



Go the Long Way

A CHANCE'S HARBOR  NOVEL

AJ PINES

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Go the Long Way

A CHANCE'S HARBOR NOVEL

AJ PINES



SuncatcherPress.com

Copyright

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First Edition

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Jakob has regrets.

It's inevitable in a life as wayward as his.

Managing the island's horse ranch, raising his teenage daughter as a single dad? It goes to fill that hole in him the way the military never did. And yet...

There's still something missing. Some fragment of himself he'd only just glimpsed that life-changing night; before it was all ripped away in a mistake that cost him his best friend. A mistake he'd do just about anything to make right.

Ethan however? He can't risk going through that kind of hurt again. The wary former football star has worked hard to rebuild his life from the ashes Jakob left behind, even if it's left him with a few regrets of his own.

Not to mention a few enemies.

Against his better judgment, Ethan is forced to accept Jakob's help, and Jakob's not about to waste this second chance.

Sparks start flying between the two men once more, but has too much time passed to rekindle their friendship? Or maybe even...*more*?

Can Jakob and Ethan heal old wounds in time to save a life —

Before it's too late?

Go the Long Way is a small town, second chance romance filled with thrilling heroics and found family.

Expect heavy elements of steamy open door MM romance, swearing, trauma, angst, suspense, violence, peril, trust, communication, m/m bisexual awakening, best friends to lovers, queer joy, first times, adorable awkwardness, Dad jokes, family traditions, holiday fluff, families of choice, and an entire forest of pining.

It is intended for mature audiences.

A Word from the Author

Go the Long Way is ultimately a story of love, second chances, and building a supportive found family. But the long way is not the *easy* way.

For **readers who detest spoilers** of any kind, feel free to skip right to Chapter 1 now.

However, if you are a **reader who is particularly selective** about the content you read, no matter the reason, you can find a list of potentially sensitive topics discussed in this book on my website at ajpines.com

*Dear Reader,
I have taken liberties.*

Chapter 1

Ricky Maddox had always been the flashy type for as long as Jakob'd had the misfortune to know him. If there was anyone who enjoyed being the center of attention more, Jakob hadn't met them yet. Which, considering Jakob's past? Was saying something.

"Look, just talk to Frank," Ricky wheedled, the sunlight glinting off his no-doubt expensive sunglasses. "He listens to you, looks on you as if you were his own son. He told me that if you wanted to sell, he would sell. Could live out the rest of his days like a king. You could too, Jakob. We could call it... an administration fee or something. Whaddya say?"

Jakob glanced at the man. Took in the thousand-watt smile beaming up at him where Jakob sat on the back of his horse; the incongruity of his tailored suit and highly polished shoes compared to the dust and gravel and mud of the ranch's drive. Even his car was out of place; the bright yellow of the supercar he had come roaring up in was a sharp contrast to the faded red and white trim of the stables behind.

Looking around at the house, Jakob considered the old gray hay barn beside it, and the red and white stables further past. The barn would probably be the first thing to go if Ricky had his way, to make room for building the big McMansion he said he wanted.

The horses out in the field beyond would be next once he realized how much effort they were to care for. Right now they made a pretty picture, grazing among the yellow wildflowers with the blue of the ocean sparkling below the ridge; the mainland a hazy, almost purple line in the distance. But once Ricky found out they weren't like his fleet of cars, ready to go for a spin at a

moment's notice, but living breathing creatures with demands and personalities of their own?

The stable would be converted to a garage practically overnight. Probably even before the dust from the last trailer pulling away had a chance to settle.

The bay mare under Jakob shifted in place, as if able to read his mind and just as uncomfortable with the idea as he was. More likely, she was just impatient. Here she was, all saddled up for a ride, and now the inconsiderate human on her back was sitting around jawing; like she was some piece of fancy furniture in a tea house someplace?

Jakob leaned down to pat her shoulder in silent apology.

"I already told you, Ricky. I'm not interested," he drawled, enjoying in no small amount the way Ricky's enterprising smile seemed to flatten. "And Frank doesn't want to sell any more than I do, which I *know* you know already because he's called me enough times to complain about you hounding him."

"It's... Richard now, actually," Ricky winced, the first sign of humanity Jakob might've ever seen from him, come to think of it. "Grandfather insisted. Richard Maddox the fourth, of Richard Maddox Real Estate."

"Bet you save a fortune on business cards," Jakob snorted. "What happened? Grandpappy see the news stories about some of those parties you used to throw?"

"C'mon Jakob," Ricky whined. "I drove all the way out here to talk to you today and this is how you treat an old friend? I'm getting mud on my shoes trying to do right by you. The least you could do is come down off your high horse there and *invite* me in for a cup of coffee; bend an ear to my offer, for old time's sake."

"You've got a different memory of those 'old times' than I do. Way I remember it, you weren't interested in being anyone's friend back then. Don't seem you've changed your stripes any since. Best thing I can say about you, is at least you're consistent," Jakob shook his head. "You say you want to buy the place, build your dream house on the land? You seem to be forgetting that to do that, you would be tearing down *my* home. Which tells me you still don't understand the first thing about friendship, *Ricky*."

Ricky's eyes darkened, but he was too good, too polished to let his

businessman's smile drop. That same slick facade that had made him such a media sensation both on and off the football field apparently translated just as well after he'd been forced into retirement and gotten into real estate instead. You couldn't get even halfway to San Morado without seeing his face on half a dozen billboards; a sight that always left Jakob with the vague regret he'd never given Ricky that well-deserved punch to the nose back when he'd had the chance.

"This is a *life-changing* amount of money I'm offering you, Jakob. Well over what the bank valued it at. My accountant thinks I'm crazy. Says I'm paying downtown prices for a cabbage farm in the sticks. Frankly, it's far more than this property is worth — "

"Seems to me, a businessman like yourself should know something is worth what someone will pay for it," Jakob interrupted, letting a little of the annoyance he felt at being talked down to slip into his voice. "Or how much someone values it — *real* value. Not some number a bank comes up based on their algorithms and such. Goes for a luxury penthouse in a skyscraper downtown or a ranch out in the ass end of nowhere. Even for an old cabbage farm."

Jakob could practically *hear* the gear change as he abruptly switched tactics.

"You've got a daughter, right? Going to be heading to university soon?" Ricky asked, as if they were making idle chatter. "Could send her to a good one, anywhere she wants. There's a big world outside this town. This could be her ticket to seeing it. You too."

Jakob grimaced, one eye on the dust cloud he could make out coming up the road. But no, it kept on going without turning onto the drive. Likely only a lost tourist passing through, then.

There were far too many folks like Ricky who assumed that just because Jakob looked and talked straight out of a western, he must be as dumb as the dirt under their feet. Never seemed to cross their minds that perhaps Jakob had already traveled his share of the world. That he *wanted* to live in a place like Chance's Harbor. That after everything he'd seen and done, he'd chosen to come back home.

No, there wasn't a single thing Ricky could offer Jakob, not that he wasn't trying his damndest. But the fact of the matter was, for Ricky to get his dream home, Jakob would have to give up *his*. A fact the guy appeared

oblivious to. Or, more likely, just plain didn't care.

"Answer's still no," Jakob answered firmly. He tried not to take any pleasure in the look of fury that flashed briefly across Ricky's faux-friendly expression, but it was a close thing. "Look, normally I would advise you to set up a meeting the next time you want to talk business about the ranch, but the answer will still be no. So if it's just going to be a waste of both our mornings again, please don't bother. Now, if you'll excuse me, I've got *real* work to get to," he said, ending the conversation.

Jakob clucked his tongue at the mare, nudging her towards the other end of the ring and *away* from a red-faced Ricky. He guided her into a trot, allowing himself a smile as he heard the crunch of gravel as Ricky stomped off, then the sound of the car door slamming.

Good, Jakob thought, if he's offended, maybe he'll finally drop the idea and leave us alone.

He heard the start of the engine, rolling his eyes as Ricky revved the motor. He'd barely registered the noise of spinning tires on loose rocks before he felt a sudden sharp pain in his cheek. Before his world *lurched* out from underneath him as the mare shied and bucked underneath him as the supercar peeled out of the gravel drive.

Ricky and his car forgotten, all Jakob's attention was suddenly consumed with the panicking horse under him. With sticking in his saddle as she ran straight for the ring's fencing, *away* from the roaring engine and the spraying rocks shooting out like artillery fire from under its tires. The mare squealed, high and shrill; trying to scrape off the rider from her back with the help of the steel panels hemming her in. Slamming her full weight against the railing of the riding ring that dared attempt to keep her from running to safety as was her natural right; as thousands of years of evolution was screaming at her to do when faced with a predator, when confronted by a threat.

Too in her own head with fear, she paid no heed to the pulling on her reins; ignoring the terrified shouts from the rider on her back or the other humans now spilling out of the stables as she pressed herself as hard against the fencing as she could; trying to get out, trying to get *away*, trying to get *free*.

Bright hot pain blossomed on Jakob's right side, all up his arm and down his leg. He knew he had to stay on. That up here was safer than down there, around a panicked horse's hooves. But — but he couldn't quite feel the reins,

the saddle's pommel in his clutching hands, his foot in the stirrup.

There had been a scream —

*...the voice far too familiar, something ancient and primal reacting to the
sound...*

— shouting, noise —

...Cassie — that scream had been Cassie. Was she hurt?...

— hands grabbing for him —

...no, no — he had to stay on, he had to get to Cassie, he couldn't let go...

— trying to peel his hands from the pommel —

...if he let go, he could fall. And if he fell...

— unwrap his fingers from the reins —

*...if he fell, he could be **hurt**...*

— a flash of Cassie's terrified face, her big green eyes wide and worried —

...worried? For him?...

— the sound of a knife slicing through leather —

...she was okay. She's okay, so what's all the fuss?...

— the feel of being lifted down, a shoulder under his arm —

...it's okay, it's okay — I stayed on, I didn't fall...

— trying to reach for her, to reassure her, only for lightning to erupt in his
veins at the motion —

...and then...

Nothing.

Chapter 2

What they don't tell you about recovery after a thing like that — after the hospital stay, all the surgeries, the pins, the damn physical training — is that even once your doctor declares you "healed"...

You're still left with all the memories.

See, Cassie had *seen* the accident — had been just coming out of the barn chatting to her friends after their riding class. She had seen the horse rear, seen it take off. She had seen her Dad get smashed against the side of the fencing and fall — but she hadn't seen him get back up.

And how she had *screamed*.

There's something about your own kid screaming that just *does* strange things to a brain, even if it's not them that's the one hurt. It's the sound of Cassie's screams that has Jakob waking up at night in a cold sweat; leg blazing like fire despite any number of doctors all agreeing it should be "almost good as new" now.

Guess it depended on your definition of "new," Jakob supposed.

In his book, "new" shouldn't come with shooting pains. Or aches when it gets cold. "New" didn't usually lead one to think he would be so reliant on his cane; that he'd have to retrofit his shower and everything else in his life to keep him from having to stand too long.

His arm had been a clean break, thankfully. It twinged here and there sometimes, but was sturdy enough to support his weight on the cane. But his leg...

Jakob was on his fourth specialist at this point. Hoping *this* would be the one that would stop trying to tell him most of the pain was just in his head, that she would actually *listen*.

If all the wishes were fishes, they could walk across the sea, right?

His therapist wanted him to try something new. Thought maybe it could help where nothing else had. She'd had him sign up for an art therapy class, one specifically for victims of traumatic injuries still suffering chronic pain. It was held at night in a local coffee house after hours.

At this point, Jakob was willing to try anything to get a solid night's sleep.

The flyer she had given him didn't have much to go on — just a big image of a cartoon artist at an easel, painted-splotched smock and beret and all.

Underneath that was the time, date, and location.

It was over in San Morado, of course. Most everything was.

A full hour's drive away from Chance's Harbor, he and Cassie had made an afternoon of it after she'd gotten home from school; done some Christmas shopping, picked Cassie up some new jeans for riding, had a bite to eat at a place where they showed you to your table and poured their water in goblets.

A bit pricey, but Cassie's smile as she pretended to be some snooty society lady, tutting as she dabbed the corners of her mouth with the cloth napkin? Worth it and then some, to Jakob's mind.

And now the art class, to top it all off. Even if it turned out to be a dud, the rest of it had been a pretty good day. Hopefully, it wasn't a dud, though. If they came back next week, Jakob wouldn't mind doing this all again.

He wasn't quite sure what to expect from the class, however. The only details were the instructions to bring whatever art supplies felt most comfortable, with a note that there would be limited supplies available at the class on a first come first serve basis.

He'd had to send Cassie up into the attic; waiting at the bottom of the ladder until eventually, she returned with the familiar shape of a dusty old tackle box. Truth be told, Jakob'd had more hope than actual memory of it having survived both decades and divorces, but there it was.

Something of a minor miracle, really.

It was a relic from back when he had thought getting to stare at naked chicks

in a life drawing class sounded like a pretty good way to tick the boxes for his degree's fine arts requirement.

*Boy, did I have the wrong end of the stick on **that** one,* Jakob snorted as he rifled through the old art supplies.

Somehow he'd managed to talk his best friend into joining him despite such a billing. Ethan had cackled for an entire week to find out all the models that year would be dudes instead; happily waving the scrap of paper in Jakob's face that he'd managed to score, bearing one particularly attractive model's phone number.

It had been a pretty good class, actually. Eye-opening, to say the least. In more ways than one...

Jakob grinned fondly at the memories as he sorted what supplies had gone bad and what might yet be salvageable; two separate piles quickly forming on the battered top of their kitchen table.

Most of the stuff had to be tossed out. Rotten erasers and dried-up pots of ink, paintbrushes either falling apart or so poorly cleaned you could pry up nails with them. But the charcoal and sticks of graphite looked like they were still okay, and Cassie had picked him up a sketchpad at the craft store that would do well enough while he gave this thing a shot.

She drove them both to the class, of course. Jakob had driven a manual all his life. Far too many years to not reflexively press the clutch when he heard the pitch of the gears; pain shooting up and down his leg from the action just as soon as he did.

Cassie was trying to be supportive, even bringing her own sketchpad and set of colored pencils along.

"The good kind, though," Jakob had told her when he'd handed her the money for it. "None of that back-to-school crap."

With a laugh, Cassie had kissed his cheek and promised, before heading out to meet up with some of her friends.

She was a good kid really, got a level head. Had been the one to call in the emergency on her cellphone. Even organizing Nash and some of the other ranch hands to cover things at the stables while she hopped into the back of the ambulance with him.

He was so proud of her, proud of the woman he could see her becoming.

Jakob's divorces had been hard on her, he knew. And Lord knows Jakob had maybe more than his share of regrets. But not once — not even for a *second* — had she ever been one of them.

In fact, she might be about the only thing in his life he somehow managed to do right.

She was telling him about some video a friend had sent; something from a game they all played together as she held the door open for him to the coffee shop where they were holding the art class.

All the available glass had been painted with winter scenes; a festive parade of holiday cheer, all brought to you by a nice steaming cup of whatever was on the menu inside.

Jakob had his hands full between his cane and his old backpack with his art supplies that kept trying to slide off his shoulder, when he heard it over the tinkling of the bells hung above the door.

It was a low rumble, bringing with it a flood of warm memories and complicated emotion.

And it was saying his name.

Chapter 3

"Jakob?"

Jakob's vision doubled and for a moment, he felt as if he was in that riding ring once more. Flat on his back in the dust gasping for air, Cassie's voice ringing in his ears as he stared at the image of a younger face; rugged and broad with a shit-eating grin that meant either great fun or big trouble or some combination of the two, layered over the one before him now.

Older, lined, scarred. There was a mark Jakob didn't recognize slashing its way through Ethan's right eyebrow and another graze across his opposite cheek. A small black hoop in his right ear, and crows feet at the corners of his eyes.

Jakob swallowed hard, though whether from the surprise or all the questions suddenly welling up in his throat — where he had been, what he had done, what had brought him here of all the places in the world? But he shoved them all down and tucked them safely away. Because after all this time, he wasn't sure... wasn't sure he had that right, not anymore.

But still — that same face, that *handsome* face — which Jakob could admit so easily now, after so much time wasted trying to deny it —

Ethan's face.

Ethan was *here*.

God — how long had it been?

"Dad?" came Cassie's voice, as if from far away. He frowned as he found himself lurching suddenly into the present through the veil of years and

memories, almost surprised to turn and find her at his elbow.

"Dad, are you okay? Do you need to go back home?" she asked, sounding worried; an odd juxtaposition with the holiday music playing merrily in the background. Sounded as if that hadn't been the first time she had tried to get his attention either, Jakob realized with a start.

"Everything alright?" came Ethan's voice and Jakob looked up as his old friend started walking their way, concern written all over that all-too-familiar face.

"Yeah, I'm — I'm fine. Just... didn't expect to see you here is all. It's been a while," Jakob said, feeling Cassie's hand resting gently on his shoulder as he answered them both, his gaze firmly on Ethan. He cleared his throat, trying once again to keep back all the questions struggling to claw their way up it, to choke him for the want of asking. Instead, he went with the simplest, the most harmless he could think of. "You, uh... You here for the class?"

"You could say that," Ethan said with a wry grin that pulled just a little at the small scar on his bottom lip, one that Jakob remembered how he got all too well. "Teach it, actually."

"Oh, good. That's... good. That's really... good," Jakob told him. Mentally, he winced, knowing full well how awkward he must sound. "You were always great at it. Glad to see you kept at it."

"Yeah... it's uh... yeah," Ethan replied, glancing away as he frowned slightly. "Almost didn't. But then it — it helped. When I tore up my ACL, I mean," he said, gesturing to his knee. "Found myself with a lot of free time, and... seemed like as good a way to fill it as any other."

"Oh," Jakob replied, uncertain how else to reply.

"Look, I've got to start the class in a few minutes," Ethan said with a quick glance at his watch. "But — stick around after, alright? We should catch up. Maybe you'll even tell me who your chaperon here is."

Jakob flushed, turning to Cassie just in time to spot the look of amused delight flashing across her face. It was an expression Jakob knew could only spell trouble. But he plowed on ahead anyway, hoping he didn't sound as flustered as he felt. "Ethan, this is my daughter, Cassie. And Cassie, this is... Ethan. He's an old... an old friend."

"Not *that* old," Ethan grumbled as he reached out to offer his hand for Cassie

to shake. "Nice to meet you, Cassie. I have loads of embarrassing stories about your Dad if you'd ever like to hear them."

Jakob could feel his neck flushing again as he herded her away from a chuckling Ethan and over to some of the still-empty chairs. They'd been set up in a rough circle around a small table, on which sat a jumbled arrangement of colorful plastic toy dinosaurs.

Some of the seats had already been claimed by art students who had arrived before them, or saved for friends arriving late. More people had filed in behind Jakob and Cassie, and it wasn't long until all the seats were filled with chattering would-be artists; the noise filling the small space and then some, the scrape of a chair being dragged over to the group making Jakob wince.

In the meanwhile, Ethan had set up a desk lamp — one of the kind with a bendable neck and hood like the little hopping animated character. He turned it on to reveal a bulb that could rival the sun for brightness in the otherwise darkened coffee shop.

Soon enough, Ethan had them all hard at work drawing the still life scene; the loud chatter dying down to only the soft susurrations of pencil and charcoal against textured paper; the scents of graphite and paints and chalk and inks mixing with the rich smell of coffee that was probably imbued into the walls at this point.

An old, familiar peacefulness settled into Jakob's chest. It blurred all the edges of the world as his focus narrowed to the motion of his hand, the shape of a curve, the fall of light and shadow almost rendering itself onto the paper. Before Jakob knew it, he had filled three pages.

Okay, *four* — but that last didn't count because it was barely a sketch. It was only when Cassie had snuck a peek and giggled that he realized he had been absentmindedly doodling Ethan instead of the dinosaurs. The giggling had only doubled when he'd hastily cleared his throat and flipped the page over.

And then the class came to an end, his fellow artists all chatting with each other around him once more as they picked up their supplies and coats. Sketchbooks and lapboards tucked under their arms, the herd had filed back out through the doorway to the sound of the sleigh bells hanging above the coffee shop's door as they left.

Soon it was just Ethan and him and Cassie. And then just Ethan and him,

with Cassie's far too cheerful "I'll wait for you out in the car Dad, take your time!" ringing in his ears. Biting his lip, Jakob turned to face the man he once knew better than his own self.

Who now, after all the years and regrets that lay between them, Jakob wasn't certain he knew at all.

Chapter 4

*Jakob sucked in a sharp breath as Ethan's other hand came up to grip his head roughly, before lips slammed into his for a messy, utterly **brutal** kiss.*

It was sloppy and hard, the wet warmth of Ethan's mouth damn near all-consuming. It felt impossible to keep up; there was nothing soft or gentle found here, no flirtatious teasing. No — this kiss was all power and demand, challenge and warning. It was like nothing Jakob had ever known in a kiss before, sending a thrill shooting through his entire body; an engine igniting inside him, roaring into life...

"So," Jakob said hesitantly into the silence that had fallen; leaning awkwardly on his cane as he watched Ethan clean up after the class, unsure how to begin.

Smoothing his hands along the muscled planes flanking Ethan's spine, Jakob rucked up the fabric of his shirt, a hunger within him now to feel Ethan's skin against his own. A hunger Ethan seemed more than willing to oblige; breaking their kiss just long enough to rip the garment over his head and help Jakob out of his too, before pulling Jakob in for another kiss...

"So," Ethan agreed, his deep voice packing the short word heavily with meaning as he picked up a chair in each hand and returned them to the nearby tables. "You want anything — "

Ethan rubbing his palms up and down Jakob's trembling thighs, kneading at his hips. Making Jakob's belly quiver as he smoothed

his way up Jakob's bare stomach and over his naked chest.

*Gasping at the sparks lighting up and down his spine, Jakob leaned into the touch; bowing his back as Ethan urged him down, gripping along Jakob's biceps and shoulders, hand curving around his neck to pull him into a desperately hungry, utterly **filthy** kiss...*

" — to drink? Marcus would kill me if I tried to use any of his equipment, so coffee's off the list. But throw a couple bills in the tip cup by the register and he won't mind if we snag ourselves an overpriced bottle of water or something from the fridge."

"Hold on to something, darlin'," Ethan whispered into the shell of Jakob's ear, making him shiver as —

"Yeah," Jakob answered as he fished for his wallet. "I'd like — "

Ethan leaned in for a kiss; his weight pressing Jakob into the mattress as he covered Jakob's body with his own; capturing Jakob's mouth with a hunger that was a hundred, a thousand times returned.

*His back flexed under Jakob's hands as he worked. Snapping his hips hard with purpose now; angling just — just **so**...*

"Um... Just grab me whatever you're getting," Jakob finished weakly; swallowing as he blinked, staring blankly at the inside of his wallet and wondering absently if he even had any real money still in there. He had gotten so used to just tapping his card these days.

There — the emergency ten Frank had always insisted he should carry on him peeking out from behind an array of loyalty punch cards. Should do well enough to cover the tab and then some.

There were a lot of different seating options in the coffee shop; a trio of extra high stools bellied up to a narrow shelf for the remote worker-type customers; tables for twos and threes and fours; a couch in front of a low table across from a pair of pleather wingbacks for the mommy-and-me crowd.

It was one of these last that Ethan flopped into, setting Jakob's drink on the table before stretching his long legs out in front of him with a groan.

"Long day?" Jakob asked as he carefully sat down on the couch opposite his old friend, resting his cane against the overstuffed arm. He stretched his bad

leg out to the side of the table, but drew up his other so he could rest his elbow on it and lean forward, studying Ethan's face.

Not the scars, or the peppering of gray hairs, no. Jakob was too busy cataloging the changes that mattered — noting the smile lines, the worry marks lining his forehead, the bags under his eyes. A thousand and one subtle differences to the best friend he once knew even better than himself, oh so very long ago.

"How are you Ethan, *really*?" Jakob asked him, his quiet voice still sounding unnaturally loud in the empty and darkened shop.

Ethan sighed and rubbed at the back of his neck. "I'm — well enough, all things considered. Got a couple students that are being a handful. And there's a bill that looks like it'll be going through that will end up causing the school's art allocation to get slashed. *Again*. I'm not sure how they expect us to teach the kids anything on the shoestring budget they give teachers as it is. I'm already paying for most of the supplies out of my own pocket; doing gallery sales of my paintings and selling prints online and such. This... I just don't know."

"Sorry to hear that," Jakob said; the curl of worry that had sprung up at Ethan's words warring with a warm feeling of pride that was rapidly spreading through his chest for his friend. "Congratulations though. Gallery sales? Sounds as if you're a pretty accomplished artist."

"Mmm. It's been an adventure, for certain. Gratifying, when it's not aggravating. But... Take the galleries, right? They really like to play up the 'washout footballer savant' angle in the advertising, y'know? Speculating about my career ending is all anyone wants to talk about at the shows; half of them don't accept I was actually injured. I've been asked about everything from drugs to mob connections to being blackmailed by Russian prostitutes, if you can believe it."

"That was when you tore your ACL?"

"You heard about that?" Ethan asked, surprise writ clearly across his face.

"I... might've been following your career, *after*," Jakob admitted. "And Frank kept me updated on anything I missed."

"You missed a lot."

"Yeah," Jakob sighed.

He could feel the words 'I'm sorry' welling up in his throat, knowing they were a rubber dinghy in a hurricane; not *anything* like enough.

"Congrats on the Super Bowl win," he said instead lamely. "That was a great game."

"Thanks. Woulda been better if my knee hadn't cost us the second, but... well. Water under the bridge, right? But I mean, that's just it. Nobody's coming for the art itself. And fuck me if I want to discuss inspirations or techniques; they talk to me like I'm a trained monkey. Sure as shit don't want to learn I'm a high school art teacher now. Something about diminishing the 'mystique'," Ethan said with a snort. "More like diminishing the price — *and* the gallery's commission. They keep asking me to go along with it, play it up. But you know me, that was never my kind of thing even before..."

Ethan trailed off, gesturing towards his knee.

Jakob nodded, remembering how the school's theater director had begged and pleaded with Ethan to join the class. Back then, he had been the only boy tall enough to make the balcony scene not... "Look like a farce" Jakob thought he remembered was how the teacher had said it at the time.

"Anything I can do to help?" Jakob asked; uncertain where even he would *begin* to unravel a problem such as that, but still feeling that familiar old need to do *something* to fix his friend's problems.

"Naw, but thanks," Ethan told him, his eyes softening in the dim lighting as he watched Jakob. "How about you, though? A daughter, huh? She okay out there while we're jawing away in here, by the way?"

"Huh?" Jakob asked, turning to glance over his shoulder out the large pane windows towards where his pickup truck was parked.

Cassie was tucked up in the cab, her head bent over her phone as colorful lights danced over her face. The muscles in Jakob's shoulders relaxed as she laughed at something on the screen, an answering grin spreading across his own face at the sight.

"Oh, yeah — she'll be fine as long as her battery holds out," Jakob told Ethan, turning back around in his seat to face the man.

"Her mom not going to be upset you've got her out so late?" Ethan asked with a tilt of his head, making the shadows of... of *something* flicker in his eyes.

"No, it's fine. Sophia's off... somewhere," Jakob said, flicking his fingers

vaguely in the direction he assumed Australia might be from here. Or... he thought he remembered her saying Australia last time they had talked. He supposed it could be Austria.

Admittedly, that was at least a few weeks ago.

It can be hard keeping up with exes, even ones you were still on good terms with. Especially one with a passport as well-stamped as Sophia's was.

"I'd have to look at the calendar to tell you where exactly in the world she's at this week," Jakob admitted. "Some professional conference or something, I think. Cassie told me, but she knows I've got no head for details when it comes to keeping up with her mom. Don't need to really, not until Sophia picks her up in the summer for their month jet-setting around whatever locations her studio has sent her out to scout for their next big show. Cassie enjoys it at least, gets to see a bit of the globe, even if it's only the scenic parts."

"So. Married, huh? That's..." Ethan started before trailing off, as if he realized he had been headed towards what wasn't always safe territory these days.

"Divorced. Twice now, actually. Cassie keeps telling me I should start dating again, but... I'm not sure she really *means* it, just something she thinks she's supposed to say. To be supportive, y'know? But since the accident, I... I don't know. Not certain I'm ready yet for that whole dance that comes with trying to find someone new," Jakob said with a grimace as he pulled at the label of his bottle. "How about you? Did you ever...?"

"Naw," Ethan replied, looking anywhere but at Jakob. "Never met the right one, I guess. Or just... I never *was* the right one. Not even the wrong one long enough to make it as far as you and your ex-wives —"

"Ex-spouses," Jakob corrected, bracing himself. But... well, it was better sooner than later, right?

It was... good — No, it was *great* sitting here catching up with Ethan, no matter how awkward and hesitant they were. Felt almost as if they had never... Almost as if *Jakob* hadn't mucked it up all those years ago, as if there wasn't a whole mountain of poisoned words and empty chances separating them now. If there was any chance they could fix that friendship, Jakob would seize it with both hands.

But there was the shadow of that sword hanging over both their heads, and Jakob knew it was now or never to find out how it would fall.

"*Ex-spouses*," Jakob repeated a little louder as he straightened up, looking Ethan in the eye. "Sophia and... my ex-husband, Reed."

Ethan...

He hadn't moved a muscle. Had gone still and quiet, his gaze sharpening in that way Jakob recognized all too easily. To an outside observer, he appeared content to merely watch Jakob for the moment, but...

Jakob knew — well... he had *known* that look, all those many years ago. Ethan was thinking fast and hard, trying to wrap his mind around something, turning it this direction and that before he spoke.

"*Ex-husband*?" Ethan asked quietly; his tone deliberate and measured, his voice unnaturally small. Jakob could see his throat working as he swallowed, hearing the slight husky rasp to it.

"Yeah," Jakob confirmed with a sigh, closing his eyes and slumping in on himself. Well, it had been a nice thought, renewing their friendship after all this time. Perhaps even... Not that he dared hope for more, not after...

Even so, it had been *good* to see Ethan again.

"I should... I should go," Jakob said, grabbing for his cane and making ready to stand. It was a much harder process now than just a year ago. No clean and quick exits for him anymore. "Cassie's phone is probably running on fumes. Be in here trying to steal mine in a moment."

Jakob froze when he felt Ethan's fingers brush against his, his gaze leaping to Ethan's face in startlement.

"It was good seeing you again, Jakob," Ethan said; his eyes gentle and warm, just as Jakob had always remembered them being. "If you... Maybe we can go and grab a coffee sometime? *Real* coffee, I mean — served by actual people."

Jakob felt a grin slip across his face.

"Yeah. I'd... I'd like that a lot."

Chapter 5

Jakob thanked the driver again as he shut the car's door, leaning heavily on his cane.

He'd had some difficulty getting out; the little ride-share's compact rode lower than his truck and it had put his leg at an awkward angle. But he had already promised Cassie last week that she could borrow the truck today to go hang out with her friends.

It wasn't like he could expect a sixteen-year-old girl to spend all her time playing chauffeur for him, right?

A little discomfort now was still worth the smile that had lit up her face when he told her he was meeting up with Ethan.

And she deserved a chance to spend time with her friends, some space to discover her own self without having to worry about her old Dad all hours of the day. Just like he'd said before she left that morning, finger twirling around a long strand of blond hair anxiously as she'd stood in his doorway; watching him rifle through his closet for something to wear that wasn't just his regular workaday standard of blue jeans, black work shirt, and cowboy boots.

There had been the usual warning about being careful and getting home by dinnertime, of course. All of which she had delivered with such mock seriousness that Jakob had met with the most teenager-like eye roll he could muster.

It had earned him both a giggle and a kiss on the cheek in quick succession. Just before she had swiped the keys out of the bowl in the kitchen and made

speed for the truck, the screen door slamming as she yelled her goodbye.

He brushed absently at the soft charcoal jumper Cassie had finally declared he should wear after he had spent ten minutes in indecision. Finally, she'd taken pity on her poor lost cause of a father, helping him find a clean pair of jeans as well and even let him keep the boots. She had drawn the line at the hat, though; instructing him to pull his hair back in a ponytail instead.

No sense in the undercut if he wasn't going to show it off, she had told him.

Bad as any of his former drill sergeants, he'd snarked right back at her with a smile.

But now, as he crossed the short sidewalk and reached for the shiny silver handle of the door, Jakob was left with the odd impression that he had forgotten his armor at home.

It's just coffee, Jakob reminded himself as he pushed open the door to the diner Ethan had suggested they meet at. *Just two old friends catching up. Nothing more.*

There was no call for the butterflies in his stomach, the clammy feeling of his palms. No reason at all he should feel this nervous.

Right?

You're being ridiculous. There's no use even thinking in that direction anyway. Not after all this time, not after you went and screwed it all up.

The ringing of the little bell over his head nearly drowned out as he stepped into a world of chattering diners, clinking dishes, and the smell of something sizzling back beyond the long opening in the wall dividing customers from cooks.

Mingling with the scent of maple syrup the interior was practically doused in, it set Jakob's mouth to water. And when combined with the sprigs of plastic greenery and twinkling lights, Jakob spotted as he glanced around the diner? A body could almost believe the place was located somewhere far closer to the Canadian border than on the southwestern edge of the San Morado metroplex.

Provided you were severely nearsighted. And perhaps too hard of hearing to catch that at least a third of the conversations were in Spanish as well.

"Jakob!" came Ethan's deep voice, cutting off the train of Jakob's thoughts.

Ethan was waving a broad hand in the air to draw Jakob's attention to the booth in the back where his friend sat.

The light from the lamp hanging low just above the table shone down on him like he was in one of those old master paintings; his dark skin glowing with ruddy undertones, strong features highlighted in burnished gold. And that *smile*. That was a smile that could rival the sun for brilliance, every kilowatt of it aimed in Jakob's direction. Jakob would bet his eyeteeth any of those luminaries would've fought tooth and nail to have Ethan as a model in their art studio back in the day.

It's just coffee, Jakob reminded himself as he propped his cane against the wall and bench; willing his heart to stop beating in double-time at the smile Ethan turned on him as he sat down.

It never was very good at listening.

"I know we said coffee, but this place does a fantastic chicken and waffles if you're hungry," Ethan told Jakob as he slid a menu over.

"Yeah, I could eat," Jakob replied, feeling like the king of understatement. His belly rumbled as a server passed by with a tray of orders, the smell of maple syrup and bacon drifting behind them. Nash had called him up early about a scheduling mix-up with the staff, then he and Cassie'd had to spend a good twenty minutes trying to find where the tractor keys had gone so Nash could drag the north pasture and...

Between all that and his inexplicable bout of nervousness, Jakob realized he had somehow completely forgotten to eat that morning.

"Mornin' darlin's," came a voice from Jakob's elbow.

He looked up at the presence of an older woman whose lipstick smile was as red as the t-shirt she had tucked into her half-apron over black jeans. The rhinestones set into the corners of her matching red cat eyeglasses sparkled in the morning sunlight slanting in through the diner's windows, and her name badge simply read 'Ruby'.

"Cook's just put a fresh pot of coffee on and we've got a coconut cream pie today that'll knock your socks off. But you'll have to order it fast if you want any before the local checkers'n'chat crowd rolls in," she said, holding her pen and order pad at the ready. "Now, what can I getcha?"

Jakob felt like he had been teleported straight into a sitcom.

"Mornin' Ruby. I'll take a cup of coffee with a plate of your chicken and waffles, please. And can you — "

"Add a couple of fried eggs on top again? 'Spose we might — seeing as how we have 'bout every other time, right?" she teased him with an easy grin.

"Thanks, Ruby," he replied, almost sheepishly. "Sorry for the bother."

"No, don't you worry none. Cook's even thinking about adding it to the menu as a regular item. Call it the 'Ethan Special' — wadda'ya think?"

"I — Um," Ethan said as the tips of his ears reddened ever so slightly.

Ruby just grinned, shooting a conspiratorial wink at Jakob. "And how about you, hon?"

"Sounds good to me. I'll have the Ethan Special too, please," he told her, earning himself a delighted grin from Ruby as she reached for his menu.

Out of the corner of his eye, Jakob could see Ethan's ears go even redder. *Oops*. Time for reinforcements. "And make sure we get a big slice of that pie after if you can?"

"I'll fetch it now and put it in the back for when you've finished," she told him as she tucked her order pad away; giving Ethan's shoulder a pat as she walked past before vanishing off beyond the swinging kitchen door.

"She seems nice," Jakob said; mentally trying to recover himself from the sense of finding himself suddenly in an episode of one of those cheesy old shows Frank used to watch.

"Seems like a walking cliché, you mean?" Ethan replied with a broad grin as he leaned back against the vinyl bench seat. "Ruby loves it — says it 'adds to the diner experience'. Keeps folks coming back here instead of just grabbing a quick cup of burnt swill and some cardboard mislabeled as food from some drive-thru window. Not that this stuff is any healthier, mind you. Sometimes you gotta pick your poison, and I suppose coconut pie's not a bad way to go if you're going."

"And the chicken and waffles?" Jakob teased.

"There's worse addictions out there. Though I hope she's kidding about slapping my name on the menu."

"Does it really bother you?" Jakob asked, trying not to be obvious about watching the way Ethan's bicep flexed as the other man draped his arm over

the back of his bench. He glanced away, towards the handy distraction provided by the sound of the diner's bell above the door ringing, signaling the arrival of more customers.

"Naw," Ethan replied, rubbing almost absently at his chin. "I just... You know I've never been much a one for being the center of attention."

Ethan was watching him now; his big frame leaned back comfortably against the worn red vinyl — nearly the same shade as his red and black checked flannel shirt.

Red was a good color on him, always had been.

"How's that work, then, being a teacher?" Jakob asked, curious how Ethan — shy and soft-spoken for as long as Jakob had known him — had found his way into teaching, of all things.

"That's different," Ethan said, a thoughtful note in his voice. "Art's not... It's not showing off, not for me. It's... These kids at that age? They need a healthy outlet to express themselves. My job is just to show them a few options, see if any of them stick — y'know?"

"How'd you get into it? Last I remember, you were majoring in accounting or something back... back then, right?" Jakob said, trying to think of something, anything, to break the silence that had fallen. "What made you switch?"

Jakob didn't like how Ethan's eyes went flat at that; the way he sort of faded, almost shrank in on himself.

"Guess I just needed a change. Only picked accounting because... because it seemed useful. Everyone needs an accountant, right? Could keep my own books, check my own numbers, make certain I wasn't being cheated by an agent or something. But after we... *after* — I don't know. You saw how much I liked that art class we took together."

"Liked the guys modeling for us, you mean," Jakob teased, the uneasy feeling twisting in his gut making him desperate to lighten the mood.

"Sure," Ethan smiled easily enough. "Picked up a few more, talked to my adviser who found me a scholarship for education majors to help cover the extra year switching set me back. With football, it's not like the school cared what I majored in, just so long as I kept winning games for them. Then when everything happened... I couldn't play pro ball anymore. Not with my shoulder in the shape it was, my ACL all torn up. But I had my fallback plan,

right? And so... here I am. Teaching."

"I bet you're a good one," Jakob told him, that warm curl of pride in his friend returning as he felt a smile steal across his face.

"Kind of funny, isn't it?" Ethan said with a quiet, inward sort of chuckle.

"There we were, taking that class for all the wrong reasons, and it ended up... well. Life just has a curious habit of changing on you in ways you least expect, doesn't it?"

"Yeah," Jakob huffed, suddenly unable to meet Ethan's eyes; looking down at their table's chipped laminate instead, as if it held the answers of the universe in its speckled surface. "Sure does."

"So... An ex-husband, huh?"

There was a strange tone in Ethan's voice, something more than just idle curiosity. Something... something that brought to mind an old wound that hadn't ever healed quite right. Jakob grimaced and almost reflexively rubbed his leg, glancing up to meet Ethan's steady gaze looking back at him, odd shadows dancing in those warm brown eyes.

It was the waitress who saved him, Ruby arriving just in time to deliver their coffees in thick ceramic mugs before dashing away again.

It was something to busy his hands with, at least. Give him a moment to organize his thoughts as Ethan fussed with adding sugar and creamer to his. Jakob watched the steam curl off his own mug in the light from the big plate window next to their booth, just off-center enough from the table to be annoying.

Jakob sighed, knowing... knowing he owed Ethan an explanation after all these years. Owed him far more than that, if he was being honest. But... maybe it could be a start. A peace offering, of sorts.

"Yeah, Sophia and I didn't last long. Just barely enough time for Cassie to come into our lives, really, before we figured out we do better as an occasional arrangement than we ever did setting up house together, do the whole atomic family thing. Honestly, I think I was just trying to prove something to myself," Jakob admitted to the contents of his mug, curling his fingers around it and feeling the warmth seep into his hands. "She was safe, y'know? But she's smart — smarter than I am, saw right through me. I mean... who wants to be someone's safe option?"

He leaned back as Ruby chose that moment to swoop in again; another flurry of cheery hospitality and perfunctory geniality, before leaving behind their very welcome breakfast in her wake.

