swing that? He's already taking about sixty percent of my paycheck.

Blowing out a breath, I ask, “Is there anything else?”

Mr. Marks nods slowly. “Yes. It also states that you would be responsible for staging costs, costs of renovations the prospective buyer outlined, and if they weren’t done in the manner agreed upon by Mr. Cambridge and the seller, the seller would be able to sue you.”

I surge to my feet. “What? How is that even legal?” James is an attorney, so he probably knew how to make it sound like it’s standard practice.

When Mr. Marks starts talking, I know I’m right. “He worded it in such a way that it seems like it’s what you two agreed upon. See here,” he says, turning the contract so I can see it. I stalk over and look at one of the numbered items. “It reads, *Previous grantor will be liable for any and all renovations heretofore and is liable for any legal obligations should such needs arise.* What most people would miss is the previous. They would assume it meant the person who it belonged to before it was sold. And it would, if this was a contract for sale, not a contract for transfer.”

I’m impressed that Mr. Marks could decipher that, but pissed that James, once again, wanted to take advantage of me when he has so much. He’s a successful attorney, one many people look up to. He has money. Hell, he has *my* money.

Flopping in the seat I vacated, I deflate on myself. I don’t know why finding this out hurts, because I *know* James hates me and will do anything to screw me over, but what’s the point

of draining me dry? It shouldn't make me feel like shit that I'm not loved in my own home. I shouldn't be surprised.

But I am. The depths that he's willing to go to make me miserable, broke, and dependent on him so I can continue to be his free maid—or a maid that pays him—is mind boggling. I can see why he wanted to bully me into signing now. This will effectively make sure I only have enough money to buy lunch.

Lifting my glasses, I wipe under my eyes, collecting the tears angrily and wiping them away. “What do I do now?” I ask Mr. Marks.

“We're tossing this. I'll let the other attorney know that we have questions about how the contract was drawn up without both parties involved. That makes the contract void. I'll handle that. In the meantime, I'll draw up another contract for the deed transfer and—”

“No,” I interrupt him. “No. I'm not transferring it. It's my house, right?”

“It is. The deed is public record, as well as your mother's will.” I wince and Mr. Marks's eyes grow soft. “I'm sorry for your loss.” He pauses for a beat, then says, “Her will is watertight. There's no room for misinterpretation.”

Swallowing hard, I ask, “What does it say?”

Turning to his computer, Mr. Marks taps a few keys, then makes a noise in his throat. “This lawyer was very thorough and the clear language used won't allow for any

misinterpretation. Here, it says, *‘In the event of my death, whether accidental, suspicious, or self-inflicted, my estate and all its contents will be passed on to my son, Damon Calvin Reed, upon the date of my death. Until he is twenty-five and his trust fund can be released, my estate will pay the property taxes, as there is no mortgage.’*”

My head is spinning. What trust fund? “I don’t have a trust fund.”

Mr. Marks looks at me curiously. “Sure, you do. It’s in an LLC. The same one that paid out your college tuition.” When I’m silent and just stare at him, he sighs. “Wow, okay. Give me a day or two and I’ll have all the information for you. The attorney is supposed to contact you when you turn twenty-five and give you all this information. I’ll find out who the contact attorney is. I’ll also find out if your mother has anything else from her estate that belongs to you.”

I drive home in a daze. What just happened? All I wanted to do was stop James from trying to take my house. Not only do I find out that I was almost screwed over so bad that I would be poor in perpetuity, but I also find out my mother left me a trust fund that releases in a few short weeks, when I turn twenty-five. What? How?

The only reason I can think of for James not telling me is because he never found a way to steal it from me. He must have known that if I got my hands on any amount of money, I would leave. Even if I were as beat down and scared as I was just weeks ago, I would have tried to escape. If I had money, I



would have left ages ago, but with James taking most of my money, it was hard to save up enough to leave the house even after I got a job at Velli Corp.

I think to pick up my phone to tell Michael, but I'd rather wait and tell him in person. I'm so done. I'm done with this family. I'm done being in this house. I'm only going back now so I can pack some things left from my mom and pretend like everything is okay. I know if I storm out, James will find a way to locate me, or he'll send Conrad and Fallon. If I leave in the middle of the night, at least I'll have a head start.

My passport hasn't come in yet, but I can go anywhere in the country with Michael until it does. The money from the casino—which I haven't touched—will be enough for us to live off if we have to hang around to wait for another passport. If I leave before it arrives at Velli Corp, I'll need to get a new one elsewhere.

As is my habit, I slide in the house silently, something I've tried to do for years so I'm not attacked when I come in. Sometimes I get lucky, like today. I close the door quietly, flip the lock and walk on silent feet in the direction of my room.

I hear loud laughter and jeering from James's office. Rolling my eyes, I keep going until I hear the name Brent.

Tiptoeing to the office, I find the door cracked. Pasting myself against the wall, I listen to what they're saying, and I'm horrified.

Fallon's voice booms out. "He went down hard. Conrad used the billy club you told us about."

They start laughing again and it covers my gasp. Fallon and Conrad did that? This happened a week ago, why are they talking about it now? The only thing I can think of is they think it's all blown over and they're not suspected of anything.

They're all idiots.

Thinking fast, I pull out my phone and start to record this interaction. I want to have proof for Michael of what was done to his brother. I know if I do this, he'll make good on what he said about taking care of them.

"Good," James says. "Give me details. I want to savor it."

I double check that my phone is recording. Even if the house was empty, it's foolish to ask for details on a crime. Especially one that's so high profile. That's all the news has been talking about. The security guard that was supposed to be guarding his hospital room leaked to the press that he overheard Brent say he would drop out of the race yesterday. That's probably why James feels like he's won.

As an attorney, I'm not sure why he's asking about information on a crime. He should know better.

Shaking my head, I move a little closer to the door, hoping the phone's microphone picks all this up clearly.

Conrad speaks up this time, laughter in his voice. Of course, the psychopath thinks this is all a joke. "He fell as soon as I hit him. Bitch didn't even try to fight back, just curled in a ball. Shit was funny, because I was kicking his back while Fallon

was kicking him in the chest and stomach. He had no way to escape.” They all erupt into laughter again.

“I wish we could have finished the job,” Fallon says with a bit of regret in his tone. “Fucking nosey people not minding their fucking business.”

James makes a noise like *pssh* and says to Fallon, “No, this was enough. Assault and murder are two different charges. You won’t be caught, but in any event, it’s harder to plead down for murder than it is for assault. Besides, I only wanted to send him a message. He should have heeded my letters.”

Conrad speaks with pride in his tone. “Yeah, well, we beat his ass good enough that he won’t want to testify if anything goes to trial. He’ll be too scared we’ll send someone to finish him off.”

“Man,” James says when they quiet. “I wish I could have seen that.”

“Gotcha, Pop,” Fallon says. “I recorded it. And don’t worry,” he rushes to say, “I didn’t upload it to my cloud, and you can’t tell who it is. He had his hands over his head for the part I recorded. I wanted to give you a gift of the night you secured your seat in the senate.”

“Thanks, son,” James says gruffly, like Fallon just gave him the key to the city. I almost scoff aloud.

Conrad speaks up. “I think the ass whooping we laid on him will have him afraid to run for office ever again. You’re in the clear, Dad. Congratulations.”

“Thank you, boys,” James replies.

I record a bit more, though they aren't saying much of anything. I hear commotion, and muffled thumps, shouts, and screams, and assume they're all watching the video.

Disgusted, I sneak away, slipping into my room. Hands shaking, I stop the recording, turn my phone volume down, then play it back. I hear everything. It's not super loud, but it's clear.

I walk to my bathroom and lock myself inside. Pulling up Michael's contact, I press call and sit on the edge of my tub. “Pick up, pick up, pick up,” I chant, willing him to answer.

After three rings, I hear his deep, comforting voice. “Hey baby. How—”

“Michael, listen to me,” I rush to say. I don't know why I feel a sense of urgency, but he needs to know, and he needs to know now. “It was them. My stepbrothers. They attacked Brent. It was them.”

There's a beat of silence and I hear rustling. “What do you mean?”

“They were talking in James's office. I heard them.” I pull the phone from my ear and quickly send him the recording. “There's your proof. It was them. Remember what I told you the other night about what James said? The night I came back? That's what he meant. That was what he didn't want blowing back on him. They did it. Michael, I'm so sorry.” My voice breaks. Michael said he and Brent are strangers, but he was so

torn up when he heard he was in the hospital. I know this can't be easy to hear.

“Damon,” he says in a deadly calm voice. It sends prickles down my back. “I need you to leave the house. Don't come back until I call you. As soon as you get back, call the police. Do not go looking for your family. Do you understand?”

I swallow thickly. I know what he's coming to do. Am I comfortable enough to be complicit in murder? Maybe a triple murder? Fuck, I don't know. I don't know what I should do.

“Umm ...” I start to say, but don't know what I'll say after that.

“Damon.” He says my name so patiently. “I'll tell you what I was doing there when I was at the ball after I take care of this, okay? You'll know everything.” I nod, though he can't see me. “I need to take care of this. Leave. Go someplace where you can be seen and don't come back until I call you.”

I nod. “I love you.”

Even though he's basically telling me he's coming to commit murder, my heart melts when he says that. “Love you too,” I whisper, then hang up the phone.

Blowing out a deep breath to calm my racing heart, I stand up, shake my limbs out to get rid of the nerves and try to figure out where to go.

The mall. I can walk around the mall for hours, as it has three levels with at least thirty stores per floor. That will take a

lot of time. And I have the money from the casino to buy anything I want.

Having made up my mind, I pull the door open and walk face first into a broad chest. I look up to see Fallon, a murderous look on his face.

Oh shit.

# Chapter 20

## Damon

FALLON DRAGS ME TO James's office by my ponytail, the pain searing my scalp as he pulls me along. I try to keep up with his longer strides and almost trip more than once, only able to stay on my feet because of the firm grip he has on me.

When we get there, he pushes me inside and my forward momentum has me falling on the floor. I land heavily, scraping my hands on the carpet. My glasses slide off my face and I scramble to put them back on just as Conrad's foot lands where they used to be.

Fallon's foot lands in the middle of my back and I drop back to the floor, holding my glasses to my face. "He was talking to somebody, Pop. I heard him telling them what we did."

My eyes slam shut, but I don't say anything. I'm not sure how Fallon even knew to come into my room. I thought they didn't hear me come in. I wince when I realize I left my bedroom door open in my hurry to call Michael. Fallon

probably saw it open and ventured in to see what I was up to. Or try to make me to do something for him.

I open my eyes to see James looming over me. Instead of flinching away from him like I would any other time, I meet his eyes and put as much contempt as I can into my gaze. He looks taken aback but smooths his expression and kneels down in front of me.