"She's ambitious," Jakob continued, gesturing with his knife as he tucked into his food; Ethan mirroring him, still quietly listening. "Honestly, both my exes are, her and Reed. Always focused on their work, their careers, on networking. Kept dragging me to all these events. Parties, galas, conferences — you name it. Hated it, but... also couldn't seem to stay away from either of them. As if I was trying to fill some void, or..."

Jakob glanced up to see Ethan still watching him, both of his large forearms braced against the edge of their table as he stirred his coffee; listening, absorbing things like he always did. Gathering all the data, weighing all his options before he made a decision.

"Met Reed a couple years after Sophia and I split. I don't know. Guess I was looking for something... different. Still had my bullshit hat on too tight, though; still playing it safe, in a way. Stubborn as a mule, Frank used to call me. And I was. Still ignoring what I wanted for some image of what I thought I was supposed to be. Selfish of me, I get that now. But back then... I couldn't see he wasn't any more right for me than she was," Jakob said, suddenly unable to hold that gaze and glancing out the window instead.

He winced at the unexpected brightness of the sun, the universe's retribution for his cowardice. He couldn't look at Ethan, though. Couldn't bear to watch him realize what Jakob had *really* been searching for, all those years ago.

Might still be hoping to find, even now.

But that was... It was too soon. Or too late, maybe.

Jakob sighed. *Only one way to find out.*

"Tried though. Met him when he was playing in some backwater little club, but that didn't last long. He's a musician — goes by DJ Thee Ray?" He glanced at Ethan to see if he recognized the name, but Ethan just shook his head no, so Jakob plowed on. "Does all these remixes of other people's work? Some of them went viral and then... Anyway, it was — It was good for a while. Great, even. But then... It was just Sophia all over again. We wanted different things. Too different. So we called it quits."

Jakob glanced up at the ceiling, but its water-stained tiles were just as devoid

of answers as the tabletop had been.

"I... I owe you an apology at the very least," he said, somehow finding enough courage to meet Ethan's eyes once more. "I didn't know who I was back then, didn't realize I could just — just let myself..."

He trailed off, unsure how to put it into words.

"Don't owe me shit, Jakob," Ethan finally rumbled into the silence, his brow drawn with lines of frustration. "We were both dumb kids trying to figure stuff out. Won't say no to a little groveling if it really makes you feel better, but... It's just good to talk to you again. Missed you, missed my friend."

Jakob poked at the remains of his plate for a moment, feeling Ethan's eyes on him.

He looked up, meeting that gaze, seeing the faint worry lurking in the depths. He took a deep breath, and —

"...*just* your friend?" Jakob asked softly.

Chapter 6

Ethan's sudden inhale at Jakob's question was drowned out by a loud chirpy ringing coming from the phone he'd set down near his right elbow, the words "unknown caller" flashing across its screen.

He tore his gaze from Jakob's as he scrambled to decline the call.

"*Fuck*. Sorry, I — " Ethan started to apologize — only to be interrupted as his phone rang again.

"I — *Fuck!*" Ethan cursed, just loud enough to make the trio of suited customers at the next table glance over their shoulder at them, vaguely reproachful looks on their faces at his outburst.

Ethan blushed bright red in embarrassment, shifting lower in his seat as his phone got the same treatment as before. This time there was maybe a touch more aggression as a clearly frustrated Ethan declined the unknown caller yet again.

"You should get that," Jakob said over the ringtone, as Ethan's phone rang for a *third* time. He nodded towards the offending device, amused despite himself at his friend's predicament, a smile playing on his lips. "Could be an emergency."

"Don't see how. I don't even *know* this number," Ethan grumbled under his breath, but he picked up the call, nonetheless.

Jakob sipped his coffee, trying to appear unconcerned — as if he *hadn't* just put his heart, raw and bleeding, on the table between them before the interruption.

"Hello?" Ethan practically growled into the phone. "Who's this?"

There was something so worrying about the way Ethan's shoulders had suddenly gone tense at hearing the caller's voice that Jakob found himself leaning forward in response.

"Alex?!" Ethan blurted out as his eyes went wide, apparently recognizing the caller after all. "How did you even get this — Okay, hold on, I — Are you safe? Well, can you *get* somewhere safe?"

Jakob's attention was locked on Ethan's face as the other man listened to whoever was on the other end of the phone. He saw Ethan's natural tones go ashen at this 'Alex's' response.

Ethan's reactions, coupled with his line of questions, all added up to the sort of trouble that had Jakob immediately looking around the diner, intent on flagging down their waitress. He was relieved to find her behind the counter by the diner's big coffee machine; even more relieved when she spotted him, setting down the coffeepot in her hands and hurrying over.

"Okay," Ethan said to the mysterious 'Alex' on the other end of the call, his deep voice worried — but resolute. "I could be there in about ten, maybe fifteen minutes. Can you hide that long? Alright — now this is important, so play attention. When I hang up, you're going to call me right back, yeah? I won't pick up, it's gonna go to voicemail. Need you to leave a message with your full name, birthdate, today's date, and everything you just told me, exactly the way you just said it. Then you gotta say you want me to act as your proxy — that bit's key, alright? Okay. Yeah, just hold on and I'll be right there, alright?"

Jakob handed Ruby far too many bills as Ethan turned to him, apology and determination warring equally on his face. "I've got — I've got to go, I'll uh — "

"You'll tell me which car out there is yours and fill me in on the way," Jakob said in an easy but firm voice, as if he was talking to a spooked horse.

Reaching for his cane, Jakob got unsteadily to his feet. He felt a hand at his elbow, supporting him for just the moment it took Jakob to find his balance before dropping away. Ethan remained a solid presence — not coddling or invasive, merely staying by Jakob's side as they hurried through the diner and out the door.

They headed out into the crowded parking lot as the winter wind pulled at their hair and clothing.

"The green hatchback there," Ethan answered, pointing, "but um, you don't have to — "

"Let's go then," Jakob said, already heading in that direction at speed; hoping to put a stop to whatever cop-out Ethan was trying to give him to sit on the sidelines before the other man even got started.

Ethan jogged after him to catch up.

If he didn't want Jakob coming along, experience told Jakob he would just say. But if Ethan needed help...

Ethan wasn't always likely to ask for it. Didn't always realize he *could* ask for it. A holdover from his childhood that — well. Of course, it was possible he had changed by now after all this time, but...

If Ethan needed help, Jakob would be there. Just like he used to be.

Just like he should have been, all these years.

Simple as that.

"Sounded serious," Jakob said, both explanation and question woven into his words.

"He's one of my students," Ethan explained over the thump of Jakob shutting the car's passenger door. "He shouldn't even *have* my number, but he admitted he snuck it off my phone just in case... Well, this is the case, I suppose."

Jakob wedged his cane in between his knee and the door as he hunted for the seatbelt. He smiled to hear the clunking sound of Ethan shifting the car into gear, the memory of teaching Ethan how to drive Frank's old manual farm truck flitting across his mind.

"He's... he's smart," Ethan said, once he had pulled them out of the diner's parking lot and onto the frontage road. "Too smart for his own good sometimes. School's got a policy against collectible game stuff after a bunch of the kids would get in fights about it, and gamble away their lunch money. Trading cards, gaming miniatures — that kind of thing. You remember."

"Hmm," Jakob hummed in agreement, thoughts of when they used to spend their own high school lunch hours playing coming back easily to him.

"Anyway, I caught him with a bunch of these figures," Ethan continued as he took the on-ramp onto the freeway. "Was selling them to some of the other kids. Turns out he paints them — It's actually really good work too. Got the principal to give him special permission as long as he keeps it to my art class and he stopped trying to peddle them to the other students on school property."

"Sounds talented," Jakob hazarded; still not sure how this tied in with Ethan weaving through downtown traffic like they were playing a racing game, only this side of the speed limit as he drove around an electric car going too slow for his liking.

"That's an understatement. Kid's good — really good. Plus, there's apparently a decent market for them online. If he could just..." Ethan sighed, sounding somewhere between frustrated and angry. "If his abusive asshole of a father could just... somehow leave the picture. Or failing that, at least leave Alex alone for a few more months until he graduates and moves off to university. He's going to play for San Morado, has a full ride and everything, just like we did back in the day. He'll be living fancy-free if he can just get out from under his father's thumb."

"Can't you call the cops?"

Ethan barked out a laugh, a dark ugly sound that held nothing of humor in it. "Any other kid? Sure. But in Alex's case, it won't work — his dad *is* a cop. Might even make it worse, honestly."

Ethan sighed, rubbing the back of his neck in a gesture so familiar it gave Jakob a serious feeling of *déjà vu*. He was suddenly confronted with a strange feeling rushing throughout his body, as if he had been time-warped back into the past, back... *before*.

As if he *hadn't* up and ruined everything back then. As if it had never even happened at all.

God, how he wanted that; the rush of raw emotion that surged inside him at the very thought so strong it nearly overwhelmed him.

Jakob blinked, struggling to rein himself in, to stay in control; trying to focus his attention on what Ethan was saying, on the problem at hand. Trying not to let his thoughts run wild, keep the sudden stampede of emotions from running roughshod over him. He knew once they had got the bit in their teeth, there would be no stopping 'em; they would run hard, losing him in a

wilderness filled with old memories and past regrets.

Jakob couldn't afford that kind of distraction right now. He needed to stick to the trail if they were to see this thing through.

"This has apparently been going on for years," Ethan said unhappily as they passed around a sports car. "Sends him to school with massive bruises every other week. Pretty sure the bastard broke Alex's arm last summer. He comes in the first day back with a big cast and a story about a skateboard accident, but couldn't even tell me what trick he'd supposedly been trying out. I've reported it through school channels, but... it never goes anywhere. The last time I made a report, there was a solid three weeks I had the honor of a police vehicle sitting outside my house each morning when I left for school, just watching me."

"Fucking hell," Jakob muttered.

"Yeah. So uh... that said — final chance. I can stop and let you out if you don't want to come along," Ethan asked as they turned into a suburb that looked like it came straight out of some episode of the Brady Bunch.

Or maybe The Stepford Wives; all tree-lined boulevards with big, lush, water-guzzling green lawns in front of cookie-cutter houses built more for aesthetics than to take advantage of their environment.

Jakob didn't envy them their utility bills.

"What are you planning to do?" Jakob asked, glancing over at Ethan's white-knuckled grip on the steering wheel.

He sighed, relaxing his hands and leaning back in the car seat, although the tenseness never left his shoulders.

"Don't know, honestly," Ethan admitted, rubbing his chin as he turned at the stop sign onto an identical street. "Suppose I'll try and get Alex somewhere safe, I guess. I'm not quite sure what that looks like, to be honest. I can't — Like I said, his dad knows where I live. Can't take him to my house even if it wasn't against school policy to have a student there. Probably cost me my job. Not to mention his dad would simply come pick him up, anyway. Shit, he might get there before us if he's got those lights and stuff on his car."

"Uh-huh," Jakob answered absently, trying to twist around without aggravating his leg. He hastily scanned Ethan's backseat for...

Ah-hah — *There* it was, just as he had suspected. Old habits died hard, it

seemed, even after all these years.

Jakob snagged the red baseball cap from where it had been half hidden under a worn black leather jacket. He quickly gathered and twisted his shoulder-length copper hair up to tuck under the hat and hide it away.

"What are you doing?" Ethan asked bewildered; trying to watch Jakob and keep his eyes on the road at the same time.

"Maybe you can't take him to your house, but he would be safe enough at mine," Jakob replied. "I mean — if you think he would go? Couple of Cassie's friends stay in our guestroom sometimes when their parents get to be too much. He's welcome to it. You drop us off a few streets away, I'll call a rideshare, and — Alex, you called him? He can stay at my place as long as he needs."

Ethan looked over at him, his gaze now frank and assessing. "You sure? He — uh... he can take some getting used to. Doesn't trust easily."

"Yeah?" Jakob said with a grin. "Sounds like someone I once knew, actually."

"Can't imagine who that could be," Ethan rumbled, throwing a roguish look over at Jakob.

And it was as if he'd taken a punch to the chest, as if Jakob was thrown back in his seat almost two decades, to when things had still been good.

Here was his old friend, under the crow's feet and gray hairs starting to sneak in among the dark. *Here* was the Ethan he remembered knowing as surely as the back of his own hand, buried under all the years and distance and not-so-ancient history.

For a moment, it felt almost as if they were two kids again. The entire world at their feet, the possibilities stretching ahead of them innumerable and endless.

Jakob could just about believe they were off to some old familiar mischief; sneaking Ethan back home after a too-late night out without waking his strict fundamentalist parents, perhaps. Or that time they had stolen the rival school's mascot, the giant inflatable eagle nearly flying off into the sky and taking Jakob along with it.

His heart in his mouth as he hung on, white-knuckled and cursing as he clung to the guide rope; the heavy winds buffeted him as Ethan laughed and roared

by turns below; those powerful arms wrapped around Jakob's waist, safely anchoring him to the ground.

Jakob felt like he almost couldn't breathe with how much he suddenly wished — no *needed* for things to be that way again between them, now older and maybe even wiser for all those missing years. Jakob would fix this, he would. He'd —

"You okay?" came Ethan's voice, the concern in his tone cutting through the fog of memories and mistakes. The warm weight of his palm on Jakob's shoulder, once more his anchor in the storm.

"We're almost there," Ethan told him; eyes darting across Jakob's face, his tone unsure. "It's not too late to back out. Here, I'll pull over and you can get out. I'll understand. It's not your fight."

Jakob grabbed the hand on his shoulder, clutching it like a lifeline.

"Don't you *dare*," Jakob warned his old friend. "This kid dangerous? Could he be a threat to Cassie?"

"Naw," Ethan said with an easy grin. "He's a good egg under the attitude, really."

"Then don't worry. Not my first rodeo dealing with teenagers. But if you're about to head into a battle you believe is worth fighting and you think I'm not backing you up? You've lost your mind," Jakob told him, giving it his best to mirror Ethan's smile.

"If you're sure..."

"If you need me, I'm here. Ain't going anywhere else," Jakob promised his old friend, trying to pack all those years of regret into the words. He gave the hand on his shoulder a squeeze before releasing it, letting Ethan focus on getting them there in time.

Chapter 7

It was a house just like any other of the dozens lining this and every other street in this perfectly manicured neighborhood.

Big green monograss lawn, a wide drive ending at a double garage, two trees planted symmetrically on either side of the walk up to the brick house. The identical little number plates in the same exact position next to the front door were the only way to tell any of the houses apart, really. Even the Christmas lights looked as if they'd all been bought from the same store and hung by the same crew.

Every bit of it picture-perfect. At least from the outside.

Ethan slowed, pulling to a stop across the street from one particular house from among the dozens just like it lining both sides of the street. There was a flicker of movement from the cluster of boxwood hedges growing against the side, the kind usually planted to hide an AC unit.

"Keep it running," Jakob told him in a low tone.

Before Ethan could even put the vehicle in park, the movement quickly resolved itself into the shape of a person; a dark-haired teenager heaving himself over the hedges and racing their way.

The kid wrenched the rear car door open and threw himself in, nearly shutting the door on the backpack held in his other hand.

There was a muffled shouting coming from the direction of the house then, a sound that was more roar than words even over a crashing noise near the front of the house.

"Gogogogogo go!" the kid shouted, scrabbling to put on his seatbelt. It clicked home just as Ethan hit the gas, and then they were away.

The houses zipped by as Jakob studied the kid in the rear-view mirror. Tall and surprisingly skinny given his broad frame, a glint of a thin chain showed through the ragged and ripped collar of his shirt. There was a nasty cut across his right cheek; the kid dragging the back of his hand through the oozing blood only to stare dazedly at the bright red smear in shock before wiping it on his already ruined shirt.

"Here," Jakob said as he held out his handkerchief over his shoulder to the kid. An old habit he had picked up from Frank, carrying them around. Never knew when you would need a spare rag running a horse ranch, even if it was just to wipe the dust off your hands.

This one was clean, though. One of the corners has gone a bit raggedy but still fit enough for use.

Jakob was pretty sure none of that was the reason behind the kid flinching at the sound of his voice when he spoke; the way he recoiled reflexively into himself — and away from Jakob's outstretched hand.

"Hey," Jakob said gently. "S'all right, kid. You're okay."

At Jakob's words, the kid looked up at them both, his eyes widening as if he was only just now registering Jakob's presence.

"M not a *kid*," he spat, thick black eyebrows drawn low; an expression of dangerous suspicion only slightly undermined by the bits of leaves and other souvenirs from his time hiding in the hedges stuck in his hair. He wore it long in front, the dark curls nearly falling into his eyes; the sides and back shaved in a fade that was probably supposed to make him appear cool and fierce, but only served to make him appear vulnerable. Exposed.

Jakob snorted. However much he protested, if this *kid* was more than a year or two older than Cassie, Jakob would eat Ethan's hat.

Sorry. Still sitting at the kid's table for the holidays there, bucko.

He took the white bit of cloth, however; grabbing it at the point furthest from Jakob's fingers. Though his eyes appeared to be focused on Ethan the whole time, Jakob could see the kid assessing him from the corners. Presenting no threat, but not easily taken by surprise, either.

"Thanks," the kid grumbled sullenly, looking everywhere but at Jakob as he

sunk further into the backseat, pressing the cloth against his bleeding cheek. His left eye was starting to purple already, and there was a fading bruise healing an ugly shade of lurid green on the opposite side of his chin.

Jakob had to fight to keep his hand from making a fist in response. He knew he couldn't afford to let this kid see that kind of reaction — even if it was directed at whoever would do this to their own child, and never in a million years at the kid himself. He glanced at Ethan, reading the same thought mirrored back in his old friend's eyes.

"If his father's police... You should drop us off somewhere crowded. Might throw him off our trail, at least for a while. Any ideas?" Jakob murmured, texting Cassie to let her know his plans had changed.

"Mmm, was thinking about the mall?" Ethan said in a low voice as he barely avoided running a red light, his head tilted in consideration. "Lots of people and there's a gaming shop there. Can say I was just giving him a ride to go pick up art supplies, meet with a friend if anyone asks?"

Jakob nodded, humming in agreement.

"Hey, Alex?" Ethan said louder; trying to get the attention of the kid in the backseat who currently sat with his head leaning against the back window, glaring out of it like he could burn a hole through the glass.

Watching him transfer that same glare now to Jakob himself, he could half believe maybe the kid could.

"Who even *is* this fucker, your *date*?" Alex spat, a guarded edge to his tone that Jakob recognized — remembered hearing decades before. Another voice; another angry, scared teenage boy; a whole other lifetime ago.

Out of the corner of Jakob's eye, Ethan's head jerked up; his spine going ridged. The tips of his ears began to turn faintly red at Alex's words, Jakob's own cheeks heating to match.

Jakob saw Alex scowl and look away, back out the window, as if realizing he had hit — not on the truth exactly — but a little too close to *something*.

Ethan cleared his throat. "This is my *friend*, Jakob. He's a good guy, and — and your dad... Well, I've no doubt he's gonna be checking my house, any of the shelters or other places I could take you. But he won't know about Jakob though. We were wondering if — if you would want to go stay with him for a while?"

There was silence from the backseat as Ethan turned onto the freeway's on-ramp, merging into the light midmorning Saturday traffic.

"Sure, whatever," finally came the muttered reply, the words fogging against the car window.

Ethan sighed, shooting an apologetic glance at Jakob. "Sorry, he's — "

"A teenager," Jakob said; interrupting what sounded like Ethan attempting to apologize for something that was so completely out of his control, that it was almost funny that he would even try. Funny, that is, if the situation wasn't what it was.

"Don't forget — I've got one of my own at home already," Jakob reminded his friend. "This ain't exactly my first rodeo."

"Right," Ethan smiled. "Alex, you still have a phone and my number?"

There was a far more worrying sort of silence from the backseat of the car this time.

"Alex?" Jakob asked, turning around a bit in his seat to properly look at the kid.

A pair of light brown eyes — the color of a newly minted copper penny as they caught the sunlight streaming through the window — watched him guardedly from under those dark eyebrows.

"Left it," came the answer finally in a flat voice, all the emotion carefully drained out. "My Dad... He can track that shit, you know? Wiped it and hid it. Doesn't matter. All my stuff's backed up online, anyway."

Jakob eyed the limp and mostly empty backpack clutched tightly against the kid's chest, the state of Alex's torn clothes. Whatever Alex had decided was vital to take with him, important enough to risk getting caught and to keep out of his father's reach...

Jakob was betting it wasn't shirts and jeans and boxers stuffed into that bag.

"Ethan, let us out near the clothing shops, would you?" he asked as his friend turned off the frontage road into the utter chaos that was the mall parking lot on a weekend. "We'll grab a pay-as-you-go phone too," he told Alex. "You can add whatever contacts you need."

"*Fine*," the kid grunted, glaring out the window as Ethan pulled up to the curb.

Chapter 8

Jakob watched Ethan's car pull away, fully aware of the moodily shuffling teenage stranger standing next to him.

"So, which first — clothes or phone?" Jakob said in what he hoped was a reassuringly cheerful tone, considering he in no way was feeling very cheerful about their situation at the moment.

But the kid had far more than his fair share to worry about on his plate. He didn't need to know the adult he had been left with was about as at sea with this whole mess as he probably was right now.

The kid just shrugged unhelpfully in response.

"Phone first then, I think," Jakob said, turning to walk towards the mall entrance once it became obvious there would be no further answer immediately forthcoming.

People rushed around them as Jakob and Alex headed for the entrance doors, all merrily decorated with wreaths and ribbons over garish posters advertising some no doubt incredible sales. As well as big cartoonish yellow bells that turned out to be small speakers, each playing some synced holiday music once they'd drawn close enough to hear.

The crowd that passed them had their arms filled with shopping bags, and their attention filled with their phones or companions or just the thoughts in their own heads. Some would bump occasionally into Jakob's cane, turning around to glare at him as if it had been *Jakob's* fault.

Alex trailed after him, like a lost little black sheep.

"I should have asked — do you have any prescriptions or medications you'll need that you don't have on you?" Jakob asked hesitantly.

But Alex just shook his head no, shoving his hands in his pockets. For all that he was almost the same height as Jakob, something about his hunched shoulders gave the impression he was so much younger than the newly minted eighteen-year-old Ethan had talked about.

Jakob took a deep breath as they exited the massive rotating door, the wash of cooled air hitting him full-on as he prepared himself for whatever other surprises today saw fit to throw at him.

"I hate to ask this right now, but — " Jakob said, already bracing himself.

"Your mom, or... Is there anyone you want to let know you're alright?"

Alex scowled at a pair of giggling teens watching him and whispering to each other behind their hands as they passed.

"No," he snapped, then flushed. "...Maybe. I could... I should leave a message for my mom. The nurses could read it to her, at least. But... there's no rush."

"Okay," Jakob said, noting that piece of information away for later. "Anyone else to notify? Anything you think you need to do or get before we head to my place?"

"M not sucking your dick and calling you *Daddy* or some shit just for... for helping me out," Alex snapped, spinning to shove a finger into Jakob's chest; practically knocking him back from the shock of it, if not the actual force.

"Uh, fine?" Jakob replied, floored and trying to recover from the sheer shock of the kid's words.

His rather *loud* words. Words that had carried far enough to catch the attention of a neon-clad trio of nearby mall joggers, all of whom were now staring at Jakob in intense disapproval as they swept by on their lap.

Jakob cleared his throat as he glanced away, too embarrassed to meet their accusing glares. "Cause, uh — No thank you? You're practically my daughter's age. That would be... *No*. Just — just *no*," he repeated, shaking his head; vaguely horrified as he absently rubbed at the now sore spot Alex had poked into him.

Alex scowled, his rather mulish expression reminding Jakob acutely of a surly colt. With a snort, the kid spun on his heel, stalking stiffly off in the

direction of the mall's phone kiosk.

Still rather stunned by the whole situation, Jakob watched him go.

Teenagers. He shook his head. *As if the one wasn't enough.*

But before Alex had gotten halfway to his goal, he turned back; crossing his arms as he waited for Jakob to slowly catch up.

Well. It was progress, at least.

"How'd you get the limp?" Alex asked as they headed towards the clothing store, the plastic bag holding his new phone already squirreled away in the backpack he had brought with him.

"Rich asshole scared the horse I was riding. How'd you get the attitude?" Jakob shot back, knowing this was just Alex testing boundaries while he had a clear field to run.

With the whole mall at his disposal, he had the distinct advantage. No way Jakob could catch up to him here if he decided to bolt — not with all these people, not with his limp. Here was safe for Alex, the territory in his favor. Jakob's place was an Unknown — and such unknowns were dangerous.

It was thinking Jakob understood all too well, especially after a life as checkered as his. But it was like he had told Ethan; this wasn't Jakob's first time in this sort of situation, not by a long shot. It wasn't even when it was him lending a hand to someone else who needed it. Just look at Nash, or Shane, or a half dozen others in Jakob's life. A fair few of Cassie's friends, too.

At least they came by it honestly. They might not have a drop of genes from Jakob's adoptive father, but they had sure inherited Frank's habit of collecting strays.

Alex snorted in reply, though; proof enough for Jakob that his gamble had paid off as he watched the corner of the kid's mouth try to twitch up out of his oh-so-serious scowl.

"Alright," Jakob said as they dodged around an inconveniently placed holiday display. "It's not much of a birthday present, but go on and grab some shirts,

pants, socks; whatever will get you through a day or two until we can see about getting you sorted out properly."

Briefly, Jakob tried to remember what other things a teenage boy might require. "Cassie and her friends will be able to help organize anything else you need when we get back to the house. They've got — I don't know, some sort of sharing or upcycling system. A few shops they like to go to. I'm sure she can fill you in. Just try not to break the bank on me here, please?"

Jakob had budgeted for the ride-out and breakfast. He hadn't planned for a teenager's shopping spree.

Alex just shrugged as he started drifting off towards the racks of shirts.

Tipping his head back, Jakob mentally recalculated his month's budget; taking out his phone to adjust his grocery list for the addition of a second teenage appetite. His eyes flicked over to where Alex was desultorily picking through the rows of clothing; abruptly remembering Ethan telling him that the kid didn't just play sports, but was joining a university's athletics program next fall.

Jakob doubled the figure, remembering how much he and Ethan could put away at that age. Between the food and the clothes, probably a razor and other toiletries, and — Aw fuck, the kid wasn't wearing a coat, was he? Just a thin navy hoodie, with a hole in the left elbow all tattered and worn. And from the slack in his backpack, there was no way he had one fit for winter on the island stashed in there...

Alex had obviously been too distracted to grab more than the basics when he'd fled from his house. Skinny as he was? Even in San Morado he'd want something to blunt the worst of the winter wind. And out on the island, the wind off the ocean cut a lot sharper this time of year than it did on the mainland. Kid didn't need a parka or anything, but certainly something with a shell layer to blunt the worst of the weather; especially if this turned out to be one of the one-in-a-dozen years they got snow.

But what fleeing teenager is thinking about appropriate winter gear in his kind of situation?

There goes that new pair of work boots, Jakob thought with a sigh as he added a few more lines to the budget.

Ah well — his current set might be scruffy, but he hadn't completely worn

through the soles yet. They would last another month or two, hopefully. He would just have to make it work.

Chapter 9

Jakob checked the time on his phone absently — his eyes tracking Alex's progress through the store as he shopped.

The kid had a couple of shirts picked out already and what looked like a pair of jeans bundled under his arm, so hopefully they wouldn't be too much longer.

Jakob needed to get back before the feed delivery came. The hands never could seem to stack the feedbags right unless someone was practically breathing down their necks, watching 'em.

Last delivery, a couple of the bags had shifted; ripping open when they had fallen and spilling the sticky sweetgrain all over the floor of the feed room. The resulting mess had undoubtedly made the resident mouse population happy — and the barn cats even happier — but it was something Jakob would rather avoid this time around.

And Nash had wanted to go over some details regarding the new schedules this afternoon too; maybe talk about bringing on another hand or two before next summer.

Jakob knew his assistant manager could handle the schedule himself just fine. Now, if only Nash himself would realize that.

It had been months since the duck incident, but Jakob couldn't shake the feeling that Nash still wasn't quite settling into the responsibilities of his promotion. It was like with the schedules — while the decision on new hires obviously called for Jakob's input, the day-to-day details of the staffs' shifts didn't.

But it seemed to make Nash feel better to have Jakob's sign-off, even on the things he was more than qualified to handle on his own. And Jakob certainly didn't mind lending a hand as needed. The man had plenty on his plate, especially after Nash had already taken on most all the more physically demanding parts of Jakob's job for him after the accident.

But... Jakob knew Nash's history, had talked to him enough to know how it made Nash doubt himself sometimes. Felt honored, honestly, that he had trusted Jakob as much as he had.

So if it helped make him feel more confident double-checking his decisions with Jakob, then Jakob was more than happy to take the time. He would try and help build up the man's confidence until Nash realized that Jakob hadn't just given him the position because of their shared history, but that he had *earned* his new role. Show him also that the promotion was due to Nash's own accomplishments and not merely Jakob's new limitations. Not to mention the ranch's growing popularity, now that the riding program had taken off as it had.

Frankly, Jakob had been in way over his head even before the accident. He just hadn't realized it yet. Not until he had been forced to slow down; to delegate almost all of his own duties as he focused on his surgeries, his recovery.

The accident had confronted him with the fact that there was no chance he could keep up with it all on his own. Even better, it had shown him that he didn't have to. These days things weren't like when the place was only another smalltime operation; barely able to sustain itself on only a handful of horses to work the cattle herds that had once been its bread and butter.

When Jakob had added the riding school program, all that had changed. Especially now that it boasted several nationally ranked competitors among its clientele, and a number of up-and-comers as well.

The fact that Cassie was one of them brought Jakob no small amount of pride, either.

All that to say, Jakob's recent inability to spend all afternoon stacking hay bales like he used to didn't even factor into his decision to add an assistant manager role. And Nash had simply been the most natural choice to fill it.

Jakob scratched his beard, musing on how to drive that point home to Nash when his phone rang, answering it as soon as he saw Ethan's name flash

across the screen.

*"Hey, **buddy**,"* came Ethan's voice from the other end, his tone sounding strange in a way that couldn't be blamed on Jakob's phone. *"Would you hang on a moment? Seems I've got guests."*

"Ethan? Everything okay?" Jakob asked quietly, turning slightly in the hope Alex wouldn't overhear. There was the sound of a lock turning, then a door opening in the background on Ethan's side of the line.

"Hello Officers, what can I do for you today?" came Ethan's voice, and even over the phone Jakob could tell his cheerful tone was forced.

Jakob waved to get Alex's attention, pointing to his phone once he had gotten it. The kid jogged over and Jakob held a finger to his mouth for silence as he muted the call and switched it to speaker.

"Sir, are you alone in the house? Do you mind if we step inside for a moment to talk?" came a voice over the phone.

It was muted, as if from far away. Not nearly muted enough, though, as it turned out.

*"**Shit**,"* Alex hissed, his eyes going wide at hearing the voice. "That's Tony, one of my dad's friends."

"Just me here," came Ethan's answer, his tone steady and strong. *"I'm sorry. Officers. Is there a problem?"*

"You done shopping?" Jakob asked, nodding at the bundle of clothing Alex was clutching tightly under his arm.

At Alex's anxious nod, Jakob began herding him in the direction of the nearest register.

"C'mon. Let's pay for this and get out of here," Jakob told him, trying to keep his words outwardly calm, while internally he fervently prayed they wouldn't have to hunt all over the store for someone to ring them up so they could leave.

"Sir, would you please hang up the phone and we can go have this conversation inside?" came Officer Tony's voice again faintly.

"Wish I could, officer," replied Ethan in that same falsely cheerful tone, now coming in loud and clear — at least compared to that of Officer Tony's. *"But this is a real important call. Something like a*

family emergency, I'm sure you understand. Can you come back another time?"

But finally, it seemed that lady luck had decided to smile on Jakob and Alex as they found that rarest of all miracles in a mall department store; an empty register staffed by an efficient salesperson. It was no time at all before Jakob was tucking the receipt into his wallet as they headed in the direction of the nearest exit; a ride-share driver already only eight minutes from their location and counting.

"Sir," came Officer Tony again, the single word so clipped and loaded with meaning it made Jakob wince to hear it. "Your vehicle was seen at the scene of a kidnapping, being driven by someone fitting your description. I'm sure you'd like to put the phone away and open this screen door so we can have a conversation in private — instead of out here on your porch in front of all your neighbors."

"What I would like, Officer, is for you to leave my door alone, please. It's locked, not stuck. And I'd also like to see a warrant if you gentlemen are so insistent on invading my home uninvited," Ethan replied; matching Officer Tony's tone with a bit of that old steel Jakob remembered so well, something deep inside him practically purring at the sound of it.

Not the time, he chided as he willed that part of himself down. *Save it for later.*

Now though, Jakob could faintly hear someone talking; but the actual words themselves were too low to make out. Was Officer Tony holding a discussion with his partner, maybe? Or more? Just how many of them had shown up at Ethan's door?

"Sir," came Officer Tony's voice after a moment, "We've received a tip as to the victim's current location and have officers en route now. Before they get there and things become... complicated, can you please tell us where you've been this morning?"

Alex froze in his tracks next to a display of home goods.

Jakob glanced back to find out what the holdup could possibly be, only to see the kid's face had gone white as a sheet.

"I — "

"What's the matter?" Jakob hissed at him, eyeing the rideshare app. *Six minutes.*

"I think — I *think* maybe my Dad's put a tracker on me? On my — " Alex looked around himself wildly, his eyes wide as he desperately patted his pockets before lifting up his well-worn backpack, covered in a plethora of patches and pins.

Five minutes.

Alex dropped to his knees on the department store tiles, frantically digging through his bag. Hastily he threw a battered pair of cleats into the shopping bag holding his new clothes, and a series of small clear plastic boxes. In the background, Bing Crosby crooned a very unwanted *I'll Be Home For Christmas* in complete ignorance of the irony.

"*Sure,*" came Ethan's voice over the phone. His tone was filled with a false geniality that felt decidedly at odds with the distinctly uneasy sensation coiling tight and bitter in Jakob's gut.

Too rough, too frantic; one of the little boxes Alex was throwing into the shopping bag overshot its mark. It hit the ground with a sharp *crack* that made Jakob flinch, its contents spilling, scattering, skidding across the tiles.

Four minutes.

"*I ran some errands, had breakfast, and then a friend called me asking for a ride,*" Ethan listed off with a sigh, sounding as if he had just endured the most boring morning possible in the entire history of the world. "*Dropped them off and then came straight here. Wouldn't know the first thing about a kidnapping, sorry.*"

"*This friend... a student of yours?*" Officer Tony asked.

"*Another adult,*" Ethan hedged. "*Is one of my students in trouble, officers?*"

"I got it," Jakob said quickly, wincing as he leaned down to pick up the brightly painted tiny figures from the floor.

He handed them carefully to Alex, who threw them far less gently into the shopping bag; hastily ripping as many of the pins and patches as he could from the backpack and throwing them in, too.

Three minutes.

With a resounding clang, Alex threw the now-battered backpack into the trash at the exit doors. His shoulders bowed, his face suspiciously wet; he looked like a man awaiting his turn at the gallows.

Grimacing, Jakob clutched the phone even tighter to his ear; not saying anything as Alex turned away, swiping his sleeve roughly across his cheeks. Fuck, but he felt so useless here. It didn't matter that he knew, logically, that he *was* doing something. It didn't erase this feeling of wanting to do more.

One step at a time, Jakob's physical therapist had told him. *Even the small ones are important in the long run.*

Jakob sighed, checking the rideshare app again.

One minute.

"*Look, Sir —*" came a feminine voice over the phone. And though its owner was clearly attempting to adopt a tone that was probably going for 'let's all be reasonable here, and work on this together', it was just as clearly so sanitized and conditioned by training seminar after seminar that it came off closer to a tactic usually plied by used car sales folk. The end result was about exactly how you would expect to hear an alley cat to sound; one trying to blend in with the mice, but unable to fully hide their twitching tail and sharp teeth.

"*— There's a missing kid out there,*" that officer was saying. "*His family's worried sick. The kid's probably scared half to death. Our records have you listed as a teacher, right? I'm sure you know how dangerous the world can be, how much trouble kids get into in a situation like this. Just like I'm sure you want to make sure this kid gets back home with their family, goes to sleep safe and sound in their own bed, right?*"

"*Of course, I wish I could help you, I do. But like I told you, I don't know a thing about any missing kid,*" came Ethan's easy enough sounding reply, though Jakob could recognize from experience the note of anxiety woven through it now. "*Fraid I can't tell you what I don't know, can I?*"

As Jakob and Alex stepped out into the too-bright sunlight outside, he spotted the rideshare's towncar weaving through all the pedestrians walking through the truly massive parking lot surrounding the mall.

"Sir, we'd like you to please come down to the station with us to answer some more questions," Officer Tony tried again.

"How about I call my lawyer; see if she thinks it's a good idea, yeah?" Ethan mused. "I'm obviously always happy to assist the police any way I can, provided my council's available. 'Course, she bills me a bit too much iff'n' I'm not actually being charged with anything. But seeing as you gents are the ones eager to ask me all these questions, I'm sure you'd be footing her tab, right?"

"Sir, if you could please — "

"I'm really sorry officers — " Ethan said, though his voice did not sound at all sorry to Jakob's ears. Sounded smug as hell, actually; which was a distraction Jakob couldn't afford right that moment. But later maybe... " — but I'm afraid I just can't be of any help to you. If you'll excuse me, I've got to finish up this call. Got another with a parent here in a few minutes, and then an absolute mountain of grading to get done before classes tomorrow. You ever had to grade a hundred and forty essays about high schooler's favorite art movements? Every single toilet-related pun gentlemen, to the point words and life both lose all meaning. Wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy. Hope you have a nice day now."

There was the sound of a door closing on a muffled, angry *"Sir! Please open the door sir!"* from the phone as Jakob and Alex got into the rideshare and greeted their driver, who thankfully took off with a minimum of fanfare.

But Jakob couldn't immediately relax though — only breathing out the sigh he had been holding, only feeling all his muscles untense when he finally heard the faint sound of Ethan's lock sliding home.

Chapter 10

"Hey, you still there?" Ethan asked; his voice coming in much louder and more clearly than before over the phone's little speaker.

Jakob glanced at Alex, before nodding at the ride-share driver in front of them as he thumbed the phone off speaker mode and unmuted it.

Alex rolled his eyes, but nodded and turned to watch out the window, the shopping bag clutched tightly to his chest like he was afraid of losing that too now.

Jakob wondered if he was just people-watching in general as the rideshare wove them through the parking lot, or if the kid was scanning for the telltale outline of a crown vic; on the lookout for more of his dad's buddies on their tail.

He was betting on the latter.

"I'm here," Jakob said into the phone. "You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," Ethan replied so confidently Jakob could practically see the shit-eating grin he was no doubt wearing. The same one that he had seen on his old friend through so many stunts before. "They didn't have a warrant or anything to charge me on, so they can't do sweet fuck all."

"If you say so," Jakob said, exhaling slowly. "Sounds as if you've got more experience with all this than me."

"What'd you say about earlier? This ain't my first rodeo either. Though usually, it's protests and the like, not... well. You know."

"Yeah. Still — had me worried," Jakob said, feeling the tips of his ears heat

as soon as the words left his mouth.

He glanced over at Alex, but the kid was sullenly looking out the window at the scenery passing by; the cheerful big-brand stores and chain restaurants clustered around the mall, blending into the general blandness of retail parks and outlet strips, car dealerships and office buildings, and so on.

He gave off every appearance of ignoring Jakob as they rode, but Jakob occasionally caught the flash of those bright copper eyes reflected in the window, watching him.

"You hear that bit about the tipoff?" Ethan's voice rumbled along the connection with concern.

"Yeah," Jakob sighed, remembering the sight of Alex ripping all the stuff off his backpack. All those patches and pins that had made it *his*; that had made it *special*.

Jakob could get him a new bag. Could even try and help replace the individual accessories, but he knew from experience it wouldn't quite ever be the same. Wouldn't erase the memory of having to destroy that first bag either, that flash of raw loss he had seen in the kid's eyes.

And that was assuming Alex would even let him help replace his stuff. Jeans and shirts were one thing, but something so obviously personal...

Jakob could already tell the kid had a stubborn streak a mile wide, and an honestly healthy sense of caution about his current situation. Could be he would rebuff any gesture Jakob made that Alex might see as putting him in some kind of debt; no matter if it was given freely, without strings attached.

Didn't mean Jakob couldn't at least try, though.

"He thinks he took care of the problem," Jakob answered Ethan simply. "Ask me about it later. You know, as a break from grading all those essays."

He grinned at hearing Ethan's warm chuckle through the phone.

"Alright," Ethan said. "I'll call you tonight, then. You can catch me up on your end. Plus, we never got to finish that conversation earlier. You free around... eight, maybe?"

"Need to check in with Frank at eight," Jakob replied ruefully. "Then he spends half an hour trying to figure out how to adjust his camera so it isn't just his forehead. Make it nine?"