James tilts his head to the side and reaches out as if to touch me. Quicker than I can think, he smacks me across the face. My head snaps back and my teeth click together. Along with the pain, I gasp because James has never struck me before. He leaves that to his piece of shit sons.

They know it as well, because Conrad and Fallon both laugh raucously, talking back and forth to each other while James and I stare each other down.

“What did you hear?” he asks, face impassive.

“Everything,” I answer, no longer willing to back down from him.

“Hmm,” is all he says before standing.

“Why did you attack him? Why did you do it?” I really want to know because it makes no sense. He didn’t even start campaigning yet. There’s no reason for him to attack Brent when he didn’t even know if he would lose.

His shrug is nonchalant. “He was in my way. I want to run unopposed. If people think opponents are being knocked off because they’re running, they won’t step up.”



Or they'll think James has something to do with it. I don't say that bit though. "James, you don't have to do that. What's the point?"

He growls and takes a step towards me. I shrink back and he stops advancing. I'm not sure why. "The point is power, you fucking idiot. Power and money. This is the way. Hell, I might even run for president one day." He laughs and his weirdo sons join in.

"This throws a wrench in my plans for you, but it doesn't matter," James says. "No one will believe your word over mine. I'm a powerful and well-known attorney and you're an orphan with no money and no clout. No one will listen to a thing you say."

I wait for Fallon to tell him I sent proof, but maybe he didn't hear that part. That's when I started to whisper to Michael because I was so overwhelmed. When Fallon doesn't say anything, I breathe a small sigh of relief.

"What are we going to do with him, Dad?" Conrad asks in a disgusting tone that could only mean pain in my future, depending on what James says.

James does that thing when he's thinking, tapping two fingers against his chin. He glares at me, then answers his son, but directs the words at me. "You'll sign that deed over to me. You'll do it or I'll have Conrad and Fallon beat you worse than they did Montgomery. You'll quit your job at Velli Corp. There will be no need for you to be outside of the house.

Conrad and Fallon will keep an eye on you. You'll stay here and do what the fuck we tell you and I won't kill you."

"No." There's no way I'll agree to anything he says. I only have a bit of leverage because he wants this house. He could kill me and take ownership of the house as he sees fit. I think, anyway. I'm not sure how transference of property works since he never legally adopted me.

"The fuck you mean, no?" Fallon's voice booms in the office and I flinch, but don't look away from James.

"No," is all I say back.

Fallon grabs my hair again and I cry out, leaning into him instead of pulling away so it doesn't hurt as much, even though my scalp is on fire. "Do what the fuck he says, or we will kill you."

"Kill me and you can't get this house. The lawyer told me they would have to find next of kin if something happens to me," I lie. "I told him I felt unsafe here and he said if something happens to me, you get nothing. Not the house, not the trust fund and not any of my mother's estate. It's all left to me."

James's eyebrows shoot up and I smile through my pain. Even though the first part of my statement is false, the rest isn't. And he knows that because he never told me about a trust fund or my mother having an estate left, as she's been dead for over fifteen years.

I try to pull away from Fallon, but he just tightens his grip. “Let him go,” James tells him, and Fallon throws me forward. My glasses smash into my closed eyes, the pain sharp against the sensitive area.

Sitting up, I slide out of Fallon’s reach. We’re in a stalemate. No one says anything for a few minutes. My mind is racing, wondering how I’m going to get out of this situation or how I’m going to get away so Michael can come do ... whatever he plans to do.

Finally, Conrad throws his hands up. “Fuck this, Dad. He’s a liability. You’re a lawyer. You can find a way to get around your bitch of a wife’s will.”

“Fuck you!” I yell, making all heads snap to me. I’ve never cursed in front of them, let alone *at* any of them. For a moment, I’m rewarded with a confused looking Conrad. “Don’t you ever speak about my mom like that! At least my mom stuck around!” That’s a dig and I know it, their mom having ran out on them when Conrad was five and showed his first signs of psychopathy, something I overheard James tell my mom. Way before I knew what a psychopath was.

His face turns red, and he barrels over to me. I slide back as much as I can, but he grabs me the same way Fallon did—by my hair and the back of my shirt—and literally tosses me across the room. I land on the coffee table and roll over to the opposite wall. The wind is knocked out of me, and it takes a moment for my lungs to reinflate.

Before I can take more than two deep breaths, Conrad has a handful of my shirt. He pulls me to my feet, then wraps both hands around my throat. He lifts me off my feet, putting pressure on my windpipe. I thrash around, scratching at his arms and hands, trying to get him to let me go. I think I'm more afraid of how unaffected he looks while he's strangling me. If he looked angry or pissed off, I could understand, but his face is blank. No emotion.

I can feel myself slowing down, getting weaker, my heart beating double-time because I know I'm running out of air. Even though I fight with everything I have, I know I'm going to die.

"Drop him," I hear James say from far away and Conrad immediately releases me.

I fall in a heap at his feet and try to drag in much needed oxygen. My lungs spasm and I cough uncontrollably. My eyes water and my throat feels like it's on fire. No matter how much I try to pull air in my lungs, the coughing pushes it out until I vomit.

Shaking, I roll to the side, finally able to inhale without a coughing fit. When my hearing returns to me, I realize they're all laughing at me. Tears leak from my eyes. I know I'll never win against them. No matter how much I fight, I'll lose. I'll get tortured until I do what they say. And if I don't do what they say, I'm dead.

What a shitty way to go out.

Rising on my hands and knees, I feel around for my glasses, giving up when I can't immediately locate them. No matter. I can see well enough.

Bringing them into focus isn't easy, but I do it. I see Conrad resting on his father's desk, looking at me like he didn't just almost choke me to death. Fallon is leaning against the door, probably making sure I don't escape. James is looking at me with humor in his eyes and I want to vomit again. He's enjoying this.

"Fallon," James says, still staring at me. "I need you to go to see the lawyer we had here a few days ago. He's not returning my calls and I don't like that. Go give him a message, will you?"

With a gleeful look, Fallon nods, then leaves quickly.

Like a child, Conrad whines. "Why can't I go too?"

"Because I need you to take care of him," he says, inclining his head to me.

Take care of me how? Standing up shakily, I hold my hands up, but not to protect myself. I hold them up as if to fight. I've never been in a fight before, but I'll defend myself. I'll get my ass beat, for sure, but I will try.

Both men break out in loud guffaws, Conrad even slapping his leg. "Bitch, please," he dismisses me with a wave. "You want to fight me? Come on. I'll give you a free shot."

He walks over to me and pats his cheek as if to say *hit me here*. Taking him up on his offer, I cock my hand back and

punch him in the face. Much to my surprise, Conrad stumbles back, holding his cheek. With his light brown skin, it takes no time for the spot to turn red.

Conrad's eyes turn flinty, and he growls as he walks over to me. I thought I could evade him since I'm smaller, but Conrad's muscles don't slow him down. He grabs me and yanks me forward as he pulls his fist back. I squeeze my eyes shut, waiting for the painful blow.

"Stop," James says. "Don't hit him in the face. The lawyer will think I coerced him by beating him. Already bad enough you left handprints on his neck. Hit him anywhere else."

The first punch to my gut doubles me over, the one that immediately follows has me dry heaving, since I already emptied my stomach contents earlier. Again, I'm tossed across the office, this time knocking against a bookshelf.

Before I can get my bearings, a kick to my stomach has me curling into a ball to protect myself. Conrad stomps on my side. The air rushes out of me as I cry out, the shout ringing in the office. I realized that's the first cry of pain I let out since Fallon grabbed my hair earlier.

"There you go. Tell me how bad it hurts, little brother," Conrad says in a manic tone, and I hold my middle as I try to pull in some oxygen.

I blink through my blurry vision, then look up at him. "I'm not ... your brother ... you crazy son of a bitch," I grit out, spitting at his feet.

Conrad's eyes blaze and he lifts his foot again. I roll just enough so it doesn't land on my ribs again, but he still gets my arm, which hurts like a bitch.

He lands a swift kick to my ribs before James calls him off. Conrad is breathing heavily, and I see a smile cross his lips before I turn away, holding my ribs. Fuck. Today is the day I die.

I'm not ready. I'm not ready to die at the hands of my crazy stepbrother. I'm not ready to give up the love I just found. I'm not ready to abandon my escape plan, finally going somewhere I'm happy and loved. I'm not ready.

"Conrad, head to the hardware store. Pick up some zip ties, rope, a deadbolt, and something for his window," James says thoughtfully.

"They sell those security bars," Conrad supplies helpfully. The two of them go back and forth on what could go over my window without raising questions with the neighbors. They're planning to lock me in my room until I'm finally willing to sign the papers and allow James to sell the house.

A few minutes later, Conrad leaves—giving me one more kick to the gut on his way out—and I'm left alone with James.

We sit in silence for a few minutes, me trying to get my bearings and James just watching me. I sit up and wince, holding my middle and rubbing my throat. It feels hot under my hands, and I know there will be bruises.

Frowning, I look up at James. "Why?"

That question is loaded. I'm asking everything I've wanted to know all these years. Why does he hate me? Why does he mistreat me? Why does he allow his sons to treat me so terribly? Why did he bother to keep me? So many whys and I'm sure he has answers to all of them.

He tilts his head to the side, assessing me. "You look like her." I startle, not expecting him to say anything about my mother. Then he continues to speak and that vulnerable part inside me hurts. "But you're nothing like her. Your mother was strong, a spitfire, bold. You're a coward. Weak. Soft. That's why I treat you the way I do. Because you let me."

My face burns with the shame and anger I feel. What a shitty answer to give someone you've abused for years.

James continues. "I knew about your mother's will. I've spent years trying to figure out a way to get what I want, but no matter how many lawyers I consult, I get nothing without you." He chuckles bitterly and I flinch, even though he hasn't raised another hand to me. I touch my cheek and feel some swelling.

"You could have treated me better," I whisper words that have stung the back of my throat since a few months after my mother's funeral. That's when the mistreatment started. "You could have been an actual father to me and I—"

James's deep laugh interrupts me. "A father to you? You're not my child. I got stuck with you when your mother refused to listen to me when I told her to quit her job. If she listened to me, she would still be here."



My heart squeezes. People die more often in car accidents than they do in plane crashes. He's blaming my mother's love for her job for her death.

Peering down his nose at me, James says, "If I could have gotten rid of you all those years ago, I would have. But your mother stipulated that you have to be present to sign for your trust fund. Couldn't get rid of you, then expect to get my cut, could I?"

Struggling to take a deep breath, I do my best and say, "James, you've been taking money from me for years. You've been using me as your personal maid since I was old enough to learn how to cook and clean. What did I do to deserve any of that? I was a child. I didn't ask for my mother to die."

James gets up from his chair and I try to scoot away, but my ribs hurt so bad and I fall on my side, holding my belly and gingerly touching my ribs.