"It's a date," Ethan said brightly, before apparently his brain caught up with his mouth and his tone turned nervous. "I mean... Well, um — I didn't *not* mean — "

"No, um. It's fine. I don't mind if... I'll just call you at nine then," Jakob said; stumbling over his words and wondering if at this point the tips of his ears would stay permanently warm like one of his neighbors used to threaten him would happen as a kid.

One of his many, *many* neighbors through the years; them moving around as his mother's free-spirited whims and whimsy took her. *Be nice enough in the winter*, came the errant thought. *Damn annoying in the summertime, though.*

"Might not be a good idea to meet up for coffee again for a while, anyway. Not if they're watching me like they did the last time," Ethan warned. "Cop car's still parked outside on the street."

"That legal?" Jakob asked, anxiety for his friend stampeding through his gut at that bit of news.

"Probably not," Ethan said with a heavy sigh. "But for some reason, the police don't seem to believe me when I tell them I am but merely a simple art teacher."

Jakob snorted. "You've never been a simple anything, Ethan."

"Sure, but they don't need to *know* that, do they?"

Jakob chuckled, prompting Alex to look over at him for a minute. But the endless string of suburban houses had petered out to rolling farmland, dotted here and there by harvesters and combines. Occasionally it was interspersed with pastures full of grazing cattle; the rural landscape that was so familiar to Jakob apparently holding a riveting fascination for the kid.

He couldn't imagine what might be running through Alex's head at this point.

Jakob wondered how often he had ever been outside the bounds of his cookie-cutter little suburb. What he'd thought he was walking into when he had called up Ethan. What he was going to think of the ranch, or even the island in general.

Speaking of.

"We're nearly to the amusement park," Jakob told Ethan as they crested a hill and a massive arch came into view, the ocean sparkling like diamonds to

either side. "I can see the bridge just beyond. We'll get home and settled in, and I'll fill you in on everything later."

"Alright. You... Take care, Jakob. Okay?" came Ethan's voice, something soft hidden in its tones that sparked a curl of warmth in Jakob's chest to hear it.

"Yeah. You too. Talk to you soon," Jakob said, feeling a grin come sneaking its way across his lips, even as he ended the call.

They rode for a while in silence, Alex's face pressed up against the window the whole time.

The marshy strip of mainland that lay across the bay from the island's north side wasn't the prettiest bit of landscaping, not by a long shot. But that meant it had been cheap as dirt when the amusement park had been built. Not to mention all the hotel towers that had come with it, lining both sides of the bay.

Being on the mainland, the park wasn't technically part of Chance's Harbor. Enough of the tourists the park attracted wandered across the massive bridge to the island's beaches, however, that the local businesses only *slightly* begrudged not getting a say in the behemoth they lay just outside their door.

Jakob took Cassie to the park a few times when it had first been built, but it'd been a few years now since last they'd gone.

"You been?" he asked Alex as they passed the big castle in the park's center, who only shook his head in response.

There were a good number of fishing boats out today Jakob spotted as they crested the big bridge. And more speedboats flying across the water than you generally saw this time of year, too.

The island of Chance's Harbor was long and skinny, made up mostly of sand and sediment that shifted with every storm that came blowing through. Its western end was where all the action was, all stately old homes and impressive historic districts. The theater, the boardwalk, and of course La Calle; where all the sunburnt tourists turned up to spend their money at the cafes, confectionaries, and curio shops that lined what had once, in the district's more humble days, been merely known as the wharf.

If the western end was the head of the comet, then the eastern was its tail. Almost completely given over to beach houses and holiday homes wherever

they could be fit; sandwiched between the coves and marshes of the northern side, and the long ribbons of white sandy beaches that stretched along the south.

Keep going far enough, and you'd eventually find a little spur of actual rock, a sweep of ridge barely attached to the island proper at all. It was connected by a strip of salt marsh that was soggy and wild even at low tide, and almost completely flooded when the tide was high. Still, it was the highest bit of ground the island could claim, and so it did; right up to the spot that once boasted an old stone lighthouse before it was destroyed by cannons and fire.

And pirates, Jakob seemed to recall. Or...it was built by pirates? Possibly both. It had changed hands many times over the years, that he knew; just as the rest of Chance's Harbor had. Bit like its namesake, really.

Out here the road was somewhat more modest, and the bridge something of a religious experience that often had you thanking your maker of choice that you survived. But with a little faith and a half-decent GPS, you'd find yourself pulling up to a ranch overlooking the gulf.

It had done a brisk business back when Frank had just been starting out, offering horseback tours along the empty beach below. He'd long ago made good on the bank's loan and then some, and now he owned the place outright. But when the amusement park on the mainland had come blowing into their neck of the bay...

Jakob sighed as the ranch's red barn came into view. It was a puzzle. How could half an hour in a rented saddle compete with an entire day of roller coasters and costumed characters, with catchy songs sung ad nauseam by a backseat of screaming kids?

Rubbing his chest at the crunch of gravel under the car's tires, Jakob frowned. He focused on taking deep breaths just like his therapist had recommended, as they drove up the path snaking between the two massive oleanders he and Frank had planted down at the foot of the drive, all those years ago.

Ethan too, come to think of it — the tightness in Jakob's chest lessening — during one of those spells he would stay with them when he'd had nowhere else to go.

He —

"YOU HAVE FUCKING HORSES?" Alex exploded next to him;

interrupting Jakob's thoughts as sure as a freight train as the kid whipped 'round, surprise written all across his face. "I thought you were bullshitting me!"

Chapter 11

Jakob blinked at him for a moment, not knowing what to say; before remembering some of the little figures he had picked up from the spill of the kid's belongings as they had scattered across the department store's tiled floor. There had been several tiny horse-mounted warriors among the various other units, their banners and tabards bearing meticulously painted patterns.

Remembered the feeling when *he'd* first seen the ranch, crammed into his mom's rusty and sputtering little hatchback along with all their stuff. With its peeling paint and cracked front headlight, it had been the one single constant of his childhood to that point. That and the sharp, bitter tang of disappointment as they packed it full of all their belongings once more.

God, how angry he had been back then. At his mom, at Frank, at the entire fucking world. Filled with an impotent fury that here they were, *again*. His mom telling him how wonderful this new life would be for them; how great this latest in a long string of endless boyfriends was; how much fun Jakob would have living here; how good it would be for him to be so close to nature; how everything was *finally* going to work out for them this time. How this time — *this time* — they could *stay*.

He had been an absolute little shitheel in the way only a sullen child could manage, but Frank had been patient. Had taken a single glance at a furious boy and seen the skittish colt, so scared of his own shadow that he tried to bite and kick at anything that came too close.

It had been the horses that had done it, of course. What kid saw one and *didn't* want to ride — at least a little bit, somewhere deep down inside?

He had been terrified at first. The horses were so so big and he had been so so small.

But Frank had started him slow, and soon enough Jakob was in the saddle more than out of it; riding that old palomino all over the backcountry within a day's ride of the ranch.

His favorite had been taking her down the saltgrass trail early of a morning, down to the empty strand of beach where he could let her have her head. Jakob could remember holding onto the saddle horn for all he was worth, whooping fit to wake a banshee; encouraging her as she ran like a mare half her age, hooves flying across the sand.

Remembered the feel of the wind on his skin, the salt air in his lungs. The seagulls calling and wheeling overhead like a cheering crowd, as the little sandpipers scuttled quickly out of their way.

Remembered too how he had come back one afternoon, breathless and wild from a ride; only to find his mom's old hatchback gone.

He hadn't thought anything of it at first. Before he had left for the stable that morning, his mom had told him she was going out to run some errands. How could a boy his age even guess that his mother could apparently just get into her rusty old car and simply... driven away? Had kept on driving, right on out of both their lives, for good.

That she was *gone*. Just —

Just *gone*.

He'd found her letter after he'd finished cleaning and putting the tack away, the mare safely returned to her paddock just as Frank had taught him. Horse and gear seen to, Jakob went inside the farmhouse to make himself a sandwich. All the different places they had lived, the classic PB&J had always been a staple; quick and easy for a hungry, impatient boy.

She had left the note on the kitchen table for them. Weighted down under the jar of peanut butter as it was, it had been a surefire guarantee Jakob wouldn't miss it.

He remembered all too well that sharp sense of despair he'd felt, curled up there under Frank's guest bed where Jakob had hidden after reading it. The way the stiff paper had jabbed sharply into his skin, clutched so tightly in his hand.

With their car gone, the room he had been sleeping in the past few months had been the closest thing to safe territory he had; even if he knew then in his heart that it was all only ever an illusion.

Just the night before, he had overheard his mom and Frank talking about turning it into a bedroom for Jakob. Or maybe Frank would convert an old storage room in the loft above the hay barn into a new office; giving Jakob the room that had been his current one, just down the hall.

That bright burst of excitement at the thought of a place all his very own sat like ash in Jakob's mouth; turned to bitter certainty at the knowledge it could never happen now.

He'd flinched to hear the front door open. The sound of Frank calling his mom's name and then Jakob's, in turn. Every footstep he had taken, every creak of the wooden floorboards under his boots as Frank had searched for them, all driving Jakob deeper under the bed.

To this day, he still wasn't sure *why*.

Desperation, probably. Some childish logic that if he couldn't be found, he couldn't be turned out. That as long as he could stay hidden, he could stay.

Frank had always been kind to Jakob. Not all of his mother's friends had. But by then, Frank had already become someone Jakob was learning he could rely on; someone he could trust. There wasn't any good reason for him to hide like a child from Frank. He knew that, even then. But when had fear ever needed a reason? And just then, it held Jakob tightly in his hold.

His heart had nearly stopped when Frank's footsteps halted outside his room. Not in fear of the man himself, but of the future Jakob could see with such certainty, spinning out before him now.

It resumed its beating in triple time as the door opened, thundering so loudly in his ears he was sure it would give him away. And — he must have made some sound then; let out some squeak or shifted his leg or —

"Jakob?" Frank had asked hesitantly. His eyes were wide and face startled where it appeared in the space between the floor and the edge of the bed; framed by the drape of the dust ruffle that Frank had lifted up, as if it was a curtain opening in some play.

"Why in the world you hidin' under there with all the lights off, boy? Where's your mama?"

Remembered holding out the hand gripping the note. The way it had felt so *heavy*, as if he could still feel it burning against his palm even after Frank had uncrumpled it; smoothing out the stark white paper, so bright against his hands. The soundless shapes his mouth had moved as he'd read it to himself.

Her handwriting was all loops and swirls, sprawling like vines across the page. He had studied it too many times to count by then, but each time it made less and less sense to him.

Some bullshit about how much she loved them both, about how she would miss them terribly. About needing to find herself; that it was somehow for the best. That it was all meant to be, some part of a larger plan.

Excuse after excuse for leaving Jakob behind, scrawled in spidery black ink across the blotchy page.

Remembered the hollow look in Frank's eyes when he turned to stare at Jakob, looking as lost and uncomprehending as Jakob felt.

"She *left*?" Frank's words were loud in the quietness of the room, his voice unmistakably angry.

Jakob winced at the noise, scrabbling to scrunch himself further back under the bed until he'd practically plastered himself against the wall the headboard rested against.

Because... Because he had been so sure at the time that anger had been directed at *him*.

He'd stared flatly back at a bewildered Frank, his eyes hot and blurry after so many hours spent crying under the bed. His whole body felt wrung out, unequal to the weight the world had abruptly placed upon it. Like it was all he could do to just lie there now and accept his fate.

Frank frowned then, and swallowed.

"I'm... I'm sorry, boy. I ain't mad at you, I swear. Ain't your fault. You, uh... You want to come out from under there? It's supertime. We can... We can find ourselves a bite to eat."

His voice had been gentle as he'd said the words; the same way he had shown Jakob how to speak to the horses; to talk them into doing things they didn't want to, like wear a halter or stand still to be saddled

"I could... make you a PB & J?" Frank had asked. "They're your favorite,

right?"

Jakob just limply shook his head no, uninterested. He didn't feel the least bit hungry. In fact, he didn't think he could bear the smell of peanut butter ever again.

Frank glanced away towards the hallway, the muscles of his cheek twitching as his jaw clenched.

"We'll sort this out, boy," he said then in a low tone, his eyes hard as they searched out Jakob's. "I won't lie to you and tell you I know how exactly just yet, but... somehow we'll — we'll make this right."

But there had been a tremor in Frank's voice as he'd said it, a note of determination when he had told Jakob — when he'd *promised*, though Jakob hadn't recognized it as such at the time — that they would sort this out.

He still remembered how soft Frank's old flannel shirt had been against his cheek, all sun faded and worn thin with age. Clinging tightly to the man as Frank held him; his whole body shaking with sobs he'd been absolutely sure at the time would never, ever *stop*.

Remembered that feeling too, when — months later — Frank had sat Jakob down at the same battered little kitchen table, telling him they needed to talk.

Jakob had felt his heart dropping into his sneakers as he'd huddled there, instantly that sullen kid once more. Scratching at the top of the table with his thumbnail and waiting for Frank to tell Jakob he was kicking him out; that at any minute someone would arrive to put him in foster care, making him leave the only place that had... that had ever been anything like a home.

"I found her," Frank had finally said into the silence.

And it had been so far from what Jakob had been expecting, that he hadn't quite been sure he had heard him right; his mind not even fully comprehending the words.

"What?" he had managed to choke out, the word coming out in a high squeak as his voice broke on it.

"Your mamma. Tracked her down to some commune a few states over," Frank explained, his eyes sharp as that pair of red-tailed hawks that nested nearby as he watched Jakob's response. "She was up to her elbows in mud planting something and happy as a clam."

Jakob scowled, hunching forward so his hair fell in his face, hiding his expression. He had been growing it out ever since she disappeared, refusing to let Frank or anyone else cut it. By that point, it almost reached his shoulders.

"Why are you telling me this?" he tried to growl, scowling when it came out more like a squawk thanks to the vagaries of puberty.

"Because the way I see it, she's left us with two choices," Frank said, his chair squeaking as he leaned back, crossing his arms across his chest.

Jakob snorted, glaring at the tabletop. He knew the chances of *him* getting any say in these so-called 'choices'.

"One," Frank continued, undeterred, "is we can figure out how you go live with her, if you want. You would be the only kid in the place, and they aren't set up in the way of schooling — or running water or electricity or much of anything, really. But you would be with your momma, if you chose to be; that's the important thing."

Jakob glanced up, unable to conceal his surprise at the idea that... that Frank might be serious about him having a say in all this after all.

"And... and what's the other choice?" he asked quietly, unsure.

Frank pulled a folded-up wad of papers from his shirt pocket and pushed them in front of Jakob.

Jakob watched him, hesitating a long while before finally unfolding them. Carefully, he smoothed out the paper as he tried to make sense of the letters on the page.

"Petition for Adop — " Jakob stared wide-eyed at Frank, his heart hammering in his chest so loud he was sure it could be heard three counties over. "You — "

"Got your momma to sign her share of the paperwork when I'd found her," Frank said gruffly, shifting uncomfortably in his chair. "But... I won't file it unless you tell me it's what *you* want."

"I... I could stay here?" Jakob asked, feeling his ears flush at how small his voice sounded.

"You could," Frank replied with a nod.

"With — with you?"

"That would be the general idea, yes."

"But... then this — it's wrong," Jakob told him, chewing on his lip.

"How so?"

"If — if you adopted me... Then it shouldn't say Jakob Groves, right? It should say Jakob Stone." He tilted his head, looking up at Frank. "... Shouldn't it?"

"Jakob..." Frank said, something guarded in his tone. "You don't have to take my last name if you don't want to."

Jakob felt his shoulders slump at that, some tiny little flame that had been burning inside him suddenly extinguished.

"But — But if you *do* want?" Frank had said then, his voice strangely thick, his eyes sharp as they watched Jakob. Like they could see into his mind, into his heart. "Well then, I... It'd be my absolute pleasure to make it happen, one way or another."

Jakob blinked, his mind shaking off the memory as the sound of gravel crunching under tires snapped him back to the present with alarming abruptness.

He took a few deep breaths, his hand pressed hard to his chest as if trying to keep the beating wings he felt banging against his ribcage safely inside.

"You ride?" Jakob asked Alex, trying to distract himself as the car came to a stop on the gravel drive just in front of the main house; working hard to keep his tone even and unaffected. He knew it was a shot in the dark, but the horses were the first thing Alex had responded to positively since he had barreled into Jakob's life that morning.

Plus... Jakob hadn't met the kid yet who, even if they didn't ride, didn't at least have the desire to.

Worked well enough on me to get me out of my shell...

"No," Alex muttered darkly, slamming the town car's door with unnecessary roughness as Jakob thanked their driver.

He winced, adding an apology for the treatment of his car and increasing the amount of the tip.

"Course I don't fucking *ride*," Alex scoffed, arms folded contemptuously over his chest and a sneer twisting up his face. "Who rides horses except rich assholes and weirdos?"

Jakob tried not to grin at how the overall impression was thoroughly ruined by the way Alex's eyes kept sliding over to the riding ring and the afternoon lessons that looked to be fully underway.

"Hmm. Well — I'm not rich, but I guess I've been called worse than *weirdo*," Jakob replied lightly over his shoulder with mock solemnity as he led the way up to the main house. "Guess that means you don't want to learn *how*, then?"

"No, hey wait — I didn't say that!" Alex back peddled hastily as he followed; trotting quickly after Jakob up the creaky steps to the main level and on into the house, the screen door slamming behind him.

Chapter 12

"So how's he doing?" asked Ethan through the headphones jacked into Jakob's laptop, the screen propped up on his chest as he leaned against the headboard of his bed.

From the looks of things, Ethan was in his living room for his end of the video call.

The back of a big paisley-covered overstuffed armchair peeked out from around Ethan's head and the edge of a lamp shade just above, the rest outside the camera frame. Behind him was a bookcase overflowing with books, all stacked horizontally in an effort to wedge more in. Here and there were shells and fossils of the sort that looked like they would have interesting stories to them.

Though... no photos, Jakob noticed.

Not that it was barren of personality — not in the slightest. Not with every inch of the wall behind him completely covered in framed artwork — all from a wide range of skill levels, all clustered around a big one in the center; a rainbow riot of melted crayons outlining the words, "Thank You, Mr. Hillsman!" cut in with big blocky letters.

All in all, it was rather cozy, really. Very... *Ethan*, Jakob thought with a grin.

They were using some encrypted program Ethan had somehow known about, some software he said couldn't be wiretapped like a phone apparently could be. He looked comfortable leaning back in his big chair, a glass of something dark amber making an appearance every now and again, the ice cube in it clinking over the audio as he did.

Looked far more comfortable than Jakob at least, who was sure he was going to end up with a crick in his neck from the angle he was curled up in. His chiropractor wouldn't approve.

Ah well, it was worth the sacrifice to chat with his friend; to get to see him looking like this again, relaxed and content despite the serious subject matter.

"Surprisingly alright?" Jakob answered, stretching his legs. "He took photos of his bruises, documented the fight."

"The *abuse*, you mean," Ethan snarled. "Don't care if the clock ticking over at midnight means Alex is technically an adult now. A grown man with a cop's training hitting someone who was legally a minor only yesterday? That's not a fight, that's a beat down any day of the week."

Jakob shrugged.

"Look, I agree with you. I'm only repeating Alex's words; don't shoot the messenger. But we talked to a lawyer I know about filing a police report — *safely*," Jakob assured him, just as Ethan opened his mouth to protest. "This isn't the first time I've had to help a kid with an abusive parent, remember? But it's a step towards trying to get a restraining order, and my lawyer's sending that on to a judge who'll be sympathetic despite — or maybe I should say, *because of* — how... messy the circumstances are. Remember Greg Mewitt, our old RA in the dorms?"

Ethan nodded, setting his glass back down and licking his lower lip. "Sounds like you've been busy. Sorry about pulling you into all this. It's... It's a damn sight more than the coffee you agreed to this morning."

"Don't you dare go apologizing," Jakob warned him. "This isn't your fault. *Or* his. Truth is, I'm happy to help. Alex... He seems as if he could use a friend. There's a good kid somewhere under all that stubbornness, like you said. Even if you have to dig deep, *deep* to find it. But that's just teenagers. I've been down this road with Cassie too, when she's gone and gotten the bit in her teeth about something. At least it's familiar territory, right?"

"Guess so. Still... If you feel as if you're in over your head, you promise you'll let me know?"

"Yeah Ethan, I promise," Jakob told his friend, eyes softening at the concern he picked up in Ethan's voice; a warm curl unfurling in his belly to recognize it as concern for *him*. "I know it sounds like a lot, but it's all just setup, really."

It'll all settle down enough soon. Wouldn't be surprised if you haven't heard from him in the next day or so yourself, actually."

"You set him up with a new phone, then?"

"Yeah, plus some clothes to last him until we can get him properly sorted out. Cassie's already got a couple of her friends coming over tomorrow to drop some things off. They trade closets and clothes like we used to swap pogs and trading cards; says it's like getting to go on a shopping spree every month. They take over my living room, clothes *everywhere* — order pizza when they're done and play video games until they pass out in one big sleepover. Send me off packing to my room as if *I'm* the teenager," Jakob said with an overly dramatic roll of his eyes.

Ethan chuckled. "God help us all — you were bad enough the first time."

"Says the pot," Jakob replied with a snort. "It was you who suggested we break into Principle Jones's office, if I recall."

"Sure, but *I* wasn't the one who'd brought a dozen canisters of glitter, now was I?" Ethan's face grew serious, a line appearing between those thick brows as his voice drifted lower. "You know this might just be a temporary calm, right? Situation like his..."

Jakob shifted against the pillow propped up under his shoulders. "Yeah, I know. The quiet before the storm, right? He was pushing some boundaries earlier at the mall. To be honest, I thought for a moment there he was nearly about to take off, as nervous as he looked. But — Ethan? Whatever he's running from at home? It's bad."

There was quiet from the other man, but Jakob knew from experience that mind of his was going a mile a minute.

"When he called, Alex brought up something about his Dad trying to take him somewhere," Ethan told him finally, his voice low and worried.

"Mentioned a program, some kind of special... I think he said it was a camp? He was asking me a bunch of questions the other week; he'd gone checking through his Dad's search history or router logs or the like after he'd found a pamphlet for it in the house. I think — I think he was taking Alex to one of those bullshit 'pray away the gay' conversion camps."

"**Fuck.** Heard whispers about those places, and none of them good." Jakob scrubbed at the back of his neck. "Can you believe we're still having to fight

this kind of bullshit in this day and age?"

"Honestly? I didn't expect to still be around this long," Ethan admitted. "We all thought life was gonna be short and sweet, like those swallowtail butterflies you see in May. The fact I'm still here to fight at all..."

He trailed off, old ghosts in his eyes Jakob understood all too well.

"Yeah. Well..." Jakob cleared his throat, aiming to steer the conversation back to something they could actually do something about. "If Alex *is* gay, and his father's not only an abusive asshole, but a bigot besides? Certainly explains why he was lashing out earlier. He's waiting for the other shoe to drop. Probably expects me to kick him out too, soon as I find out."

"Or kick him around," Ethan grimaced. "His father's a real piece of work. You should have seen how he used to avoid me and the other male teachers. Up until he saw me wearing a pride shirt to school one day, and I suddenly found myself with a very sullen second shadow."

Jakob grinned at the mental image of Alex following Ethan around like a very sulky duckling. "But you said he's eighteen now, right? If he's an adult, his dad can't force him to go anywhere Alex doesn't want."

"That's just it," Ethan replied, his jaw clenching as he leaned in. "I checked the teacher online portal after the cops left. Someone updated his file last night using one of the school computers. De-registered him from all his classes, listing him as 'homeschooled'... But his Dad's a full-time cop, and his mom has health problems and lives in a care home. I'm pretty sure there's no other family around close enough to provide him with anything in the way of lessons. Plus — and this is the really odd bit — his birthdate got turned back a year."

"He's *seventeen*?" Jakob sat up, suddenly worried. "Ethan, you know I'll do everything I can to help the kid. But I gotta tell you — I don't particularly want to show up in the papers on some variant of 'local bisexual man goes to jail for harboring a runaway child' if it turns out he's actually a minor."

"No — he's eighteen," Ethan said, sending a wave of relief rushing through Jakob and unknitting the muscles that had clenched tight in his neck. "Or at least, he is according to his mom, and the copy of the birth certificate she used to register one *Alejandro Xavier Martin y Estrada* for school back when he started kindergarten. I printed out the scan of it for him, but I really hope he thought to grab the original before he left."

"If he did, he's got his head on a damn sight better than I did at his age," Jakob frowned. "But Ethan — printing off students' personal info like that... Is that legal? Don't mind telling you, I'd be uncomfortable if I found out one of Cassie's teachers was snooping around her files."

"It's... not generally approved of, let's say," Ethan grimaced. "If Alex wasn't eighteen, *and* hadn't given me his express permission? I wouldn't even chance taking a peek, much less the hard copy. S'why I asked him to leave me that voice message asking me to look into stuff, just in case. Like you said, those headlines are way too easy to imagine."

"So why risk it?"

"*Because* someone updated his file last night," Ethan explained, an intent fire burning in those brown eyes. "Someone who I don't think is familiar with those files. They have a change log that records any updates like the one they made, including the time stamp. Not only can I see the previous version before they altered it, but I saw that they did so around 2 AM. Not generally an hour anyone with authorized access is thumbing through students' personal information. Didn't want to take the chance they'd come back and finish the job, though; go cleaning up after themselves by deleting the only record he might have access to right now that proves he is who he says he is, and how old."

"Those logs say who?"

"No," Ethan sighed, leaning back in his chair. "It's tagged as *Maintenance*, but that account was listed as restricted when I went to click on it. And here's where it gets stranger — whoever it was? Tried to attach a second copy of a birth certificate to Alex's file."

"A duplicate?" Jakob mused. "Software error, maybe?"

"Don't think so. It's not an exact clone, not even a quick job with an image editor. It looks similar to the first one; same place in Guatemala, same seals and all mostly. But the years are changed, and the signatures don't quite match. Even those black lines you get around the edges of a scanned document are different. Looks fresh."

"You think someone's trying to swap in a forged birth certificate?" Jakob asked. "His dad?"

"Seems like it," Ethan shrugged. "I mean, obviously I can't prove anything,

but... I've seen enough students trying to fake their parents' writing to skip out of class. This feels like that, only — it's not just some kid looking to play hooky; forging a document as official as this has got to be some kind of federal crime, right? Why would Alex's dad go through the trouble — not to mention the risk if he gets caught?"

"Given everything we've seen, I'd wager this isn't his first time planting evidence. This isn't just turning a three into an eight on a check, this is long-game stuff. If he's got experience planting evidence, or if he's got the right connections, he might not see it as a risk. Or maybe a risk he can easily get out of, which is much of the same."

"But why? What could it possibly get him?"

"Wrecks Alex's university plans maybe, leaves him under his dad's thumb that much longer. Some parents get strange about their children growing up, especially if they didn't turn out a little cookie-cutter version of themselves like they expected. Especially when we're talking ultra-conservative parents discovering they've got a queer kid," Jakob grimaced. "If Alex's dad can claim his son is still seventeen, he can send Alex to that camp. There wouldn't be anything you, me, or Alex could do about it if the state believes him."

"And then... with his dad being a cop, who else is Alex supposed to go to? Even if he tried to run away, they'd only catch him and bring him right back," Ethan worked out. "Damn, this is so fucked up."

Ethan pursed his lips as Jakob nodded. "But...there'd have to have been other documents, right? Affidavits and so on?"

"Sure," Jakob agreed readily, experience laying it out for him neatly with almost military precision. "Hard copies stuck in a filing box somewhere in the middle of nowhere; susceptible to floods and fires, insects, mold. That's if those in charge can lay their hands on them easily — if they aren't misplaced, misfiled, or even missing completely. Lots of mistakes made in those days, especially when you're talking about that region of the world. Lot of falsified records come out of there too. Wouldn't be the first to fake a birth certificate from around there. All together, it wouldn't be too difficult to throw doubt and suspicion on the original document's authenticity, which is all Alex's father really needs. Then he swoops in with the altered one, a story about mixed-up papers from some little hole-in-the-wall missionary church; a

screw-up that he's now trying to put to rights for the sake of his son?"

"...If I ask how you know all this, am I going to get the old '*If I told you, I'd have to kill you*' spy routine?" Ethan asked, his right eyebrow arched.

Jakob hummed, neither confirming nor denying. "Y'know, depending on when and how Alex and his mother came into the country? Could be a whole can of worms lying there, just waiting to be opened. Especially if his dad's feeling petty and tries to nick you for kidnapping on top of it. Don't mind telling you that this school records thing has me worried, Ethan. I mean, why else bother?"

"Wouldn't put it past him at this point," Ethan snorted. "So you think he's planning something?"

"Think he's long past that; I think he's *doing* something. Just not sure what yet," Jakob answered him honestly. "You said Alex's mom's still alive and in the picture, right? Can't she help?"

"From what little he's let slip about her condition... 'In the picture' might be stretching it. You tell me what you think the likelihood is of a local judge taking the word of an immigrant dementia patient over that of a cop. Especially since this new version of his birth certificate only lists them both as *Elisa* and *Alex Martin* instead of either of their full names."

"No chance this is all just some innocent coincidence, is there?" Jakob asked, looking for any other possibilities despite knowing the most likely answer. "Maybe he was adopted, and this is a legitimate updating of documents? Or an immigration thing; anglicizing to fit in before he heads off to university or something?"

Ethan's expression turned rueful.

"I'm a teacher in a city called *San Morado*. I've got plenty of kids from all over coming through my classes, and this ain't that. His mom's listed on the certificate as Guatemalan, but his dad's American. Means Alex automatically is too, no matter where he was born. Plus, the timing's just too convenient, y'know? If it was legitimate, why is it being done at 2 a.m. from a computer terminal in the school's library? Why didn't the person know the system well enough to mark the first birth certificate as an out-of-date document when they were trying to upload the new one, instead of fouling up the file? None of it makes any *sense*," Ethan said, shaking his head.

"Unless you're trying to forge a legal document, and you've watched one too many cop dramas that show a tech guy with someone shouting over his shoulder, '*Zoom! Enhance! Ah-ha — book 'em, Danno!*' to bust the bad guy of the week," Jakob concluded. "We already know Alex's dad has reinforcements, with emphasis on the *force*."

"Yeah," Ethan nodded, sounding resigned. "If Alex wasn't born on US soil and didn't think to grab all his records on his way out this morning... Think we should contact the embassy? Seems like that could take time."

Jakob tilted his head, thinking fast. "I might know someone who can get a hold of a certified copy of Alex's original birth certificate a little quicker than the official channels move. I'll get in touch with them tonight, see if we can't sort this out."

"*Please*," Ethan said, open relief washing across his face at that.

An answering lick of pleasure teased up Jakob's spine in response, spurred along by the knowledge that he was *helping*.

"God, this really is turning into a TV drama, isn't it?" Ethan muttered. "I... I almost feel silly going all Sherlock Holmes because of one measly student file, but it just... It didn't add up, y'know? He say anything to you about any of this?"

"No," Jakob sighed heavily, nearly dislodging the laptop. "I'll ask him in the morning if he knows what's going on, but... He doesn't talk about personal stuff on his own. Skitters away from the subject as quick as if he'd heard a rattler's tail. Is polite enough to Cassie, but as far as I can tell, he seems to live by that old credo that 'if you can't say something sarcastic, better to not say anything at all'."

"Don't think I've run across that one," Ethan said with a mischievous smile.

"No? Come on over, you can witness a textbook example of it," Jakob told him, feeling a wry grin slip across his lips to match. "Cassie thinks he's hilarious, unfortunately. It's only encouraging him."

"Mmm. Wish I could," Ethan said, a soft look crossing his face. "But..."

"They still sitting outside your house?" Jakob asked in surprise.

"Oh, Officers Curly and Moe left a few hours ago," Ethan told him with a huff, rolling his eyes at the absurdity of it all. "I'm now being graced by the watchful presence of Lts. Larry and Shemp."

Jakob snorted, grinning despite himself.

"You said Alex thought he was being tracked or something?" Ethan asked, leaning forward in his chair.

Jakob stretched carefully, trying not to unseat the laptop again. His leg was bothering him after all the stress today and the weird angle he had it at now for so long, lying here on the bed. Might be due a soak with Epsom salts after he got off the call with Ethan.

He wasn't in any hurry though — it was too nice just chatting like this with his friend. Like it was old times.

"That backpack he brought with him, the one with all his pins and patches and stuff? He thinks his dad messed with it," Jakob answered, looking over at his locked bedroom door reflexively.

He dropped his voice quieter, hoping there wasn't anyone out there listening in the hall.

"Don't mind telling you, Ethan — it nearly broke my heart watching him dump all his belongings into a shopping bag, stripping what he could off it before pitching it in the trash. He's trying to play it all off, like he's just here for a sleepover or something, but... I think it really messed with him, having to lose that too, on top of everything else."

"I'll get him another one," Ethan said sharply then, his face turning determined. "I'll... I can — We could meet up, and — "

"Ethan."

"No, I — I'll order a backpack online and have it shipped to your place. Just — "

"Ethan," Jakob interrupted his friend, louder this time. "It's not that easy. It's not only about a *bag*, and you know it. It just... It put the cherry on the whole shit sundae."

Ethan heaved a sigh, deflating like a balloon as he scrubbed at the back of his neck. "Yeah. I know — I *know!* I just... I want to do *something*."

"Ethan," Jakob replied, his mouth practically hanging open in shock. "You *did* do something. He called, and you were there for him. That's huge. I mean, you've had *cops* waiting outside your place all day just for trying to keep him safe."

"Doesn't feel like it," Ethan grumbled petulantly. "Feels as if I'm just sitting here, while his dad's probably coming up with new and interesting ways to make Alex's life hell. This whole thing's such *bullshit*, Jakob. I don't care if he's legally an adult now — he's still only a kid! He shouldn't have to deal with any of this. He should be more worried about his English essay or next week's Trig test than of his own *father*."

"Like you were?" Jakob asked softly before he could help it, the words slipping out by themselves before he could stop them. He found himself holding his breath and hoping he hadn't gone and overstepped; shattered this fragile, nascent peace they had somehow managed to find.

"...Maybe," Ethan finally said with a sigh after a long pause, and Jakob let out the breath he had been holding. "You know what he was like."

"Yeah," Jakob replied.

And he did. Remembered Ethan calling him on the house phone late at night, waking up Frank and riding in the old pickup truck to find his friend. The sight of Ethan standing there, leaning dejectedly up against the corner store's old pay phone near the apartment building where he lived. The way the glow of the old street light cast strange shadows on his newly blackened eye; picked up the tear tracks streaked down his face before he had scrubbed his fist across his cheeks to hide them.

Remembered the impromptu sleepovers, sharing his clothes and shoes. The way Ethan would always drag his feet Monday morning riding into school with Jakob. Both of them knowing he would just be picked up that afternoon by his mom, brought home to have it start all over again.

Remembered that icy feeling of disbelief washing through his bones as one particular morning when Ethan told him — his voice breaking, hitching every third or fourth word — about how his dad had woken him up at six am just to kick him out of the house for good; all plans to celebrate his friend's eighteenth birthday dropping right out of Jakob's head like a bale of hay that had slipped from his hands.

He had always seemed so — so angry when he had to call Jakob and Frank for help. Solid, good-natured, warm Ethan; sounding so lost on the other end of the line, frustrated and not knowing what else to do.

Remembered too how relieved Ethan had been when Frank said that he could stay. That Ethan could live at the ranch with them as long as he liked,

provided he pulled his weight around the place same as Jakob. How relieved Jakob had been for him that Ethan finally, *finally* had somewhere safe to stay.

"That why you've been helping Alex?" Jakob asked quietly.

"I'm helping Alex because it's the right thing to do," Ethan replied, stone-faced — before the expression slipped into something more... *hollow* was the only way Jakob could describe it. "But... I guess I can't say that's not part of it either. Can't ever really know, can I?"

"Don't have to," Jakob told him with a small grin. "Like you said, it's the right thing. So knowing you, I bet you'd have done it anyway."

"So," Ethan said after a moment, clearing his throat; his eyelashes suspiciously wet. "What's the plan for tomorrow, then?"

"Well, I thought I'd have a nice long lie-in. Let the kids serve me breakfast in bed before they go off to lift bales, tote barges — all that good stuff."

"Jakob," Ethan protested with an exasperated grin and a fond look in his eyes. At least, Jakob was hoping it was fond.

"Alex seemed really interested in the horses," Jakob answered truthfully this time. "Was thinking about letting Cassie give him some lessons."

Ethan suddenly looked concerned. "Your daughter? She's pretty young, though. Is that safe?"

"She's the two-time Junior Barrel Racing World Champion, been in the saddle since she was little. Frankly, she rides better than I do... Well, *did* anyway. It's not hard to outshine me these days," Jakob said with a rueful grin. "But she teaches some classes here in the summer when she's not training. Think she's got an eye on taking over my job one day. It'll be okay. We'll have him on one of our most experienced horses, and I'll be nearby too — keeping an eye out. He'll be fine."

"Yeah — I remember the first time you had me get up on a horse. Told me I'd be fine too, if I recall," Ethan told him with a smirk.

"And you *were*," Jakob argued.

"Got a scar on my shoulder says different," Ethan replied, raising his eyebrow.

"Only needed a couple of stitches. Don't be a baby," Jakob countered with a grin, their well-worn argument familiar territory.

Silence stretched between them then, but it was... comfortable. Easy.

Just two old friends grinning at each other like fools.

"This is... nice," Ethan said, finally breaking the silence.

"Yeah," Jakob agreed, his thoughts running in the same direction.

"Can I — You mind if I call you again tomorrow?" Ethan asked. "To see how Alex's doing, I mean."

"That'd be... fine," Jakob replied as he shifted slightly, a sudden tendril of nervousness snaking along his spine.

*Ridiculous. How old are you? Get it together. You would think you were about to ask him to **Prom** or something.*

"Or... You can just... call. You know, if you like."

"Yeah?" Ethan asked, a grin sweeping across his face at Jakob's words. "Yeah — That sounds pretty good. I'll uh... I'll call you tomorrow then."

"Tomorrow then," Jakob repeated, feeling a matching grin steal over his own face in response. "Good night, Ethan."

"Night, Jakob," Ethan said, looking thoughtful as he leaned forward to end the call.

Jakob shut his laptop and stowed it away in its place in his nightstand; going to brush his teeth and get ready for bed. The whole time... It was almost like he was a kid again, like *anything* was possible.

Like everything was as it should be, now that Ethan was back in his life.

Like it might've been if only Jakob hadn't gone and fucked everything up between them, all those years ago.

Then

Chapter 13

What does he see in them?

Brown eyes flicked in Jakob's direction and he quickly looked away, heat creeping up the back of his neck at being caught staring.

Again.

He tried to focus on the movie they were watching, but soon enough his traitorous eyes drifted towards Ethan once again. The play of light flashing across his best friend's face, the flexing of his throat as he took a sip of the beer they had snuck past their floor's RA, that low rumbling chuckle erupting every now and again...

All still somehow just as fascinating now as the other half dozen times Jakob's attention had wandered away from the movie. And all provoking just as many questions, too. Questions for which Jakob was starting to fear there might be no way to find answers for.

No way... except *one*.

He frowned. *Enter the Dragon* deserved better than this from him. Deserved better than the second-hand TV they had managed to scrounge up for their dorm room, too. Small, it nonetheless dominated the dresser it perched on like a one-eyed gargoyle, the tape slot grinning obscenely at them as if it knew a secret it refused to tell. Its speakers had all gone to shit and parts of the screen didn't even show color quite right, the image washed with greens and reds where they had no business being.

But it had the considerable recommendation of having been cheap as hell, making it good enough for him and Ethan — and perfect for their pitiful

excuse of a budget furnishing their dorm room.

When Frank had offered it to Jakob for the low, back-breaking price of cleaning out the stables at the end of the summer tourist season, Jakob had, of course, said yes. As it was a chore he would have had to do anyway; a free TV was at least some small condolence to his aching muscles after.

The sight of a sweaty, glistening Ethan working alongside him in a white tank top, the thin material clinging to every muscle and curve?

Yeah, that hadn't been half bad either.

It... wasn't the first time Jakob had noticed his friend like that, not by a long shot.

Ethan was handsome, that was easy enough for anyone to see. But so were a lot of other guys on their football team, for that matter. It was just a simple and observable fact, didn't mean anything. Jakob had plenty of other matters to be concerned with: his scholarships, classes, his chores on the ranch, a constantly rotating cast of girlfriends; he had no lack of things with which to occupy his time and attention.

If only his eyes would get with the program and stop trying to notice so *much*.

In the locker room, on the football field, at a party. Last break when Ethan had come back home with Jakob and helped pitch in around the ranch. Even sometimes when they were here in their dorm room, studying or playing games or watching a movie as they were now; Jakob would look over and catch a glimpse and —

He *liked* girls. There had never been any question of that. It's just that...