Squatting in front of me, he looks me over and smirks. "I never wanted anything to do with you. Not even when your mother was alive. I would have stuck it out, because I loved her, but you? Never. I hate that you look so much like her. I hate that you're so fucking weak. I hate that you're breathing the same air as me and my sons. I hate you, period. You were number one in her life when I was her *husband*. She should have left everything to me."

Reaching out quickly, James grabs my hair before I can move and forces me to my feet. I try to pull away, but it hurts too much, and I end up sagging. James must not want to keep

a hold of me, because he pushes me against his bookshelves. My back hits hard and I cry out, dropping to my knees.

Once again, I'm pulled up to standing with James's face inches from mine. "You are a waste of fucking space. After you sign over those papers, I'll keep you locked in your room for the next few weeks. As soon as you turn twenty-five and your trust fund is released, that will be mine too. We'll find a way to get rid of you, might have you beaten like we did that other motherfucker that got in my way. We'll make it look like an accident, then I'll win the sympathy vote." He laughed maliciously and I want to vomit. "I can see the headlines now. *Lawyer Wins By a Landslide, Following the Unsolved Murder of his Stepson.*"

Before he can discuss any more of his future plans that have to do with my death, we both hear a click and James goes stock still. I look behind him and see Michael, gun pressed to James's temple.

"Nice vision you got there, but there's just one flaw. This is my boyfriend you're planning to kill and my brother you assaulted. You won't be leaving this room alive."

# Chapter 21

## Michael

**M**Y BLOOD BOILS WHEN I see how broken Damon looks and the angry bruise on his cheek. It takes everything in me not to just shoot this motherfucker right now, but I don't want Damon to see me like that. I want him as far away from this violence as he can get. I saw how it affected Abel, and Abel is a tough little fucker. Damon is tough in other ways, but I don't think murder will be easy for him to see.

“Damon, baby,” I say in a normal voice, not wanting to startle him anymore. “Step behind me.” When his stepfather doesn't let him go, I smack him on the side of the face with my gun. His stepfather lets him go. “Come on, baby.”

Doing what I say, Damon skirts around his stepfather and moves to my back. “I'm sorry I didn't leave,” he murmurs.

I push Damon's stepfather, causing him to stumble forward. He whips around, a look of anger on his face, but my gun

raised at eye level causes the expression to bleed away and his eyes dart to Damon. “Who is this?”

Smiling, I do a bit of a bow, taunting him. “Michael Prince. And you are?”

His jaw ticks as he answers. “James.”

“James. Nice to meet you properly. I rarely talk to my victims before I kill them. It’s a novel experience.”

Briefly, a flash of fear crosses his face, but he covers it well. “We weren’t going to hurt Damon,” he says in what I assume is his best lawyer tone. “Just get the money. Then he can go. I want nothing to do with him.”

I shrug. “Don’t care. You’re going to die for what you did to him his whole life and for what you did to my brother. Brent Montgomery.” Now the fear is evident in his eyes, and I relish it. Shooting him might be too easy.

He licks his lips in a nervous gesture. “That was ... a misunderstanding.”

“I’m sure. Damon, do me a favor and go to your room. I’ll come get you when this is taken care of.”

“My stepbrothers,” Damon says, and I curse myself for forgetting about them.

Glancing over my shoulder, I tell my frightened boyfriend, “It’s fine. I’ll just—”

I don’t get the chance to finish my sentence. James smacks the gun from my hand. I should have known better than to get

that close. When I turn to face him, I barely dodge the fist he throws to my face. Even though he missed, he's fast. I barely have my bearings when he tackles me to the floor.

I'm not fast enough to avoid the first punch to the face, but I do block the second one. His hands wrap around my throat, but he doesn't get time to put pressure on my windpipe because I punch him in the side, hard. He moves his hand to hold his side, so I take that time to roll us, pin his legs, and start to pummel his face.

Every hit I deliver is for the way he treated Damon, every story he told me giving me strength. I hit James for stealing Damon's money and beating him down until he felt worthless.

Then I switch hands and beat him for the pain he put my brother through.

As if from far away, I hear a roar and a scream, then, once again, I'm tackled to the ground. The man that lands on top of me is big. Maybe has fifteen to twenty pounds on me. He lands on my chest, knocking the wind out of me, but I don't let it show. I raise one hand to guard my face and with the other, I blindly give him body shots. That doesn't seem to bother him.

"You killed my father!" he shouts in my face, landing a good hit that breaks my nose, my blood spraying everywhere. Even though it hurts like a bitch, I smile, finally finding a formidable opponent.

Bucking him off me catches him off guard. When he's off balance, I roll him over. He scrambles to his feet, and I do the same, not wanting him on top of me again.

“Michael!” I hear Damon shout, voice full of fear.

“Go to your room, baby,” I say, not making the mistake of taking my eyes off ... “Conrad, I presume.”

“Fallon, bitch. You’re a dead man,” he says before he rushes at me, throwing punches wildly. I dodge them, backing up until my back is against the bookcase James had Damon against. When he throws another punch, I duck, and his hand hits the wood. I hear him snarl and I stand back up to throw a jab at his face, cracking his nose.

“Fuck!” He bellows, then reaches out as if to choke me. I duck under his arm and push him into the bookcase, smiling at his frustration.

Fallon spins around, face red with blood and anger, then he stalks over to me again. But before he reaches me, I hear three shots and see blood bloom across his front. He looks down in confusion, stumbling back as he touches his chest. He coughs, blood spraying. He drops to his knees before falling forward.

I spin around and see Damon with a gun in his shaky hands, but a look of determination on his face.

Slowly, I walk over to him, hands out in front of me. He looks at me with a look of confusion, and I think he doesn’t recognize me. He surprises me by saying,, “I’m not going to shoot you, Michael.”

Grinning, I wipe my face, trying to get as much blood off as I can before I pull him into my arms and kiss him. I don’t add

tongue—I just want to feel his mouth against mine so I know we’re both alright.

After I pull away—and wipe my blood from his face—I reach down and take the gun from his hand. “You know I had him, right?” I try for a joke, but it falls flat.

Damon nods but looks down at Fallon’s body. “I didn’t want to risk it.” He takes a shuddering breath, running a shaky hand over his braids. “I’m not even sure how I managed to shoot him. I’ve never shot a gun before.”

I pull him in, hugging him hard. “You did good, baby.”

Damon starts to reply, but we both freeze when we hear the door open and a shout down the hallway. “This is a lot of shit, Dad.”

Hurriedly, I wipe my face with my shirt, pushing Damon behind me. This is the one that Damon told me beat him and made him go out places with him so he could be humiliated.

He’s mine.

When Conrad steps into the office, he freezes, eyes landing on his brother, then his father’s body behind us. His face morphs into anger and he tosses the bags haphazardly down the hallway. Lifting his shirt, he reaches behind him to the small of his back and pulls out a blade similar to the one Mamba had.

I roll my eyes, figuring it would be too much to ask for someone not to have a blade on them. I absolutely hate blades.

“Damon, hold this, but don’t shoot him,” I say, passing the gun to him without taking my eyes off Conrad. “He is mine. Do you understand? When he moves from the door, go to your room. I’ll come get you when this is done.”

“But—” he starts, but Conrad cuts him off.

He points at each one of us in turn with the end of his knife. “I’m going to kill you, then I’m going to kill you.”

I give Damon a little push towards the doorway. “To your room, understand?” I see him nod from the corner of my eye.

Conrad looks back and forth between us and, like I think he will, he moves to me. He probably thinks he can get rid of me first then come back for Damon.

Not fucking likely.

I take several steps to the side and he follows, glancing over at Damon as he slides out of the room. Hopefully he’ll do what I say and lets me handle this one.

Two out of three ain’t bad.

I could have just shot him and be done with it, but I want to beat his ass first, for all the times he’s put his hands on Damon.

Conrad is wilder and more reckless than his brother. Having the knife in his hands gives him more courage than if he was fighting me unarmed.

He swipes wildly, and I feel the air breeze past my face. Since I’ve been in two separate fights this evening, my



reflexes are slower, and I take a long gash across my forearm when I try to disarm him. I hiss, but don't reach to stem the bleeding.

With one more wild swipe at me, I catch his arm by the elbow, jut my hip out, and flip him. He lands on the coffee table, and it breaks under his weight, the knife flying from his hand. I bring my foot down on his face, stunning him. Then I kick him in the ribs a couple times before he gets his bearings and rolls away.

“You're so used to beating on men smaller than you, you can't even fight a man your size without a weapon, huh?” I ask in a taunting voice, watching as he tries to discreetly locate his blade.

He snarls, standing upright, but stumbling. His hand goes to his head, shaking himself. “You'll pay for what you did.”

“You're paying for it now,” I tell him as he rushes at me. Unlike his brother, I don't let him throw wild punches. I duck and dodge, then hit him with several body shots, then an uppercut to the chin. Grabbing his shirt so he doesn't fall down or move from my punches, I hold him and hammer his face with my right hand—the same arm with the long gash from his serrated blade.

His knees go out, but I don't let him go. I follow him down to the floor, punching him until my arm gets tired. Conrad is taking gurgling breaths, but I don't give a fuck. He dies today.

A gleam flashes in the corner of my vision and I see his knife under the mess of the table. Since I know he's not going

anywhere, I drop him and make my way over to it, grasping it in my aching hand.

I turn back around and see he's trying to move away from me, dragging his body a few feet away. "Aw, don't leave. We were just getting to the fun part."

He starts to stammer, but his swollen lips won't allow him to speak. I don't want to hear anything he has to say.

Dropping to my knee beside him, I raise the blade high in the air and bury it in his chest. I push it in as far as it will go and twist. He's dead before I pull it free.

Falling back on my butt, I look around at the carnage. The office is a mess, blood everywhere, furniture knocked over or broken, and three bodies in three different death positions.

Make that two.

While I watch, I see James's chest rise and fall. He stirs, then turns on his side, opening his eyes to look at me. Before he can scream or say anything, I throw the knife at him, watching it sink to the hilt in his eye.

Now they're all dead.

Just to be sure, I go around and check their pulses. Yep, dead.

Blowing out a deep breath, I try to clean myself up as best I can before I make my way to Damon's room. My nose has stopped bleeding, but my arm is leaving trails down the hallway. I'll make sure to clean that up.

“Damon, it’s me,” I say after I knock on the door.

It opens quickly and Damon throws his arms around me. I hiss when I lift my arm to wrap around him, but I don’t regret holding him in my arms.

He’s trembling slightly and I hold him tighter. “I’m here, baby. Talk to me.”