Jakob was starting to wonder if...

He might like Ethan, too.

"What?" Ethan asked absently, reaching for the bowl of popcorn that sat balanced across their thighs.

They were sitting on Ethan's bed to watch the movie. They had to — you couldn't see for shit from Jakob's because of how they'd had to angle the TV to catch the signal. Shoulder to shoulder, it was just as if this was any of the dozens, maybe hundreds, of sleepovers they'd had since they were kids. Ethan's bed might have a weird dip in it where someone had long ago

managed to bend the ancient, institutional frame, but it served.

The cinderblock wall Jakob was leaning against was like ice, though; neither his cheap hoodie nor the decades-deep layers of chipped paint that now covered it providing anything close to insulation at all. Nights such as tonight it was kind of nice, especially with the flush he could feel shooting up his neck at Ethan's question.

"Just... Nothin'," Jakob huffed, turning back to the movie and trying to remember which of the characters was supposed to be the bad guy again.

"No, what?" Ethan asked, hitting the pause button on the remote. "You keep glancing over here. I got something on my face?"

He scrubbed a broad hand across his jaw and cheekbones before throwing an expectant look at Jakob for approval.

"No, it's — it's not that," Jakob muttered. "Just... forget it."

But of course, that only made Ethan more interested, that same hand coming to rest on Jakob's knee in an old familiar gesture Ethan had probably done a thousand times before.

It was fine. It was comfortable. It was *them*.

It was absolutely no reason for Jakob to suck in a sharp breath at the touch. No reason at all for his belly to erupt in a million butterflies at the way Ethan's eyes were so focused on him.

Something unreadable flashed across Ethan's face at Jakob's response, however. Something dark and shuttered, an expression that looked so out of place that —

Jakob grabbed for Ethan's hand before he had fully pulled away, keeping his friend's palm firmly on his propped-up knee. Shit. He didn't want to risk hurting his best friend the way so many had before; Jakob needed to tread carefully here. He needed to —

"What's it like?"

— *needed to not say **that**, fuck. What is **wrong** with you?* But the words had slipped out in a breath before Jakob could stop himself, off racing down the beach.

"...what's *what* like?" Ethan asked in a deliberately measured tone that said he already had his suspicions just what Jakob had meant, but had a far more

developed sense of caution than Jakob had shown.

But... Fuck it — the horse had the bit in her teeth now. Might as well see where she would run, right?

As long as Ethan doesn't punch me in the face for it...

"Sex," Jakob managed to whisper, swallowing at the disbelieving stare Ethan turned on him then.

"I, uh... *What?*" Ethan said, his words slow and careful, his hand a burning brand on Jakob's knee. "You've had sex, Jakob. My eardrums are still shot from Rachael shrieking when I accidentally walked in on you two last week."

"No, I mean..." Jakob mumbled, ducking his head as his cheeks went hot. "With... with *guys*. What — "

Good grief, why hadn't he just told Ethan that yes, there *was* something on his face and avoided all this? *Stupid mouth.*

"What does it feel like?" Jakob finally managed to spit out. "'s gotta be... Gotta be good, right? To, uh — give up girls for?"

He could feel Ethan's gaze still heavy on him, sure his eyes were tracking the flush that was burning its way down Jakob's neck.

"It's um... Yeah, it's good?" Ethan said, clearing his throat before continuing, his hand clenching into a fist which he tapped twice on Jakob's knee. "If... If you're looking for a comparison, I ain't gonna be able to help you much. But I don't feel like I've 'given up' anything anymore than a straight guy feels he's 'given up' men, right?"

"Oh, I... Yeah, that makes sense."

Seriously, could the earth just do Jakob a favor and swallow him up whole right now, please?

"It's... different, I guess," Ethan continued after a moment, throwing Jakob a sideways look. "The appeal of it, I mean. Not too different, but... Guys aren't — They aren't ..."

Ethan vaguely waved his free hand in the air in an approximation of half an hourglass.

"'S'what's nice about em, all firm and strong up against you. The way they smell, especially if he's been working out..." Ethan trailed off; lifting his hand from Jakob's knee to rub at the back of his neck and shooting an

apologetic look at Jakob. "Sorry. Ah... Too much?"

Opposite of too much, really, Jakob thought to himself, his mouth going dry.

"Uh... no," Jakob rasped, then swallowed. "No, it's uh... it's fine. Honestly, feels as if I should have asked you a long time ago. I just — I didn't think..."

Jakob grimaced. "I didn't think," he repeated the accidental truth. "Feel like I've been a crummy friend. How many times do I go on moaning to you about the cheerleaders, or that brunette in our Chem class? Don't want you to think you can't tell me stuff. Even... especially this stuff. The important stuff."

Jakob could have sworn he still felt the phantom imprint of Ethan's fingertips seared into his skin through the denim.

"I... you sure?"

Jakob just nodded, holding his breath. "It's okay. Don't have to tell me if it's uncomfortable for you. But don't avoid it for my sake either. I um... I don't mind. No, wait — " he corrected himself, "I mean... I want to know. I, uh... I promise."

Ethan's lips pursed, but he didn't say anything.

Jakob tried to keep his eyes on the movie, but inside, he couldn't help but worry. Had he gone too far? Pried too far into what was obviously a tender spot for his best friend? They had both been through so much over the years, more than most of the other guys on their dorm floor could possibly even guess at. And a good deal of that, they had weathered *together*. Surely — *surely* this could be no different, right?

His mind going round and round in circles, Jakob nearly missed when Ethan muttered —

"It's... It's tight."

"What?" Jakob asked, glancing over at his friend for clarification.

Ethan's eyes had gone wide, as if he hadn't meant for that to slip out.

"Oh, God," he hissed, burying his face in his hands. "I didn't say anything. *Please* pretend I didn't say anything."

"C'mon," Jakob urged, curious what had Ethan in such a state.

Ethan groaned, but then rolled his head from shoulder to shoulder like he did to psych himself up just before they went running out onto the field at the

start of a game.

"Alright. An, uh... an ass?" he finally explained, sheepishly. Honestly, he sounded for all the world as if the words were being dragged out of him now; as if it were his turn to wish the ground would open up underneath and swallow him up whole. "Didn't you tell me one of your girlfriends was into anal?"

"Julie. Or no, wait... Claire," Jakob corrected himself, counting. "Said she was saving herself for marriage, but anal was fine. Doesn't make a lick of sense to me, but what — I was gonna argue? I'd have to have been crazier than she turned out to be."

"Was that the gal carried a little highlighted Bible in her bag so she could quote 'em at people?" Ethan asked, head tipped as he tried to remember.

"Yeah," Jakob confirmed. "But this is the kind of stuff I mean. I don't know any of the guys you've dated, aside from helping cover for you at practice that day you and Dennis Franklin both played hooky in the eleventh grade. It doesn't seem fair. You should... You're not — " Jakob took a breath, trying to put his thoughts in order. "You've never brought any dates back here. That's... It's not because of me, is it?"

"Naw," Ethan replied with a dismissive flick of his hand. "Don't worry about it."

"But it's your room as much as mine," Jakob argued. "Just give me a heads up when to clear out."

"No, I mean... It's not because of you, or that I don't want to. Be a lot easier, sure," Ethan said with a self-deprecating laugh, and even in the dim light, Jakob could make out the way those plush lips twisted bitterly. "Too many questions if someone saw us in the hall, though. Not worth the risk."

"Oh," Jakob murmured, and suddenly that phantom touch where Ethan's hand had previously been was an unignorable, aching absence.

Ethan sighed. "Easier to fuck at their place, unless it's just something quick behind a bar. Bench seat in my truck's pretty handy, too."

This last had Ethan's eyes flicking toward Jakob's face, checking for his reaction.

Jakob shifted, clearing his throat. Ethan had gotten a reaction all right, though probably not the one he had thought he would get with how anxious his face

looked at that moment. Jakob couldn't help but wonder how many guys Ethan had been with in that truck, almost as familiar as his own. Had Jakob sat where they...

"Why?"

"Huh?" Jakob asked, confused.

"Why do you want to know?" Ethan demanded, a look of honest curiosity on his face. "Why now, I mean? You've never been curious before."

Well, that's not the truth.

"I, um... I saw you," Jakob admitted. "Behind the garage at the party last week. He uh... You both looked..."

Gorgeous. Fucking hot. Like my wet dreams come true.

"...as if, um — as if you were enjoying it," Jakob finished lamely.

"Oh," Ethan replied, swallowing. "We uh... Yeah. Didn't uh... I mean, you should've... 'M sorry."

"What in the world do you have to apologize for?" Jakob gaped at him. "I'm the one that should be saying sorry."

"I didn't... I don't want you to think..." Ethan crossed his arms over his chest, hunching inward as he scowled. "Don't want you to think differently of me, I guess."

Hoooboy, a bit late for that. But not — Jakob suspected — in the way Ethan feared. Because ever since that night? That little scene had been all Jakob *could* think about.

"Hey, It doesn't change anything," Jakob promised Ethan fiercely, gripping his best friend's knee.

"Well, that's — that's good, then," Ethan huffed. "'Cause you're, uh... You're the person I'd want to have at my back. In anything."

"Same here," Jakob said, squeezing Ethan's knee for emphasis. "Always. And I'm — I'm sorry. I'm being... a nosy jerk, I guess. I just wanted to... Uh, never mind."

"You just want to know... What? What my sex life is like?" Ethan finished, an odd light in his eyes as he tilted his head.

White-hot with embarrassment, Jakob hung his head, nodding. He didn't trust

himself to speak right then. He wasn't sure how he could make this moment more uncomfortable for them both, but that didn't mean he was eager to find out.

"It's only that... not a lot of straight guys want to know, is all," Ethan explained, slowly.

And oh boy, wasn't THAT something Jakob had been wrestling with enough already?

"It's sex," Jakob couldn't help but argue. "Any guy would be at least a little curious how..."

His words trailed off as Ethan shook his head no.

"Maybe, but... Not in my experience," Ethan said, giving Jakob a long, considering look. "How... How much of us did you see, Jakob? Exactly how long did you watch?"

Chapter 14

The Discovery

"Didn't," Jakob lied. He kept his eyes locked on the frame caught paused on the TV, but the image was overlaid with the memory welling up in his mind of that night, refusing to be ignored.

Two figures, grinding against each other, pressed up against the gray cinderblock wall of the parking garage.

He stood there for an embarrassingly long moment, honestly unable to wholly process what he was seeing at first. And once Jakob had finally figured it out? Once he'd understood the situation he'd found himself in?

From his vantage point in the apartment building's stairwell, he'd smirked, fully intending to keep walking. Right up until he'd heard the oh-so-familiar voice of the very person he'd gone searching for, that was; Ethan's bitten-back curses echoing loudly off the bare concrete.

"Was looking for you. See if you were ready to head home," Jakob explained instead. "Heard your voice, saw you'd found some company, and I... went back upstairs to the party. Figured I'd give you some privacy."

Not a total lie, but — that wasn't the entire story, was it?

No, not by a long shot.

Of course, the smart thing for Jakob to do was to turn himself right around. Act as if he didn't notice anything, get his ass back up the stairs and return to the party like he'd never seen a thing, right?

*He'd been about to do just that, too. But then he'd heard how Ethan had... had **groaned**, and —*

Swallowing against the surge of bitter metal rushing across his tongue once Jakob realized the door had gone and locked itself behind him. All his previous amusement drained away as he found himself trapped in that stairwell; presented with a club-seat view of heaven, of hell, of — of everything, and only one possible direction to go.

There was absolutely no way they would see him if he'd taken even three more steps, much less gone for the open stairs he could see on the other side of the parking garage. And... It wasn't as if they were being quiet or nothing. Anyone could have come across them like that.

And then there'd been no force on earth that could've made Jakob move from that spot.

Because it hadn't been only embarrassment burning him up from the inside out then, had it? Like a stack of dry kindling, that *pull* he'd done his level best to shove down all his life had finally sparked into existence, blazing far too hot to ignore. The sight of Ethan curled around that other guy, face tucked in the side of his neck, both of them grunting and groaning? The other guy braced hard against the wall, bent back like a bow into Ethan; eyes closed and mouth open, head tipped back as he wailed like he was seeing the face of God?

So detached. Acting as if you were merely some innocent, put-upon bystander. Like you didn't enjoy it too.

And **oh**, but he had, hadn't he? Made him feel as if he was some piece of shit creeper. Trying to keep his drifting eyes in check, to give Ethan what privacy he could, but — but —

But then he'd seen it.

About half a second from just giving in and shoving one hand down his pants, trying to convince himself it was only to relieve some of the pressure on his furiously hard cock; Jakob's eyes had finally adjusted enough to the garage's dimness that he could make out the shape of a service door on the far side of the wall next to him.

Salvation; if he made it unnoticed.

Damnation; if he didn't, if he stayed.

A revelation, either way.

An entire ocean of hormones screaming at him to stay, he beat a hasty retreat as quietly as he could. Heart pounding, lungs sucking in the cool night's air, relief and regret both flooding through his body as Jakob leaned against the outside of the door.

Unbidden, his mind conjured up memories of what Ethan was doing on the other side of this slim bit of steel; his ears easily summoning the ragged edge to his partner's moaning, each grunt punched out of his throat with every snap of Ethan's hips.

Of the glint of dark eyes as Ethan's partner caught sight of Jakob's escape...

"Didn't even see the guy's face," Jakob said, resolutely not looking at Ethan as he felt his neck heat. "Was it, uh... someone I'd know?"

Like Jakob *didn't* know for a fact it'd been Sean from their Algebra class last term. The same guy their professor had spent the semester constantly getting mixed up with Jakob, to his utter frustration.

It had nearly cost Jakob his scholarship when Sean hadn't shown up for their final, and the professor recorded his failing grade under Jakob's name. Fortunately, Coach had gotten it straightened out, but it had definitely put a damper on the first few days of break until it was sorted.

Jakob had never been able to figure it out — Sean was pale and freckled, wore glasses and a constant rotation of eye-wateringly bright tie-die t-shirts. Sure they were both redheads, but Jakob's was a darker, coppery color about the shade of a deep red ale or his step-father's sorrel horse. Sean's had been so light it was almost verging on blond. He wore his curls close-cropped too, while Jakob's was straight as straw and long enough it was forever falling into his eyes.

The guy was always hanging around them; trying to convince Jakob and Ethan to sign up for his frisbee golf league, sitting behind them in class, asking to borrow Ethan's notes. Not that Jakob couldn't now make a few guesses as to why.

Squeezing his eyes closed, Jakob struggled to will it all safely

away. Ethan was his friend. His best friend. Who or where or how he wanted to fuck wasn't any of Jakob's business at all.

But his mind refused, swirling with potential; different positions, what it would sound like when they found their release...

Had they... Had he and Ethan been hooking up for all those months and Jakob just... hadn't noticed? Were they *dating*? Some friend Jakob was turning out to be, he didn't even —

"Is he... your boyfriend?" Jakob blurted out before he could stop the words.

Oh, for fuck's *sake*. Could he sound any more awkward about this whole thing? Any more obvious that he'd been thinking about Ethan's sex life, far more than a mere friend by all rights should?

He'd spent far too many of the last few sleepless nights remembering that moment, the sheer possibilities; all playing in his head like a movie marathon while Ethan lay fast asleep on the other side of their room.

What they'd been doing together. What *Jakob and Ethan* could be doing together, if only — If only...

He sent some bullshit message to Ethan's phone about a headache or something, then walked the three miles back to their dorm; his cock hard enough to cut glass the entire way. Jakob didn't know how long he'd spent in the shower once he got in, only that it wasn't nearly long enough, wasn't nearly cold enough, to keep his mind off what he'd seen.

Icy water sluicing over his back and down his thighs; the sharp ache as Jakob bit into the tightly clenched fist he'd jammed into his mouth as he struggled to stifle his moans. Laughing it off as embarrassment flooded through him anew, when Ethan had innocently asked about the teeth marks on Jakob's hand the next day...

But Ethan's booming laughter was a relief, quieting some mad scrabbling thing that had been doing loops in Jakob's mind.

"No," Ethan chuckled. "No, he's... It was just a quick fuck. He's... He's not my, um — my type."

His gaze skittered away at the last of this, eyes filled with shadows before they flicked hurriedly away.

"What... what *is* your type, then?" Jakob couldn't help but ask as he snuck a glance over at Ethan's profile, the lines of his face illuminated by the light of the TV...

Ethan looked over at him then, and his eyes were —

Were *scared*, Jakob realized, his heart lurching in his chest at the raw fear he could see in Ethan's face.

"Don't... Don't know if I have one," Ethan replied, and Jakob wondered if *he* had sounded this obvious when he'd lied. He hoped not. But then...

"C'mon, Ethan," Jakob pressed, licking his achingly dry lips. "What do you look for in guys?"

"A nice ass and even half a smile do me just fine," Ethan scowled, refusing to meet Jakob's eyes.

Jakob frowned. That... didn't sound like Ethan. Not the real one, anyway. That sounded like the Ethan that had learned to take his lumps; to sit down and shut up; to make do, because he knew he wouldn't see better.

That sounded like the Ethan who still lived in the same house he'd grown up in, under the strict and unrelenting judgment of his dad.

"That can't be all of it," Jakob pressed, telling his fist to relax and smoothing the bedsheets back out. "What is it that catches your eye about a guy?"

*Give me a clue, a sign, **anything** that going out on this limb isn't as fantastically fucked up as it seems...*

"*Jakob*," Ethan huffed. "I've lived my whole life in a state where it's literally illegal for me to fuck. We play college football on the same damn team; can you imagine the shit I'd get in the locker room if the guys found out? Or *Coach*? Even — You know how my Dad gets about just... *normal* stupid stuff. You think I'm going to risk any of that just to be picky about something like... I don't fucking know, *eye color*? It's just sex. The wine and roses can wait until after I get drafted by a pro team and away from here. Until then... I'll take what I can get."

"Oh," Jakob said as he chewed on his lip, knowing the single syllable was worlds away from being sufficient. "I... yeah. I didn't — I'm sorry. I'm doing a shit job at this, uh — this friend stuff."

"It's... It's fine," Ethan muttered.

Jakob could damn near feel a growl welling up in his throat at the resignation in Ethan's voice, however; that old and far-too-familiar sound that meant his best friend in the world was being forced to make the best of a bad hand.

Again.

"It is a *damn* sight far from fine," Jakob grumbled. "You've got enough assholes to deal with in your life already. I could at least try harder to not be one of them."

Ethan considered him a moment, before a small smirk crossed his lips. "Good thing I *like* assholes then, huh?"

Jakob snorted.

They fell into a semi-strained silence to the sounds of massive property damage and Bruce Lee kicking bad guy butt over cheap, built-in speakers.

"They're... starting to put security cameras up in some of the apartment parking garages," Jakob warned in a low voice.

"Yeah," Ethan replied just as softly. "We checked around first. Ain't exactly my first time, y'know."

"Okay! Um, *good*," Jakob practically squeaked, keeping his eyes firmly fixed on the TV screen. He was trying hard not to think about Ethan's *first* time. Wondering if he could possibly have been as big a bundle of nerves as Jakob felt right now. "Just... be safe, yeah?"

Ethan scoffed, bumping Jakob with his shoulder. "Okay, *mother*."

They fell into silence again, broken only by the occasional rustle as one or the other of them raided the popcorn bowl.

Out of the corner of his eyes, Jakob saw Ethan turning his head, chewing the inside of his lip as he studied Jakob.

"Redheads," Ethan whispered, so soft Jakob almost missed it.

With careful, near-infinite slowness, Jakob turned his head, studying Ethan's silhouette for a moment. Wondering...

"*And?*" he prompted, self-consciously brushing back a lock of his own copper hair and tucking it behind his ear.

"*And...* what?" Ethan asked, the stubbornness thick in his voice.

"*That's it?*" Jakob teased, trying to keep his tone light and innocent. "Some redhead with a nice ass winks at you from across the party, and you two go

wander off for a quick fuck?"

"Well, yeah?" Ethan blinked at him. "Sex... It's just a bit of fun, right? Not like I'm gonna get him pregnant." His expression turned mischievous then, more like the Ethan Jakob knew, and not the one he'd accidentally put on the spot tonight. "What — jealous, straight boy? There's fewer steps to the dance than you usually have to go through. You thinking about trading up?"

Jakob felt his stomach drop at Ethan's flippancy, the truth and the lie in Ethan's teasing both swirling round and round. "But... isn't that, um... still risky?"

Ethan tilted his head, his face scrunching up, before smoothing back out once he'd worked out what Jakob meant.

"I pack condoms, don't worry. Most of the time it's all hands and mouths anyway, especially if we didn't plan it. Just jerking each other off, really, or a quick blowjob. Only do anal with guys I trust. Like to, uh..." Ethan's eyes flicked to Jakob's face, and then just as quickly skittered away. "Like to hold 'em after, when the guy's all warm and jelly and happy. Like knowing I, uh... That I did that."

"Oh. That sounds..." Jakob could feel his heart beating faster, Ethan's words leaving him feeling flushed. Not that the image he'd painted helped at *all*.

"Think I'm starting to understand the appeal."

"Yeeees. Join the Dick Side, young Skycocker," Ethan crooned in his best evil emperor's voice. "Let the cum flow through you!"

Jakob snorted, thumping Ethan's thigh with his fist.

He didn't miss the relieved expression that briefly flitted across Ethan's face, like he hadn't been too certain how his words would be received, despite Jakob's prompting.

Should know me better than that by now.

Of course, there were still some things about Jakob that Ethan didn't know at all, wasn't there?

And that's my fault. Too up in my own head to be a true friend.

But Ethan always had been the brave one of them both, hadn't he?

"So... redheads?" Jakob pressed. "That all I get? What if some hot guy comes asking me about my handsome friend? How do I know who gets the pass?"

See? Even now, here he was being a little chicken shit.

But Ethan stayed silent. The muscle in his jaw jumped; his eyes staying firmly locked on the fight scene playing out on their TV.

"I'm a sucker for dimples," Ethan finally admitted, his voice little more than a croak. "Tall. Works out, but — *wiry*; not in a muscle head way. Smart. Funny. Likes football, obviously. And fishing. And games and animals and — "

Ethan cut himself off, clearing his throat.

"*And?*" Jakob pressed, barely daring to breathe after that laundry list. If anyone who knew Jakob was asked, would say it sounded exactly like...

Ethan frowned, looking out their room's single window, just above Jakob's bed.

"I... that's it."

"Doesn't sound like it," Jakob urged, seeing the shape left by that one last missing piece and wondering, *hoping*...

But Ethan merely shook his head, glaring out the window, his jaw clenched tight. And no wonder. He'd put a lot of himself out there with that.

Now it was Jakob's turn. That was only fair, after all.

Chapter 15

"Alright, so... What if I know someone who matches that description?" Jakob asked as he sat up; propping his elbow on his knee as he turned to face Ethan.

"Don't hold out on me, Jakob," Ethan drawled, his eyes dancing with amusement. "You two-timing me with some other gay best friend I don't know about?"

With a snort, Jakob shook his head.

"What if he's... *not* gay, though?" he asked slowly, his attention fixed firmly on Ethan's face now. "Or what if he's, uh... curious? What then?"

"*Oh*," Ethan huffed, looking down at his hands. "So that's what this is all about, then. You're talking about someone in particular."

"I... *Maybe*," Jakob allowed.

"Well, uh..." Ethan rubbed at the back of his neck, like he did when he was thinking something over, before glancing up at Jakob again. "Got me feeling like one of your stepdad's stud horses now, but... Sure. If you think they're someone I'd get on with, then send 'em on over my way, I guess."

"Sorry," Jakob winced. "Didn't mean to make you uncomfortable. If it's a problem — "

"Naw, just never pegged you as the matchmaker type," Ethan grinned. "Hell, it's just a bit of fun, right? I, um... Yeah. Tell 'em I'd be more'n happy to help 'em figure their shit out. Take real nice care of them for you. Promise."

Jakob tried to ignore how his belly flipped at the devilish smirk Ethan shot his way then. Instead, he took a deep breath, and —

"What, what are you — *Jakob*?" Ethan's voice had gone all strangled as Jakob smoothed his hand over Ethan's knee and up his inner thigh.

He kept his touch light, his movement slow enough that Ethan could put a stop to the whole thing before Jakob went further than he was comfortable with. The solid muscle he could feel under Ethan's jeans was intriguing though, all hard and broad and...

"Tell me if this is a bad idea," Jakob murmured. "But — "

"It's a bad idea," Ethan hissed, grabbing Jakob's hand midway towards its goal and pinning it tight against his thigh. "Whatever you're thinking right now, one thousand percent it's a bad idea and we shouldn't — We shouldn't..."

Ethan's words died in his throat, as if he no more wanted to recite a list of all the excuses than Jakob wanted to hear them. *Again*. Lord knows he'd wrestled with them enough in his head, over and over and *over* the past few days. Hadn't made any difference. His mind had been made up long ago, it seemed. It had just taken him until that night in the parking garage to realize what *exactly* it was he wanted.

Or rather, *who*.

And if Ethan truly wasn't interested in him like that, then Jakob could deal with it. Just because they were friends, just because Ethan was gay, it didn't follow at all that he'd be willing to jump into Jakob's bed. No matter what he might claim about it all being 'just sex', Jakob knew it was more complicated than that for Ethan.

But from the way his breath stuttered when Jakob leaned in close, planting one knee on either side of Ethan's own as Jakob straddled his thick, muscular thigh; the way Ethan's gaze was riveted to Jakob's own, flicking down to Jakob's lip when he'd wet them with his tongue; the way he wasn't shoving Jakob off with a laugh, like it was all just some big joke...

"Shouldn't what?" Jakob whispered, transfixed by warm brown eyes as they flicked across Jakob's face, searching for...

Well, truth be told, Jakob wasn't too sure. But whatever it was, he could only hope that Ethan found it. He didn't protest as Jakob leaned in closer, at least, one broad hand coming up almost reflexively to grasp Jakob's hip; steadying him and making something deep inside Jakob's chest nearly purr with how

good it felt.

Curving his hand along the column of that thick neck, Jakob found himself fascinated by the way Ethan's Adam's Apple bobbed; the sound of his breath hitching as Jakob tentatively brushed oh-so-gently over the thin skin and rough stubble with the pad of his thumb.

"But — But you like *girls*," Ethan protested weakly, swallowing against Jakob's touch. "Don't you?"

Jakob hummed. "Why can't I like both? Maybe I like girls *and* I like you. What then?"

"Just — Just me? Not guys in general?" Something wary lurked in Ethan's voice, strange shadows swirling in his eyes.

"I mean, everyone gets curious," Jakob replied with a shrug. "Who *doesn't* peek in the locker room, right? And we can all admire a good dick if it shows up in a porno; wonder what the girl's feeling when she takes it. But that's different. It's *you that* I... um. That I..."

Jakob trailed off at the strange expression Ethan was giving him then, glancing away, unable to meet his gaze. But insistent fingers tugging at Jakob's chin, tipping his head up to meet Ethan's eyes.

"That you *what*?" Ethan pressed, something lurking dark and leery in his tone that Jakob couldn't quite put a name to.

"I..." *Wake up from wet dreams about, hand on my cock and your name on my lips as I grunt into my pillow and come in my boxers; half desperate to go crawling into your bed, wake you up and beg you to — to —*

"Maybe — Maybe you were right," Jakob whispered. "Maybe it was a bad idea. Just... a normal curiosity, right?"

"Straight guys *don't* check out each other's cocks as a general rule, no," Ethan countered after a long moment, eyeing Jakob consideringly. "Not like... Not like *that*."

Jakob swallowed, his eyes never once leaving Ethan's face.

"Maybe... Maybe I'm not so straight then." Jakob tilted his head, considering how *true* that had sounded. How good it felt to say out loud. Out loud and to his best friend, someone who... who could understand.

Because there it was, wasn't it? Something he had only just realized when

he'd seen Ethan with that other guy in the parking garage, and yet somehow known in his bones since forever. Something that was becoming clearer to him with each passing day.

"Please, Ethan?" Jakob whispered, hating how needy his voice sounded just then.

Feeling far too exposed as Ethan studied Jakob's face, frowning at whatever he found there; blowing out his breath harshly in a half-choked mockery of a laugh. "You can't just throw away our friendship for curiosity's sake. If you — "

"*Throw away our friendship?*" Jakob snorted. "How am I doing that? I'm coming to you *because* you're my friend and — Look, Ethan, I... If you don't want to, just say so. Sure, maybe I'm not gay. Not like you are, I mean. But how else am I going to find out? You saying I should go find some random stranger to — how'd you put it? 'Figure my shit out'? Pick up some guy in a bar and hope he 'takes real nice care of me'? I don't want that. I want *you*."

"You — " Ethan swallowed, a gutted look on his face. "You can't just... *say* that, and... and..."

"If you don't want to, then tell me no," Jakob pressed, reaching up to cup Ethan's jaw.

He marveled at the scruff of bristles under his fingers as he brushed along the sweep of Ethan's cheek, drinking in those big brown eyes as they danced over Jakob's face; now wide and wondering in surprise.

"Tell me you want to stop and we will," he whispered. "We'll start up another movie and laugh about this tomorrow. And I'll... I'll go find someone else. Let you know how it went, if you want. Or not, if you don't. It's all up to you, Ethan."

Running his thumb across that plush bottom lip, Jakob smoothed away the tenseness from Ethan's silent mouth.

"Tell me to stop, Ethan."

But Ethan didn't; his grip on Jakob's hand relaxing even as sharp brown eyes danced warily across Jakob's face.

"Tell me you don't want this."

Silence again, aside from the hitching of Ethan's breath as Jakob resumed his

explorations. It was encouragement enough that Jakob leaned in, licking his lips as he —

"I... Are you drunk?" Ethan demanded, suddenly furious. His eyes flicked to the freshly cracked open bottle, oh-so-innocently sweating beads of condensation onto the desk at Jakob's shoulder. "How many of those have you had tonight?"

Jakob froze at the closed-off expression Ethan wore, cold and wary.

Towards *him*.

Fuck. *Fuck!* This wasn't how he'd — This wasn't how this should *go*.

A dozen, a *hundred* different scenarios Jakob had played out in his imagination this past week about... Well, not *this*, but about telling his roommate; from the devastatingly pornographic to the tooth-rottingest holiday romcom setups Chloé had insisted on them watching together, before turning around as soon as the credits rolled and sucking his soul out through his cock.

And in the safety of Jakob's mind, each one had always worked out somehow. But *this* —

"Barely a sip," Jakob sighed, regretting ever opening his damn mouth. "Still stone-cold sober, a fact I'm starting to regret right about now."

"Is this a *prank*?"

"Um... also, no?" Jakob answered with a wince as he sat back on his heels.

"But I'll say it was if it makes you feel better. I just — I wanted... Look, just think about it — "

"Fucking hell, Jakob," Ethan muttered; his thumb brushing across the back of Jakob's hand where it remained tucked in Ethan's own, frozen midway up his thigh. "You really believe I'd be able to think about anything *else* now? I just... I don't understand *why*."

"Told you — I want to see what it's like," Jakob explained, swallowing hard as he stared into those big brown eyes, more familiar to him than his own.

"To... To see if I'd like it. That's why it's got to be you. Don't want anyone else."

Uncertainty was galloping its way through his gut just then; whether he should proceed on, or if Ethan truly *didn't* want —

Jakob sucked in a sharp breath as Ethan's other hand came up to grip his head roughly, before lips slammed into his for a messy, utterly brutal kiss.

It was sloppy and hard, the wet warmth of Ethan's mouth damn near all-consuming. It felt impossible to keep up; there was nothing soft or gentle found here, no flirtatious teasing. No — this kiss was all power and demand, challenge and warning. It was like nothing Jakob had ever known in a kiss before, sending a thrill shooting through his entire body; an engine igniting inside him, roaring into life.

But all too soon it was over as Ethan drew back, panting, looking about as desperate as Jakob felt.

"*There*," he spat, as Jakob's mind reeled. "Is that what you wanted? Does that answer any of your damn questions?"

"Yes," Jakob whispered, before curling his fingers up the column of Ethan's neck and pulling him in for another kiss.

And oh *God*, but kissing Ethan was like a cold lemonade on a hot summer day, as wild and sharply sweet in all the best of ways.

Gentler this time, tasting of surprise and wonder and hesitation. If the first kiss had been a challenge, then this one must have been the answer Ethan sought. The hand resting lightly on Jakob's hip slid around to the small of his back instead, before Ethan urged Jakob's body flush against his.

Slinging his leg across Ethan's thighs to straddle his hips, Jakob practically plastered himself against his best friend's body; all magnificently firm and strong against his own, just as promised.

The angle trapped Jakob's hand between them, right at the first sign of a swell rising up from the taut plain of Ethan's jeans. A tantalizing warmth radiated outward to greet Jakob's fingertips, and with slight twist of his hand, he found himself cupping along the length he found in Ethan's jeans; marveling at the feel of his friend thickening in Jakob's palm, the loss of movement not a loss at all.

Ethan groaned, pulling him closer, smelling of shaving cream and popcorn, and something... Something a small part of Jakob's brain could only hesitantly identify as 'masculine'; the rest of him so totally and completely absorbed with the man himself.

He couldn't help the desperate groan that escaped him, nor the way he was

clutching at Ethan's shirt in frantic need of an anchor.

The hand Ethan had laced through Jakob's hair tightened in surprise, forcing Jakob's head back under the pressure. Which only served to make him groan *again*.

Dragged from his throat, the sound nonetheless seemed to loosen some of the tautness in Ethan's frame. He let Jakob keep control of the kiss, and Jakob tilted his head slightly, exploring this new terrain; changing the angle to deepen it, sliding his tongue along the seam of Ethan's lips and into his mouth.

A thrill ran through him at the sensation of Ethan's tongue meeting his own, at the feeling of the cock growing hard against his thigh as they began to explore each other. In the confines of his own jeans, Jakob's cock was rapidly filling as well, straining against the thick fabric.

He slid his hands up Ethan's hips, his sides, beneath that ratty old t-shirt from their senior homecoming dance. The one where Jakob had brought his then-girlfriend and Ethan had come stag, and they'd both somehow ended up on the roof of the shop class; drunk as a pair of skunks after Kevin Nelson dumped a whole fifth of vodka into the school punch without anyone seeing; talking about everything and nothing under the light of the fat full moon.

And they could have had *this*, Jakob realized with a pang; they could always have had this. Ethan had confessed to Jakob that he liked guys back in the ninth grade, after the class field trip to the zoo.

The teacher had gone on and on about the animals in the exhibits, comparing them to Noah's ark, all two-by-two. But then their class had come across a pair of penguins guarding their egg in a nest. And when the teacher had started up about mommies and daddies, a nearby woman had interrupted him; cheerfully introducing herself as the animal's carer, before correcting the teacher that both the penguins he had been discussing were, in fact, *male*.

And if Jakob had just gotten his head out of his ass back then...

But here they were *now*, he reminded himself; Ethan warm and willing under Jakob, and neither of them wasting any more time.

Chapter 16

Smoothing his hands along the muscled planes flanking Ethan's spine, Jakob rucked up the fabric of his shirt, a hunger within him now to feel Ethan's skin against his own. A hunger Ethan seemed more than willing to oblige; breaking their kiss just long enough to rip the garment over his head and help Jakob out of his too, before pulling Jakob in for another kiss.

Jakob groaned at the sensations coursing through his body, overwhelmed by the signals flooding his brain. He mouthed a trail of kisses along Ethan's jaw, biting lightly at his ear and — OH! — setting off a thoroughly unexpected chain reaction; Ethan bucking against Jakob with a groan at the flash of teeth, dragging an answering moan from Jakob's throat as the bulge of Ethan's erection teased at Jakob own; straining furiously against the cotton of his jeans.

That. Jakob needed more of that and he needed it *yesterday*, his hand nearly shaking as he reached for Ethan's fly.

"What — What are you doing?" Ethan whispered, halting Jakob with the simple press of his palm flush against Jakob's chest.

Jakob took a deep breath. "I told you. I want to know what it's like. And I — I want *you* to show me. Unless... do you want to stop?"

"No, I — Jakob, you... You don't know what you're asking..."

Jakob couldn't hold back the chuckle that snuck out of his throat, the strangeness of the situation fizzing in his belly like a shaken soda. "Pretty sure I'm asking you to fuck me."

Ethan sucked in a loud breath as his eyes went comically wide, his fingers

digging into skin where they still gripped Jakob's hips tight. "*Fuck*, Jakob," he breathed. "You can't just... You — "

"Please fuck me?" Jakob asked in his best 'I'm only a lil ol' innocent porn star' drawl; tilting his head and throwing Ethan the old puppy dog eyes just like he had done before a thousand escapades in their past. It was a look that promised fun and heralded mischief. A look that had always had Ethan saying *yes*.

"You're going to be the death of me, I swear," Ethan huffed. "Are you *sure* you want this?"

"Want you," Jakob rasped, his voice a little hoarse as he gazed down at Ethan; those eyes so wide and dark, those lips slightly parted and kiss-swollen.

Mmmm, don't mind if I do...

"Want more of this," Jakob whispered against Ethan's skin after he'd finally relinquished his friend's mouth, sucking his way down Ethan's neck and across his bared shoulder; each gasp and moan he managed to wring from the man shooting straight to Jakob's cock. "Want you close, want to feel you, want... want you to — to..."

He trailed off, still not sure how to say it, to put it into words. Words that didn't sound in his head like they were straight out of some cheap porno. That had been fine for a joke, but this... Jakob didn't want *this* to be a joke, even — especially — if this never happened again.

"You've got me," Ethan promised him, eyes glinting, his hand coming up to cup Jakob's jaw. "You've always got me. I just... I can't lose you, Jakob. Don't want you having any regrets, feeling like — like I pushed you into something."

"Not pushing," Jakob corrected, fully aware that if *anyone* was pushing here, it was him. "*Joining*. You're my best friend, Ethan. Nothing could ever change that. Maybe this is just... something more. But only if you want."

"I *want*," Ethan growled. "Shit, you have no *idea* how much I want you. How many times I've thought about — about... *Please* don't be screwing around on me here, Jakob. Don't think I could take it, if you — if — "

But Jakob silenced him with another kiss, trying to press his sincerity on Ethan through his touch; thrusting his hips forward, groaning as a bolt of lust

shot through him right from Ethan's cock into Jakob's as he ground against the unmistakable hardness in Ethan's jeans.

It wasn't enough though, something just... *not right* about the jean material, the way it constricted and pinched...

"Here, wait — can I?" Ethan asked, his fingers brushing lightly against Jakob's belly and sending shivers racing up and down his spine at the touch. He teased over the button of Jakob's fly and Jakob nodded quickly; the *zip* filling the air like the sweetest of music before he was lifting his hips to help Ethan tug the pants down his thighs.

"Fuck," Ethan whispered as Jakob kicked his jeans away. "You — You really *do*..."

Jakob gasped as Ethan reached out to trace the damp spot on Jakob's boxers wearing a poleaxed expression; his touch ghosting over Jakob's cock and making him buck up into Ethan's hand from pure reflex as his body screamed for *more*.

And more he got, as if Ethan could read what Jakob needed on his face; palming Jakob's cock through the thin fabric of his boxers, squeezing gently along the length of him, then further to cup his balls as Jakob quivered; trying not to start rutting into Ethan's palm like — like some kind of animal, no matter how — how fucking *good* —

"Look at *you*," Ethan's deep voice rumbled around Jakob as he shook in Ethan's hands. "Just beautiful. Look so fucking perfect. This what you want?"

Jakob nodded his head furiously, gripping Ethan's broad shoulders like the steering wheel to his pickup, feeling like he was spinning out of control simply from his best friend's touch.

"Use your words, darlin'," Ethan urged in that sexy-as-sin voice of his. Then he tensed, as if realizing what he'd said. "I — sorry. I shouldn't have — "

"Say it again?" Jakob interrupted him. He'd never had anyone call him that before, either, but he liked it. *Oh*, did he like it. Liked the way it sounded in Ethan's mouth especially, all warm and fond. "Please?"

"Darlin'?" Ethan whispered, his voice low and husky, and Jakob shivered at the endearment; pressing forward into the firmness of Ethan's hand with a moan.

"Fucking *hell*," Ethan muttered, before tipping Jakob's chin up with his

fingers to steal a kiss. "Tell me what you need."

"Anything," Jakob begged between kisses, his hands dropping to the button of Ethan's fly. "Everything. *You*."

He was long past feeling self-conscious now, not when Ethan was looking at him like that, his eyes wide and full of awe. Between them both, they managed to peel Ethan's jeans off him, throwing them in roughly the same direction Jakob's had gone earlier.

Jakob reached to help him get his underwear off too, but froze at Ethan's whispered, "*Wait* — " before Ethan flipped them both over, sending Jakob's brain into overload.

At six foot even and a hundred and eighty-four pounds as of his last team weigh-in, Jakob was *not* a small man. But there was a reason Ethan dominated the field as their team's left tackle, and all that muscle pressing Jakob into the mattress had his cock *leaping* to attention.