Damon shivers. “They’re dead.” He lets out a shaky breath. “I thought I would feel worse if they died. I mean, I envisioned it, but I thought I was a bad person and told myself I would feel like shit if they really died. But I don’t.” He peers up at me and I see tears brimming in his eyes. “I’m free,” he whispers, then buries his head in my chest, sobbing.

I hold him, rocking him slowly. “You’re free, baby,” I murmur. “You’re free.”

I’m not sure how long we stand there, and it doesn’t matter. I hold Damon until his cries subside.

Tilting his head up, I wipe his tears with my clean hand. “I have to get someone here to clean this up. You want to stay with me or stay in your room?”

“I’ll always want to be where you are,” Damon whispers earnestly.

Nodding, I tuck him to my side, and we walk to the living room. We sit on the couch and I pull my phone from my pocket to call Quin.

“It’s done,” I tell him when he answers.

“Clean up?” he asks.

“Yep.”

“Done. My contact will be there in twenty. Don’t leave. They might need help. And don’t worry, they’re discreet.” We click off and I pull Damon on my lap.

“You’re bleeding,” Damon says, pulling my arm towards him. “Here, we have a first aid kit.”

He hobbles to get it, holding his side, and I lean back, closing my eyes. They’ll be black and blue soon from my broken nose. I touch it gingerly and wince when my fingers land lightly on it. Fuck. I haven’t been in a fight like that in years. Three opponents in less than an hour. I’m getting too old for this shit.

Damon comes back and sits on the floor in front of me to clean the gash on my arm. I curse when he rubs alcohol pads over it, the burn making my heart stutter a little. He gives me an apologetic look but keeps gingerly cleaning me up.

I get fed up with the slow burn and take a bottle of alcohol, open it, and dump it on the slice. “Fuck me!” I growl, clenching my teeth so I don’t cry out more from the immense pain.

Damon gives me a reproachful look. “That was unnecessary.” He pulls my arm back to him, using gauze to mop up the alcohol and the fresh blood that’s dribbling down. When it’s clean, I twist my arm and see the gash isn’t deep, but it’s long.

Taking some clean gauze and medical tape, Damon wraps my arm up. When that's done, he sits beside me, taking a fresh wipe to clean my face. "I don't know how to set your nose. Do you?"

I nod, but don't move to fix it. I'm already in pain from my arm—my nose can wait.

Sighing, Damon says, "Thank you. For coming for me and doing what you did. I thought I'd be stuck here forever. I'm glad you're here."

"Me too, baby." If it weren't for Brent and the shit James pulled before, I wouldn't be here. If it were under different circumstances, I would thank James for bringing us together, but fuck that guy. I'm glad he's dead for what he did to Brent, and what he did to Damon for over a decade and a half.

James and his sons terrorized this sweet man for years, stole from him, treated him like a maid, and basically made him a prisoner in his own home. They treated him so bad that I wonder how he turned out so fucking amazing.

He's the sweetest man I've ever met. He's optimistic, he's loving, very caring, smart, and one of the best people I know. I get to see the real him.

During our two weeks together, he blossomed. He grew before my eyes. I know *that* Damon, not the one that was so beaten down that he was afraid of his own shadow. Not the one that was miserable in every aspect of his life, and not the Damon that hated putting on his clothes every day because he wasn't comfortable.

I got to know the real Damon and I fell in love with him.

“What do we tell the police? Do I report them missing? Do I pretend I don’t know what happened?”

After my nose is clean, I take a deep breath and pop it back in place, cursing again. I wipe under my nose again, collecting the small trickle of blood that leaked out.

When I’ve gotten my bearings, I grab Damon’s hands. “I think the best thing to do is wait twenty-four hours, then report them missing. I’ll ask the cleaners what they want to do, and we can come up with a plan.”

“Who are the cleaners?” Damon asks just as a knock sounds at the door. “Who is that?”

“Cleaners.” I stand and motion for Damon to stay on the couch when he tries to follow me. I grab the gun he put on the table and tiptoe to the door. I check the peephole and smile when I see the people on the other side.

Pulling the door open, I wave the two men in. “Prince,” Paddy says, bringing me in for a hug. “Good to see you again, brother. You’re a sight for sore eyes.” His voice is gruff and tight, his Irish accent thick.

“You too, man.” I pat his back and turn to the other cleaner.

Declan, Paddy’s right-hand man, steps up and claps me on the back as well. “Always have to bail you out, hmm?” he quips, referencing when we had to call Paddy and his crew to help us get Abel when he was abducted. His accent isn’t as

thick as Paddy's but there's no mistaking he's an Irishman, through and through

“What have we got?” Paddy asks and I wave him back to James's office. Damon looks at me with solemn eyes. I hold my hand up so he stays in place, and I escort my two old friends to a crime scene.

Paddy whistles when he sees the state of the office and the three bodies littering the floor. “What the fuck did you get yourself into, lad?”

Quickly, I go through what happened with Brent and Paddy nods. “So, yeah, he definitely needed to go.”

“Glad you handled that. Mamba was a pain in my ass.” Paddy looks around some more then checks out the bodies. “Okay, so, you fucked them up pretty good.” He turns around and sends me a smirk. “Best thing to do is maybe robbery gone wrong, but not here. We'll have to move the bodies.”

I nod, kicking at the legs of James, who's sprawled out by his desk. I wish I could kill him again.

Declan walks over to Fallon, who's face down. “A shooting, a knife to the eye, and ...” He inclines his head to Conrad.

“He got the same treatment,” I say. “It was his knife.”

The Irishmen laugh and slip into a shorthand I'm used to hearing but could never quite understand. They come to a decision and turn to me. Paddy says, “I need three men here to help us do what needs to be done. It's dark out, so no neighbors will see us transporting.”

“What do you need?” I hear from the door and see Damon standing there, arms around his middle.

I hold my hand out and he ambles over. Paddy’s eyes grow soft as he looks at my man.

“You’re a little beat up there. Ribs?” Damon nods, tucking into my side. “I’ll have a look at them shortly.” He focuses back on me and answers my question. “Car keys. We’ll drive them down to the pier and make it look like an accident. I’ll also have some men come clean things up here.” He inclines his head, and we all leave the office.

Taking a seat on the couch, Paddy waves Damon over and lifts his shirt. He prods a few ribs and Damon flinches, biting his lip so he doesn’t cry out. “Does your father—”

“He’s not my dad,” Damon growls in a tone I’ve never heard before..

“My apologies, lad,” Paddy says, dropping his shirt. Damon nods. “Does that piece of shite have a job he reports to?”

“He’s a lawyer. High profile.”

Paddy shrugs. “That doesn’t matter. We can handle that. Will it be suspicious if he doesn’t show up to work tomorrow?”

“Yes. Probably.”

Paddy swears under his breath. “Okay, we need to get started now. Declan,” he calls to his right-hand man who hurries to his side. “Grab me something to bind these ribs. And call three men to move bodies and two men to clean. No mess, nothing left behind.”



Declan gets on the phone and barks out orders, coming over with a shirt and a pair of scissors. Paddy binds Damon's ribs, and I feel myself getting antsy, hating seeing Damon in pain. Once that's done, Paddy stands and I do the same, pulling him in for another hug. "Thanks for helping, Paddy. I won't forget this."

"Anything for you, lad. Tell Savage I asked about him and I miss our chats. I'll be calling soon."

With that, Paddy and Declan head to the office. Grabbing Damon's hand, I pull him to his room. "Pack a bag. You're staying the night with me. We can figure out how to cover this bruise on your face so you can work tomorrow. Everything has to look normal in case the cops come see you. Understand?"

He nods. "What will happen?"

"What do you mean?"

"Will the cops come? Or suspect anything?" He burrows into my chest. "Michael, I'm scared."

"Don't be. Everything will be fine. Paddy is good and his guys are excellent cleaners. Not the first time they've had to get rid of someone." Damon shudders. "I'm sorry baby. I haven't exactly been living on the right side of the law. We know what we're doing."

Exhaling, Damon nods. "I trust you, so if you trust them, I trust them, too."

Kissing his head, I let Damon go so he can pack a bag. For the rest of the night, I plan to hold him and take care of him. I

need to make sure my man is alright.

# Chapter 22

## Damon

**M**ICHAEL HAS US WALK stealthily into the hotel. He has avoiding cameras down to a science and we make it to his room without any fuss. I gingerly hold my ribs as we walk inside.

After dropping my bag, Michael gently pulls me to the bed—being mindful of my ribs—and sits me on his lap. “Tell me what you’re thinking, baby.”

Sighing, I lay my head on his shoulder. “I feel like I’m going to wake up any moment and realize this is all a dream. I’ll wake up, back in my bed, listening to Conrad tell me to get up and do god knows what. I think James will waltz out of his office and tell me to go pick up his dry cleaning. I think Fallon will tell me to get some dinner on the stove before he kicks my ass.”

“That won’t happen,” Michael says earnestly.

“Are you sure? Are they really ... dead?”

“They are. They’ll never come back. I’ll protect you from everything, even their ghosts.”

I didn’t know I needed to hear that until he said it. My lip trembles and tears leak from my eyes. My head rests on his shoulder and I cry silent tears, cleansing my soul. I not only cry for me, I cry for my mother who I never properly grieved. The one time I got too overwhelmed with emotion and cried at the dining room table, James told me to shut the fuck up and stop being a bitch. He said my mother was too soft on me and I needed to buck up. I hadn’t cried for her since.

Now, I feel all the emotions I felt when I was a child bubbling up and overflowing. A sob bursts from my throat and I crumple, holding on tight to Michael as I cry ugly tears. He rubs my hair and murmurs to me, telling me things will be okay and I’m safe now and things will get better.

When I’m all cried out, I lift my head and kiss Michael deeply, seeking comfort from his lips. He frames my face, pressing his lips to mine and caressing my tongue.

“Thank you,” I tell him when we separate. “I feel ... okay, I think.”

“Damon. Baby. You shot Fallon.”

“I did.” I search myself to figure out how I feel about it. I think I’m okay. I mean, he deserved far worse. “He was ... he could have killed you. I had to protect you.”

His eyes go soft and he kisses my forehead. “I appreciate that, baby. We’ll get you into therapy when you get to Canada.

You don't have to tell them what happened, but you do need to talk to someone."

"I agree. I will." My hand drifts up to my cheek. "My face. What will happen at work tomorrow? Will the cops suspect?"

He tilts my face back and forth. "You have makeup, right?"

I nod, smiling while I think about how I snuck away during lunch last week to get color matched at the mall. I wanted everything I could get my hands on for when I got to Canada. While I don't foresee me wearing makeup every day, I want to some days, and didn't want to struggle to find a color that blends with my skin.

"Okay," he says. "We can practice tonight so we don't have issues in the morning."

After a shower to get the blood and violence off, we go through applying makeup a few times and by the time we're both exhausted, we have it down. I feel confident that I can hide the redness. Michael snuck off to get me ice and by the time we're ready for bed, the swelling has gone down.

Snuggling close to his chest, I hold Michael tightly, hanging on for dear life. "You're incredible. You rescued me today, you know that? Most men would prefer flowers over a bloodbath." The deep rumble of Michael's laugh washes over me and I smile. "I'm glad you came into my life, Michael."

He kisses me and pulls me on top of him. Before I fall asleep, I ask him the question that's been on my mind since we

got to the room. “Michael, you said you’d tell me what you were doing here.”

I feel his sigh and he holds me tighter. “I did. It’s not pretty, baby.”

“That’s okay. I want to know.”

After a few moments, Michael tells me about an assassin that was hired to kill his brother. How he got there just as the man was ready to kill Brent. I listen with a sense of shock. Michael really did save his brother.

“That’s why you didn’t have a tie on,” I say off handedly.

He chuckles. “Yes. It was Quin’s idea.”

“You’re amazing, you know that?”

Michael kisses the top of my head. “Does what I did scare you?”

I shake my head. “No. I know you wouldn’t hurt me. I’m not afraid of you Michael. I’m afraid for anyone that messes with you, though.”

Laughing, Michael rolls me until we’re on our sides. “Get some sleep, baby. I’ll hold you all night.”

Feeling safe, I tuck my hands around him, and we fall asleep.

The next day, I go back home after work so it doesn’t look suspicious. I’m bruised and sore all over, so it was hard not wincing every time I made a sudden move or stood up. I was

also worried someone would see the bruises on my neck and face under my make up, but no one stared or whispered.

It's a little eerie walking into an empty house, but I don't hate it. I'm a little sad that all that violence took place in my mother's house, but that couldn't be helped.

Looking around, I realize that I don't consider this place home. I have more bad memories here than good. My mother worked her ass off to buy this house, but all I feel is misery having to be here.

As Michael and I discussed, I wait twenty-four hours before I contact the police. I tell them I haven't seen my family in over a day and all my calls had gone to voicemail. I was careful to call all three at least twice the evening prior just in case the police got suspicious and checked phone records. They took my statement and said they would be in touch with me as soon as they knew something. With James being who he was—it's still strange to think of James, Fallon, and Conrad in the past tense—they get started immediately trying to find them.

Michael told me his friends would make things look like an accident, but I'm not sure how three gunshot wounds and two stab wounds would be made to look like an accident. I don't ask questions. I don't want details. I've overheard James talk about plausible deniability more than once.

The following day, Mr. Archer gives me the day off, saying I should be home, waiting to hear about my family. It made the news that a well-known, high-profile attorney—one that

wanted to run for the senate—and his sons are missing. I don't argue since I'm supposed to be leaving in a few days anyway.

Before I leave, a courier walks in and asks for me. After I sign for the package, I open it and see that it's my passport. I smile sadly, thinking how James didn't have to die. Had he waited a few days, I would have been gone and he could have done whatever he wanted with the house if he found a loophole. Hell, I would have even left the deed for him after I managed to get away.

Whatever. No use musing over it now.

When I get home, I long to call Michael so he can come spend time with me, but we agreed it's best that we don't contact each other for a few days. Or at least until the police find the bodies. I don't even know *how* they'll be finding the bodies. All Michael said was they will be found.

It doesn't take as long as I would have thought for the police to come to me with their findings. They knocked on the door at two in the morning three days after we killed my family.

When I throw the door open, the officer removes his hat and I sag against the door, the full weight of what happened really hitting me. I'm not upset because they're dead—far from it. It's the realization that I really am free that hits me when the cops start to express their condolences.

What they gathered when they found the bodies of my family is a robbery gone wrong. They think they went out and someone recognized James and tried to extort him. When they didn't get what they wanted, they killed them all.



To the police, it is pretty cut and dry and they don't suspect me at all. They said they would hunt down leads and would keep me abreast of any developments. All I do is nod, my arms wrapped around my middle while I listen to them speak about what they know so far. I tune them out, staring off into space, wondering how long I have to remain in California now that I have nothing tying me down.

Of course, I have to stay long enough to make funeral arrangements. If I leave them down at the morgue, it will look like I had something to do with their deaths. Then all the work Michael and his friends did would have been for nothing. I also have to stay long enough for my birthday so I can get my inheritance. It's been so long since I had a good birthday that I almost forgot it was coming up.

For so many years, my birthday has been just another day. The last two years, people at Velli Corp have brought me cupcakes, but when I got home, there was nothing to celebrate. Now, I'm looking at getting a windfall of an undisclosed amount, a house, and whatever else my mother left me.

I shake myself when the police officers stand, realizing they're done talking to me about whatever it was they were saying. "I know this may be shocking to hear," he says, giving me a sympathetic look. I guess they interpreted my gazing off into space as a sign of grief. "We'll do what we can to find who did this." Pulling in a deep breath, I nod, standing as well. They shake my hand, give me a card, and tell me they'll be in touch.

Shortly after they leave, I call Michael and ask him to come over. Since there is no one else here, I tell him to just come through the front door. I'm on the couch, a blanket wrapped around me when he walks in. Smiling, I open my arms to him, and he comes quickly, dropping to his knees in front of me, kissing me softly.

"Hey, baby," he murmurs, rubbing my face where the bruise has faded to almost nothing. "How are you feeling?"

I think about that. How am I feeling? I'm not sure if I've been burying everything like I did with my mother or if I'm as okay as I feel. Or I think I am, at least.

Shrugging, I grab his hand and bring it to my chest. "I'm not sure. I think I'm alright. I have to get the funeral stuff done and that will let me know if I'm really as broken up as I'm supposed to be."

Moving to lay behind me, Michael pulls me close, hugging me against him, my back to his front. In my ear, he says, "You don't have to feel any way right now. Let your feelings come naturally. I'll be here every step of the way."

"Speaking of that, I think you should go back home." I close my eyes when I say that, hating myself for how it sounds.

He's silent for a moment and I fear he's thinking the wrong thing. I fear he's thinking I don't want him when that couldn't be further from the truth.

Finally, he clears his throat and asks, "You don't want me here anymore?"

Twisting around, I hold his face in my hands. “Of course, I do. I never want you to leave. I’m only saying that because I don’t know how long things will take, and my birthday is in a few weeks. Weeks where you can’t be seen in public. I can’t ask you to do that after you’ve already been hiding for so long.” He opens his mouth to speak, but I put my hand over his mouth. “I know you’d stay for me. But I can’t ask that of you. It will give me time to get everything together, put the house on the market, pack and sell everything. And ...” I grin when I look at him. “It’ll give you time to miss me.”

He nuzzles at my hands, then puts his head on my chest. “I miss you now.”

The couch is big enough for us to fit comfortably, so we lie there until we both fall asleep.

Unfortunately, Michael’s private jet is available a few hours after we wake. I push him to leave as soon as possible so I can concentrate on getting everything done. If he stays, I’ll want to spend all my time with him, since I can now. That wouldn’t look good for me keeping away from suspicion and Michael keeping a low profile. I would want to be seen in public with him, have dinner, go to the movies, hold his hand, be in love out loud. That won’t work while we’re in California.

He kisses me long and deep before he breezes out the door and I stand in the middle of the foyer for a while. I miss him already.

The following few days are hectic. The house is full of people coming and going before and after the funeral, people I

don't know because they're Conrad's, Fallon's, and James's friends. Some didn't even know I existed until after their deaths. It makes me uncomfortable to accept their condolences, but I feel like most of them are disingenuous. The way James's coworkers have to school their expressions when they talk to me, like they'd just finished talking shit before I walked up. Not like I care. I didn't love him and it's obvious he wasn't loved either.

I planned a triple funeral service—more than what they deserve honestly—and have them buried at a local cemetery that no one in attendance will probably ever visit. I hope they're burning in hell.

The reading of James's will is really weird. He left everything to his sons, which included my house. The lawyer that read the will seemed a little confused by that, as I informed him that the house was in my name. He sputtered and tried to cover what his colleague did, trying to fuck me over in his death. That kind of blunder could have been dragged out in court if the boys were smart.

Since his sons are dead, unless I contest it, everything goes to a distant relative that lives on the East Coast. Other than fixing the error of my home ownership, I will contest nothing. I want to be done with this as soon as possible. I sign a release for their possessions, call movers, and have everything packed up and sent off. I'm not sure where it's all going, I just need it out of my house.

Since I plan to move, I put the house up on the market, Mr. Marks being my contact for the sale. With the housing market the way it is, I'm not sure when it will sell, but I don't need to stick around for it.

Walking from room to room, I cringe at all the bad memories that overshadow the good. Where my mother measured me every few months against the wall is overshadowed by the day I walked in and saw James painting over it, a look of glee on his face when he saw me. I walk to the kitchen and think about the days my mother and I used to bake cookies. Then I think about all the times I would cry over the stove when I was forced to cook while I was exhausted or sick.

My bedroom wasn't spared from bad memories. I try to think about the times Michael came to see me, cuddling in bed with me. Those memories morph into Fallon dragging me out of my bathroom by my hair, taking me to James's office where they planned to keep me prisoner in my own house and take what was mine. Everything here is tainted. It needs to be left behind.



On the morning of my birthday, I wake up to a knock at the door. Groggy and exhausted from packing the last of my things last night, I drag my feet to the door. I'm met with a large bouquet of flowers and a package that a delivery person

has a hard time keeping ahold of. He holds on to the signature pad and I sign, excited to find out who sent me something. I haven't gotten a birthday gift in over fifteen years.

Feeling more giddy than I have in years, I take the box to the kitchen counter. There's no return address so I don't know who could have sent it. I'll take a stab and guess it's from Michael.

Smiling from ear to ear, I pull the card from the flowers and read it, tears welling.

**Even though I can't be there for your special  
day I want you to know**

**I'm thinking of you. I love you and miss you.**

**Michael xx**

I hold the card to my chest, blinking back tears. God, I miss him so much. I didn't think I could love someone so much so quickly. If all goes well, I'll be with him in a few days.

Setting the card to the side, I eagerly open the box, thinking it's a larger gift from Michael. I'm pleasantly surprised to see a photo on the top of the packing peanuts. Pulling it out, I can't keep from smiling as I look at it. Sitting on a couch are a smiling Abel and a serious looking Savage with Pogo on his lap. On the floor in front of them, Quin sits with a blond man

with a wide and beautiful smile. Beside them is Michael with a knowing grin on his face.

Turning the photo over, I see a message that says, “Meet your family.” My heart flutters and I don’t think I can contain all the love I have for Michael in my heart.

I rummage through the box and giggle when I pull out pair after pair of panties, some lace, some boy shorts. What made the box heavy and a little hard for the delivery person to keep ahold of is all the makeup that’s at the bottom. Some of it is irregularly shaped, so it moved around during transit.