Especially when Ethan started rolling his hips, grinding their cocks together in a shower of cascading lights and sparklers, lighting up Jakob's entire body like the damn Fourth of July.

Specifically, the one they'd spent all the money they'd made mowing lawns that summer at the fireworks stands clustered just at the edge of the city limits. All that work and planning, just to have one of the rockets go off not ten feet over their heads. The sparks had rained down around them as they'd huddled together, trying to present as small a target as possible; eyes locked on the plastic bag where the rest of their highly flammable loot lay. Hooting and hollering, hands clutching each other's clothing. Half pulling, half being dragged as they'd both run blindly; shrieking their heads off with laughter as they'd raced across the damp sands of the beach towards the arguable safety of the dunes. Only to hear the *whoosh* as the remainder of their cache lit up behind them...

"Ethan, I'm — I'm gonna — "

"That's it, Jakob," Ethan whispered into Jakob's neck, breath warm on his skin. "That's it. I've got you."

"But it's — I don't want... It's too — too *soon*," Jakob protested; writhing and gasping as he tried to explain, tried to extricate himself despite his body's demands that he do *no* such fucking thing. "I want — I wanted..."

"Alright, alright," Ethan panted as he rose, his weight shifting the mattress, to sit back on his heels between Jakob's thighs. He looked as wild-eyed and desperate as Jakob felt; flushed and gorgeous, Ethan's massive chest heaving as his lungs sucked in air.

Jakob's gaze trailed further south across flexing abs to catch at Ethan's belly button, before following the dark trail of hair down, down, and downward still; right up to the hem of Ethan's boxer briefs and the obvious curve of his cock where it was straining against the material. There was a damp patch visible on the fabric, igniting a curl of *need* within Jakob.

I did that, he thought, a lick of pride shooting straight to his cock. *That's mine.*

"So... What is it you want then?" Ethan asked; palms curling around Jakob's ankles, thumbs rubbing anxious little circles around the bumps of bone.

But Jakob was already moving, body crying out at the loss of Ethan's against his.

"Want to feel you," he murmured as he hooked his fingers in the waistband of Ethan's boxer briefs and — at Ethan's shaky nod — pulled them down as Ethan rose up on his knees.

Jakob swallowed, watching as Ethan's cock sprang free; staring transfixed at the thick, flushed length of it bobbing just in front of his face.

They'd seen each other naked hundreds of times before — swimming in the bay, showers after practice. That time there'd been a summer storm, and they'd been so all over mud and sand that Jakob's step-dad hadn't let them in the house until they'd hosed themselves off down by the stables first; horse blankets wrapped around their dripping but clean selves as they'd gone whooping up the drive.

Jakob knew the story behind each and every one of Ethan's scars covering his best friend's hide. Had been there for more than a fair few of them, in fact, just as Ethan had been for Jakob's in return. But this... Both of them naked *together*, wrapped around each other here in Ethan's bed?

This was *entirely* different.

Jakob wet his bottom lip, considering; reaching out to gently run his fingers along Ethan's length, his cock so heavy and warm and *alive* as it twitched against Jakob's hand.

"How... How does that even *fit*?" Jakob asked in awe. And though he was as familiar with the workings of a cock as any man could be, suddenly he was face to face with the practicalities of what — up until now, at least — had only been theoretical at best.

"I... you work up to it," Ethan answered, his words ending on a groan as Jakob wrapped his fingers around that rigid girth and began to stroke Ethan much as he would himself. Swiping his thumb over the leaking crown, Jakob marveled at the gasp that slipped free of Ethan's mouth as he smeared the precum he collected there around the tip of Ethan's cock.

Ethan's eyes fluttered shut, his lips parting, head tipping back as he moaned low and sweet.

Fuck, but he was a beautiful sight like this. One Jakob could happily watch all day.

"Ja-*Jakob*," Ethan panted. "I'm not going to — uh, to last very long if you keep doing th-that."

"Sorry," Jakob whispered, stilling his movements.

"No reason to be sorry," Ethan insisted as his hand curled along the side of Jakob's neck, his thumb resting right over Jakob's rabbit-quick pulse. "Just trying to follow your lead, make sure you get... whatever it is you seem to be wanting from all this. Can go as slow or fast as you like. Just gotta tell me what you want."

"Want you naked, for a start."

"Now *that* I can do," Ethan grinned, before rising from the bed to do just that. Jakob didn't waste the chance to shuck off his own underwear, unable to resist snapping his at Ethan like the band was a slingshot. Ethan had his back turned, fiddling with something in the top drawer of his dresser. He was distracted enough that Jakob managed to hit his friend right in the side of the head to a startled, "*Hey!*"

And *that* earned him a tackle; both of them laughing as Ethan's weight drove Jakob down onto the bed, the circle of Ethan's arms making him very willing to go. The mattress bounced under them, the frame squeaking in protest, Ethan's grin rivaling the sun for brightness.

It turned strained though, anxious; shadows lurking in those warm brown eyes as he held up for Jakob's inspection a —

Oh. A condom packet and a bottle of lube.

Jakob swallowed, suddenly nervous, despite all his previous bravado. A fact that Ethan instantly picked up on, his expression shuttering as he lowered his hands.

"We... You don't have to. Plenty of other stuff we can do. It's just that you said... I mean, I *thought*..."

Licking his too-dry lips, Jakob slowly reached out to pluck the bottle from Ethan's hand, turning it over curiously and watching the viscous liquid shifting inside; the way the tiny bubbles slowly gathered just under the surface, all bunched up but never quite breaking through.

"No, it's, uh — " he cleared his throat, willing his voice to come from the ceiling and back into his normal register, and tried again. "It is. I mean, *yes*. I want to. I just..."

Jakob took a deep breath, focusing on Ethan's expression. Struggled to put out of his mind how unusual the situation was. To grab hold once more of that thrill of feeling Ethan's naked body pressed against his own, the way his cock was drooling so fat and heavy against Jakob's thigh. Staring into those sharp brown eyes, watching him so intently now. But still the familiar face of his best friend in the entire world.

Jakob reached up, cupping Ethan's face in his hand, inhaling sharply as Ethan turned to press a kiss on Jakob's palm and sending the fire burning in Jakob's belly even higher.

Yes, this is right. This is how it should be. A little voice inside Jakob whispered, giving words to the ache he could feel in his bones.

Jakob took a deep breath, gathering up all the scraps of his courage.

"What do I need to do?"

Chapter 17

Apparently, what Jakob needed to do was be thoroughly and utterly kissed by Ethan, his lips ravished to an inch of his life. Sweet yet urgent, it was an ordeal he manfully bore with a moan that welled up from the deepest parts of him, called forth by Ethan's hands.

Oh, those hands — large and callused as Ethan stroked up Jakob's bare sides from thigh to hips to ribs; a lengthy procession of warmth that sent shivers down Jakob's spine. Fuck, but Jakob had never realized how good a man's hands could feel, as Ethan mapped every inch of his skin by touch alone.

"Just relax," Ethan murmured as he broke away to kiss along Jakob's jaw. "Relax, and let me take care of you."

Brain melting into the mattress beneath them, Jakob could do little more than nod his enthusiastic support of that idea, more than happy to follow Ethan's lead.

Curving his fingers against the column of Ethan's neck, he gasped as Ethan sucked and nibbled his way down Jakob's neck and chest. At the scrape of teeth against Jakob's collarbone, someone made a strangled sort of keening noise. Jakob was *pretty* sure it was him, but sure-sure meant summoning more brain cells together than he could currently manage at that moment.

A mystery for the ages, then.

He arched like an old barn cat into Ethan's attentions, feeling wild and wanton as Ethan licked a long and lazy swirl around Jakob's left nipple, before tracing his tongue further; a slow wet stripe of heat down Jakob's belly that he could feel in his cock, those molten brown eyes fixed firmly on

Jakob's the whole while.

Oxygen was a secondary concern to the sensations galloping now through Jakob's body, yet his lungs screamed for it all the same. And with each inhale came a fresh wave of Ethan's scent; the spice of his body wash mingling with the light, clean notes of freshly laundered sheets, all threaded through with something strong and masculine that Jakob couldn't quite put a name to. Something both new and achingly familiar. Something Jakob's brain recognized as something indefinably, undeniably, *Ethan*. Something he was fast becoming addicted to.

Always was, always was.

Gasping and clutching at Ethan's shoulders, Jakob writhed as Ethan's tongue laved across the planes of his abs, dancing unbearable patterns over the tender skin of his belly. And yet further still Ethan went, Jakob watching wide-eyed and half-unbelieving as his best friend nipped along his hip, the pink of his tongue tracing the groove from hip bone down to — to —

"Oh, *fuck*," Jakob groaned as Ethan's tongue fluttered across the crown of his straining cock; thighs falling completely open in reflexive welcome even as Jakob grit his teeth, trying his damndest not to come right there all over Ethan's face. Trying not to even *think* of coming in Ethan's face, because in that direction lay a whole herd of trouble on its own...

But Ethan chuckled, taking pity on him, and did no more than tease. A good thing too, as Jakob was wound up tighter than a spring, ready to burst at any moment. If Ethan had put his *mouth* on Jakob's cock right then...

"Here, hand me that pillow, wou— "

Jakob had never moved so fast in his *life*, ripping the pillow out from underneath his head to shove it blearily in Ethan's direction.

Anything. *Anything*. Whatever Ethan wanted, Jakob was more than happy to give him. Good *God*, but they could have been doing this for years.

He'd wasted so much *time*...

"Alright now darlin', lift your hips for me," Ethan murmured, the words rumbling around in that big chest before they were drizzled like honey straight into Jakob's ears. Least — that's how it *felt*, leaving Jakob so eager to obey that it nearly drowned out the nervousness still twisting in his stomach.

But he kept his eyes on Ethan's oh-so-familiar face as the pillow was shoved

under his ass. As Ethan's large hands slid along Jakob's thighs and gripped his hips, urging Jakob to plant his feet on the mattress and open his knees wider; manhandling him into whatever position Ethan desired.

The tips of Jakob's ears were burning red hot at being... *exposed* like this; his heart racing, his blood screaming *yesyesYES* all the while.

Jakob's breath hitched as Ethan hefted Jakob's ankle over his shoulder with a confident motion, pressing a kiss to the inside of his leg again before asking in that low, honey-dark voice —

"Ready?"

Jakob swallowed hard, his throat achingly tight as he nodded.

"Words, Jakob," Ethan whispered. "If we... If you want to do this, I'm going to need words."

"I — I want to," Jakob assured him. Tried to assure himself as well as he licked his dry lips.

Because he did, he really did. Especially with Ethan kneeling there between Jakob's splayed legs looking like some kind of carved Greek statue of the god of sex; all half-lidded eyes and hard-packed muscle, his ruddy cock jutting up proud and heavy as it waited for Jakob's command.

Jakob's entire body was *singing* for this man, for his best friend to — to —

It was... it was all so fast. Here he'd only just asked Ethan what this felt like, and now here they were, Jakob's leg slung over Ethan's shoulder as he was about to be shown first hand.

Ethan frowned, able to read Jakob as easily as Jakob could read him. "You sure you want to do this? We don't have to rush, can — "

"What's it like?" Jakob choked out, his voice small and thin as he repeated the question that had somehow gotten him *here*.

"To take a cock?" Ethan tilted his head; eyes fixed on Jakob's face, studying him. "Dunno, I've only ever topped. Guys I've been with seem to enjoy it a lot though."

"A lot of guys?" Jakob asked.

"A few," Ethan shrugged, which was... *interesting* given the position they were in. "Enough to get the hang of what I should be doing, judging by how many ask to see me again. Is... that a problem?"

"No, it's uh... hot, honestly. Really... *really* hot," Jakob bit his lip, the memory of Ethan and Sean once more rose to the fore of his mind. Even now, he was reaping the benefit of Ethan's experience, his gentle surety grounding Jakob despite the thundering of his pulse galloping away in his ears; the way his heart threatened to bolt free of his chest at the slightest shadow of doubt.

He let out a deep breath, and —

"Show me."

"You sure?" Ethan asked, his hand coming to rest on Jakob's knee, an old familiar comfort.

"Yeah," Jakob nodded in reply. "I am."

"Alright," Ethan replied, turning his head slightly to press a kiss to the inside of Jakob's leg before reaching for the lube. "I'll do the prep. You just focus on relaxing."

"Is this... Is that how it usually works?" Jakob asked, his brows furrowing as he watched Ethan pour some of the clear liquid into his hand, rubbing his fingers together to warm it.

"Can be. That's how I'd prefer it," Ethan answered, brown eyes flicking up to Jakob's face. "At least this first time. Think you'll enjoy it more if you can focus on relaxing and enjoying yourself. Just let me know if you're uncomfortable."

Jakob gave a small nod.

And then Ethan reached down between Jakob's legs.

He sucked in a breath as he felt Ethan's slickened finger slide — not around his asshole as Jakob was expecting, but — but to his *taint*; that strip of skin that *t'ain't nut, t'ain't butt* as they used to giggle over on the school play yard; a no-man's-land just behind his balls that Jakob had never given more thought to than a quick wash required...

Except — *oh* — except not a no-man's — *oh, fuck* — land at all, especially if that man was —

"*Ethan* — "

Jakob's voice broke on his friend's name but he didn't care, *oh* how he didn't care.

"Wh-*what* — ?" Jakob struggled to gasp out between waves of pleasure as

Ethan's fingers danced between his legs; trying to sit up to *see*, but finding his body was hardly more than a puddle of nerve endings, eagerly heeding only Ethan's call.

"That's your prostate," Ethan grinned as he continued to massage that little bit of heaven that apparently lay hidden behind Jakob's balls. "And if you think it feels good from *this* side, you ain't seen nothin' yet. Want more?"

A frantic nod was all Jakob was capable of, the words flying out of his head with every stroke of Ethan's fingertips. With near-Herculean effort, he somehow managed to pry his eyes open; drinking in the fond expression on Ethan's face as he watched Jakob shudder and twitch under those hands.

"Alright, darlin'. Think you've got the idea," Ethan crooned, palm curling around Jakob's shin. "Now let's see about that pretty little hole of yours, yeah?"

But then Ethan froze, rearing back as if he'd been kicked with a stricken look on his face.

"Sorry," Ethan said, swallowing hard. "S-slip of the tongue."

"Slip all you like," Jakob urged. "That's *hot*."

"It's not too, uh... *gay* for you?"

"*Ethan*," Jakob huffed, letting his head fall back with a soft thump onto the mattress. "You can't seriously be worried about — what? Offending my straightness here? I want your fucking *cock* in my *ass*. *Please*."

"Alright, alright. Just didn't take you for such a greedy bottom," Ethan chuckled, the sound deep and promising. "But don't worry, I'll make sure you're good and taken care of."

Jakob took a deep breath, shivering. Though whether at Ethan's words or that devilish smirk now curving those lips as Ethan's still-slick finger slid towards Jakob's hole, he couldn't say. He was far too distracted, warmed by the heat he could see blazing in Ethan's eyes as Jakob grunted at his touch. The questing digit circled a few times, slippery and warm and — and — *unusual*, sure. But also... nice? *Big*. But it felt oddly good too, in a way Jakob hadn't expected.

He let out a small gasp as Ethan's finger pressed more firmly against his hole, biting his lip as it slowly breached him. The intrusion was strange but — not unwelcome, not at *all*.

"Jakob? Doing alright there?"

"M'good," Jakob confirmed, the unfamiliar pressure almost... almost *burning*, and yet — somehow unexpectedly pleasant, too. Especially as Ethan's finger kept moving, now pumping in and out with a slick friction that made heat pool in his belly.

"I'm going to try to find your prostate again," he told Jakob. "Just focus on how good it felt before, right?"

"Yeah," Jakob nodded. "Yeah. Alright."

Ethan's finger twisted inside him, massaging along his —

He gasped, one leg shooting out and nearly kicking Ethan as pleasure jolted through Jakob's body like a lightning strike.

"Found it," Ethan laughed; sounding not a little smug, the bastard.

Jakob could barely bring himself to be bothered by it though. Not when Ethan was rubbing inside him now as if he was some kind of magic genie lamp, sucking in a breath as a second finger joined the first.

"Pull your knees up to your chest, alright?" Ethan commanded.

And before Jakob's brain had fully registered their meaning, he'd already obeyed; nearly folding himself in half as he clutched the backs of his own thighs, so focused was he on the sensations wracking his body now.

"One more. Breath for me, Jakob," Ethan whispered, slipping another finger inside.

The burn this time was a little uncomfortable at first, but once again the sensation soon shifted to pleasure as Ethan began to pump his fingers into Jakob's body in earnest, slowly picking up speed.

Jakob groaned as they dragged across his prostate again and again, trying to pull Ethan in closer. Lifting his hips to meet those thrusting fingers; seeking, wanting, *needing* —

"More," Jakob grunted. "Ethan. Ethan, *please*."

Begging for something he didn't know the shape of, only that it was unbearable that it would be something he lacked —

"More of this, or... ?"

"Fuck me, Ethan," Jakob begged, unashamed at this yearning sensation he

could feel writhing in his gut; crying out for completion, for release.
"Please."

Thankfully, it seemed Ethan had no intention of making him wait any longer.
"Do believe you're ready," he murmured; withdrawing his fingers and leaving Jakob awfully, *terribly* empty...

"Yeah," Jakob nodded, swallowing hard.

"Up with you then, lazybones," Ethan said, smacking Jakob's haunch playfully. "You're likely to enjoy this more if you're in control of how fast we go."

Jakob banged his shin on the nearby desk with how quickly he hurried to obey.

Kneeling on the edge of the mattress, Jakob watched as Ethan settled into the space Jakob had just been, his large frame taking up most of the single bed. He licked his lips as Ethan tore open the foil packet and rolled on the condom. Seeing Ethan's cock disappearing into his fist as he slicked himself up with the lube had Jakob's mouth going unexpectedly dry.

"C'mon, cowboy," Ethan grinned when he was done, gesturing towards his proudly jutting cock. "Saddle up and ride."

Nodding, Jakob shuffled up the bed as instructed, slinging a leg over Ethan's thighs with the ease born of long hours riding trail.

Saddles didn't usually come equipped with a cock, however, warm and thick as it nestled into the crack of Jakob's ass like it belonged there. Nor was he used to seeing this new expression shining with eager fondness on Ethan's face, and certainly not leveled at *him*.

"Relax, Jakob," Ethan urged, his hands coming up to grip Jakob's hips, steadying and sure. "Take it slow. Bear down on me if you need to, and just — tell me if it gets to be too much. We can always back up and try again."

Jakob nodded, anxious and impatient and quite possibly the most turned-on he'd ever been in his entire life.

"You still sure about this?" Ethan asked.

"*Fuck* yeah," Jakob rasped, eyes locked on the face he trusted most in the world.

He licked his lips as Ethan reached down between Jakob's legs to line up his

cock, holding himself at the ready.

Jakob held his breath and slowly, *slowly* —

Began to lower himself down.

Chapter 18

Jakob hissed as the thick, blunt head of Ethan's cock pressed against his hole, belly clenching tight at the unfamiliar sensation. He saw the flash of concern on his friend's face, but just grinned back; chuckling weakly at his own twisted-up nerves as he continued to sink downward, letting his breath out nice and slow.

Ethan's hands came up to grip his ass to support him, squeezing and kneading at the firm muscle; those cinnamon-brown eyes locked on Jakob's the whole time.

A soft moan slipped free of Jakob's throat as he went, hyper-aware of how his hole was being stretched around Ethan's not-inconsiderable girth.

"Good?" Ethan grunted, wearing an intent expression as he watched Jakob slowly breach himself on Ethan's cock.

"Yeah," Jakob panted with a squeeze to Ethan's knee under his white-knuckled hand. "S'good."

Squirming slightly as even more of Ethan pressed into him, Jakob fought down the whine he could feel building in his throat; the pressure and stretch now bordering on uncomfortable.

"You've... you've got to relax," Ethan warned him, his voice strained.

"Breathe. It'll hurt... *I'll* hurt you if you don't."

"You'd never hurt me," Jakob whispered.

"*Jakob*," Ethan huffed. "There's no rush. Whatever you need to make this good, *say* it. I'll take care of you. Can go back and work you open some more

if that'll help. Trust me — it ain't a hardship watching you squirm on my fingers, that I promise you."

But Jakob just shook his head. "I'll — I'll try to relax," he said instead.

Lifting up a bit, Jakob angled his hips before slowly pressing down once more, urging his body to listen to Ethan as he sank further onto that waiting cock. Focusing on Ethan's warm hands as they smoothed along Jakob's thighs, on those brown eyes shining up at him now; so full of trust, and — and *lo—?*

"Push back against me," Ethan instructed him. "Like you're trying to force me out. It'll help."

Jakob obeyed, concentrating; every breath making things somewhat easier as the discomfort began to ease

"Doing beautiful, Jakob," Ethan encouraged him, thumbs rubbing little circles in the straining muscles of Jakob's legs. "Just like that, alright?"

"Alright," Jakob gasped out as he pulled up again, then pressed back down; the slight shift all he needed to make the going easier this attempt. Rocking his hips, his eyes shut tight, he lost himself in the thrill of Ethan filling him. In the —

Blinking, Jakob's eyelids flew open barely in time to catch Ethan's fluttering closed, a soft, "Ah, fuck — that's *good*," whisper-light on those lips like a prayer.

The smallest of flexes brought with it a strange sensation, blended with a sort of satisfaction washing through Jakob. All of it underscored by the knowledge that, yes, that *was* Ethan's thigh pressing flush against Jakob's ass.

His best friend's cock was buried in him to the hilt; Jakob had taken the entire thing.

"So, Mr. Questions," Ethan asked in a strained voice, hands rubbing soothingly along Jakob's taut thighs. "What's it like, then?"

Jakob shifted slightly, considering; his breath coming a little shaky as he tried to adjust.

Ethan's cock felt... strange. Good, but strange. An unfamiliar intrusion, an unexpected... *pressure*. Jakob wasn't sure he could call it comfortable. Not in the way sitting up to his neck in a sports bath was, that's for sure; hot water

and Epsom salts turning his muscles to jelly. But it didn't hurt, and with each breath he took, the pressure shifted to hints of pleasure; a promise of incredible things that waited just on the horizon.

And over it all, was this feeling of — of *connection*.

One only increased by the look Ethan was giving him now. Like everything they'd ever done together — all the adventures, all the scrapes, all the years they'd shared — as if it had all led to this moment, this joining, this new chapter unfolding between them. As if Ethan couldn't believe this was happening any more than Jakob could. As... As if Jakob were —

"Perfect," Jakob murmured as he bent — very gingerly — for another kiss. A quick one, that ended on a moan as their movement aligned things just so...

Ethan chuckled, a low rumbling thing that traveled up from his body and into Jakob's where they were joined, making his eyes cross as he sucked in a breath. "S'okay if I move now?"

"Yeah, only..." Jakob frowned, biting his lip.

"What?" Ethan inquired softly in a voice that made Jakob's heart burst to hear.

"Say it again?" he asked quietly.

Ethan hummed happily, grinning as he rubbed his palms up and down Jakob's trembling thighs, kneading at his hips. Making Jakob's belly quiver as he smoothed his way up Jakob's abs and over his chest.

Gasping at the sparks lighting up and down his spine, Jakob leaned into the touch; bowing his back as Ethan urged him down, gripping along Jakob's biceps and shoulders, curving around his neck to pull him into a desperately hungry and utterly *filthy* kiss.

"Hold on to something, *darlin'*," Ethan whispered in Jakob's ear when he'd finally released him. "This bronc's about to buck."

Then those powerful hands gripped Jakob's hips tight, lifting Jakob so high that it felt as if Ethan's cock might nearly slip free; before he pulled Jakob back against him in one smooth thrust, the movement slow, yet powerful and — holy fuck — *deep*; dragging incandescent fire along Jakob's prostate the entire way and punching out a long, drawn-out wail from him that seemed as if it started in Jakob's toes only to end somewhere in the stars above.

"Again," he whimpered. "Please."

Ethan didn't need to be asked twice, hands urging him up again before guiding Jakob to impale himself on Ethan's cock once more. This time, the angle wasn't quite as good — until Jakob leaned forward a little and then —

"Oh, fuck, *Ethan* — "

"There?" Ethan panted, his voice deep and intent. "Try small rocks. See how that suits you."

Jakob nodded, head thrown back and eyes squeezed shut as he chased that sensation, shifting into an almost grinding motion that aimed Ethan's cock *exactly* where he needed it.

"Better?"

"Yeah. Feels *good*," Jakob assured him, though it didn't tell even half the story.

The musky, heady scent of them together was filling his nose, the sound of their ragged panting loud in the quiet of the room. All punctuated with the slick noises of skin on skin as Ethan slid in and out of him, obscene and delicious. The sensations drove him ever higher; shooting straight from Jakob's ears to his leaking cock, now steadily drooling a thin, clear sort of pre-cum onto Ethan's belly.

Somewhere down the hall, someone was playing their stereo too loud; someone else yelling, though whether from the music or at some video game, there was no telling —

"*BOOM! Fuck you in your gay little ass — made you my bitch!*"

Stomach dropping, attention snapped to their door; Jakob froze at the shout, the wild laughter that followed. A thin bit of much-dented wood was all that separated him and Ethan from the rest of their floor, the dorm, the world beyond; abruptly filling Jakob with the crawling, burning question of — of if he'd *locked* it or — or...

"Shhh, it's locked. I checked," Ethan murmured, as if he could read Jakob's thoughts; his palms smoothing up Jakob's spine.

After all these years together, he probably could.

His forefinger traced gently but firmly along Jakob's jaw. Tugging his attention back to the man whose cock was buried in Jakob's ass.

"Don't mind them. Focus on *us*, Jakob — on this," Ethan urged with a determined look in his eyes. "I've got ya, darlin'. You just tell me what you need."

"I need, um... Can we swap? Have you on top?" Jakob asked, suddenly needing the security of his best friend between him and — and *everything*...

"Course we can," Ethan answered with a grin. "Anything you want."

It was a bit tricky on the narrow single bed, Jakob unsure whether his hard-on or his ass was currently winning the 'Most Awkward' Award, especially as neither of them were small men. In no time at all, he was on his back once more; a pillow under his ass and Ethan squaring up between his thighs.

He wrapped his ankles behind the small of Ethan's back, letting out a breath as Ethan began pressing in. It was much, *much* easier this time, and soon Ethan was right where he belonged; Jakob sighing rapturously as his body welcomed Ethan *home*.

"*Fuck*, Jakob. The way you *feel*," Ethan muttered, gazing down at Jakob with a look like...

Jakob's eyes skittered away, the air leaving his lungs all in a rush, unable to process *that* and *this* all at the same time. Still, warmth flooded his belly and cheeks both, his mind refusing to abandon the thought altogether.

"*Ethan*," he pleaded instead; choosing the coward's route as he pulled the man closer with his legs, thighs wrapped tight around Ethan's waist like he might never let him go.

"Oh, if I *must*," Ethan chuckled, his hands gripping Jakob's hips with a purpose as he withdrew, then thrust back into Jakob with shallow rocks that —

"*Ah!*" Jakob shouted before quickly slamming his hand over his mouth. And a good thing he did too, as now Ethan had the bit in his teeth; angling to hit that spot again and again and *again*, lighting up every fiber of Jakob's body into a radiant glow.

Ethan kept his pace slow and measured; the long, luxurious drag of his cock a kind of torturous ecstasy that sent shivers down Jakob's spine on each stroke.

"I'm gonna go faster now," Ethan warned him, and Jakob nodded; his lips parted, eyes sliding shut.

"Please," he whispered around his hand, feeling as if something was building within him; as if he could almost see the shape of something glorious right up ahead. He just — he needed —

"And *harder*," Jakob urged.

"Whatever you say, darlin'," Ethan answered, the grin thick in his voice as he complied.

His thrusts grew a little more forceful, a little quicker; stoking the fires burning within Jakob, warming him from the inside out. Head tipped back against the pillow, Jakob moaned into his fist, hips bucking with each stroke as Ethan picked up his pace.

And through it all, Jakob's cock kept dribbling that clear pre-cum. A glistening string drooled from the crown to pool warmly on his belly. It — it was like Ethan was *pushing* the cum from him. As if *he* was in control of Jakob's orgasm, and Jakob was merely along for the ride.

It surprised Jakob how *absolutely* okay he was with that, a pleasant purr buzzing away in the rear of his brain. A purr that grew to a roar as Ethan leaned in for a kiss; his weight pressing Jakob into the mattress as he covered Jakob's body with his own; capturing Jakob's mouth with a hunger that was a hundred, a *thousand* times returned.

Ethan's back flexed under Jakob's hands as he worked. Snapping his hips with purpose now, pounding *hard* into Jakob's body; angling so that he rocked across Jakob's prostate on each and every perfect thrust. As if after Ethan had gone to all this trouble introducing Jakob to that little bundle of nerves, he intended that Jakob never, *ever* leave it to languish again. As if he was seeking to imprint *himself* on Jakob's body; drive some piece of him so deep Jakob could never forget it, never forget him, forget this. As if he were trying to reach out and touch Jakob's very *soul*.

"F-*Fuck*," Jakob groaned as Ethan's pace sent a thrill of lust shooting straight to his cock; light glimmered under his skin, the pressure building inside him now threatening to —

"I — I'm close, Ethan."

"Yeah, me too," Ethan grunted, his voice strained. "Can... can — *ah, fuck* — Touch yourself for me, Jakob. Want to — to feel you come on my cock."

And *oh*, but Jakob wanted that too. Wanted to keep alive this connection

between them as long as they could. Wanted Ethan to understand, to enjoy every modicum of what he was doing to Jakob; this new shape he had forged him into, the fire burning merrily in his veins.

The tension and pressure in his stomach were coiling tighter and tighter. Building as Jakob reached down, fisting himself as instructed. His grip was rougher and faster than he usually preferred when it was just him and some porn on a free afternoon. That wasn't enough for him right now though, his body desperate for something... something *more*...

The touch of a large hand over his, the brush of Ethan's fingers on Jakob's cock —

"Come for me, darlin'," Ethan urged in that voice of mingled smoke and sunlight. "Let me see you."

And as close as Jakob was? It was enough and more than enough to send him racing, galloping, *thundering* over the edge.

Chapter 19

"E— "

Hastily, Jakob jammed a fist into his mouth to muffle his shout, not yet ready to let that secret slip. Trying also to keep from alerting the whole floor even as he bucked, writhing like a mad thing; his back arching off the bed, toes curling in almost painful ecstasy as his soul was coaxed from his body. Pain flared somewhere off in the far reaches of his other hand where he'd bitten down, but it was a distant concern.

In that exquisitely luminous second, his entire essence was spilling out his cock and over their stomachs in warm bursts; sweeping Jakob up in the stampede as the world around him exploded into light.

And all the while, Ethan continued to rock into Jakob's body; easing him through it, drawing out his release. Jakob groaned as his orgasm seemed to stretch into forever, breathing deep inhalations of Ethan's scent; mouthing contented kisses against the warm and sweaty expanse of Ethan's neck, shoulders — wherever Jakob could reach as he slowly coalesced into his own skin once more.

Chest heaving, brain just starting to come back online once more, Jakob realized he could feel Ethan's thrusts beginning to lose their rhythm, signaling the approach of his own climax. But for some reason —

"Wh — Where're ya goin'?" Jakob slurred, his tongue feeling strange and lazy in his mouth, unresponsive limbs flailing in an effort to keep Ethan where he belonged. "You haven't come yet."

"Close," Ethan panted, his voice strained. "Gonna... I'll pull out if — if you

don't want it, and — "

"Why *wouldn't* I want that?" Jakob asked, reaching up to cup Ethan's face, confused. "Told you I want you, Ethan. Want to feel you. *All* of you, every bit you'll give me, for as long as you can."

"Fuck, I — Jakob, I'd... I'd give you everything," Ethan said, his voice sounding broken, shattered. "*Everything*. All you ever — ever had to do was — was *ask*."

"Asking now," Jakob whispered into Ethan's ear. "Come on Ethan. Come inside me. Fill me up and make me yours."

"You — "

"*Please*."

With a sound almost like a sob, Ethan buried his face in Jakob's neck. Thrusting into him one final time, he planted himself hard and deep in Jakob's still-quivering body; letting out a hoarse cry, shuddering as he came. Muffled by Jakob's skin, it escaped his lips like a prayer; the shape of it sounding suspiciously like...

Like Jakob's *name*.

Jakob hummed contentedly, rubbing Ethan's thigh tiredly with his foot, his entire body feeling lax and loose.

They lay there in a tangle; Ethan doing his best imitation of a big, oversized cat as he covered Jakob with his body, both of them sated and warm. The weight of another man against him wasn't something Jakob knew he needed in his life. Now he wasn't sure he ever wanted to do without.

The sweat and cum between them had started cooling, the gray glow of the still-paused movie on the old TV the only light in the darkened room. But Jakob didn't care, he'd never felt more satisfied; his entire body warm and pliant and relaxed.

Jelly, Ethan had called it. *Just as advertised*.

Sure, he ached in new and incredibly intimate ways, but... All he could think

about was how much he already wanted to do it again.

He grunted as Ethan shifted, lips ghosting over Jakob's shoulder; heralding what turned out to be the great sin of Ethan extracting himself from their satisfied puddle of limbs and naked skin. There was an immense and awful sucking sound as he levered himself up and broke the seal of their sweaty chests; prompting a chuckle in that deep rolling voice that summoned up an answering grin from Jakob in response.

His abandonment didn't last long, however. Just time enough for Ethan to dispose of his condom in the wastebasket under his desk, and quickly locate a couple of old t-shirts from his hamper. One for himself and the other for Jakob, as it turned out; a quick wipe down for each of them before Ethan was back.

He perched gingerly on the edge of his own bed; the mattress dipping as he sat stiffly. The nervous expression he wore was infectious, and Jakob frowned.

"So... What now?" Jakob asked; the words coming out louder than he'd meant them to, shattering the comfortable silence that had fallen between them.

He... wasn't sure if this... What the new rules of all this might be. Ethan said he liked to hold his partners after sex, but... Was that what they were now? Jakob didn't know. They were well beyond the bounds of friendship here, at least as Jakob knew it. But... what lay in store for them on the other side?

As ever, he looked to his best friend; happy to follow wherever Ethan led the way.

Even in this, he mused, a small smile spilling onto his lips. Just took the long way about it all, didn't I?

"Up to you, I suppose," Ethan drawled as he traced furtive patterns in the bedsheets. His expression was uncertain, almost wary as his eyes landed on Jakob's face. "Did that, uh... did that answer your questions?"

"And then some," Jakob confirmed as he stretched like a cat, registering all the signals and aches his body was sending him. "I may have some follow-ups for you later, though."

"Oh?" Ethan asked with an intrigued tilt of his head as his eyes drifted along Jakob's still-naked form, drinking in the movement. "Uh... yeah, sure. I —

Whatever you need, Jakob. Any time."

Jakob chewed his lip, the warm contentment purring away in his belly dulled somewhat by the almost business-like tone of Ethan's answer to Jakob's dangled invitation.

"I... How does this work now?" he asked, frowning. "I mean..."

Jakob trailed off, but... Ah hell, you miss one hundred percent of the shots you don't take, right?

"Can I sleep here?" he blurted out quickly before he had a chance to think about if he was asking for too much; all too aware of the flush that was creeping up his neck. "In your bed, I mean. With, um... With you?"

"Fuck, you sure?" Ethan's eyes were wide as his hand found its way to Jakob's leg, something fragile glimmering within their warm brown depths in the light of the old TV. "I... I didn't know if this was a — a one-off, just a wild hair up your ass kind of thing, or..."

He trailed off, as if afraid saying any more might break whatever spell had gripped the both of them in its hold here tonight.

"Certainly just had *something* up my ass," Jakob smirked as he shifted over on the bed, making what he hoped was a conspicuous amount of room for Ethan to join him. "Would like to again sometime. If — If you want, that is."

"*Yeah?*" Ethan breathed, his eyebrows shooting into his hairline. His tone was filled with a sort of dawning wonder that made Jakob's heart flutter to hear it, knowing *he* had helped put it there. "I mean, yeah. 'Course I want that. It's just that... You're my best friend, Jakob. I don't want to do anything to risk throwing that away."

Jakob frowned. There was that fear again.

"Not throwing it away," he argued. "Building something new on it, maybe. Or just... just having some fun if you'd rather, like we always have together."

"This is a little different from taking your stepdad's boat out to check the limb lines," Ethan countered.

"Yes, but so was moving off to college. We grow, we change, and sometimes we get lucky enough to have the sense fucked out of us by our best friend. Now come to bed already," Jakob demanded. "I'm exhausted, and it's — oh, crap — two am and I've got classes in the morning."

"You *certain* about this?" Ethan asked warily, tragically not moving. "Just, with a lot of guys... I mean, not — "

And here he made an unsure kind of gesture towards Jakob that... sure, fair. Jakob wasn't entirely clear what this whole situation meant for him, either. He still liked girls, but hot *damn* sex with Ethan had turned out to be fantastic too. That was fine. Figuring it out was going pretty well for him, all told. Long as Ethan was game, it was a question Jakob felt could wait at least until morning.

*Oh, morning sex; now **there's** a thought...*

"Usually it's been kind of a 'Wham, bam, thank you, Sam,' sort of thing before we're parting ways," Ethan said, his thumb rubbing little circles again where his hand still rested on Jakob's leg. "Which — that's fine. Good even, in a few cases, but..."

"But sometimes, something different can be nice. Right?" Jakob grinned, the ache in his body as he made himself comfortable under Ethan's covers underlining his own understanding of that statement all too well. "Well, their loss is my gain. Or not. You're free to sleep over there in my bed tonight if you're not into the idea. But I'm calling dibs on this one."

"Oh, *dibs*, is it?" Ethan chuckled encouragingly, the sound warming Jakob's skin. "If I remember right, you have to lick it to call dibs. Them's the rules."

"Is that what you were doing to my cock earlier?" Jakob asked innocently as Ethan slipped in under the covers next to him.

"I, uh..." Oh hell, Ethan looked cute when he was flustered, and when had Jakob started noticing *that*?

Or, an even better question: How had Jakob never noticed that *before*?

*You take **one** cock in your ass and now you're going all moony*, he laughed at himself.

Or... maybe he'd always *been* moony over his best friend, and that's what finally drove him onto Ethan's cock?

*Mmm. A decent enough hypothesis. Might require further testing, though. Preferably while **on** said cock...* Jakob mused as he reached up to cup Ethan's face, drawing him in for a lazy kiss.

It was just as perfect as the ones before, maybe even better. *This* kiss, Jakob

knew what lay on the other side; his questions answered, his anxieties squashed. *This* kiss they could take their time. *This* kiss was a promise. A small one, a simple one; a promise of more kisses yet to come. The rest they could hash out in the sunlight tomorrow.

Together.

"Careful," Ethan rumbled in that deep voice of his when they'd finally parted; both of them settling in, and Jakob's head resting against his shoulder. "A man could get used to this."

And though he tried to keep his tone light, Jakob knew his friend all too well. He could hear the warning woven all throughout those words — and the thread of fear, too. A fear Jakob knew from experience would take time to soothe in Ethan. Time that he was always more than happy to give him, especially swimming in these unfamiliar waters.

"Good," Jakob replied simply.

From the brush of Ethan's hand down the sweep of Jakob's back, it seemed to be enough.

It was... *different* being held by someone bigger than him.

Curling around someone like this; Ethan's body far harder and more muscled against him than Jakob was used to, instead of being the one a small and curvy partner curled into. Trying to figure out the mechanics of tucking himself in against Ethan's larger frame, half wondering how much he really needed *both* arms. Hell, Ethan even *smelled* different...

Ethan's words from earlier drifted back to him, and — as discreetly as he could — Jakob tucked his nose into the join of Ethan's arm and inhaled; letting the warm, spicy, and overwhelmingly *masculine* scent of his best friend fill his lungs, setting off something humming contentedly in the back of his brain.

Ethan chuckled, and Jakob flushed a little — *caught*.

"Told you it was a good smell," Ethan murmured, pressing a sleepy kiss to Jakob's hair.

Jakob grinned. Accepting that — okay, *yes*. Ethan was right. *Again*, the bastard.

Finally, he found a position that suited; his turn apparently to do an

impression of a languid feline, half-draped across Ethan's prone form. He had one large and well-muscled arm wrapped around Jakob's middle, anchoring him as warmth and comfort sang their siren call.

He smoothed his palm along Ethan's side, reveling in the low hum the touch seemed to draw from the chest below Jakob's ear.

"Yeah, I could *definitely* get used to this," Ethan sighed, pulling a very willing Jakob closer to him.

Jakob hummed in agreement, glancing up at Ethan's face to see him looking the spitting image of the cat who got the cream. Sleep tugging hard at him now, he settled in against Ethan's warmth, his jaw nearly cracking on a yawn.

Unf. Had Jakob ever felt more content in his life? He didn't think so. Curled up with Ethan, their limbs entwined together, body still buzzing all happy and sated? Felt like the most natural thing in the world.

This... was long overdue.

*But we're here **now***, Jakob told himself as he let his mind drift. *That's what matters, right?*

If only it could have stayed that way...

Now

Chapter 20

"DAD!"

"Hmm?" Jakob mumbled into his pillow, hazy impressions of sparkling brown eyes and warm skin drifting so tantalizingly just out of reach.

"DAD!" came Cassie's voice from down the hall and headed quickly in his direction, the frightened note in her tone finally reaching him, prodding at his brain and bringing him reluctantly to consciousness.

"Cassie, wha — ?" he groaned; blinking in the still dim light of a winter's morning as she darted into his en suite bathroom and slammed the door behind her, Alex in the hallway hot on her heels as the lock clicked home.

The kid pulled up sharply in Jakob's doorway just before he'd crossed the threshold into the room proper, like there was some sort of barrier on it straight out of some sci-fi show. Fury and frustration were writ large across his face; his hands clenching, shifting from foot to foot.

"Cassie? Is everything okay?" Jakob called loud enough to be heard through the door, suddenly fully awake and worried. Ethan had vouched for this kid and he'd seemed alright yesterday, but... Jakob didn't know him, not really.

If he'd tried —

"No!" Cassie yelled back through the door, a strange jingling sound coming from the other side. "It's *not* okay! Tell him he can't go racing off in your truck just because of some article he read online!"

Jakob looked at Alex in confusion.

But the kid wouldn't meet his eyes. Just glanced down at the shoes quickly

jammed on his feet, the laces still untied. Jakob could see the muscles twitching in his cheek as he clenched his jaw, trying to bite back his words.

"Alex," he said, working to keep his voice low and gentle. "If you tell me what the problem is, maybe I can help."

Sullen silence.

Jakob sighed, scratching his hands through his beard; seeking to smooth the cowlick pulling uncomfortably at his jaw.

"Alex," he huffed, still mindful of his tone. "I'm riding without a saddle here. Fill me in. Please?"

Bright copper eyes flicked up to meet his for a moment — and then it was like the kid exploded, all barely contained emotion and energy

"It's fucking *bullshit*, Jakob," Alex snapped as he gestured and paced in a tight circle in the hallway, still never quite stepping over the doorway's invisible line. "He can't do this. I — I need to fix it — "

"You *need* to tell me what the problem is," Jakob said, as if talking to a spooked horse. Not too far off, he figured, not really. "And then both of you get out and let me pull some pants on so we can figure out how to fix it — *together*."

"*Then* you should probably apologize to Cassie," Jakob continued, relieved to note Alex's abashed expression at that. "Or don't be surprised if you end up with the shit chores this week. And this is a stable, so I mean that literally."

"I — Yeah, okay. Sorry," the kid muttered, and then loudly enough to be heard through the door, "*Sorry, Cassie.*"

"I think you meant to say '*Sorry Cassie, O Eternal Gaming Champion,*'" came through the door, only slightly muffled.

"*Cassie*," Jakob huffed, scowling at the door. It was far too early to be dealing with this without at least a pot of coffee in him.

The door to his bathroom opened a crack and a green eye peered through. *Good enough.*

"Alright, so what's the problem?" Jakob asked, looking between them.

"He tried to grab the keys and take the truck, but he said last night he can't even *drive* — " Cassie reported —

— at the exact same time as Alex burst out with —

"My friends all sent me this article and my Dad's a fucking *liar* but now he's brought Mr. Ethan into it and it's all just... it's just so fucking *shit*. And no one can stop him, but — but *someone's* got to stand up to him!" Alex said, his chest heaving, fists clenched at his sides.

Jakob sighed. "Alright, both of you — give *me* the keys and let me get dressed. *Then* show me the article. We'll take it from there. Cassie, start a fresh pot of coffee, would you?"

She nodded and tossed Jakob the truck keys, which landed with a jangle on the empty side of the queen bed. She turned back down the hall with a speed Jakob could only hope heralded that pot of coffee he could already tell he would be desperately needing —

But not before shoulder-checking Alex as she passed him.

"Hey!" Alex shouted, whipping his head around in outrage.

Jakob could hear the faintly retreating sound of a raspberry in reply.

God, what had he done in a past life to deserve this?

"Jakob..." Alex sputtered, turning back to him; a ragged, almost pleading edge to his tone.

Jakob got the impression that Alex wasn't the kind of kid to plead for anything. Like he had long ago learned it would never be of any use. But the look on his face —

"Alex, I know you only met me yesterday," Jakob told him in a low voice — as reassuringly as he could manage while still sitting in his bed; him in his boxers and only a duvet for cover as an unknown, agitated young man fidgeted in his bedroom doorway. "I know I can't ask you to trust me that easily. But... But Ethan does, right? Trusted me to get you here, to keep you safe? So I'm not gonna ask you to trust *me*. Just to trust Ethan. We'll sort this out, all of us, together. But — Alex? I can't do anything until I can put some pants on."

"But..." Alex argued reflexively, before ducking his head for a moment, the tips of his ears turning red. When he looked back up at Jakob, there was still stubborn determination in his face, but somehow it seemed like there was now less... pure, outright desperation, frankly. At least less than there had been before. "Yeah. *Okay*. I'll — I'll just..."

He made a sort of jerky hitchhiking gesture over his shoulder before turning and heading in that same direction; his footsteps sounding strangely loud on the creaky wooden floorboards of the old farmhouse.

Jakob sighed as he reached for his cane and swung himself over and out of bed.

Pants first. *Then* he could see about rescuing the damsel in distress.

He snorted as he hurried to pull on a shirt. He could just imagine solid, steady Ethan's reaction to being called a damsel.

Jakob padded barefoot down the hall after the kids. His cane thumped hollowly on the wooden floor in a counterpoint to his footsteps as he worked the morning stiffness out of his leg on his way. As he neared the kitchen, he could already smell the coffee brewing, the aroma already buoying his spirits; like some sort of wizard's magical potion of fortification in some tabletop game, giving his character a stat boost before a fight. Something to help prepare him for the battle ahead, maybe, before finding out what all the fuss was about.

Trust Ethan, Jakob told himself, repeating the same advice he had given Alex. *You owe him at least that much. Whatever it is, we'll manage it. Just trust Ethan, and it'll... it'll all work out okay.*

But as he rounded the corner and saw two worried faces snap up to meet his gaze, a lit phone screen between them on the kitchen bar's counter; Jakob tried to ignore the little tendril of worry now snaking its way through his chest.

Chapter 21

Distraught Father Pleads With Kidnappers: Please Bring My Son Home Safe

By Mackenzie Preston

SAN MORADO (WP) — Local boy went missing yesterday when playing in the front yard of his home. The child's father, whose name is being withheld at this time to protect the identity of the victim, is a decorated police officer and well-respected member of his local community.

"He's a gentle soul, very trusting," said the boy's father. "He doesn't have many friends, and I think his kidnapper might've taken advantage of that."

Authorities say the last verified sighting of the boy was at about 10 a.m. on Saturday morning, when he was seen getting into a green hatchback. Police say they are currently questioning the owner of the vehicle, Ethan Hillsman, 39, a resident of San Morado, who teaches art at the boy's school. Sources say police suspect Hillsman might have used his influence over the child to lure him away from his home. Hillsman matches the description of the man seen driving the car at the time of the alleged kidnapping, but police say they have not yet made any arrests.

Police are also looking for a second unidentified man for questioning who was seen in the car with Mr. Hillsman at the time, described by eyewitnesses as an older man with a beard, wearing a dark sweater and a baseball cap. It is as yet unknown what role this potential accomplice might have played in the boy's alleged kidnapping.

The boy's mother, who sources say suffers from early onset dementia, "...just wants to see her boy. She doesn't understand that someone has taken him, why anyone could want to hurt her son," according to the boy's father.

"Please, wherever you've taken him, just don't hurt him," his father told reporters in a tearful plea to his son's kidnappers. "I know he's got to be so scared. I don't know why you've done

this, but he belongs with his family. Please, bring my boy home."

No motive is known at this time, but with the spate of recent convictions of teachers for having inappropriate relationships with their students making headlines across the country, San Morado Police Chief Barbara Johnson has released this statement, "It's critical that we find this boy quickly and return him to his family, before any harm can come to him. If you have any information as to the current whereabouts of the boy or his alleged kidnappers, please call our tip line at 1-800-555-TIPS"

A vigil is planned tonight at St. Sebastian's Church at 7 pm, and a charitable fund for the boy's family can be found at BringAlexHome.plea

Chapter 22

[ETHAN | TODAY — 7:44 AM]

It's bullshit, Jakob. It's not true — not a word of it

I know

You okay?

[ETHAN | TODAY — 7:46 AM]

He's a KID. He's one of my students. I swear I would NEVER

I believe you

You wanna call?

Incoming call from
[ETHAN HILLSMAN]...

✓
Accept

✗
Deny

"Did Alex see it?" were Ethan's first words, blurted out in a big rush as soon as the video call connected.

He was sitting in his kitchen looking like death warmed twice over in a microwave. His hair was ruffled, with little spikes marching through the dark strands here and there. As if he'd been absently twisting the locks repeatedly in frustration; an old self-soothing habit he'd had for at least as long as Jakob had known him.

He took in the hunched shoulders of his friend; the furrows etched heavily into his brow. Despite the early morning sunlight streaming in through the big window to the right of him, Ethan's eyes were dull and flat instead of their usual warm brown. His face was ashen and worn under his natural tones, covered in a dark unshaven stubble.

The scruff looked good on him; despite the circumstances, Jakob found himself appreciating the ruffled, slightly wild image Ethan presented on Jakob's laptop screen.

Not the time, he reminded himself.

"Yeah," Jakob answered with a sigh. He glanced up through his own kitchen window towards the path between the house and the main stable, where he could hear the faint sound of laughter.

He could make out an animatedly chatting Cassie leading an uncertain Alex, probably to go feed the horses and let him meet the animals.

She was pointing at something she had seen, but Jakob couldn't tell what from this angle. Whatever it was, it seemed to interest Alex; his hunched shoulders loosening slightly at whatever she had said.

"They woke me up with the news," Jakob elaborated, turning his attention back to the man on the screen in front of him. "Alex had some half-baked plan to take my car and... well... Not positive he had gotten any further than that, really. Just that he wanted to help you. Though I'm not sure how getting himself wrapped around a tree on the way is exactly helpful. Did you know he doesn't even have a license?"

Ethan blew out a big breath, his expression relaxing at the chance to worry about someone other than himself for a moment.

He had never taken well to being the center of attention. It made him nervous, Ethan always said. He'd always preferred to be a supporter; help

others solve their problems, rather than have that spotlight be focused on his own.

Sometimes — far too often, in fact — at the expense of himself.

"Yeah," Ethan replied, a frustrated look on his face. "I did. He said his Dad wouldn't give him lessons himself, and couldn't — or wouldn't — pony up for the school's driver's ed fees. And if Alex lived in any of those places where they've got a half-decent public transportation system, it wouldn't be a problem. But Chance's Harbor? You need a car to get anywhere around here. It... it set him back a bit with the other kids in his class, with his friends. Not that he has too many of those, really. Not anymore."

"Maybe his dad's on a budget?" Jakob hazarded doubtfully.

"Naw, not being able to afford the fees or have the time or ability to teach Alex himself is one thing. We've got plenty of students like that," Ethan said, rubbing the back of his neck. "Few of us in the school pass the hat around; even a couple of parents too sometimes. We usually manage to scrape together enough to help cover the costs of those kids who need it."

"That's good of you."

"Yeah, well... Alex's dad wouldn't even sign the permission slip when we offered to pay the fee for him," Ethan said as the frustration in his expression darkened to an outright scowl. "Got all indignant, barged into the school, flashed his badge and screamed in some student teacher's face about how it was none of her business. Accused her of trying to corrupt his son, 'usurping his parental authority' and... something about Alex not needing to go anywhere on his own without supervision. Poor woman was in tears by the end of it, from what she told me later. It was only her second day, working with a completely different grade on the other side of the building; she'd never even met the kid."

"*Fuck*. I mean... I can understand having a rough time letting your kid grow up, but that's..."

"Beyond reason?" Ethan asked with a snort. "Alex is an adult now, and he's going to graduate here in a few months. What's he expected to do? It's... Alex's dad may have been within his legal rights, but it's... it's not *right* — y'know?"

Jakob scratched his chin, his beard tickling his fingers. "Doesn't help with his

documentation problem either, does it?"

"No," Ethan sighed, then pursed his lips. "You don't think..."

"No idea. Well... In for a penny, in for a pound, right?" Jakob drawled, feeling a small grin slip across his face as an idea came to him. "I've managed to teach more than one teenager to drive over in the north pasture. I'll ask Alex if he wants to learn how too."

"Only if you promise me you won't — "

Jakob chuckled at Ethan's suspicious expression. "Yes — I swear there will be absolutely no attempts at car surfing this time. You learned, though, right?"

"God, if I think of how many stupid ass bullshit things we used to do as kids..." Ethan said, wincing. "By all rights, there should be a pair of headstones out there with our names on them."

"Yeah well... There aren't and we grew up. Eventually," Jakob said with an easy shrug, gesturing at the laptop's camera with his coffee mug. "Just consider how many mistakes that we're making here now that we'll be looking back on in the next twenty years."

"...You don't — You don't think *this* is a mistake, do you?" Ethan asked hesitantly, his face drawn up again in an anxious expression.

"No," Jakob reassured him firmly. "You and me; us helping Alex — however this all shakes out, I'm certain that this is something I'm going to look back on and know that it was right. I just wish it wasn't necessary. But... even from just the little I've seen, from seeing how much you care? Alex's a good kid. He needs a chance to grow into a good adult, whatever form that takes for him. I'm more than happy to have him here, for as long as he needs."

Jakob took a sip of his coffee, watching the flurry of expressions flitting across Ethan's face, until finally he seemed to settle on sheer relief.

"Time to stop stalling though, Ethan," Jakob said into the growing silence, taking a deep breath to steel himself. "How are *you* doing?"

Ethan slumped then, inhaling deeply as the heel of his palm came up to scrub roughly at his left eyebrow. "School principal called me this morning."

Jakob couldn't help his sharp intake of air at that. Judging by the way Ethan's eyes jumped to his, it had been audible through the connection.

"That... doesn't sound good," Jakob hazarded.

"It's not," Ethan confirmed unhappily. "School board's calling an emergency video meeting this afternoon. Principal said she tried to vouch for me — hell, board president was in that art class you came to; stays after sometimes and we talk football. Maybe that's why I got a heads-up, I dunno. But... he passed along the warning that the board's likely to be a stickler for policy here. He's going to try and get them to ask me to 'take a sabbatical' while all this gets sorted... or at least — at least until it dies down. Said... Said it would look better for me than having to place me under... under administrative leave."

Ethan looked away at that, glancing out of his kitchen window; his Adam's Apple bobbing furiously as he swallowed.

"Won't that just make it look like..." Jakob trailed off, unsure how to say it.

Ethan snorted. "Sure as hell won't help."

"What about your classes?"

"They'll bring in a substitute. Hopefully not the same one that let the kids fling paint on the ceiling last time while they sat playing on their phones, but... I'm not sure they'll exactly be giving me a say in it," Ethan said, looking pained at the thought.

"...Is there anything I can do?" Jakob asked quietly; uncertain how he could help, but still feeling that familiar itch to jump in and save the day. To try and fix things for his old friend.

He hated seeing that dejected look on Ethan's face, wanted nothing more than to be able to reach through the laptop screen and smooth his fingers across the furrows etched so deeply into Ethan's brow. To see those warm brown eyes shine, that smile...

"You're already doing it. I'll be alright, just... Might have a little more time on my hands for a few days than I thought," Ethan told him, pasting on a thin smile that didn't come anywhere near his eyes. "Might stretch a new canvas, paint something. Never know, a bit of a break might end up being a good thing, right?"

"Sure," Jakob said, trying to sound supportive. "A vacation's always nice."

"Yeah," Ethan said weakly. "Maybe. Anyway, I'll let you go. Didn't mean to be a bother this morning, just... Just wanted to see how you all were getting on."

"You're not a bother Ethan. Far from it," Jakob shook his head, trying to

reassure him. "Call anytime you need."

Ethan snorted, "You're going to regret that offer when I drunk call you at two a.m."

"Mm, a video booty call does have potential, though. Or maybe I fire up the computer and we play games until dawn like we used to," Jakob suggested, something warm spreading through his chest to see a genuine smile cross Ethan's face at the memory. "I'm serious — I don't mind, Ethan. Not if it's you."

Ethan made a happy little hum at that. "Thanks. Really. I uh... Might take you up on it. Damn, but I wish things were — well, simpler right now, I guess. We never did get to finish our coffee."

Jakob chuckled, nervousness blooming in his chest all of a sudden at Ethan's words.

But, what the hell — you miss a hundred percent of the shots you don't take, right?

"Suppose I might just have to ask you out on our second date then, won't I?" Jakob asked, ducking his head a bit as he felt his ears heat. "Know a good little hole in the wall near La Calle. Ten bucks gets you a mountain of pupusas and a cafecito that'll keep you awake into next week. If — If you'd be interested, I mean."

And now the smile on Ethan's face could only be called brilliant, his eyes crinkling at the corners to match. It was a grin so infectious, Jakob couldn't help but smile back.

"Yeah, I uh... Yeah. Sounds good," Ethan answered — still beaming — and Jakob let out the breath he hadn't even realized he'd been holding until then. "Sounds real good."

Chapter 23

"What're those supposed to be?"

Jakob looked up from his phone as Alex slunk into the room in that way of teenagers everywhere who were curious about something, but didn't want to admit it. Rather like some of the old barn cats that hunted around the stables, really; the ones that resolutely didn't want to be petted at all, right up until suddenly they absolutely *did*.

Following Alex's gaze, Jakob spotted what must have caught his attention; a row of five stockings hung halfway up the big bay window looking out over the ranch and the ocean beyond.

"Family stockings," Jakob answered him, smiling softly at the haphazard collection.

"They look like a craft store barfed on them."

Jakob tilted his head, watching the storm clouds gathering on Alex's face and recognizing all too well the signs of someone spoiling for a fight. Just as he recognized too, the hunched line of his shoulders, the way the kid's body language screamed he expected any conflict he might manage to get, he expected to lose.

Testing boundaries again, Jakob decided. He took a long, slow sip of his coffee, keeping his voice even as he said, "Cassie made those."

"Obviously," Alex snapped. "No one ever in a million years would choose to buy those things."

He'd leaned up against the kitchen door frame, Jakob noted. Braced, but with

multiple options open for a quick exit; able to spot any threats that might be coming up from behind.

Jakob shrugged, glancing back at his phone screen, the utter picture of unconcerned. "Think they turned out pretty good, considering she made them when she was five."

"Who's *Sofia*?"

"Cassie's mom."

"And *Reed*?"

"Cassie's stepdad."

"You that much of a cuck that you let your wife's new husband have a stocking on your wall?"

Jakob frowned into his coffee, but didn't rise to the bait.

"Sofie hasn't remarried," Jakob explained, keeping his tone even. "Reed's my ex-husband."

He glanced up at the following silence, just in time to see a complicated look scuttle across Alex's face.

"Reed's a lame name," Alex finally huffed, though he unbent enough to drop into the chair opposite Jakob at the table. "And *Grampy*?"

"Cassie's grandfather. My..." And here Jakob paused, unsure how to explain. "Frank's somewhere between my stepdad and... he adopted me when I was little, after my mom left."

"Sounds fucked up," Alex said, but... His tone had lost its bite, and when Jakob looked up, the look on the kid's face...

That was commiseration, not judgment.

"What's eating you?" Jakob asked, keeping his words as soft as he would with a skittish colt.

Alex made a vague gesture that could have meant anything from the contents of the room to the state of the world in general.

Which... *fair*.

"You've got a lot on your plate right now," Jakob said, leaning back in his chair as he studied the puzzle before him. "But it's a mad dog that bites the hand trying to feed it. No one's going to hurt you here, Alex. Nobody except

yourself."

Alex's shoulders hunched inward at that, his head dipping as he looked away.

"Sorry," he muttered, his tone just miserable enough that Jakob could believe he actually meant it. "I think I'm just... in over my head, maybe."

"This about Cassie's friends coming over later today?"

Hesitantly, Alex nodded.

"Cassie... She was showing me all these photos. Like I'm supposed to remember names and faces of folks I never met?" Alex snorted, then frowned. "Some of them... I didn't know she had friends who were..."

"Some of them are *very* out, aren't they?" Jakob asked, his mind easily calling up images of Cassie's friends like a flipbook.

"Yeah," Alex sighed. "Guess so. It shouldn't matter, though. What the fuck do I care about some strangers? *Or* what they think of me?"

"Sure. But... that doesn't erase the fact you do," Jakob told him, Alex's little half-shrug confirming his suspicions. "Look, you don't have to tell anyone anything about yourself that you don't want to. I promise, none of Cassie's friends would purposefully pressure you to do something that you aren't comfortable with. But on the other hand, if anyone's going to understand? It'll be that group. Might be nice to have some... support, right?"

Alex just grunted in reply.

"When I said that stuff in the mall yesterday? I, uh — I wouldn't have if I'd... I mean, If I knew you were *actually*, um..."

"Don't worry about it," Jakob told him. "Good as forgotten."

"I... shouldn't have made fun of Cassie's stockings, either," he said after a moment, looking up; his copper bright eyes swirling with shadows. "Please don't tell her I said those things."

Jakob nodded.

"Know they aren't the prettiest, but... it's tradition. It's *our* tradition," Jakob corrected himself. "Sure, none of the stockings are perfect. They aren't supposed to be — because none of us are perfect. But she made each of them just as unique and special as the people they're for, and... I've always thought that makes them pretty magical, all together like that. Much better than store-bought, even if they're a little rough around the edges these days."

Alex stared at Jakob for a moment, then snorted.

"You're corny as hell, you know that?" Alex informed him, but there was no heat in it at all. Instead, there was something... something almost shaped like longing in the kid's tone as he looked over at the row of stockings again, staring hard. As if he was actually *seeing* them now. As if —

Jakob glanced over at the stockings, and then back at Alex's expression; an idea forming in his mind...

It's not that Jakob didn't *like* Cassie's friends.

He did, actually.

Really.

They were an interesting collection of very individualistic kids; smart and so very aware of the world in a way he sure as shit had never been at that age.

Maybe still wasn't, to be honest.

He could barely keep up with the thread of their rapid-fire conversation, only just catching the general shape of it. From the recent appropriation of cultural designs by some big brand; to lamenting the state of fast fashion's effects on the environment; to discussing the exploitation of workers because of some new crochet trend — they seemed to cover it all.

Flitting from topic to topic like a flock of chattering crows, all the while laying out their offerings across every available surface in Jakob's living room; items glittering here and there in the blinking lights of the Christmas tree.

They were an interesting assortment of kids, sure. Eye-opening too, deliberating over this topic and with the speed of a generation raised on memes and video clips. But...

It's just that — collectively, anyway —

They were so damn *loud*.

Judging by Alex's face, he was apparently thinking along the same lines.

Jakob maybe should have left them to it; disappeared off to see to the long

list of things that always seemed to need doing around the stables. Give the kids their privacy, and all that.

And yet...

Jakob had a nagging suspicion Alex could use the support of having a familiar — well... *slightly* more familiar face somewhere about in case he got to feeling overwhelmed again. Not to mention Jakob wanted to see how Alex would react to a group of people who celebrated their differences, instead of forced conformity like Alex's father had seemed to demand of his son.

Plus, if he had left? Then Jakob would've missed the moment Alex had turned and spotted *Liam*.

He was the older brother of Kiya, if Jakob remembered right; home on break from some university on the east coast. Jakob had seen the kid before at the house often enough, dropping his sister off until she and Cassie had gotten their own licenses.

He smiled into his mug of coffee, wishing he could take a photo to send to Ethan at the expression on Alex's face; the way his spine had gone as stiff as a board as he furiously tried to look everywhere *but* at the lanky, curly-haired teen.

Jakob frowned.

Was he a teen? Couldn't be much older than that, surely.

He would have to ask Cassie tonight. It's not like Jakob was Alex's father — and oh, did that open up a whole line of questions he'd have to discuss with Ethan the next time they talked — and Alex was an adult besides, but... still. No sense borrowing trouble.

He wasn't the only guy to have shown up, either. Or... non-femme presenting, maybe? Cassie's friend group had opened up an entirely new lexicon for Jakob. One that he hadn't yet fully adapted to, if he was honest, though he was trying his best.

They were a lot less restrictive than his own had been at her age, that was for sure; all of them introducing themselves to Alex by name and pronouns before getting down to the serious business of their clothing exchange. Soon enough, Jakob had a living room full of chattering young adults; each joining in with equally loud enthusiasm as they picked up tops and inspected shoes, swapping and helping each other mix and match outfits.

Jakob smiled. It was a whole different world than the one he had grown up in. A better one, in his opinion.

"M'not wearing a *skirt*," came Alex's voice, cutting through the general din coming from the living room.

Jakob's head flew up, his eyes scanning to find the source of the issue before it could escalate into anything like a full-on problem. Even if Alex's words had sounded more flustered than angry...

Kiya shrugged from where she had been holding the offending article of clothing out for his inspection; laying it back over the arm of the couch according to some obscure system of organization that they had decided amongst themselves.

"Suit yourself," drifted her voice over the chatter. "But with your legs? I think you'd pull it off."

"It's his call," rebutted Liam firmly. "If he's not feeling it, I'll take it home myself. Might wear it when we all go see the movie next weekend. Just pick what feels comfortable for you, Alex. That's the main bit, yeah? Hey, did you need another pair of jeans? These look about your size."

"Yeah, I... Th-thanks," Alex muttered, clearing his throat as he accepted the black pants Liam was holding out to him.

Jakob ducked quickly to hide his grin, careful not to let Alex catch him noticing the entire exchange.

Crisis duly averted, he went back to puzzling at the word game on his phone; trying his best to tune out the sheer volume of noise a gaggle of happy, chattering teens could produce.

Jakob chuckled to himself as he watched Alex trying to surreptitiously slip the skirt into his own small pile of clothing; tucking it under an oversized gray hoodie just as soon as he thought no one would see.

Then cursed, as he lost *another* turn on a damn wrong word.

Fuck kind of word went S_NT_, anyway?

Chapter 24

Jakob rapped his knuckles on the guest room's wooden door, the knocking oddly loud in the narrow hallway.

"shit — JUST A MINUTE!" He heard Alex yell from the other side of the door.

There was the sound of rustling, of cloth ripping, then Alex cursing. Jakob hesitated, worry warring with the hard-learned lesson to give Cassie her space. A rule he was trying to apply equally to both the teenagers now living under his roof.

"You alright in there?" Jakob settled on asking in compromise.

"No! I mean, yes!" Alex yelled back. "Go away! Uh... please?"

There was a strange thumping sound coming from Alex's room, almost like... like someone *hopping* or suchlike.

"Okay," Jakob said to the door. "I'll, uh — I'll be fixin' dinner, alright? Got something to ask you, when you have a minute."

He beat a hasty retreat for the nominal safety of the kitchen; the thud of his cane alternating with his footsteps on the wooden boards running down the length of the hall.

Peering up at the clock, Jakob decided it was close enough on towards dinnertime that it wouldn't hurt to get a head start on prep.

By the time Alex made his appearance, slouching through the kitchen's doorway, Jakob already had the onions and peppers diced and sizzling in the

pan.

He glanced over at the teen as Alex dropped into a chair at the little kitchen table; taking in his hunched shoulders and the scowl Alex seemed to habitually wear, like it was some sort of armor.

"Hey, uh — " Jakob started, clearing his throat uncomfortably. An awkward feeling was fluttering around inside his windpipe; he tried to focus on adding the ground beef to the pan to cover his reaction. "We don't know each other all that well, but... I've got to be sure you're being safe while you're under my roof. Do we need to have, um — the drug talk or... or anything?"

"No," Alex replied as he reared back in his seat, obviously aghast at the thought. "We do *not*. I... *no*."

"Okay, good," Jakob exhaled, relief flooding through him. "It's just — You heard that lawyer on the call this morning. We gotta keep our noses clean while they look into your case; get all this documentation stuff sorted out."

"I wasn't doing drugs!" Alex huffed.

"Oh. *Oh*," Jakob realized, feeling his eyes going wide. Quickly, he tried to backtrack with a rather clumsy, "Umm, if you — "

"I wasn't doing *that* either!" Alex said in a rush, his own eyes suddenly large as he sat bolt upright in the chair.

"I mean, it's... it's fine if you were," Jakob told him. He was trying for reassuring, but suspected he probably sounded just as uncomfortable as Alex now looked.

Fuck, it's not as if he didn't already have one teenager. You would think that would give him an advantage here in knowing what to do. Make this sort of — of boundaries thing easier, wouldn't you?

He glanced at the pan. *Dammit*, he'd nearly put in too much paprika.

"That's your room, and — and I want you to feel comfortable here," he stammered. Hastily, he tried to remember how all the parenting sites said this talk should go, back when he'd last had to do this about a million and four years ago. *Open and honest and supportive*, right. But the actual words? *Oof*. Crickets. *Well, here goes nothing*. "So if — "

"*Nooooo*. Oh *God*, nonono. This isn't happening," Alex whined from behind his fingers; his hands covering his face. "I was... I was just — Look, I was

only... trying on some of the clothes. From the swap. Yesterday."

Abruptly, Jakob remembered the skirt Alex tried to hide under a gray hoodie and it felt like something suddenly *clicked*; the knot he had sensed forming between his temples melting away.

Oh, thank God.

This, while obviously a prickly subject given the keyed-up way Alex was sitting, was still far easier ground for Jakob to cover. Familiar territory, as it were.

"So how did you like them?" Jakob asked as he washed up a container of grape tomatoes he had bought earlier that week from Mrs. Brown's vegetable stand over by the fairgrounds. He tried to keep his tone as neutral as he could manage; light and casual. Like they were simply talking about everyday things, and *not* something he could tell from Alex's posture the kid was obviously feeling anxious about enough already. "Any of the clothes... fit you?"

"They're... alright, I guess," Alex said, slumping over the table and tracing the wood grain with the tip of his index finger. "Some of them, I mean. I don't... I don't know if some of the others are... my *style*."

Jakob hummed noncommittally as he rummaged around in the cupboards.

"I remember those days," he finally admitted, staring sightlessly at the tin of cumin he'd been looking for. "Can feel like there's almost too many options, all of a sudden. And there's you, excited to try something new, sure. But also under all this — this *pressure*. Like you're behind, somehow expected to have it all already figured out. Maybe a bit of a worry there too — like, 'what else is this gonna change', right? All the while, feeling as if you've no idea how you're supposed to even start. Any of that ringing a bell?"

"*Yeah*," Alex sighed as he slumped back in his chair, the word so quiet it was nearly a whisper.

The silence stretched in the little kitchen there for a while. Jakob struggled to keep his eyes focused on the task in front of him. He knew he needed to give Alex plenty of space to think it all through. Still, it was hard not to glance over at him to see if he was still there, or pry, or meddle any more than Jakob already had...

"What're you making?"

"Tacos," Jakob replied easily enough.

"Can I help?"

Jakob glanced over in surprise, just barely catching the almost innocent look of child-like eagerness that crossed Alex's face — before it was quickly shuttered by one of feigned disinterest.

"Sure," Jakob said, carrying over the paring knife and cutting board he had liberated from their drawers; setting them down on the table next to Alex, along with the tomatoes.

"Just... sliced?" Alex asked, unsure.

"Yeah, that'll do fine. Thanks," Jakob told him, watching as a trace of... *something* passed through Alex's eyes before he ducked his head, attention focused on his task.

"S'ok if they are your style, you know," Jakob told him, picking up the thread of their skirt conversation.

"The clothes, I mean," Jakob explained at Alex's questioning look. "S'ok if they aren't, too. I — Alex, I know this is easier said than done, and... You've had a — a tough go of it, sure. But... I want you to feel safe here. Like you can be... yourself. *Whatever* form that takes. D'ya understand what I'm saying?"

Alex just glared back at him mulishly.

Jakob sighed.

"When I was a kid... well, Frank offered me that same kind of safe harbor. Offered it to Ethan too, soon as he could. But — I didn't know, didn't understand just how much..." Jakob gestured vaguely with the can in his hand, not quite knowing how to put it all into words. "I got — got scared, I guess. Made some bad choices *because* I was scared. Hurt Ethan for a long time. Hurt myself too, though I didn't realize it. Don't want that for you. For you to feel like you have to — to hide from yourself like I did."

"Fuck off, you're not my *Dad*," Alex spat, his shoulders hunched as he sliced roughly enough at the tomatoes Jakob worried for a moment he might cut himself.

"No, I'm not," Jakob agreed, cautiously. "Not trying to be. Seems like he's something you could use less of in your life right now. But what I can be is..."

a friend, I guess. If you want. One who can maybe actually understand some of the stuff you're going through. Can't ever have too many of those, right?"

Jakob didn't know you could slice fruit sullenly, but Alex managed it all the same.

"Not trying to tell you what to do," Jakob said to the unsteady thump of a knife, adding a bit more ancho chili powder to the taco mix. "Just... offering some experience from someone who already went the long way about things. Because, whatever it is? I promise — it's okay."

The sound of tomatoes being sliced to within an inch of their tiny, juicy lives was his only answer.

"But... If you don't want to tell me, that's okay too," Jakob added; turning back to open the can of red beans, rinsing them in the strainer before adding them to the sizzling meat with a splash of water from the faucet. "Can understand it. Just want you to feel like you've got *someone* you can go to about whatever's bothering you, though. Ask whatever questions you need asking — not that you're required to or anything. And if that's not me, or even Ethan... Just promise me you'll... That you won't lie to yourself about it, alright? Whatever *it* is. And that if you *do* find someone you trust to talk about it with? That you — you try."

"...Any question, huh?" Alex asked, watching Jakob with a calculating gleam in his eye.

"I mean, let's not get *too* pointed. Not sure I'm up to telling any '*Dear Penthouse*' stories," Jakob said as his ears went hot; realizing just how big a door he had left open, and exactly what kind of questions *he'd* had as a teenager. But...

But Jakob had landed himself in a lot of trouble before he had found his own answers. Was still finding the answers, in some cases. If he could save, say, Cassie that sort of grief? A little embarrassment on his part was an easy price to pay. And too, there was something about Alex Jakob recognized all too well; something in the defensive hunch of his shoulders, that scowl —

Like he'd said, Jakob sure wasn't about to try and impose himself as some sort of replacement father figure; get himself all tangled up in whatever complicated associations Alex seemed to have going on there. And yet — he was here, under Jakob's roof and eating at his table. Alex might not realize it, but he was already one of Jakob's kids.

At least, as much as he cared to be.

"But... yeah, same as I've told Cassie; I'll speak up if it's something I'm not comfortable answering," Jakob continued, stirring in more cumin before turning off the heat to let it bubble away on its own. "But you should always have someone that you trust enough to at least ask."

"*Fine*," Alex said in a tone of voice that had Jakob instinctively bracing for any bombshell the kid was about to launch. "You and Ethan... You dating?" Well... almost any, apparently, as Jakob's mind went blank at *that* question. Gosh. Were they?

"Maybe?" Jakob hedged, amusement swirling at the sight of Alex's startled face at the honest answer he had obviously not expected to actually get. "I'd wager we're a solid '*It's complicated*', but we'd only just sat down to order when you called him. Not sure if that counts as an actual date or anything."

"Oh. Oh, *shit* — " Alex sputtered, his eyes going wide. "I'm — "

Jakob merely waved him off, before realizing he had been holding the spatula and nearly flicked taco meat onto the fridge. "Don't apologize. Don't *ever* apologize for asking for help when you need it. We'll find another time for a cup of coffee. He and I have some ground to make up but... It's waited this long, it can survive a bit longer."

"It's just... I mean, *how*..." Alex trailed off, hesitance clear in his voice.

"Hmm?" Jakob prompted when the silence had stretched too far. He turned around to face Alex then, making sure to keep his body language open and friendly as he wiped his hands clean on a towel. Waiting.

"You — You're both *guys*," the kid finally exploded in a rush, scowling then as if upset as himself for asking.

"Last I checked, yeah," Jakob replied slowly, cautiously. He tossed the kitchen towel onto the countertop before crossing his arms over his chest. "*And*... ?"

Had he read the whole situation wrong? Had Ethan been mistaken about those pamphlets Alex had told him about, that camp, all of it?

Alex was welcome to stay, whatever his story was. Jakob just hoped he wasn't about to find himself landed in the middle of a bigoted minefield right here in his own home.

"But — I thought... My dad, he — My... my dad says..." Alex stuttered, *something* so thick in his voice then Jakob couldn't help but glance over.

The kid was gripping the table edge with both hands, knuckles turning white with the force. His shoulders hunched up to practically around his ears as he stared unseeingly at the cutting board of sliced tomatoes in front of him.

"Hmm. Disapproves, huh?" Jakob asked gently, taking an educated guess. Relief washed through him — a scared kid who had been taught some wrong things that needed unlearning was a far different beast than one who was going to serve up casual hatred at every breakfast.

"...*yeah*," Alex finally admitted with a loud sigh. "You could say that."

"Well, who cares, right?" Jakob replied firmly, and *that* caught Alex's attention. "It's not up to him, and frankly — it's none of his business. We love who we love."

"But... I *like* girls," Alex said hesitantly.

"Me too," Jakob told him with a simple shrug. "Well — women, I mean."

"And... And guys?"

"Sure. You can like both. Or... more genders, even."

"...Just like that?" Alex asked in an undertone, drawing little trails in the pool of tomato juice and seeds puddled on the cutting board.

"Yeah, just like that," Jakob answered firmly, reaching up to collect the plates from the upper cupboard. "It's okay to like girls, like boys, both, others, none or... whoever you're attracted to. Or *not* attracted to. It's okay to want to have sex, or a relationship, or to not want any of that at all. And honestly? Your Dad doesn't get a say on it. It's not *his* life — it's yours."

Alex didn't look convinced, chewing on his lip like...

"Something else on your mind?" Jakob hazarded.

"What did you want earlier, anyway? When I was... When I was trying it on?" he asked; his eyes glued to the cutting board, his body tense.

"Oh," Jakob thought back a minute, struggling to remember. "Ethan said you might be looking to learn how to drive. I may not be any good behind the wheel these days, but I taught Cassie, and that went alright. Nash moved the horses from the north pasture this morning so he could drag it, but says it turns out there's a part he needs to order for the tractor. Leaves us with about

a week until he gets around to moving the horses back, and the middle of a field's just about the best place to learn the basics in a truck. If you're interested, that is?"

"I... sure," Alex replied, looking surprised. "Yeah. Umm, thanks."

And yet... Based on the way Alex was quietly herding all the tomato seeds to one side of the cutting board with the edge of his knife? Something told Jakob that there was another sort of question currently preying on the kid's mind.

"How — How do you know..." Alex's face screwed up in frustration as he searched for the words to explain whatever was on his mind. "'M not a *girl*," he finally burst out.

Jakob paused, tilting his head as he watched the teen. "...alright? It's fine if you are, though."

"I'm *not*. And — And you and Ethan..."

"...not girls either, as far as I know," Jakob confirmed, fighting to keep a grin off his face at the sheer oddness of the conversation, an amused sort of surrealism curling through his stomach.

"Then... how does it work?"

"...like, the sex-ed stuff?" Jakob asked him, warily.

"No, I know all *that*," Alex said quickly, his ears turning as red as the tomato. "I've got the internet, I've seen — " and here Alex just waved the pairing knife in a vague circle, " — *porn*. I mean like, you guys. *Together*. But — you're both *guys*."

"I feel like we should come back to the porn at some point, make sure you don't have the wrong impression about some stuff. Whole lot they leave out of those in the name of entertainment," Jakob said, giving him a *look*. "But I'm still not certain I understand your question here."

"Like... *guy* guys," Alex floundered, making unhelpfully vague gestures in the air that made things about as clear as mud. "You're... You... It's... *neitherofyouaretwinks*," he finally bit out in a rush.

"No, don't suppose you could say that about either one of us..." drawled Jakob as he tilted his head curiously.

Alex let out a huff as he threw himself backward in his chair.

"...Someone brought a skirt to the clothes swap," he muttered; scrunching down, making himself a smaller target. "Liam... said I'd look good in it. And he's — he's got... *Ilikehisshoulders*."

Ah. Jakob thought he was beginning to see what was going on here.

Seemed that somehow Alex had gotten it into his head that *every* relationship had to fit the all-mighty boy-meets-girl Hollywood stereotype, even when it was boy-meets-boy instead.

But that trope didn't fit most *hetero* relationships Jakob had seen, much less his own, and... well.

Whether he had picked it up from his dad or, *hell* — just media or something... It seemed he was having a hard time reconciling himself to one role or the other, finding neither fit quite right. Which... understandable.