The amount I pull out is staggering. I’m not sure why Michael thinks I’ll use all this in the few short days before I see him, but I appreciate that he sent me something on my actual birthday.

I pull out my phone to call him to thank him for my gift when my phone rings. I hurriedly pull it from my pocket, expecting Michael, but Abel’s name appears on the screen.

“Hey!” I shout almost excitedly, waving like an idiot.

“Hey, yourself,” he says, grinning at me. “Happy birthday! God, I wish you were here for it, but Michael told me why you can’t. Is it next week yet?”

Grinning, I hop up on the counter, not loving the silence surrounding me, but happy I’ll be out of this house soon.

Unable to keep the surprise from him, I tell Abel, “I’ll be there in three days. Michael and I were going to surprise you, but—”

Abel lets out a piercing scream and I hold the phone away from me, grinning at his exuberance. When he gets himself under control, he says, “Okay. Why would you keep that from me? We talk every day! And I *see* Michael every day! Ugh! You two traitors belong together.” He pouts and I giggle. “Anyway, Michael will be calling soon. I wanted to tell you happy birthday first.”

I roll my eyes at him, thinking he’s full of crap, but I love him anyway.

“Thank you. Love you.”

“Love you more. See you in a few days. I’ll be letting Michael know I’m riding with him, and I don’t give a fuck what he says. See ya!”

He hangs up before I can say anything about his antics.

Shaking my head, I hop off the counter just as my phone rings again. This time it’s Michael and I rush to answer.

“Happy birthday love,” he says by way of greeting.

“Thank you, baby, I love my gifts! I’m not sure how I’m supposed to use all that makeup, though,” I deadpan, making him chuckle.

We talk on the phone for a few more minutes, while I wish I were there with him instead of looking at his face on the screen. Soon. Very soon I will be waking up to this beautiful man, my protector, every morning. Treasuring him until the end of time. I’m counting down the days.



If I didn't have to go see Mr. Marks, I would have been content to spend my birthday on the phone talking to Michael all day. But I need to wrap this last piece of my American life up before I can become a Canadian.

I step into his office and Mr. Marks waves me back with a bright smile on his face. "Happy birthday, Mr. Reed. Hope you have some big plans tonight."

I shake my head. "None. Just talking to my boyfriend. Making plans for my move."

"Out of the country, right?" he asks, and I nod. "That's a bold move. Brave though. Good luck with that."

I nod my thanks. "So, what do I have to do?" I'm ready to get everything sorted. Most of all, I want to see what my mother left me.

Shuffling some paperwork, he clears his throat and says, "Well, you know you have the house. It's valued at \$4.6 million." My eyebrows shoot to my forehead, making Mr. Marks chuckle. "Yeah, the location and the bit of land surrounding your house really adds value. It's close to the city, but out of the hustle and bustle. The sale of this house will give you a really nice nest egg."

"Oh," is all I can think to say.

"Now, for what your mother left in her will for you. Looks like she had her own little nest egg. To the tune of about six million dollars."

My mouth drops open. Six million. “How?” I blurt. “What —? How?”

“Your mother had some stocks that did really well. A few weeks before her untimely death, she cashed some out and that got her a good chunk. It’s been growing ever since. As far as her estate, she has about three million in stocks and bonds and has a property in Pasadena.”

I know I look like a fish out of water the way my mouth is opening and closing. I shake my head, a braid flopping over my shoulder. I have almost eleven million dollars? Just yesterday, I was worried about how long I could stretch my casino winnings so I wasn’t living off Michael until I found a job. Now, I can live comfortably without having to get a job or depend on him.

My heart hurts because I’m only seeing this money because my mother is dead. We could have done so much together with this kind of money. She could have stopped flying if she wanted to and we could have traveled. Done anything and gone anywhere. My mother is gone, but I’ll do everything for the both of us. I think she would have wanted that.

It takes me a moment, but I get my bearings and nod. “What do ... what do I do now?”

Mr. Marks slides some papers over to me and I scoot closer to the desk. “Sign here and here and I’ll have your funds sent to your account. For the stocks, if you’d like, I can actually recommend a good accountant and I can handle things, even with you out of the country.”

I nod and sign where he indicated. “Yeah, I would like that. I like working with you. I wouldn’t know how to go about getting one on my own.”

Feeling overwhelmed with everything that just happened, I don’t immediately drive home. I sit in my car and stare off into space, wondering how I’m supposed to feel being free from my shitty life and finding out I’m a millionaire.

Unbidden a smile stretches across my face. Good. It feels really fucking good.

# Chapter 23

## Michael

**A**GREEING TO LEAVE DAMON was one of the hardest things I've had to do, but I think it was the right call. He got all of his paperwork from his mother's estate in order, put his house on the market and got all his things packed and the house clean. He told me it looks and feels strange because he's the only one there and can't remember a time when the house was empty.

He probably wouldn't have gotten all that done with me there, because I would have wanted to do everything else but that. Even though we couldn't leave the house, we could have spent time inside, getting to know each other, letting me get to know his mind and his body. God, I miss him so much.

I scramble around, trying to make space for him in my room, even though I did that the day I got back home. Even still, everything has to be perfect for him. I've waited years to have Damon by my side. Nothing less than perfection is worthy of him.

“Hey,” Red says as I go about straightening the coasters and magazines on the coffee table. “Where’s the fire?”

“Damon flies in today,” I answer without looking at him. There’s nothing wrong with the things on the coffee table. I just need something to do with my hands.

Red takes the stack of magazines from me and places them back where I picked them up. He pats my hand and motions for me to have a seat. Dramatically, I do what he says, flopping down and throwing an arm over my eyes.

“Why are you stressing?” he asks in a soft voice. “You think Damon is going to turn around and leave if the magazines aren’t in alphabetical order?”

I look over at him and he gives me a small grin. Sighing, I sit up, hands dangling between my legs. “No. I just ... I just want him to love it here, you know? He’s used to living in California. What if he hates Canada? What if he wants to move back?”

“I don’t think that will happen. I think he wants to be here with you and Abel. I’ve talked to him a few times while Abel and I were together, and he sounded really excited to get away from that area. Don’t stress. You’re a catch.”

“You’re just saying that because we live together.”

He barks a laugh, standing to get his jacket. “No, I mean it. Don’t sell yourself short. Damon will love it here because he loves you and Abel. He’ll be happy to be with you both.”

Knowing he's right, I stand to grab my jacket as well, then give him a confused look when he follows me out the door. "Where you going?"

"Where are *we* going, you mean," I hear behind me and spin to see Abel and Savage standing by my car. "We're going to get Damon."

Chuckling, I unlock the car door. "We can't all fit in my car, you know."

Quin steps outside, walking up to me. "Me and Red are taking my car."

"You too?" I ask my best friend, wondering when they all decided this.

"Yep. We all like Damon. Why not welcome him to his new home?"

Everyone wanting to come with me to get the love of my life means so much. If I cried, this would be a moment that I shed a tear.

Clearing my throat, I nod, then get behind the wheel of my car. "Let's do it then."

The drive is quiet, save the radio playing softly in the background. I'm trying not to let my nervousness show. I know Damon loves me and I'm not worried about whether he wants to be with me or not. I'm worried that he'll get here and not want to stay. I worry he'll be restless and unhappy, only staying because my family is here and it's where I want to be.

Canada is nice and I've fallen in love with the country, but if Damon doesn't like it, I'm willing to go wherever he wants. He's my family now and I would rather be where he is.

With all my thinking, the drive is quick, the hour and a half flying by. I hear Savage chuckle in the back and put his hand on Abel's bouncing knee. "You know," I say, meeting his eyes briefly, "it's been years since I've driven you around like this. Can't say I miss it."

Savage's deep chuckle fills the car and I still marvel at how much Abel has changed him. I don't think I've heard him laugh in all the years I worked for him. Smile, once or twice. Smirk evilly, more than I can count on both hands. But I've never heard him laugh and be this carefree. The things a good man can do for you.

"Yeah, well, Abel makes me drive now," Savage says, gazing down at Abel with a soft look on his face.

Pulling into a parking spot, I draw in a deep breath and step out of the car, breathing in the cool, crisp air to clear my head. Butterflies dance in my stomach at the thought of seeing Damon again.

Me and my chosen family crowd around the baggage claim area, staring in the direction of the gates. I bite my bottom lip and look down at my phone. Damon texted me earlier, telling me his flight would arrive at three fifteen. It's three twenty-one now. I start to get antsy, then realize that he has to go through customs. Calming down, I stuff my hands in my pockets,

preparing to wait at least twenty minutes for the customs line to dwindle down.

Ten minutes later, I see him. Damon looks amazing. Even though he has on a jacket, I can tell he's dressed how he always wanted to. His jeans hug his thighs in a sexy way. I can't stop staring at him. When he looks up, his eyes meet mine and he breaks out into a wide grin.

Getting myself in gear, I break away from our little group and meet Damon halfway, scooping him up in my arms and spinning him around as I hug him tightly.

I feel wetness on my face and pull back to see tears leaking from Damon's eyes. I also see that he has his contacts in and makeup on. Smiling, I wipe his tears then smack a kiss on his lips.

"I missed you," I murmur against his lips.

"Missed you too."

I set him on his feet and kiss his forehead, not wanting to let him go. But he hasn't seen his best friend in three years. I can share him just this once.

Stepping out of my arms, Damon rushes forward, pulling Abel in for a long hug, crying and whispering to each other. We all stand back, allowing the two best friends to get reacquainted with each other.

When they finally separate, Abel takes Damon's hand and walks over to Red. "Allow me to introduce you to Red in person. He's amazing."



Damon reaches out tentatively to shake his hand, but Red gives him a quick hug. “I hug. It’s my thing.” Damon chuckles and wraps his arms around him.

Savage and Quin speak to Damon as well, then he walks over to me, tucking himself to my side. Bending to his ear, I whisper, “Welcome home, baby.”

The smile he gives me stops my heart then has it galloping in my chest.

After we collect Damon’s bags, we leave, Abel and Damon sitting in the back to talk and reconnect, laughing loudly about god knows what. Whatever it is, I’m just happy to hear the delight in Damon’s voice.

I was worried about him while he was in California by himself. Even though he told me he was okay after shooting Fallon, I didn’t like leaving him by himself. He promised me he was okay, even though he said he had flashbacks once or twice. I got the number to the therapist Abel sees. As soon as we get him settled, I’ll set him up with an appointment. He doesn’t have to feel bad about what he did, but I want to make sure he’s mentally sound.

Now that he’s here, there’s so much I want to do. So much I want to show him. I want us to build our lives together. And that may mean moving into our own place. I love rooming with Quin and Red. I love the thought of us all being under the same roof, but Damon just left a home full of people. He might want us to live alone. And that’s fine. There’s a new

house being built a few doors down from ours, so we would still be in the same area if he wanted to move out.

When we get home, I shake away my nerves and grab Damon's bags from the back. I walk him inside and pull him upstairs, putting his bags in my room. My room is the same size as Quin's, with its own full bathroom off to the left. The only difference between Quin's room and mine is that I had a balcony added to the floor plan. I like to wake up and stand outside for a few minutes, enjoying the sunrise.

Maybe Damon will enjoy it with me.

I move over to my walk-in closet, placing Damon's bags there. I put his suitcases on what I made his side of the closet, beside the boxes of clothes we shipped from Nevada. When I step out, I see Damon standing at the door, looking around.

Trying to see my room through Damon's eyes, I glance around too. My king sized bed is made neatly, my deep red blanket stretched tight over its surface. The black dresser is on the other side of the room, next to the balcony. I cleaned out some drawers there too, just in case he needed them. The black armoire where I keep my TV is right across from the bed, adding a more sophisticated touch to the room. Lastly, the faux fur rug between the bed and armoire was Abel's idea, one that I've grown to really like. It feels good under my feet.

Damon steps in slowly, looking around as he makes his way over to me. "I love it. But ..."

My stomach plummets. "But what? Do you want to move? Want to have our own place? Are things too cluttered? Do you

—”

He chuckles and covers my mouth so I stop with my rambling questions. “No. I was saying, I love it, but do you think we can switch out the blanket? Conrad had this same exact set.”

Quickly, I snatch the blanket from the bed and toss it in the corner.

Damon laughs and shakes his head. “I don’t mean right now. We can always go shopping later. I’m a millionaire now.”

His laugh sounds forced. I see the sadness around his eyes and I figure he’s thinking about *how* he became a millionaire.

“Yeah, you are. How does it feel?”

Damon shrugs, plopping on my bed. “I’m not sure. Good some days, sad others. My mom did right by me, but I wish she was alive to enjoy some of the wealth she built. I miss her.”

“I know baby.” I pull him on my lap and kiss his forehead, then run my hand over his ponytail. It’s not the big, curly one I fell in love with when we went out in Vegas. I think he put some product on it to tame it. I can’t wait to see him wear it in his big ponytail. It’s so soft and beautiful.

We sit like this for a moment, then I remember what I was supposed to give him when we had a moment alone. “I have something for you,” I murmur, extracting myself from his arms to go to my closet. When I come out, he smiles when he sees what’s in my hand.

I hand him the mask he wore the night we met. I was supposed to give it back to him when he came to my hotel a few days after the ball, but I was so struck by him that I forgot. Then I was supposed to give it to him in Vegas, but it wasn't on my mind. When I finally got home, I pulled it out of my suitcase and promised I would return it. I'm sure he won't need it in the future, but I want him to have it. So he remembers how all of this started.

Damon runs his fingers over the mask, touching it gently. "I wasn't going to go, you know?" he tells me, head down while staring at the mask. "James"—he trips over the name, coughing slightly— "James told me no. He, Fallon, and Conrad *laughed* when I asked to go." I tamp down the anger at the hurt in Damon's tone. They're dead. We put them in the ground. They can't hurt Damon anymore.

I pull him close and Damon smiles up at me, his eyes soft. "James left the invitation on the counter. I wasn't going to, but I told myself if he didn't come back for it by the time I finished the dishes, I'd take it. It was invitation only." I nod, though I got in because Quin has his ways. "When I got to the store to pick up their suits, there was a suit there. Perfect size. Didn't need it tailored or anything. It was ... perfect."

"Think it was a sign from your mom?" I ask, knowing how he feels about those.

He nods. "Yeah, I do. Everything just fell into place. The suit, the invitation, seeing you. Wanna know what I think?"

"Always," I answer honestly.

“I think my mother was giving me a shove to get out of the bad situation I was in. I think she left me signs that I needed to go. She wanted me to see you because she knew how much I would need you. She was letting me know that she didn’t abandon me just because she died. I think she gave me you.”

Taking his face in my hands, I kiss him, putting all my love into it. “I think so too. I needed you, Damon. And now that I have you, I don’t intend to let you go.”

“Good,” he answers with a smile. “I don’t want to go anywhere.”

Then Damon kisses me again, straddling my lap. “Red and Quin went to Savage’s house,” he whispers as he kisses down my neck. “They wanted to give us some alone time.”

Flipping him onto his back, I gather his hands in mine and put them over his head. “Then let’s not waste time.”

I make love to Damon slowly, taking my time and getting to know his body. I savor him, even though I know I have days and months and years to do that.

I have forever.

# Epilogue

## Damon- One Year Later

“PLEASE,” I BEG, MOANING into the pillow in front of me. My ass is propped in the air and Michael is behind me, fucking me slow.

“Please, what baby?” Michael asks, his hand on my waist tight and unyielding, his hips plowing into me.

“Augh, fuck. Fuck ... fuck.”

“This what you’re begging for?” His strokes speed up and I nod, holding on to the sheets for dear life. “Tell me.”

I lift my head, moaning as I try to get my thoughts together. “Fuck ... me ... harder.”

Michael growls and picks up the pace, his hips swinging, pounding me hard. I reach down and stroke my dick, my hand moving fast.

“That’s right, baby,” Michael grunts, pushing inside me and hitting my prostate. “Fuck, you feel fucking good. Your ass is

so tight.” He slaps my ass, making me yelp. “Like that?” he asks and I nod, prompting him to do it again.

The fiery slap sends me over the edge and I come hard, covering my hand and the bed under me with my spunk.

“Fuck, Damon.” Michael thrusts in and out of me quickly, pushing me down to the bed, making me lie in my own mess. I couldn’t care less.

Putting pressure on my lower back, Michael fucks me harder and faster, making me moan loudly as he pounds my oversensitive prostate. I’ve come to love orgasming before Michael. I love when he strokes my oversensitive prostate, so I can feel this fine edge of pleasure and pain.

Just when I think I can’t take anymore, Michael groans, his hips start to stutter, then he stills, emptying inside me.

He slumps over my back, breathing heavily in my ear. I smile, loving the feeling of his heavy weight on me. Pulling out, Michael rolls off me, then drags me into his arms.

Peering up at him, I grin. “Good morning.”

“Morning,” he whispers. “Happy birthday.”

“Never had birthday sex before.”

Michael smiles, kissing my forehead. “Count on it twice a year. For yours and mine.” I chuckle, which turns into a groan when Michael slides his fingers inside me, pushing his come back in.. “Or everyday can be your birthday if you want.” He kisses my neck and I writhe against him, never getting tired of being with him like this.

This year has been the best of my life. Michael and I stayed with Quin and Red, though he's asked me more than once if I wanted to move. Mainly because I stayed with three men before and didn't have a good experience. But I always tell him no. James, Conrad, and Fallon weren't my family. They didn't treat me well and they didn't want me there.

The opposite is true here. Michael, Red, and Quin love me. They enjoy having me around. They treat me like a person. There's no way I'm giving that up.

I figured it would take me some time to get adjusted to Canada, with a bit of a culture shock for good measure, but I didn't feel that at all. Everyone has been polite and kind to me, very welcoming when I tell them I'm American. Of course, the first question they ask is how I'm liking the country, looking a little smug when I say I love it and have no intentions of returning to the States. If only they knew the real reason.

The cops called a few times, saying they have no new leads in the case of my stepfamily, but I don't think they're in a big hurry to solve it now. Someone sent in an anonymous recording of James, Fallon, and Conrad talking about the attack on Brent. Brent won his senatorial race by a landslide because of his social justice platform and the cops aren't too keen on finding the killers of the men who attempted to murder him. The case is now cold and I will not call for updates or to reopen the investigation.



I'm glad Michael gave me the idea to send in the recording and Quin was able to make sure it was untraceable.

About six months ago, the sale of the house was finalized and I was able to cut the final ties I had in California. Mr. Marks gave me the name of an accountant in California for my stocks, but Quin found a good stockbroker here who conducts her business ethically. After the transfer of my assets, I told Mr. Marks I enjoyed working with him, but no longer needed his services. He wished me well and that was it. We were done.

Now, I'm a Canadian citizen, Quin doing whatever it is he does to have the process rushed, and I couldn't be happier. Abel and I have gone into business together, doing some freelance teaching and development services. Well, I teach, Abel does the development part, usually small projects alone and we tackle larger ones together. It's been great.

I grab Michael's hand—though my hand, straining dick protests—and pull it out of me. “Stop before we stay in bed all day.”

Michael grins, leaning forward to kiss me. “Your fault for letting Abel throw you a party.”

“I haven't seen him for the past few birthdays. Let him have his fun. We have all night, since Quin and Red are going to Red's brother's house tonight.”

An empty house would be perfect. I have some new lingerie that Red, Abel, and I picked out a few weeks ago. Yeah, it's my birthday, but a great present is seeing the look of desire on

Michael's face when I step out of our bathroom with the lace jockstrap and sheer camisole.

His salacious smile has my dick taking notice, twitching against his thigh. "Can't wait. Come on," he says, rolling away from me. "Hop in the shower while I change the sheets. I'll join you shortly."

I hop off the bed, kissing Michael on the back as I head out. God, it's so crazy that I have all this now. A man, a nice house, a new life, a great business and good friends.

The waterfall shower feels amazing, beating over my body and relaxing me. Michael's strong arms around me relax me further and I melt against him. He kisses me gently on the neck, then gets my wash cloth ready, rubbing it over my belly where I came all over myself.

"We have thirty minutes before we have to be at Abel and Savage's. Need me to help with your hair?"

Since that very first time he did my braids, Michael has been jumping at the chance to do more. And he's gotten so much better.

"Nah, I'll wear a ponytail." My hair has gotten so much longer. I think about cutting it sometimes, but when I get it tamed, I really love it. Especially when it's in a ponytail and the curls pop just right.

We don't get handsy while in the shower, namely because Abel would give us hell for being late. He has to be the most

punctual person I know. I'm not in the mood to hear his tantrums on my birthday.

Abel and I have gotten closer since I've been here and Red is included in that. I never thought I'd find it easy to make a friend as quickly as I did with Abel, but that's what happened with Red. He's such a good guy. After hearing his story, I love that he got to reconnect with his brother, despite the crap he went through when they were kids.

We're a big family here and I couldn't ask for more.

Well, I would love to be married to Michael. It's not necessary, since I know neither of us wants anyone else. But I think him claiming me like that will make me feel like I really have it all.

Sometimes, I get those moments where that weird part inside of me tells me I deserve nothing and I am nothing. That annoying, hurt part of me has been beaten down and almost destroyed over the past year, but it's still hanging on, the voices of James, Conrad, and Fallon coming at me when I least expect them.