"Yeah? You try it on?" Jakob asked, pretending he didn't already know the answer. Easier to focus on the surface level of their conversation for now, while he waited to see if his hunch was correct.

"No!" Alex spat, scowling. "I — "

"It's okay if you did," Jakob told him conversationally, as if it was no big issue. Because it wasn't. "At your age, it's good to try things. Figure yourself out, what you like and don't like. Hell, even at *my* age, I'm still figuring that kind of stuff out some days. Skirts were never my bag, personally. Couldn't get past how much they flapped when I walk, and — it's silly, but not having comfortable pockets was a deal breaker. Still, it was worth trying. Lot of stuff is. We're all a bit of a work in progress, y'know? That's just life."

Alex was silent for a few more minutes. Judging by the state of the tomatoes on his cutting board, they would be having something closer to salsa at this point.

That was fine. Life was about adapting.

"...okay, yeah," Alex finally admitted. "Maybe I — maybe I *did*. It's just... I wanted to — to see."

He trailed off then; ducking his head and glancing away as those shoulders came back up.

"And... how'd it make you feel?" Jakob nudged as he started getting out the shredded cheddar and all the other taco fixings.

"...It was — It was cool at first, I guess?" Alex finally answered, his face a complicated and shifting mix of emotions. "Swishy. Which — My dad would shit a *brick* if he knew, and that's kind of... Well, honestly it's a bit terrifying, but also sort of — of awesome, in a weird way? Fuck his bullshit, right? But... It just... It didn't feel like *me*."

Jakob hummed. "Sounds as if you enjoyed being able to try something new out, but that particular option wasn't your thing. At least, not today anyway. But, y'know that's okay too? You don't have to be planning on becoming a world-class painter just to pick up a paintbrush. I think it's good you tried something new. Know that can't have been easy."

"Yeah," Alex huffed, stabbing at the mass of tomato bits with the tip of the knife. "But — But Liam said..."

"Dress for *yourself*," Jakob answered the unspoken question firmly, glancing up at Alex as he texted Cassie that dinner was ready. "But also, I bet Liam was just being encouraging. Not lying, only... trying to be supportive, right? He's a good kid. He'd probably think you look great in whatever makes you most comfortable. And if not? Then he's not worth your time."

"You sound like one of those old after-school specials, you know."

Jakob snorted.

"I *wish* they covered shit like this back then. Might've made life a whole lot easier for a lot of us," Jakob said as he handed Alex a bowl for the... tomato coulis, maybe they'd call it. "Y'know, the world's been feeding us this story for eons about the jock and the cheerleader, the knight and the damsel, the big strong hero and the simpering maid. But just because it's one that's been given the most airtime, doesn't make it the *only* story, right? Can be two knights riding off into the sunset together; the maid saving the cheerleader. Maybe the damsel knocks the jock on her ass and goes on their own adventure. Hell, I'd watch that show."

"...I *guess*," Alex replied as he dumped the tomatoes into the bowl, sounding not entirely convinced.

"Look, take it from me and my two ex-spouses," Jakob advised him even as he heard the squeak of the screen door opening, the thump of Cassie's boots in the entry hall. "Don't change yourself to be what you think someone wants. Be yourself and find someone who wants you for *you*. You'll both be much happier in the long run."

"Like you and Ethan?" Alex asked, a sly grin already spreading across his face at the chance to tease Jakob.

"I — " Jakob could feel himself blushing hotly again. "...we'll see."

Chapter 25

[ETHAN | TODAY — 11:27 PM]

u there?

[ETHAN | TODAY — 11:28 PM]

can I call?

"Hmm?" Jakob mumbled, groggily fumbling around for his phone to see who possibly could be texting him at this hour.

He stared at it bleary-eyed for a moment before his sleep-fogged brain woke up enough to register Ethan's name as the sender. He thumbed it open quickly, navigating to the secure app they'd been using before hitting the little phone icon to call.

"Everything okay?" he croaked out in a sleep-roughened voice barely half a second after he'd heard the line connect.

"No. Jakob, I — They — " came Ethan's deep rumble over the connection. Usually so calm and sure, now Ethan sounded strangely... panicky.

"Take a breath," Jakob told him, suddenly wide awake and worried as he sat up in bed. "You hurt?"

"No, I — No," came Ethan's reply, and Jakob felt the sudden sharp spike of worry that'd lodged in his chest ease slightly. "I'm not hurt. But... Someone's been in my *house*, Jakob."

"What?" Jakob hissed, his mind still trying to catch up, sure he couldn't have heard what he did.

"The school board went all afternoon and into the evening," Ethan said, which — wasn't any kind of answer at all.

He could hear Ethan taking a ragged breath. Could imagine the way he'd reach a hand up to rub at the back of his neck, just as he always did when he was nervous.

"Most of them — they *know* me. A lot of them have kids that have been students in my classes over the years. They just officially replied back to me a couple hours ago, but... It was just like I'd been warned," Ethan continued; still sounding shaky, his voice rough. "Got personal texts from most of them. All saying how sorry they are; how they went to bat for me. But in the end... They're sticking to their policy.

"Shit," Jakob breathed out.

"Yeah," Ethan agreed with a sigh. "I mean, I guess I can't really blame them, but... They asked for me to step back until this blows over, and I — Sure. What else am I going to say to that, right? But... I — I went for a run after. Clear my head. Don't know how long I was out, just... felt good to just — just *run*, y'know? To not have to think about any of this bullshit. But when I got back..."

Ethan trailed off, sounding lost and confused. The tone of his voice, the late-night call, the bitterly familiar feeling of sleep-fogged helplessness now swirling in the pit of Jakob's belly...

It all dredged up old and ugly memories of *other* midnight phone calls, from the time when they were kids. From the days when —

"You sure someone was there?" Jakob asked, dragging himself forcefully into the present once more. He hated how strange and powerless he felt sitting there in his bed, listening to the stress in Ethan's voice. "They take anything?"

"No. At least, I don't think they did. TV, laptop — all the stuff that's remotely valuable, it's all still here. But... someone definitely tried to log in on my computer. My papers are scattered all over my kitchen, and someone's broken into my filing cabinet and gone through my documents. I don't even know what else. Jakob, I — I don't know what to *do*," Ethan said, his voice sounding small and scared.

Jakob scrubbed at his face.

His first instinct — drummed into him after years of television PSAs and D.A.R.E. programs in school and the frankly mind-boggling amount of police dramas on TV — was to tell his friend to call the cops. Which was utterly ridiculous because both of them knew there was every likelihood that it *was* a cop — a very specific cop — who had just been snooping through Ethan's house.

Very, *very* illegally, sure. But — who would stop him? If Ethan called the police now...

They'd come in. Dust for fingerprints no cop would be dumb enough to have left. Probably have themselves a good, long *legal* poke through Ethan's belongings. Same as had just been done, really. But this time it would be at Ethan's express — and fully admissible in a court of law — invitation.

In fact...

There was every likelihood that whoever had been in Ethan's house would be among those who'd show up to the call.

Fuck.

"Police still watching your house? Could they have witnessed it? Maybe take a photo of them sitting outside, prove they'd have to have seen *something*. Maybe get the dashcam footage..." Jakob trailed off, knowing it was a long shot.

Ethan's sudden bark of laughter had a worryingly sharp note to it. "My chaperones seemed to have fucked off who knows where sometime during my run. There's — "

There was a loud *crash* —

...*the sound of glass breaking...*

A muffled "*Fuck!*" coming as if from a distance through the phone —

...*a loud bang and clatter, as if it had been dropped...*

"**Ethan?!**" Jakob shouted into his phone.

"— *fuck, fuck! I'm here — I'm — FUCK! — I'm not hurt, I'm —* " came Ethan's clearly shaken voice, as if from far away. Then suddenly, he was coming in loud and clear. "Sorry. I — I dropped my phone."

Somewhere in the background, Jakob could faintly hear the sound of tires

peeling out.

"What the fuck was *that*?!" Jakob demanded, his hand not holding the phone clenched white-knuckled, fisted into his sheets.

"I... Someone — Jakob, someone... Someone just threw a *brick* through my window?" Ethan answered in a tone that was filled with a strange sort of... humor?

It was clearly framed as a question too, albeit one that was impossible for Jakob to answer. As if Ethan couldn't believe what he was saying — what he was *seeing*. As if he was asking Jakob to somehow confirm that *yes*, that had really just happened.

Jakob swallowed. He could feel the cold creeping swiftly through his limbs as the fear spread through him; the acrid, bitter taste coating the back of his throat. Feel the worry for his friend taking hold of his lungs and squeezing tight, all while fighting the urge welling up from his belly that made him want to scream.

"*Ethan*," Jakob said tightly; shoving down the inane worry that the thumping of his heart would be heard over the phone line with how loudly it seemed to be beating now against the cage of his ribs. "I think you should come here. If you want, I mean. But... do you feel safe there? Tonight?"

"I — I'm not..." Ethan said, his voice shaky and wild. "I don't... I can't lead him right to Alex. To you, to your own kid. I'm sorry, Jakob. I'm so fucking sorry. I shouldn't have let you get mixed up in this. If I had known — "

"You didn't '*let me get mixed up in*' anything, Ethan," Jakob interrupted. "I jumped in feet first and eyes wide open all on my own. And it's not anything I'm not proud to be a part of either. None of this is your fault, you hear me? *None of it*. You were trying to be a good guy, do the right thing. And you *did*. Now we just have to figure out what the next right thing is, alright? If that's you coming here, that's what you do. Fall back and let me worry about the risk."

"I... Yeah," Ethan exhaled deeply, making the phone's speaker crackle in Jakob's ear. "Alright. I should — I should clean all this up. Put cardboard or something up over the missing pane. I can lock down the storm shutter over it, though... It's not like they can't just get in if they want to, right? Already proved that," Ethan said with a choked-off laugh.

"Ethan — "

"No, it's — I'll be okay, Jakob. But — I might..." Ethan sighed, the frustration thick in his voice. "I mean, if — If you meant it, I — I guess I could..."

"I did and you should," Jakob swallowed, wishing he could jump through the phone line and be *there*, damnit.

"But how can I be sure that I wouldn't be... I don't know — *followed*, or something? Or that he hadn't done something to my car? Put one of those trackers or whatever on it. *God*, this is a nightmare. I sound like a character in a TV show."

"I can ask Alex?" Jakob hazarded. "He might know something."

"He still up?" Ethan asked, his voice sounding tired.

Jakob glanced at the clock on his nightstand. "I can ask. I — He was about to steal my car for you yesterday. I don't think he'll mind me waking him up for a question. Can — Can you hold on for a moment?"

"Yeah," Ethan said, his deep exhale blowing over the phone and making the connection crackle. "Yeah, let's go ask the teenager who can't drive how to ditch the cops. It'll be like old times."

Chapter 26

Jakob nudged the front door open carefully, trying to keep the two mugs of coffee he was juggling one-handedly from spilling. The job was made more difficult with the blanket he had draped over a shoulder and only one hand free, but the other was occupied by his cane and... well.

Not a lot of other options there.

That was alright. He was coming to terms with it.

The screen door was easier to manage as he shouldered it open, the screech of the springs seeming to startle Ethan out of his thoughts. He was sitting on the edge of the front porch, leaning back against one of the support posts, his eyes fixed on the training ring. Jakob followed his gaze to where Cassie was showing Alex how to saddle a horse, their breath making white puffs of steam in the chilly December air.

At the sound of the screen door opening, Ethan had turned; putting a hand under himself and moving as if he was about to get up.

"Let me — "

"No, sit. I've got it," Jakob interrupted him, pulling the door shut with the hand holding his cane. He let the screen door slam behind as he made his way across the whitewashed old boards of the covered upper porch to Ethan's side; handing him both mugs to hold as he leveraged himself down next to his... next to *Ethan*.

"Been up long?" Jakob asked as Ethan passed him back his mug of black coffee.

"Naw," Ethan answered; wrapping his big hands around the cup Jakob had already dosed with milk and sugar how he remembered Ethan used to like it. He had watched Ethan fix it the exact same way at the diner, two days and ten thousand lifetimes ago. Despite all the other things that had changed between them, it seemed there were at least a few that had remained constant.

"Just got out here," Ethan said after taking a sip, looking down into the mug with a small smile. "The way I tossed and turned all last night, I was sure I was going to sleep 'til noon, but... I guess a lifetime of being up in time for the school bell leaves its mark."

"I told you to take my bed. That couch is fine for a nap, but not the whole night through," Jakob said as he set his mug down on his other side, opposite the one Ethan sat on.

He shook out the fleece blanket he had carried out with him and wrapped it around his shoulders against the early morning's chill. He tucked it so he could get his hands loose, picking his coffee back up and letting the ceramic warm his fingers.

"I'm not going to make you sleep on your own couch, Jakob," Ethan said, throwing him a wry look, his eyes soft and fond. "'Sides, I slept fine. Just took a while for me to get there. Mind felt like it was running on a dozen different hamster wheels after... after everything."

Jakob could practically feel Ethan slump next to him; the warmth of his shoulder was just a hairsbreadth apart from Jakob's own.

Should he cross that distance? It wouldn't take much.

But...

Ethan had been through the wringer all yesterday, maybe... maybe he deserved some space. Whatever this fancy was that had taken hold of Jakob; whatever spark had been lit, burning him up inside since that night of the art class...

Would it be fair to push all that on Ethan right now, on top of everything else he was dealing with?

It had been in the wee hours of the morning when Ethan had finally shown up at Jakob's door.

After he'd been woken, Alex had groggily confirmed Ethan's fears that his

dad would more than likely have put a tracker on Ethan's car, warrant or no. Alex had suggested Ethan take his bike to a location someone could pick him up instead.

But when Ethan had gone to his garage, he had found the tires flat; a couple of small puncture marks looking as if they had come from a pocket knife like the one Alex said his dad routinely carried.

So Ethan had ended up getting in touch with some of his buddies who had dropped him off at Jakob's door in a big white work van.

The massive guy with the bald head and combat boots who had introduced himself as Marcus had barely looked as if he could fit in the driver's seat. And the matched bookends he had named Ace and Bear had turned such unnerving twin grins on Jakob as to make his palms itch; a strange urge to check his back pocket for a wallet he knew damn well was up in his room on top of his dresser.

But it was the last of their merry little band that had seemed to run the show. They had called her Valeria; dressed head to toe in motorcycle leathers and a commanding air. Her hands and fingers flew as she gave out her orders; Marcus acting as her interpreter for Jakob and Ethan's sake. Ace and Bear sure hadn't felt the need to wait, reacting to her signs just as soon as she had made them.

Ethan's phone had been confiscated by Marcus before they had even let him leave his house.

In its place, Valeria had summarily handed him a burner phone just before they'd left. One that came complete with a dire warning to be careful who he called, and to tell no one his location unless he wanted it getting back to whoever was hounding him. She had also promised they would do a sweep of Ethan's car and house, and keep an eye on things there for however long he was away just to be sure he had no more...unexpected visitors.

Ethan had looked slightly discomfited at the cheshire grins Ace and Bear had worn upon hearing that, but not enough apparently for him to protest her decree.

And she had done it all with such a brisk, no-nonsense, almost *bored* attitude that had left Jakob wondering just where exactly Ethan had come by such friends.

Ethan bumped his shoulder into Jakob's, jarring him loose from his idle thoughts.

"Can hear the gears turning," Ethan rumbled. "What's happening inside that head of yours, hmm?"

"Just... thinking about last night," Jakob answered into his mug, the rich smell of the coffee calming him as he tried to order his thoughts. "How'd you say you met them again?"

"I didn't," Ethan said with a wry chuckle. "Tell you, I mean. But... they show up at a lot of the protests I've been a part of recently. Lotta kids at these things, not so many adults. So we'd hang out, talk, get to know each other a little bit. Bit of an odd bunch, secretive as all hell. But... dependable. Good folks, really."

"And they wouldn't have been followed here?" Jakob asked, still not entirely feeling convinced.

Ethan laughed aloud at that. "You met 'em. They're even more paranoid than Alex. Ace and Bear said they would look over my car for me. *Without* bothering to ask for my keys; which I don't mind telling you, is a bit unsettling. And Marcus... That van does not have seatbelts in the back, I can say that much."

"And — What was her name? Valeria?"

Ethan just grinned. "She lives for this kind of shit. All about getting into that '*good trouble*', you know? Might even send me a thank you gift when it's all... when it's all over," he said, his voice going quiet at the end.

"Never woulda believed it," Jakob teased, bumping Ethan's shoulder back to try and lighten the mood again. "Ickle Ethan — all grown up now and making waves, evading the police. What's next, I find out you're secretly a vigilante? A medium channeling the spirit of ol' Captain Chance himself?"

But instead of laughing along, a strange look came over Ethan's face at Jakob's teasing. His lips pulled into a frown as he stared into the depths of his coffee mug as if he was searching for answers in a crystal ball. "Yeah... Well. Lot has changed over the years since... since we were... whatever we were."

Jakob frowned at that, glancing down into his own reflection in his coffee's dark surface. He looked up to where Cassie had Alex up in the saddle now.

The mare under him was one of their steadiest as Cassie taught Alex how to hold himself, how to sit in the saddle, how to hold the reins, how to communicate with his horse.

If only there was someone to show *Jakob* how to navigate all this as easily as the riding lesson seemed to be going.

"Sure it has," Jakob said hesitantly, trying to feel his way. "Nature of time, isn't it? Both of us... we've grown older. With any luck we've grown something like wiser too, maybe. Or at least, less likely to make the same obvious mistakes again. But still... Change can be good, right?"

Ethan only hummed, the sound low and lonely.

"Ethan?" Jakob asked, feeling a hollow expanding in his chest as he turned to watch his friend. Desperately, he hoped he hadn't read this all wrong; that he hadn't seen an open window where there was only an unscalable wall...

"What... What happened back then, Jakob? Why — Why'd you..." Ethan trailed off. His eyes were locked on a point some way out past the riding ring, Adam's Apple bobbing as if he was swallowing down the rest of what he wanted to ask.

Oh. They were having *this* conversation, were they?

But maybe...

... maybe it was long past due.

"...Why did I leave?" Jakob finished the question for him in a whisper, feeling like his voice might crack from the strain of even that much. He searched Ethan's expression for clues, alert to the slightest hint of a flicker from that oh-so-familiar profile.

"Yeah," Ethan answered him with a sigh, his shoulders slumping as he rubbed at the back of his neck. His forearm blocked the early morning rays of the sun, casting his face into deep shadow.

Jakob clenched his hands tightly around his mug. His fingers practically itched to trace the downward curve of Ethan's lips, to smooth away those worry lines etching their way across his brow. To fix all of Ethan's problems for him, if only just to bring out that easy grin of his once more.

"I was... I got... scared," Jakob finally admitted into the silence, knowing Ethan deserved some sort of answer after all these years. Realizing there was

no possibility of anything like a future between them until they had gone and dealt with the past. "I was young and dumb and I... I ran. And then... I — I *kept* running. Ran all the way to... well, some places I can't tell you about, all on the government's dime. Enlisted before I'd even realized what I had done."

"*Shit*," Ethan huffed, his eyes wide and startled. "You could have just told me, Jakob. I — we could've just gone back to how it was; forgotten all about it, gone back to before. Chalked it up to one more stupid mistake — "

"*Don't*," Jakob warned sharply.

"Don't what?" Ethan said, sounding lost.

"Don't... don't call it a mistake," Jakob answered him in a quiet voice, ducking his head. "The *mistake* was when I let myself get all twisted up, and ran off on you the next morning, not... I just — I don't want to call that night a mistake, alright?"

Ethan turned towards him, watching Jakob now with wild eyes. "I scared you into *joining the army*, Jakob. I'm not certain what else to call it."

"Marines," Jakob couldn't help but correct him in a soft voice; fingers picking at the blanket around his shoulders, worrying at the weave.

"Sure, *Marines*," Ethan spat, the '*whatever*' ringing loud and clear. "That's just the where. Sure as hell doesn't explain what the hell *happened*, Jakob?"

Jakob swallowed hard at the expression on Ethan's face, before looking away with a sigh.

Chapter 27

He still remembered how it had felt to wake up that morning, mind sleep-fogged and confused. Wrapped up in Ethan's own blankets, wrapped up in *Ethan*. His best friend softly snoring away next to him, just like on countless sleepovers growing up.

But... But something was — was different this time.

Very different.

Blinking there in the early light spilling through the open curtains of their shared college dorm room, the brightness of it doing nothing good for the pounding of his head.

Blearily staring at the sight of his own empty bed across the room; trying to work out why it was over *there*, but *he* was over *here*...

Snatches of the night before filtering slowly through his brain then — of limbs and lips and tongues and fingers and hands and... and... *and* —

Heat blossomed through his body as the memories became more intense; clear as a bell what *exactly* it was they had gotten up to the previous evening.

Jakob shifted, taking stock.

There was the ache of his muscles rousing, all accounting for their exertions last night. The feeling of...

Hmm.

An unfamiliar sensation, but not a bad one — not really. And far outshined by the warmth and comfort of waking up sprawled across Ethan; the novelty of it, the sense of — of *rightness*...

That was — right up until Jakob had *fully* woken up; the fluff and cobwebs clearing from his mind enough that the enormity of the flying leap they had taken the evening before could come crashing back down around his head.

He could hear the sounds of the other students outside their room now; making no attempt at silence as they got up, got ready for another jam-packed day of early classes and late-night partying.

Abruptly there was a pounding on the door, the pummeling thunder of it nearly as loud as Jakob's heartbeat had just become.

He froze; even as he felt Ethan shifting underneath him, taking the first steps to join him in wakefulness.

"*What?*" Ethan yelled groggily to whoever was on the other side of the door.

The answer came back, garbled and muffled. Something about borrowing a textbook neither of them had, before Ethan sent them packing.

But Jakob had only been half aware of the conversation, his mind running like a frightened colt round and round the riding ring.

Had they heard?

Would they know?

What would they think?

Who would they tell?

Oh, God... what if —

*What if **Frank** found out?*

"Hey," Ethan slurred, his voice still husky from sleep. But he was wearing a smile on his handsome face that almost made Jakob's heart stop with how brightly it shown, and all of it focused on *him*. "Morning. E'rything okay?"

"Yeah," Jakob lied. "Gotta catch a professor before class. You go on back to sleep."

"Mmm," Ethan rumbled in contented reply, his eyes already slipping shut; just the merest glimmer of them peeking out through his long lashes. "Meet for lunch?"

"Sure," the lie came even easier this time, Jakob's mind roaring with static.

He disentangled himself from Ethan's arms; his eyes feeling itchy, his chest so tight it felt like he could hardly breathe.

Straight into the shower, that's what he needed. Get clean, clear his head —

Jakob flinched as someone tapped on the flimsy plastic curtain; one hand flying to cover the hickey Ethan had left on his collarbone, the other to hide the mark on his inner thigh. The rest he couldn't do anything about, didn't even know where they all were, a single large yet amorphous ache under the hot water. And — judging by the ones he *could* see — definitely, unquestionably, *unexplainably* larger than Jakob had ever received from a partner of the female persuasion.

"Hey, you in there," came what might be the last voice on the planet Jakob wanted to hear right then.

Greg Mewitt wasn't too bad as a floor's RA went, even if Ethan and Jakob had to be careful to keep their music down lest they disturb Greg through their shared cinderblock wall. But he was *also* the son of Jakob and Ethan's tenth-grade math teacher back home, and known to run his mouth about anyone and everything besides.

Jakob felt his neck heat and his heart speed up, the sound of his own shouting last night echoing in his ears...

"You got soap?" Greg asked. "I'm out."

"Yeah," Jakob answered him, swallowing against the knot of fear that had leapt straight up from his belly into his throat. "I — "

"You use *soap*?" laughed a newcomer, and no — Jakob had been wrong. *That* was the last voice he wanted to hear in the entire world, Ricky Maddox's laughter a more aggravating sound than nails on a chalkboard to Jakob's ears. "Man, that's so gay. Just let the water clean you like a real man."

Something about being the team's star quarterback seemed to make the guy think that gave him a free pass to be the world's star asshole, too. He was constantly mocking everyone, both on and off the field. To the point Coach had threatened on more than one occasion to bench Ricky the rest of the season for his attitude alone.

Not that he'd ever go through with it, as they all well knew — especially

Ricky. He was just too good a player to waste like that; each of Coach's toothless warnings serving to turn him into even more of a terror, not less.

Hastily, Jakob shut off the water and grabbed his towel, hurrying to wrap it around his hips and hide the damning evidence marked upon his thigh.

Barely in time, too. Jakob wasn't even given half a chance to tuck the corner in before the curtain was whisked away in a blast of cold air; the old rusty rings screeching a metallic protest as they were dragging across the cheap metal pipe.

"Ah, no wonder," Ricky smirked. "It's Jakob. Probably been in here washing his ass, getting all nice and ready to bend over for — "

"Fuck off," Jakob muttered; clutching the thin towel tightly in his white-knuckled fist and trying not to think about how close Ricky's jab came to the truth.

"Oh, ho! Someone's in a mood today, huh?" Ricky crowed. "You suck Ethan's cock with that mouth?"

It's only talk. He's just being the same dipshit he always is, Jakob tried to tell himself as he yanked the curtain back in place. *Doesn't mean anything. Doesn't mean he **knows**.*

He ignored the sound of something ripping as he grabbed his jeans from the hook on the cubicle's tile wall, not even bothering with his boxers as he roughly shoved his pants on. He wadded up the rest of his clothing and jammed the lot under one arm.

He took a deep breath, knowing Ricky was still waiting for him by the silhouette the shower room's central light was throwing against the plastic curtain of the shower.

Grimacing, Jakob threw the curtain back again to reveal the smirking intruder now standing between him and the door.

"Here," he grunted, shouldering his way past the lurking Ricky to shove a bottle of body wash at Greg.

"Sure walking funny there, Jakob," laughed Ricky from behind him, causing Jakob to stumble slightly as he was suddenly forced to think about his own feet. "What's the matter? Ethan too rough last night?"

And *that* brought Jakob up short, vision going strangely dim at the edges as

he twisted around to spear Ricky with a glare.

"Look, he's gone all pale!" Ricky cackled. "Wow, nice hickeys, Stone. Looks like Ethan worked you over good. Or do you prefer to call them 'love bites'? Does he lay you down all tender before he marks you up? Maybe calls you some pet name like 'honey' or 'darlin' or — *HEY!*"

"I am so *sick* of your bullshit," Jakob growled as he shoved Ricky up against the shower room tile. A red haze filled his vision, pulse thundering in his ears as —

Jakob blinked as he felt a hand grab onto his wrist and hold tight, halting the fist he had aimed at Ricky's grinning — and oh so punchable — face.

"Jakob," Greg hissed, his grip tightening on Jakob's arm. "I know he's an ass. But if you punch him, I have to report it. He's not worth having the cops breathing down your neck, is he?"

Jakob opened his mouth to protest, then shut it with a click when nothing came out.

"C'mon man, this isn't like you. You, uh — You feeling okay?" Greg asked, looking at Jakob with concern as he tugged at his still-cocked arm. "You're all flushed and stuff. Need me to get Ethan? Or..."

Greg trailed off for a moment. His eyes flicked to Ricky, then away just as quickly.

"I, um — I heard you... uh, shouting last night. If you guys are fighting or... or something — " And the way Greg's attention landed on the bruise marking Jakob's collarbone made the 'or something' echo loud in Jakob's ears — "Then I can call your stepdad instead, if you'd rather?"

And oh, oh fuck — he *could*, Jakob realized with dawning horror as he lowered his fist. Greg's uncle owned the donut shop back home, where Frank and his buddies liked to meet up every Saturday morning. There they'd spend hours shooting the shit and solving all the world's ills together. Or at least the weekend crossword, which they claimed was just as tricky.

If Greg mentioned any of this to his uncle, then... Frank would know about it. Within a few days at most. Hell, as big a gossip as Greg's uncle was, the entire *town* would wax lyrical and long-winded in their opinions about Jakob and Ethan. Likely before the week was even out.

A metallic taste flooded his tongue as Jakob furiously shook his head no,

unable to process the situation he'd put them both in over the thundering in his ears.

"What a queer," Ricky laughed. "Look, I think he's going to cry. Man, when I tell the whole team about this? It's gonna be *epic*."

"Shut *up*, asshole," Greg hissed, but Jakob hardly heard him.

Releasing his grip on Ricky, he stumbled past them both; focused only on the safety of the doorway, and the hallway beyond. Trying to ignore the way Ricky's, "Hey, wait. You don't think those two actually — " rang in Jakob's ears as he began to *run*.

Dripping and half-naked, shivering in the cold, recycled air of the dorms; Jakob found himself under the ping-pong table in the study lounge three floors up, with no memory of how he had gotten there.

He peeled away his arm where he'd wrapped both tightly around his knees; checking his watch, mind whirling.

In another hour, Ethan would be up and staggering towards the little coffeemaker on his dresser, humming tunelessly under his breath while it brewed its magic brew. Before heading blearily off to his own classes, along with most of the guys on their floor.

Their room would be empty, the way clear. Jakob could grab his stuff, free of questions. But then?

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. What had he done? If Greg didn't suspect something before, he sure had to know after Jakob had gone running off like a spooked horse.

He might even be calling his uncle right this minute, trying to pass the word along to Frank. Tell him that the boy he'd adopted, that he'd let take his name, was —

— was —

— was *queer*.

In his heart, Jakob knew there was nothing wrong with being gay, or queer,

or whatever term people wanted to use for themselves. Isn't that what he'd always told Ethan?

"Yeah, sure. Now tell the world that," Ethan spat, kicking the pile of seaweed angrily as they'd walked down the stretch of beach back to Frank's ranch; the long shadows cast across his face by the setting sun doing nothing to hide his black eye. "Starting with my Pop, on down to the rest of 'em that think they should have some kind of say."

Jakob flinched as somewhere down the hall came a whoop, followed by the sound of someone playing video games in their room with the door open.

"HA! Got you now, you queer!" The unknown voice squawked at whatever unfortunate soul waited at the other end of their headset. *"Tell your mom I'll have to stop by tomorrow, 'cause today your gay little ass is **mine!**"*

Jakob cringed, the words cutting through his too-tender spots like a hot knife. Whether the tinny sound of simulated gunfire over cheap speakers was from Medal of Duty or Call of Honor was anybody's guess, though, and the last thing Jakob cared about right then.

But.

Frank had served in the Marines. He was always meeting up with his old buddies. Jakob had starkly vivid memories of all of them sitting around waiting at the VA, holding white styrofoam cups of astoundingly terrible coffee; each trying to outdo the other at telling the most outlandish stories.

No matter what Jakob did, no matter what Frank *heard*... He'd be sure to respect that, right? Could still be proud of Jakob, even — even if...

Checking that there was no one in the room to see him crawl out from under the table, Jakob stood up, quickly pulling his shirt on over his head.

There was that recruiting office just off the edge of campus, wasn't there? Jakob could go there, and then —

Chapter 28

"You swore we weren't throwing away our friendship that night, Jakob," Ethan said in a raw, broken rasp. "But you *did*. You broke your promise."

Jakob sighed, pulling the blanket tighter around his shoulders. "I know."

"*You know*," Ethan mimicked in a passable imitation of Jakob's voice. "That all I get?"

"I — "

"Did you know you were my first crush?"

"Really?" Jakob swallowed hard. "You... you never said."

Ethan snorted. "Can you blame me? You remember how it was back then."

"Still... You could've told me, Ethan. Even if we'd never..." Jakob trailed off, the truth of it too raw to say.

"Always asked myself if I should've," Ethan sighed. "If it would have changed anything. I can't tell you how many years I wanted to. But — you were straight, or so I thought. Told myself to swallow it down. Ignore it. That what I had of you, had to be enough. That it wasn't worth losing you over, throwing our friendship away just to..."

Ethan trailed off, his jaw clenching.

For his part, Jakob kept his silence. What could he even say?

"Then — And then you..." Ethan hung his head, the muscles in his jaw flexing as if he was sounding out the shape of his words. "Thought I'd won the lottery that night, Jakob. That every single one of my dreams had somehow come true. It... That night? That night was *everything*. But the next

morning, I felt like... God, I felt like such a fool afterward once I realized you were gone. When you said we were 'building something new', I — I actually let myself *believe*..."

Jakob sighed, and cursed himself — not for the first time — for his stupidity and... and just plain fucking *cowardice* all those years ago. For worrying so much about what didn't matter, that he'd run away from what *did*. "It wasn't you — "

"Fuck right off with that, Jakob. You really gonna try and give me the '*It's not you, it's me*' line?"

"No. I — "

"Been trying to tell myself it's in the past. That I've done the therapy and moved beyond it. That I should just be happy to see my old friend again, but... You used me, Jakob," Ethan spat. "*Me*. Got your rocks off and you left. You *left*. Left me wondering what I did wrong. If I'd hurt you, or... *God*," Ethan sighed. "How many scrapes we been through together, Jakob? And then not even a word of warning? A chance to let me make it right? To fix... whatever it was I'd broken. To apologize?"

"You didn't do anything to apologize for," Jakob tried to assure him, turning to face Ethan full on. "That night... That night was everything for me, too. It's me who fucked things up, Ethan. Not you."

"Now you tell me," Ethan huffed. "You ever think about how it felt in my shoes? When I finally worked up the nerve to call Frank and tell him I hadn't seen you for a week? That I was worried, but couldn't — couldn't tell him *why*. Not without feeling like I was betraying you even more? To hear him tell me the next month he'd finally — *finally* gotten a phone call from you; off happy as a clam in some other fucking *state*?"

"No, I only meant..." Jakob sighed, not quite sure how best to explain. "I wasn't running from *you*, Ethan. I think — I think I was running from... from myself? From what I wanted. From what I was — *am*. I just didn't know it at the time. Didn't *want* to know it. I do remember what it was like, all too well. Not that it's easy now, not by a long shot, but... I had this — this fear, right? That, what if... What if that was why my mom — What if that was why she left? Just dumped me on her last boyfriend, and then... never came back? Because somehow — Somehow she *knew*?"

Jakob took a shaky breath, feeling those warm brown eyes on him without

even having to look up.

"Frank... he raised me like I was his. Tracked her down so he could get her to sign the papers, letting him adopt me. Helped me when he... when he didn't have to. But... what if... I was afraid that if I was... That he might regret all of it. Take it all back. That I would lose him, too. And I — I couldn't deal with that. Deal with your disappointment; with his. I don't know why, but — But I take after my mother too much I guess, because off I ran too at the first sniff of trouble. And you... you didn't deserve that, Ethan. Not at all. I'm sorry. I'm so, so damn sorry I did that to you."

Ethan was quiet for a long moment, his eyes watching Alex's mare trotting around the corral. "I thought... I'd always worried that..." he frowned down at his hands in his lap.

Jakob waited, and when Ethan spoke again, it was in a whisper so low Jakob had to strain to hear him.

"I was afraid I'd... That I had pressured you," Ethan explained in a wretched voice. "Pushed you into something... something you didn't want. Hurt you, maybe. Bad enough that... I thought — I thought you left because... because you hated it. That you hated *me*."

"No," Jakob said, the breath he'd been holding escaping all in a rush on that one word, reaching out a hand to grasp a broad forearm. Needing to touch, to reassure his friend; needing to ground himself before this buzzing feeling in his chest burnt him all up.

"Never, Ethan. You've got to believe me," Jakob pleaded. "I didn't hate you or any of it at all. That was the whole problem. It — You were... You set the bar pretty damn high. It took me a long time to come to terms with myself. To accept myself. Did a lot of stuff I regret now, but — You? That night? That ain't one of 'em, not by a long shot. Not once I got my head on straight — well... Once I figured myself out, I mean," Jakob said with a rueful chuckle.

He was rewarded with an amused snort from Ethan's direction.

"My only regret," Jakob continued, knowing he needed to make himself totally clear if he was going to have any chance of fixing this. Of building something new with Ethan on the ashes of the bridge he had so thoughtlessly burned all those years ago. "My *only* regret — is taking off that morning. For dropping out of your life, instead of — of seeing what we... what we

could've been together. Where we could be now. *That's what I regret.*"

Because once he had finally stopped running; had finally, *finally* accepted — and even learned to celebrate — who he was? When he had finally gotten up the nerve to come out to Frank, to introduce him to Reed, to invite his adopted father to their wedding?

"Do you love him?" Frank had asked him later that night. Reed had long ago headed home at that point. Leaving both of them to settle into the pair of rocking chairs on the front porch, watch the occasional boat pass by on the bay side of the ranch. Just as they had done for years.

Frank's voice had been even and unreadable, not a hint of judgment or condemnation to be found. And yet —

Somehow, it had still been terrifying all the same.

"I do," Jakob had replied nervously; so certain at the time that he had found the man he would be spending the rest of his life with. Just as equally uncertain of how this man who had come to be father to him in all but blood would react to the news.

"Good," Frank had said so easily, a broad smile spreading across his face. "You deserve to be happy, Jakob. And if he makes you happy, I'd be proud to have two fine men as my sons."

As if it was as simple as that. As if it had *always* been as simple as that. As if... As if Jakob hadn't already thrown away the best —

Jakob hummed ruefully, blinking away the old memories. "I've made a lot of mistakes. Wasted so much time. I'm so damn sorry, Ethan. Can't tell you how much it twists me up to know I... that I went and screwed everything up so far past fixing. Missing out on — on the life we... That I could have had with you, if I hadn't been such a *fucking* coward."

They fell into an uncomfortable silence then, to the sound of hoofbeats drumming loud in the pasture beyond.

"Wasn't much of a life to miss," Ethan said, breaking the silence finally with a shake of his head. "Won't lie to you, I was pretty much a zombie for months after. Thank God for Coach and classes and just... the routines, right? Eventually, I picked my shit back up and figured out how to live my life with a big you-shaped hole in it. Won a couple bowl games. Got drafted into the

NFL. Won a few more. Never thought I'd even see a Super Bowl game live, much less have the ring sitting on a shelf in my office. Or... well, stuffed in a duffle in your living room for now, I guess. Should have been the time of my life, but... You should have been there, Jakob. Side by side, like we always planned."

"I should've," Jakob admitted. "Used to look up stories about you, check up on how you were doing. Frank kept me updated too, every time I called home."

"Yeah, well..." Ethan trailed off, causing Jakob to glance up just in time to catch the shadows swirling in his eyes. "I'm sure you saw the articles then. I... never could shake the feeling something was missing. Trusted the wrong people, made some bad business decisions; frittered it all away. Had to declare bankruptcy."

"Oh?" Jakob frowned, trying to remember. "Not certain I read anything about that."

Ethan's laugh was a bitter thing to hear, Jakob's gut twisting at the sound.

"You wouldn't have. Lawyers from Vegas, man," Ethan snorted. "Never *ever* trust 'em. My own damn fault, but... Hindsight's a bastard, ain't he?"

"Ethan — " Jakob grimaced, concern flooding through him. "If it's worth anything at all to you, I am *deeply* sorry I wasn't by your side through it all."

Ethan watched him quietly for a moment, before sighing, his big hand scrubbing harshly at his face.

"Won't lie to you, me too," Ethan finally admitted, his voice thick and rough before he cleared his throat. "But don't go trying to take the blame like you were responsible. I'm a big boy. I made my own choices. The fault's mine and I don't aim to share."

Jakob grunted at the fist Ethan tapped against his knee.

"Eventually, I crossed paths with Valeria and her crew. Thank *God*," Ethan laughed. "They helped me get back on track. By then I'd torn my ACL, had my surgeries, my therapy. My *retirement*. Hadn't been in long enough to make much of a nest egg for myself yet, though. Hadn't been thinking that far ahead. What I did earn, I'd already blown on stupid shit to fill the void. Do you know what it's like to be washed up at twenty-seven? A has-been before you'd even gotten your first gray hair? But I managed. I'd already lost

you. What was losing football, too?"

"Was that when you got into teaching?" Jakob asked, not knowing what else he could possibly say.

"I... yeah. Moved back here for a fresh start, got my teaching degree, and... Had to make myself a new life, didn't I? Again. One without football, or any other old ghosts hanging around to haunt me — or so I thought. Because now... Now you're back. Or, you *say* you're back. I... Jakob, what the hell am I supposed to do with you now?"

Jakob sighed long and deep for everything he missed out on, wretchedness roiling through his belly like a sticky black tar.

"Don't have to do anything," he said, swallowing hard. "I always told myself that... Maybe one day, y'know? Get back in touch and — and who knows. But it sounds like I've let too much water pass under the bridge, and for that... I'm not certain I could ever make it up to you. Know I sure as hell don't deserve a chance to try. Kind of amazed you didn't kick me out on my ass the moment I walked into your art class. I could understand if... if when this is all over, you — "

Jakob startled to feel a hand brush his, his eyes flying open before he had even realized they were closed. He glanced over to find Ethan watching him intently, head tilted consideringly as if trying to work out the best possible play.

"Ethan... ?"

Trailing off as Ethan's fingertips fluttered gently against his cheek, Jakob allowed himself a moment to simply soak up the warmth of that broad hand cupping his chin, his jaw, his cheek. The brush of a thumb across his cheekbone as Ethan tilted Jakob's face up to meet his eyes.