I've been seeing the therapist that Michael set me up with and it's been really helpful. I'm able to push the voices away sometimes and not believe them, but some days are worse than others. For the most part, I believe when Michael, Abel or the rest of my family say I'm wonderful and that they love me.

After we get out of the shower and I do my hair and makeup, we get dressed to head to Abel's house. I told him I want to share my first birthday with my new family alone and not

worry about the hustle and bustle of a restaurant or nightclub or something. Though Abel, Red, and I do plan to visit a nightclub soon. And of course our overprotective men will be in tow.

Since Michael has a key to Savage and Abel's house, he only knocks twice before he slides it in the lock and lets us in.

Abel hurries out of the kitchen giving me a long hug. "Hey. Happy birthday! God, you're old."

I playfully hit his arm, making him laugh. Abel is three months older than me, so I don't know what he's talking about.

From the couch, Red says, "I didn't think you two were going to show up. I heard no signs of slowing down when we left."

My cheeks heat. I don't try to be loud, but Michael makes it impossible for me to keep quiet. I don't want to move out, but avoiding Quin and Red hearing us having sex is the only reason I would.

"Don't tease him," Michael says to Red, throwing one of Pogo's chew toys at him. Red dodges it, then makes a face when he realizes it's probably covered with Pogo slobber. "Let me go wash my hands," he says, kissing me on the cheek before he walks away.

I sit on the couch beside Red and put my head on his shoulder. "Were we really that loud?"

“Nah. I’m just messing with you. I’m pretty sure Quin and I are louder. My Daddy and his monster—”

“Hey!” I practically shout, putting my hands over my ears. I’d rather not hear about what Quin is or isn’t packing. I hear enough with Red shouting Daddy at the top of his lungs when they’re in bed.

Red laughs, moving my hands from my ears. “I’m done, I promise.” I give him a grateful look, making him laugh harder.

Abel comes over and lays across our laps, dramatically putting his hands over his eyes. “I’ve been working so hard on this party. You better enjoy it or I’ll cry.”

Rolling my eyes, I push him off my lap, his feet hitting the floor with a thud. “Yeah, I’m sure.” Looking around, I see Abel really did go all out. There are streamers, hanging lanterns and a big Happy Birthday banner hanging. “It looks really good. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, bestie. Now come on. Time to open presents.”

He takes my hand and drags me after him. I glance over my shoulder at Red and he grins, hurrying after us. There’s a gleam in his eyes and I wonder at it, but don’t ask as I’m dragged to the backyard.

Stepping outside, I see Quin on the grill, Savage playing fetch with Pogo, and Michael sitting at the table, holding something I can’t see.

When his eyes meet mine, he smiles and inclines his head for me to have a seat across from him. I look at Abel and he grins, pushing me forward.

Taking the seat, I try to see what Michael is holding, but he hides it from me. Jerk.

“You know I love you, right?” he asks and I nod, feeling my face heat as I smile like a fool. “I’ve wanted you to be with me for years and I still can’t believe you’re here now. I want you forever. I want us to grow old together. I want my future to be with you.”

I feel tears brimming in my eyes and I nod, wanting the exact same thing as Michael. If there’s one thing I want more than anything, it’s a life with him. A life with my family. A life here, in Canada.

“Since it’s your birthday, I felt it was only fitting that I give you what you asked Abel about all those years ago.” I feel my eyebrows scrunch, but I’m not confused for long. From under the table, Michael pulls out a sleeping lab puppy, the chocolate coat gleaming in the afternoon light.

I gasp, reaching my hands out immediately. Smiling, Michael hands him over, where I pull him in, tucking him under my neck. The puppy’s soft fur tickles my neck and I give him a gentle squeeze. “Michael ... how did you keep him a secret?”

Abel pipes up. “The puppy was here. That’s why I’ve been keeping you away the past few days. Sorry,” he says in a tone

that suggests he's not sorry at all. I look at him over my shoulder and he winks.

The puppy slowly comes awake, then starts to move around quickly, it's hyper energy making me laugh. I turn him on his back, rubbing his belly. Then I spot the ring attached to his collar.

With shaky hands I grab the collar, working the ring off. I look up to see Michael beside me, down on one knee. I burst into tears, hugging the puppy to my chest as Michael gently removes the ring from my fingers.

"I've wanted to ask you to be my husband since I laid eyes on you at the ball. I knew from the first time I saw you I wanted to be with you forever. Every day I wake up and see you in my arms, I thank your mom for sending you the signs that led you to me." He slides the ring on my finger and kisses it, meeting my eyes. "Damon Reed, would you do me the honor of being my husband? Making me the happiest man alive?"

Through my sniffing and heavy tears, I nod, swallowing several times before I say, "I would love to be your husband."

Michael takes my face into his hands and kisses me deeply. I put one of my hands over his, since I'm holding the hyper puppy with the other.

When we separate, our family comes over, giving us hugs and congratulating us. I smile through my tears, still not believing this is my life.

I can vividly remember the days where I was talked down to, beaten, abused and used, not able to even imagine being this happy, my heart being this full. But here I am, with the love of my life, my best friends, my family and a new puppy.

Life is good. Life is exactly as it should be.

I have my happily ever after.

THE END



# Afterword

Dear Reader,

Thank you again for taking the time out of your day to read my book. This book wraps up my very first completed series! It was a rollercoaster ride, for sure. I loved writing a slower burn story and loved the Cinderella aspect. I loved writing a possessive, pining Michael and a hurt but optimistic Damon. They really complemented each other nicely. I had a good time bringing Sav, Abel, Red, Quin, Pogo, Paddy and Declan back. The full circle aspect was a lot of fun. I hope you enjoyed reading this book as much as I loved writing it!

There are a few people I'd like to thank for the completion of not just this book, but the whole series.

My amazing beta readers, Tracy-Ann Ruglass and Brie Michelle Elizabeth. I couldn't have done any of this without you two. You both gave me such amazing feedback and helped strengthen the books. I'm not sure what these books would have looked like without you both, but I'm glad I don't have to

find out. Both of your help is invaluable and I'm glad you could help me on this author journey.

Sierra Koch and Kota Quinn...you both literally listened to me cry about this book. Real tears. Lol. If not for the two of you helping me brainstorm, with Sierra beta reading for me, I don't think this book would have been completed. Thank you for letting me cry in your voice notes. :)

My family, of course. I can't count the number of times I said, "Let me bounce an idea off you," just for me to ramble and they listen to me come to the conclusion on my own. That helped get the creative juices flowing and I'll be forever indebted to you all for your silence. Lol.

And last but not least, you readers. When I wrote *Taming Savage*, I didn't know if anyone would want to read my book. It was so different than the four books prior. But I went with it and the response was overwhelming. Thank you for taking a chance on *Taming Savage*, *Trusting Quin* and now, *Treasuring Michael*. I don't think I have enough words to express what it means to me. Just know that I take none of you for granted.

If you have time, please leave a review on Amazon or Goodreads. It helps me out more than you could ever know.

Thank you!

RS McKenzie

# Also By

## **Tales Reimagined Series**

### **Taming Savage**

#### **Abel**

After the death of our parents, I was taken in by my brother, who has been taking care of me more out of obligation than love. When he doesn't come home from a job—if burglary can be considered a job—I discover he's been taken by a beast of a man with soulless eyes. Even with his scars he's hot as hell, but his cold eyes chill me to the bone. My brother is the only family I have, so I do the only thing I can to make sure my brother is free: I offer myself to the beast for a year instead. When I find out who he is, I fear I may be in over my head.

## Savage

The first word that comes to mind when I see Abel? Beautiful. The second? Untouchable. He's much too beautiful for the likes of me, with my shifting moods and damaged body. What if I spend this year trying to win him over—mind, body, heart, and soul? It would be possible if my enemies weren't a constant threat. If I were a regular guy, I could have someone like Abel. I have these scars because of who I am; these scars that scare everyone away. Could a beauty like Abel ever see beyond the beast to the man underneath?

*Taming Savage is Beauty and the Beast reimagined as a dark and steamy gay romance with heart-pounding action, forced proximity, age gap, found family, a naughty virgin, first times, kink exploration, a mild D/s dynamic, and features a cold, damaged crime boss and the snarky beauty who will finally tame his beast.*

<https://a.co/d/5LIe8dP>



**Trusting Quin**

**Red**

I knew from the moment I met him, one night would never be enough. He was the Daddy of my dreams—equal parts sweet and stern, 100% hot as hell. The intensity when we came together was like nothing I'd ever felt before. It was never meant to be more than one night, and he'd always be the one that got away.

## Quin

Weeks after the business trip where I spent an amazing night with a gorgeous boy, I receive a phone call in the middle of the night. My sweet boy is in trouble and needs my help. He comes to me trembling and tearful, and I'll do anything in my power to help him. And I mean *anything*. Whoever hurt my boy will wish they'd never been born.

*Inspired by Little Red Riding Hood, Trusting Quin is the second installment in the Tales Reimagined series but can be read as a standalone. Contains Daddy/boy dynamics, sex work, references to sex trafficking, graphic violence, on page murder, off page murder, murder boyfriends, spanking, inappropriate humor, high heat, and of course, a sweet HEA.*

<https://a.co/d/h6xhYIR>



Surprised by Fate

## **Brandon**

After being unfairly fired from my job, I head to my family's vacation house where the quiet seclusion will give me time to figure out my next move. Fate has other plans when a snowstorm lands me—in need of care—on the doorstep of a sweet and sexy alpha. One touch from him and I know nothing will ever be the same. With the storm raging outside, another storm starts raging inside me. My heat has come early.

## **Mason**

Catching a snow-covered omega wasn't on my agenda for the evening, but as soon as I touch him, I know he must be my fated mate. I always thought fated mates were a myth, but something about this man is making my body and heart go haywire. Does he feel it too?

**Surprised by Fate is an instalove, fated mates, mpreg romance. It contains high heat and sexual content not suitable for anyone under the age of eighteen.**

<https://a.co/d/fWCnlkX>



## **My Professor Sweetheart**

**Jamie**

What is fun?

Sure, I go out occasionally with my best friend and I have my MMA fights, but I've never put myself out there. I've never done anything unexpected. So when best friend tells me to sign up for this blind auction, I figure why not? I graduate this year and need to take a chance on something more. And that's exactly what I get. Will I be content to leave it at just this weekend?

**Andres**

Am I lonely?

My best friend told me I'm a lonely Daddy that needs a boy to spoil. It's been years since I've had one and I have to agree. She suggests an auction where I bid on a man that might like the kink or at least be open to trying. I don't expect to bid on my student. Is he worth breaking the rules for?

**My Professor Sweetheart is a professor/student, forbidden relationship MM romance. It is part of the Sweetheart Escapes multiauthor series. It can be read as a standalone, but why not grab them all?**

<https://a.co/d/aBdMEOm>