Those warm brown eyes, shining now with all the surety of a sunrise and just as glorious to watch. *Moreso* even, as they watched him back; Ethan's gaze flicking between Jakob's own eyes and his mouth.

Not daring to breathe for fear he break this spell, Jakob tipped his face towards Ethan's hand, nuzzling into it as —

"Damn it all to fucking hell," Ethan muttered, looking away with a wince, as if pained. "Tell me —"

Jakob's heart leaped right out of his damn chest as Ethan took a deep,

shuddering breath; opening his eyes to look Jakob square in the face, his expression ragged, and wanting, and oh so fucking beautiful...

"Tell me if this is a bad idea, Jakob," Ethan said, as solemnly as a priest. "But... can I k— "

"*God*, yes," Jakob breathed, already in motion; unable to take the waiting any longer, to waste this chance. Not after all these years, not after turning that night over and over in his mind so many nights, going over every detail again and again and again.

He fisted his hand in Ethan's shirt and, non-too-smoothly, pulled a very willing Ethan into a kiss far too long in the waiting.

It wasn't like that night so long ago — all teeth and tongue and cheap beer on their breath. It wasn't a frenzied rush, a desperation borne of anxious uncertainty and sheer bravado, no.

No, this was... it was...

Fuck — it was coming *home*.

Jakob moaned at the feeling of Ethan's fingers threading into his hair, the rasp of their morning stubble catching against each other. He —

"Geez — get a room, you two!" yelled Alex's voice and Jakob grinned when he felt Ethan's hand bump into his own, both of them together flipping Alex the bird.

"Why just a room?" Jakob shouted back, breaking off the kiss to glare at the grinning pair of gremlins giggling from the edge of the riding ring. "I have a whole damn house!"

"Gross!" Cassie called back; laughing as she swung up into her own saddle, the patient gray gelding flicking his ear at the sound.

Jakob watched as she led Alex off around the riding ring, his heart swelling with pride to see her taking so naturally to the role of teacher as she corrected his seat.

"So, uh... about that 'whole damn house' of yours, then... ?" Ethan rumbled, recapturing Jakob's attention as those warm brown eyes sparkled with the sort of mischief that nearly stole Jakob's breath away.

"You always did have the best ideas," Jakob huffed as he stood; Ethan steadying his elbow and holding out his cane.

His face almost hurt, so big was his smile as — laughing and jostling each other like the boys they'd been once so long ago — the screen door slammed behind them.

Chapter 29

"Now, where were we?" Jakob asked as the bolt slid home under his hand; everything that wasn't him and Ethan locked away with the rest of the world on the other side of this door.

The very door he suddenly found himself pressed up against as Ethan's body weight smashed up against his own; lips hot on Jakob's neck as he kissed his way up to nibble on Jakob's ear.

"Making up for lost time, I believe," Ethan growled in his ear, his broad hands smoothing down Jakob's sides. "Unless — ?"

Doubt and uncertainty clouded Ethan's eyes — doubt and uncertainty Jakob had put there all those years ago.

That wouldn't do.

That wouldn't do at all.

Jakob hummed appreciatively as he arched his spine, pressing back. He turned his head, throwing a leer over his shoulder as he ground himself against the bulge he could feel straining at the front of Ethan's pants; slotting so perfectly into the cleft of his ass, warm and thick where it strained hard against him.

"Sounds good to me," Jakob told Ethan in a low voice, rocking experimentally.

Ethan let out a relieved sort of chuckle, nipping playfully at the lobe of Jakob's ear before sliding his hands down to knead at his hips possessively; his own hips thrusting in shallow little circles as he ground himself into

Jakob's ass.

"What are you thinking?" he growled low into Jakob's ear, sending a shiver roaring up his spine.

"I'm thinking that as much fun as it'd be having you fuck me against this door, the whole ranch will be able to hear the thumping. Not to mention that the bed is going to be a lot kinder to my knee."

Jakob gasped as Ethan practically flattened him into the door at that, rutting against him hard enough to make them both moan.

"I defer to your judgment," Ethan said as he stepped back, large hands gently tugging Jakob around before diving for his shirt hem and peeling it off.

With a mischievous glint in his eyes, Ethan dropped to his knees, nosing into Jakob's crotch and his swiftly hardening cock. He lipped at the bulge it made, mouthing tenderly over the confining fabric, his breath warm through the thin layer of cloth.

Batting Jakob's hands away when he tried to assist, Ethan's thick fingers hooked into the hem of the sweatpants Jakob had thrown on against the winter's chill outside. He hummed happily as he pulled both Jakob's pants and boxers down just below his ass, grinning as his cock bobbed merrily free.

"Mmm... pretty as I remembered," Ethan purred, licking lightly at the head of Jakob's cock and making him groan. The heat of his breath against the sensitive crown made his legs shake, but Jakob held himself together.

Right up until Ethan took him into his mouth, that was, moaning as Ethan's broad tongue swirled, lazily circling the tip. Large palms gripped his hips, holding Jakob firmly in place.

"Fuck..."

Jakob's hands slid down to knead at Ethan's neck, tugging at him roughly. Ethan hummed happily, taking more of his length, lips stretched obscenely around Jakob's cock. Jakob groaned at the sight, eyes transfixed by those broad shoulders and perfectly muscled back flexing as Ethan sucked greedily on his cock.

"You're so damn beautiful," he told Ethan softly, dragging his thumb across Ethan's cheek. "But as much as I'd love to watch you all day..."

Ethan gave a questioning hum deep in his throat, the sound vibrating up

Jakob's shaft and —

"Wait," he pleaded, tapping a warning Ethan's shoulder. "Please. Not as young as — as we used to be. Got the whole morning to ourselves and, after all these years — *Ethan!* C'mon, I want more from you than just a quickie."

Ethan chuckled, but relented, pressing a chaste kiss to the flushed tip of Jakob's cock as he started to stand.

"Dibs," he declared in that low, husky rumble and, oh, yes, was Jakob happy to be claimed.

He dragged Ethan into a slightly messy kiss, backing him up until his legs hit the bed; letting himself fall over backward and taking Ethan with him, pulling him down to keep from breaking the kiss.

"Tell me what you need," Ethan whispered when they finally came up for air.

"You, uh... still top?" Jakob asked hopefully, especially after that little taste Ethan had given him against the door.

"Yeah. Tried bottoming once or twice just to see what it's like, but... It's not for me. If... If you don't enjoy bottoming either, don't feel like you have to on my account," Ethan said, old shadows lurking in his expression even as his fingers stroked gently along the edge of Jakob's jaw down to his chin. "Plenty of other options."

"Prefer to bottom when I can get it, actually," Jakob grinned excitedly.

"Oh?" Ethan practically purred, a possessive light glinting in his eyes. "And just how often do you 'get it'?"

Jakob sucked in a sharp breath of air as Ethan rolled his hips, grinding their cocks together in a shower of sparks.

"Not nearly often enough," Jakob admitted, his voice gone husky as he fisted his hands in Ethan's shirt, pulling the man closer against him. "Been a dry spell lately, especially after the accident. And with Reed, I almost always topped. He tried fucking me once or twice in return, but... His heart wasn't in it, y'know? It was nowhere near..." Jakob paused, sighing. "I didn't realize how good I had it. My first time with a guy, and you went and ruined me for the rest of 'em."

"Damn Jakob. Flattery will get you everything, you know," Ethan growled, breath hot and heavy on the skin at Jakob's shoulder, damp from where he'd

been mouthing along the slope. But then his expression turned serious. "You — you were a hard act to follow, too."

Jakob hummed, considering. Despite the weighty words, he kept his tone light as he rutted lazily up against Ethan's thigh. "Seems like we're both pretty hard right now."

Ethan grinned, crisis averted.

"Maybe we should do something about that," Ethan drawled with a leer. "My tests are all clear and up to date. You?"

"Good to go. So — if you're interested, I mean — " Jakob added hastily, "I would really, *really* like for you to fuck me."

"More'n happy to oblige," Ethan smirked, leaning in for a slow and tender kiss, with a heat behind it that promised so much more. "How about you go on and lie back like a good little pillow prince, and let me take care of you. Got lube around here somewhere?"

"In the right nightstand, small box on the right. Couple of toys and things in there too if you like."

"Maybe next time. Been so long... Want to focus on this; on you." Ethan hesitated. "I mean — Sorry, that sounds awfully presumptuous, doesn't it? *If* there's a next time, should've said."

"Sure hope there's a next time," Jakob admitted. "And a time after that, and a time after that, and... As long as you care to stick around, then I'm here. Not going anywhere, Ethan. Not this time. I promise, I'm done running."

Ethan considered him a moment, then reached up, threading his fingers through the strands of Jakob's hair and scratching gently through the buzz of his undercut.

"Me too."

He tugged Jakob down into another kiss, sweet and promising, before urging Jakob up off him so he could get the things they'd need.

Jakob propped himself up on his elbows to watch Ethan stretch as he fetched the bottle of lube; the hem of his shirt riding up to give Jakob an excellent eyeful at the skin beneath. Even after all these years, it seemed that Ethan had taken just as good care of himself as when they were on the team; all deliciously padded muscle that Jakob was already itching to get his hands on

again.

"Hey now, play fair," Ethan laughed as Jakob's impatient fingers danced across a ticklish spot in his bid to unbutton Ethan's jeans.

Jakob did little more than grunt in reply, far too entranced by the sight of Ethan's rolling hips and emerging thighs as he shimmied out of the jeans Jakob was hurrying to peel him out of.

The mattress dipped under Ethan's weight as he shifted to kneel on the bed, tossing the bottle of lube between them. He grabbed the hem of his t-shirt and tugged it over his head, revealing a body that made Jakob's breath catch as his eyes drank in the sight.

Ethan's chest was broad, with more hair than Jakob's and a dark thatch Jakob was intrigued to see trailed *aaaaaaaaall* the way down to his thick, flushed cock as Ethan's briefs went in the direction of his jeans. Jakob's fingers itched to tangle in it, let his fingertips travel along that enticing highway. To feel it pressed against his own chest, or back, or — hell, belly if they attempted a sixty-nine...

"You gonna get over here, or what?" Ethan teased, reaching for Jakob's hand to tug him down on top of his still-larger frame.

"I am. Just admiring the view," Jakob laughed, leaning forward for a kiss.

"You've been hiding this under so many layers of clothing. Wasn't expecting Mr. August himself under that button-down. You, uh — you look damn good."

Ethan did too, allowing Jakob the chance to slide his hands greedily over that magnificent barrel chest, down his sides and over Ethan's hips; tracing down the valleys cutting from hipbone to flushed and weeping cock, then following the trail of hair back up to his navel, Ethan's stomach quivering under Jakob's teasing touch.

Sadly, the limitations of Jakob's knee meant he couldn't indulge himself in leaning down to nuzzle Ethan's chest like Jakob oh so very much wanted to. Instead, he contented himself with carding his fingers in the thick, coarse hair; taking his time exploring the contours of the muscles beneath as he mapped their shape with his palms.

There were differences in Ethan here too, he discovered. New scars, a couple of tattoos. Evidence of a life he had missed; one Jakob was interested in

relearning, inch by glorious inch.

"Hey, I'm not the only one," Ethan retorted, reaching up to rub an appreciative hand along Jakob's side and pull him closer. "You clean up pretty good yourself."

With a happy hum, Jakob arched into the touch.

"Feel free to come and take a closer look..." he teased, shivering as Ethan's hands stroked through his hair; warm as they smoothed down his neck and across his shoulders. Down his back they went, lighting up his spine like midway carnival lights. Before finally grabbing two great big pawfuls of Jakob's ass and pulling him flush against Ethan with a gasp.

"Know what? I think I will," Ethan growled, rolling them over.

His weight was a delicious pressure that made Jakob want to squirm as Ethan settled atop him, his body covering Jakob's own. He filled his hands with Ethan's broad shoulders, delighting in the expanse of firm, warm skin as Jakob rocked his hips up.

"What's the rush there, gorgeous?" Ethan murmured, nuzzling Jakob's jaw before nibbling at his ear. "Thought you said we've got all morning?"

Jakob shivered to hear that word in Ethan's mouth, calling up echoes of another endearment from the misty reaches of the past.

"Mm, but we're so behind," Jakob countered as he slid his hands down the broad expanse of Ethan's well-muscled back before grabbing a double handful of *Ethan's* behind for emphasis.

"Oh yeah? Guess that means we've got some catching up to do then, yeah?" Ethan murmured; kissing the corner of his mouth, then pressing a line of them along Jakob's jaw, as Jakob tilted his head up to give him more room. His hand trailed down Jakob's chest, thumb flicking his nipple as —

"What are you doing?" he asked when Ethan started to shift.

"Getting comfortable," was the simple reply, as Ethan moved to kneel between Jakob's thighs. "What do I need to know about your leg?"

"Can't trust my weight to it long, can't flex it much or too quickly, either. Hope you're not expecting anything athletic today. Sadly, riding you is off the table for at least a while. Feel free to bend me *over* a table sometime, though," Jakob mused. "That could be pretty good. Otherwise... This

position works, plus I get to see your face."

And oh, hell — Ethan was blushing, Jakob's heart fluttering at the sight.

"Your knee?" Jakob asked after he'd gotten himself back under control.

"About a billion surgeries later, as long as you aren't asking me to play anything more intense than some backyard scrimmage on Thanksgiving? I should be alright," Ethan grinned, hand curving around Jakob's ankle as he chewed his lip. "You ever used a swing?"

"Only in my fantasies," Jakob grinned, shoving a pillow under his ass as Ethan helped lift his hips. "Not like I've had anyone beating down my door after the accident, and I didn't have all these restrictions before."

"Might be something worth exploring for the future; help keep the strain off your leg. Pretty fun, too," Ethan mused, before getting a sort of pole-axed expression on his face. "If... If you want. I didn't mean to — to presume —"

"It's a good idea," Jakob assured him, grinning at the thought. "Maybe you'd like to help me find one and set it up? After."

Ethan grinned, that old devilish grin Jakob remembered so well. "*After*," he agreed, dropping a kiss on Jakob's knee.

*Don't you **dare** go messing this up again,* Jakob told himself furiously.

Chapter 30

"Alright, let's get you ready then," Ethan said as he picked up the bottle of lube and slicked up his fingers. "You just relax and I'll take good care of you."

"Know you will," Jakob replied honestly.

"Good," Ethan replied with a soft smile.

The first brush of Ethan's finger had him shuddering, a bolt of pleasure and anticipation rushing through him, his legs falling open in wanton supplication.

"Ohhh, *fuck*," Jakob hissed, his hands fisting in the bedsheets as Ethan's slicked-up finger slowly pushed inside.

It felt good, better than he remembered. His body was eager, welcoming the intrusion as his nerves lit up, reminding him just how long it had been.

Jakob let his eyes fall closed, savoring the sensations. He could hear his own breathing, and the soft, wet noises that echoed off the bedroom walls. And beneath it, the pounding of his heart, the blood rushing through his veins as Ethan's questing finger searched...

Sucking in a sharp breath, Jakob gasped as stars exploded behind his eyes.

"Yeah?" Ethan asked, wearing a smug grin that made it clear he already knew the answer. Ethan had found Jakob's prostate and then some, and didn't seem inclined to let up now that he did.

"*Yeah*," Jakob panted in reply.

His vision was glitching out like a TV with a bad antenna as Ethan laughed,

leaning in to kiss Jakob's knee.

"More," Jakob demanded, opening his legs even wider, and soon, a second finger started to press inside.

The stretch was welcome, and Jakob arched into it, wanting more, faster.

"*Ethan*," he whined, his voice low and wrecked.

Opening his eyes, Jakob was treated to the sight of an intense expression on Ethan's face, attention locked on where his fingers disappeared into Jakob's body.

Ethan lifted his head to meet Jakob's gaze, but he didn't slow his fingers; keeping up a steady, tortuously slow rhythm that had a thready keen already welling up in Jakob's throat.

"Patience," he rasped, kissing Jakob's inner thigh. His voice was a little raw — as if this was having just as much of an effect on him as it was Jakob.

"You want to be ready, don't you?"

"I *am* ready," Jakob insisted, rocking his hips down. "Ethan, *please*."

"Soon," Ethan disagreed as he leaned forward, his mouth closing — oh fuck — over the head of Jakob's cock.

"Please, I — "

Jakob's words cut off with a groan as Ethan's fingers sank in deeper, rubbing against his prostate, a jolt of pleasure coursing through him.

He shuddered, moaning. Ethan's warm mouth; the gentle, rhythmic slide of his fingers as they played Jakob's body like a fiddle at a dance... He didn't know how much longer he could take this; the heat writhing in his belly, Ethan's free hand cupping Jakob's balls, feeling a third finger start to tease him open as Ethan began to — to *suck* —

"*Don't!*" Jakob blurted out, lifting his head to look Ethan in the eye.

The word cracked sharp as a whip in the quiet of the room, and Ethan stilled instantly; pulling off Jakob's cock as he shifted, starting to draw away as —

Frantically, Jakob flailed; hooking his good leg over those broad shoulders, grabbing for Ethan's shoulder — Whatever he could get a hold of, to keep Ethan in place.

"I want — I want to come with you inside me," Jakob explained. "But I'm not going to last like this. 'M not a virgin anymore, Ethan. It's not — not my first

rodeo here. I'm ready. Trust me. *Please.*"

"Mm, yeah, alright," Ethan agreed, and his voice was rough. "You've been so good. Just love the noises you make."

"Then stop teasing and get over here," Jakob insisted. "I'll make all the noise you like once you've got your cock in me."

"Bossy," Ethan chuckled, but he pulled his fingers out; leaning over to seize the glinting foil square laying on the duvet next to Jakob's ass.

He tore the packet open with a flash of bright white teeth, carefully rolling the condom down his cock before reaching for the lube. He drenched his hand, stroking himself a few times until it glistened in the light.

"There," Ethan said, the anticipation thick in his tone as he leaned down for a kiss.

A kiss Jakob was happy to oblige him in, even if his mouth felt a little dry after that show. He could feel the curve of lips against his own as Ethan smiled against Jakob's mouth, breaking away to kiss a trail along his jaw and down his neck before leaning back. His gaze was hot and heavy as he studied Jakob's naked form, spread out before him on the bed as if he were a banquet — one Ethan meant to devour.

A cocked eyebrow and a quirk of a grin was Jakob's only warning, as Ethan grabbed under Jakob's thighs and *pulled* with a growled, "*C'mere.*"

Knees hooked over Ethan's forearms, Jakob's heart fluttered at the brief loss of control; lust surging through him at being manhandled, even as something purred deep within him at the care Ethan took in supporting his leg through it all.

Ethan hoisted Jakob's legs over his shoulders, putting the strain on Jakob's back, his core. After a lifetime of riding and tossing around hay bales, this was a part of his body that could bear Jakob's weight, especially in service of such a good cause.

Left him completely at Ethan's mercy, however; a position with no way to retreat. Jakob's cock lept at the realization, *more* than okay with putting his pleasure in Ethan's capable hands.

"You ready for this?" Ethan asked, gripping his cock and stroking it against the crease of Jakob's ass.

"Yeah," Jakob breathed, kneading at the duvet under his hands at the kiss of Ethan's cock against his hole. "Fuck me, Ethan. *Please.*"

Ethan hummed happily, crowding in for a kiss; pressing the breath out of Jakob's lungs as he was bent nearly in half. "How can I say no to that?"

Leaning back, he guided the head of his cock around Jakob's hole before pushing in slowly.

Jakob's body was more than ready, and the tip of Ethan's cock slid past the ring of eager muscle with little resistance.

"*Fffuck,*" Jakob hissed as Ethan gently speared him open. "You feel even better than I remember."

"Just wait until we get going," Ethan whispered. "Learned a few things over the years."

Jakob could only groan in agreement, head tipping back as he was filled, inch by delicious inch.

Blinking his eyes clear, Jakob wasn't sure when they had squeezed themselves closed. He didn't want to miss a minute of this, though; the intent expression on Ethan's face, the hunger burning in his eyes, the way he bit his bottom lip as he watched his own cock sinking into Jakob's willing, waiting, *wanting* hole.

Jakob had wasted far too much time already. Now he didn't plan on losing out on a single second more.

He could feel the sweat prickling on his skin, his pulse pounding in his veins as he was spread open. Taken apart and remade in a new shape; like the tumblers of a lock to a key, as his body fit itself to Ethan's cock.

"Alright?" Ethan murmured, his hand warm and comforting as he smoothed his palm up Jakob's thigh.

"Yeah," Jakob hummed, shifting his hips a little. "Yeah, it's good. Forgot how big you are."

"Need me to back off?"

"Don't you dare," Jakob panted, grinning up at him despite feeling as if Ethan was rearranging his *lungs*. "Want every bit of you, remember? Much as you'll give me, as long as you care to."

"Careful," Ethan warned, an old light flickering in his eyes. "A man could get

ideas, you keep talking like that."

"Hope so," Jakob grunted as Ethan rocked into him, his cock filling Jakob up; making him feel complete in a way Jakob had forgotten. "Oh, *fuck*. Feels so good."

"I've got you," Ethan urged as he shifted back, pulling almost all the way out before thrusting into Jakob's body once more. "Just relax. Let go, alright?"

"Yeah," Jakob breathed, relaxing into the pillows, "yeah, okay."

"That's it," Ethan soothed, stroking his flank, "Fuck. The way you *feel*, Jakob. So hot and tight. It's incredible."

"Easier than the — the last time we did this, huh?" Jakob panted. "Told you I liked to bottom."

"Can see why. It's like you were made for my cock, taking me like this."

Maybe I was, Jakob couldn't help but think. *Maybe I always was, and it just took me this long to understand.*

"You're doing most of the work," Jakob replied instead, giving Ethan's cock an appreciative squeeze.

"Oh, don't think I'm not enjoying myself," Ethan teased, rocking into him harder now, making Jakob gasp as he brushed across that little bundle of nerves inside him just so.

"There?"

Helplessly, Jakob could only nod as Ethan hit it again and again; sending fireworks shooting up Jakob's spine and back to his cock with every stroke.

"Fuck," Jakob breathed, arching up into the next thrust. "Fuckfuck*fuck*. More. Faster. Ethan, *please*."

"Yeah?" Ethan grunted. "You want more?"

"God, yes," Jakob gasped, desperately fisting his bedsheets so hard he was almost afraid they might rip. If he had somehow been able to spare the brain cells for such a thought, that is, over the cacophony of his entire body screaming at him for, "*Please*."

"Whatever you need," Ethan told him, and then he was really moving; snapping his hips and thrusting into Jakob at a breakneck pace, making him feel every inch of Ethan's cock as he drove into Jakob's body again and again and *again*.

Jakob let his head fall back against the duvet, eyes slipping closed as he gave himself over to the sensation now gathering under his skin.

"So good," he moaned. "God, Ethan — You feel so, so fucking good."

"Yeah," Ethan rasped, his voice a little strangled. "So do you. Fuck, Jakob. Can't believe — "

But he cut himself off, snarling even as he picked up the pace, slamming into Jakob now, pounding his prostate with ruthless precision and filling Jakob's vision with stars.

"Yeah," Jakob panted sightlessly; thrilling at the way Ethan chased his pleasure in Jakob's body, knowing it was *him* that was driving Ethan wild.

"Yeah, me too. I — "

He gasped and —

"What do you need?" Ethan grit out, his voice husky and wrecked.

"I don't — I don't *know*," Jakob answered, his neglected cock leaking steadily now; Ethan's every thrust making it bounce, smearing pre-cum across Jakob's belly. "Just — touch me. Touch me, Ethan. *Please*. I need — Ethan, I *need* — "

"Yeah," Ethan groaned, wrapping his fingers around Jakob's length. "Yeah, I've got you."

"Always did," Jakob gasped as his world hummed to the tune Ethan demanded of him. "I just — just didn't have enough sense to know."

"*Jakob* — " A sound half shout, half sob; ripped from Ethan's throat like a wild thing.

He swore, burying his face in the crook of Jakob's neck, his thrusts growing erratic.

Ethan was close, Jakob could tell. Not nearly as close as Jakob, though. He just... He needed —

"Call me — Call me darlin', Ethan," Jakob gasped out, hands fisting the bedsheets like he was holding on for his damn *life*. "Please? Like you did then. Like — like I'm *yours*."

Ethan made a keening sound in the back of his throat, and then —

"C-come for me, darlin'," Ethan rumbled. "For *me*."

Jakob had never had a simultaneous orgasm with a partner. They weren't nearly as common, or at least as easy, as all the romance books made out. He'd never felt his soul surging up from his toes to go shooting out his cock at the very same moment his partner clutched him close; their joy called up to meet and mingle with his own.

Not until *then*, that was. Hips jerking, rhythm falling utterly apart, Ethan slammed home; Jakob's name on Ethan's lips, his expression rapturous as he buried himself in Jakob's body and found his release.

Jakob came too, with a shout; his entire body going rigid as he spilled over Ethan's fist; his hole quivering and clenching around the other man's cock driven so deep within. As if at least Jakob's body had enough sense to never, *ever* let this man go; as if Jakob's soul recognized he was *home*.

Chapter 31

"Hmm."

"*Hmm?*" Jakob hummed in return, intent on the patterns he was drawing on the broad planes of Ethan's back. He watched the play of light and shadow cast by his questing fingertips as they danced across the sweep of dark skin; the morning sunlight highlighting Ethan's muscled form like he had been drizzled with honey.

Jakob was fighting the urge to give that shoulder a lick, a long sweeping stripe along Ethan's right deltoid; see if it tasted as sweet as it appeared. Not that he was fighting very hard...

"You expecting someone today?" Ethan rumbled, his voice sounding as boneless as he looked sprawled out naked across Jakob's bed.

Jakob smirked. *Just let him try to argue about taking the couch again tonight.*

He propped himself up on his elbow to look out the window at whatever Ethan had spotted.

"Oh, that's Cassie's friend," he answered, spotting the familiar car turning off the road onto the stables' drive. "Said that she and her brother are coming over to play some board game with her and Alex this afternoon. They've all got the day off for some teacher training thing. Which unfortunately means I should probably put on some pants." Jakob told him with an absentminded frown as he looked about for where they might have landed.

He started to swing his legs over the edge of the bed with the intention of a quick shower; when Ethan grabbed his wrist, the other arm looping around Jakob's shoulder to pull him in for another kiss. Hot and hungry and full of

promise, he could feel Ethan's big hands sliding down along his sides, sweeping over his lower back...

"Ethan..." Jakob growled against his lips after a moment, and Ethan released him — but not without following it up with a swat to Jakob's ass that made him yelp in surprise.

Ethan chuckled at the mock scowl Jakob flashed him in return. The effect was probably ruined, though, by the way the corners of his mouth kept trying to turn up into a smile.

"Jakob?"

"Hmm?" Jakob hummed, pausing in his hunt for a shirt as he turned questioningly towards Ethan.

"You — um. Is this..." Ethan's voice trailed off uncertainly, his brow furrowed as he plucked at the sheets under his hand.

And as if there was a neon sign lit up behind Ethan's head, Jakob could practically hear his thoughts, his worries, his fears all turning and churning like gear works inside his skull.

Is this just a one-time thing?

Is this time going to be the same as the last?

*Is this you running out on me, **again**?*

Is this — Is this — Is this —

"Is this where I hope you'll choose to sleep tonight instead of trying to tough it out on the couch again?" Jakob asked in an attempt to keep it light; walking over to run his palm up what length of Ethan's calf he could reach from the foot of the bed, fingertips tracing the sweep of his ankle.

Jakob might've gone and gotten lost before, all those years ago. Messed things up between them in pretty spectacular fashion. But by some miracle, Jakob seemed to have been granted a second chance here. He wasn't about to make the same mistake twice.

He just needed a chance, needed to show Ethan that things could — that they *would* be different this time around.

It would take time, he knew that. Knew too he would do whatever was needed to reassure Ethan, to make him believe Jakob was here for as long as he was allowed. That he was in it for the long haul, if Ethan would let him.

Jakob could hear the squeal of the screen door opening, the faint murmur of greetings as Cassie's friends arrived. Further outside, he could hear Nash calling to one of the stable hands, the rumble of the old tractor's engine starting up.

All the sounds that meant it was time for Jakob to be getting on with the day; no matter how much he might wish he could spend the entirety of it here in his bed, wrapped around Ethan.

But early morning was hardly a time for serious conversations, really. Not with a whole day's work stretching out before him. And so many years' worth of hurts couldn't be healed in one go.

Tonight. There would be time enough tonight.

They could spend the entire evening reconnecting, reassuring each and every manner they could both contrive. And again the next morning, over and over, for as long as it took; a penance Jakob was only too happy to pay.

But until then...

"Can't promise you I don't snore," Jakob offered almost casually, turning to find a pair of clean jeans. "But I know your back will thank you. Not as young as we used to be, you know."

As if this was just a comfortable, easy conversation; as if no momentous decisions rested on his words. As if his heart wasn't beating so loudly in his throat, it rivaled the tractor's sputtery old engine for noise.

"I — yeah," Ethan replied as the tenseness left his frame. He settled back against the pillows, his expression relaxing back into the broad smile he had worn earlier. "Might just take you up on that after all."

Jakob couldn't help the grin that swept across his face at the sight of Ethan now sprawled comfortably on his back in Jakob's bed, like everything out of his fantasies come true. Lying there with those powerful arms folded under his head. Wearing nothing but a huge grin on his ruggedly handsome face.

He looked like the cat who had eaten the entire flock of damn canaries, *and* the cream besides.

He looked good there.

As the warm spray of the shower hit his skin, Jakob let himself hope that maybe... maybe it would become a regular sight.

Chapter 32

Damp, dressed, and mostly decent once more, Jakob leaned down to scoop up Ethan's pants, throwing them in the direction of the bed as he left.

He grinned at the surprised yelp that sounded behind him over the thump of his footsteps and cane on the wooden floorboards that followed him down the hall.

"Jakob!"

"Mr. Stone! Ah, *sir* — "

— came the startled twin greetings from Liam and Alex as he stepped into the living room, suspicious in their forced cheerfulness and effusiveness.

Suspicious too in how close the boys had been sitting on the couch, their cheeks now flushing a furious red as they looked everywhere but at him — or at each other.

Jakob smirked.

"The girls setting up the game while you boys are... making sure my couch doesn't grow wings and fly away?" he asked in the gruffest Responsible Parenting voice as he could muster.

"Umm... no. We're — we'll just, uh... go," Liam hastily replied, already jumping up and tugging on Alex's shirt sleeve to get him to follow.

But Alex...

Alex was still sitting with his head bent; seemingly frozen in place as he stared down at his clenched fists resting on his knees.

It was hard to read his expression from here, his dark curls falling into his

face and obscuring his eyes. But it wasn't quite able to obscure the black eye he had arrived with, now fully bloomed a lurid purple.

Ah, hell. Somehow, despite everything going on, Jakob had let himself forget a few key facts leading up to Alex's stay with them.

"Alex?" he called in a much gentler voice. "Alex, it's — you're okay. You're safe here."

Eyes the color of a bright copper penny flicked up at him and back away just as fast. Fists clenching, Alex took a deep shuddering breath and then finally looked him in the eye.

Jakob smiled, trying to look as harmless as he could.

"Why don't you boys help set up the game," he offered, still keeping his tone mild as he watched Alex's reaction. "And after — if you aren't all sick of each other by that point anyway — you and Liam can go pick us all up some pizzas. Then... I don't know — Then all of you could throw on a movie or something on the big TV if you like. Ethan and I will make ourselves scarce. I'm sure we can find something to do to keep ourselves out of your hair."

The corner of Alex's lip twitched up into a smirk at that and Jakob frowned, replaying what he had just said at double speed in his mind.

Then he groaned, realizing what he had implied.

And... well — given the events of the morning, it's not like he had any defense here either, was it?

But the rigid line of Alex's shoulders had loosened, his hands hanging relaxed at his sides now as he stood. As if he'd been reminded of where he was, just *whose* home he was in. And that things could be — were — very different here than the house he had so recently had to escape from.

So be it, Jakob thought as he watched the boys drift towards the dining room table and the upcoming game Kiya and Cassie had already laid out. The girls were busy placing tiny figures across a giant board, laying down markers in some particular arrangement across its surface.

Alex shot Jakob a last curious look over his shoulder, before quickly becoming engrossed in the deck of cards Cassie had just handed him to shuffle.

Jakob's cheeks felt flushed at the idle examination, surely as red as the teens'

had been a moment ago. But...

If a little embarrassment on my part makes him feel safe here, Jakob thought as he headed into the kitchen to hunt up some coffee and perhaps breakfast, then really — where's the harm?

Because honestly... Alex was handling everything pretty well, all things considered. Better than Jakob would have in his shoes, at least.

Miles better than Jakob had *done*, in fact.

Over the chug of the coffee machine came the sound of the kids starting their game; the low buzz of excitement as Cassie donned what Jakob had always called her "Future President's Voice" as she read out the rules.

His phone dinged, a reminder flashing up on the screen that Nash would be in Jakob's office in twenty minutes to go over the job listing for the potential new ranch hands. Jakob double-checked he had allowed extra time before Owen was due to arrive to discuss repairing the eastern wall of the stables. He had a feeling his assistant manager would probably want to talk about that idea he'd had for adding a riding class to the stable's usual slate, too.

As the smell of the coffee drifted through the kitchen, Jakob could feel the stupid little happy grin creep across his face. He leaned against the counter to poke at the day's word puzzle on his phone, staring at the screen; his thoughts distracted by the knowledge that Ethan was probably dozing in Jakob's bed. Idle plans passed through his mind at what the afternoon might bring; the evening, the next few days, the weeks... maybe months to follow?

He didn't dare let himself dream further than that.

The minor agitation of the letters _ROST staring unhelpfully back at him from his phone warred with the complete and total sense of utter contentment that had spread through him.

Jakob hummed happily.

There was a knock at the door and Jakob glanced over at the clock on the microwave, mentally subtracting an hour since he had never remembered to set it the last time the clocks changed.

It was still too early for classes down at the stable to start. Far too early for guests too, especially this time of year.

He was expecting a delivery from the vet of vitamins for the horses, but that

wasn't supposed to arrive until this afternoon. That was probably it. Those estimated delivery times they gave you never did have even a passing familiarity with reality, did they?

"I got it," he called to the kids as he made his way to the front door.

They always wanted him to sign for this stuff. Like it was the secret of the universe inside, and not just horse supplement or whatever.

But when Jakob opened the door, it wasn't to find the disinterested gaze of some bored and indifferent delivery driver that greeted him on the other side of the screen; underpaid and overworked and in a hurry to be off to their next stop.

No. The shoes, the haircut, the way the man stood framed there in the doorway —

Jakob didn't even need to see the black Crown Vic parked in the middle of the gravel drive to know —

It all added up to *trouble*.

Chapter 33

"Hello? Can I help you?" Jakob asked the man standing on his porch wearing a pleasant enough — but empty — expression.

"I'm hoping so, sir," the man said with an unnerving sort of too-friendly confidence.

He fished out a small leather wallet with the ease of long practice; flipping it open and shut with practically the same movement far too fast for Jakob to properly see.

"Y'see, I don't know if you heard about that boy that's been kidnapped recently?" the man continued easily enough. But though his words sounded friendly and light, there was definitely more than just a hint of ice and iron hiding underneath. "Been all over the news since yesterday? Got a tip early this morning he might've been seen around your property. Mind if I come in and ask you a few questions?"

"I'm sorry. But my daughter and her friends from school are home today. This isn't a very good time," Jakob said, despite not feeling sorry at all. In fact, if he were honest? There had been a little zip of thrill shooting up his spine at the expression of frustration on the officer's face, before it was quickly and professionally smoothed away.

"I can understand that, sir. But if you would just — "

"Can I see your badge again? You hear all these stories about people impersonating police these days and I didn't get a very good look, Officer, uh... What did you say your name was?"

"Of course," the officer said, looking as if bringing his badge back out for

Jakob to examine actually physically pained him. "And it's *Detective*."

"Ah, my apologies. What can I do for you, Detective... Martin?" Jakob asked with forced calm. He tried to raise his voice somewhat. Not *too* obviously, but still hopefully loud enough to be heard all the way over at the dining table, even over the lure of gaming with friends.

Judging by how fast Detective Martin's smile slipped, Jakob's attempt at subtlety hadn't been much of a success.

"Look, *sir*," Detective Martin tried again, a small tic twitching in his left cheek. "This really will go far easier if I could come inside and we can sit while I ask you these questions. I'm sure you want to see this boy returned to his family, right?"

Whatever Jakob was going to say next was drowned out by the sudden whoop that came from the direction of Jakob's dining table.

It was quickly followed by a bright peal of laughter, almost — but not quite — drowning out Alex's answering cry of, "You fucking bastard! That was *my* quest. You better share your fucking gold or I swear..."

But Detective Martin didn't seem interested in waiting to find out it was what Alex was about to swear.

Instead, he used the distraction to try and push past Jakob; leaving no question in Jakob's mind that he fully intended to come inside the house, permission or no. He even already had one shiny polished patent leather shoe firmly wedged into the doorway so Jakob couldn't shut the door on him.

At this point, most people's instinct was probably to step back; that old Saturday morning cartoon conditioning kicking in to 'let the police officers do their jobs'.

But Jakob's instincts, however, were *not* that of most people — not by this point in his life.

The detective was brought up short at the barrier of Jakob's cane; weight shifted forward, blocking the doorway as he held it in a steel grip.

"Sir," Detective Martin ground out from between clenched teeth. "Please move out of the way."

"No," Jakob firmly answered him back in the same tone, pasting a politely apologetic smile on his face. "I think this is the point I ask to see your

warrant, right?"

"Let me *in* — "

"No," Jakob repeated, all pretense at politeness evaporating the instant the detective tried to shoulder past him and into his home. "Not even if you huff and puff."

"Sir, this is not a joke. That is my *son* you are holding in there — "

"Not holding anyone," Jakob growled back at him. "It's my house. Get a warrant or go home, but I'm not inviting you in to harass my family and guests. I'll — "

Looking back, Jakob could only remember what happened next in bits and pieces. It was almost like a strobe light at one of Reed's DJ'ing gigs; all flashes and snatches, moments of movement, sound. The peculiar feeling that everything was happening both too fast and too slow, all at the same exact moment.

There was another loud bark of laughter from inside, this time sounding as if Alex had gotten one over on Liam in their game.

The reassuringly solid presence of Ethan, appearing at his shoulder. The warmth; the rumble of the words, "Everything alright, Jakob?"

There was the way Detective Martin twisted as he reached for his hip —

...the angle of his arm, the pull of his shoulder...

Such a familiar movement to Jakob, one he had seen far too many times before —

*...one he **still** saw in his sleep when the dreams got bad...*

The sight of Martin's hands gripping the gun. Jakob's own fingers, stark against the black metal as old training kicked in —

...Reach. Seize. Disarm...

Slow.

So very, **very** slow.

The crack of a gunshot —

...the smell of powder in the air...

A yell —

...*a scream*...

There was someone under him, Jakob's knee in the middle of their back. His hands held their arms in place as they struggled, their face smashed into the ground —

"Dad?"

Cassie.

"Dad," she called, her voice strange. Urgent. "What — what do we **do**?"

Jakob glanced up to see her face, white as a sheet. Looked around to see her friends were in about the same state. And Alex...

Alex was...

"Call an ambulance," Jakob told her, trying to keep his voice as even as he could. "Tell them... Tell them someone's been shot. That a police detective forced his way into our house and shot an unarmed civilian. Give them our address and stay on the line. Do whatever they say, okay?"

She nodded, but hesitated.

"Cassie — now. You need to dial *now*," he told her, trying not to snap but not sure he succeeded. He would apologize later, when —

When —

For now, though, it seemed to do the trick. She gave a sharp nod, pulling out her phone to make the call.

Good girl.

"Alex?" Jakob asked, turning his attention to the teen's near-bloodless face.

Under Jakob, the detective struggled, and Jakob spared a moment to give the squirming detective a vindictive jab with the knee currently pinning him firmly to the ground. He knew his body would make him pay for this abuse later, but he would deal with that when the time came. Right now —

"Where'd he get hit?" Jakob demanded, trying to stay focused, to prioritize; clinging to all his training now with every ounce of his soul.

"Um, in the shoulder, maybe? He's not — I think he's in shock. I'm applying pressure. Is — is that right?" Alex asked from where he had his hoodie pressed tight to Ethan's right shoulder, trying to staunch the bleeding.

"Only... Sometimes they put stuff in shows and video games, and it's all just

made up. But my dad always said... Uh, my — my dad — "

"Look at me, Alex," Jakob ordered him gently. His heart lurched at the devastated look in Alex's eyes as he wrenched his gaze up to meet Jakob's; away from where it had been drifting toward where Alex's father was pinned under Jakob's knee.

"You're doing good," Jakob told him, trying to sound reassuring; like he had a plan. "You got a credit card, something plastic?"

"I — *what?*" Alex asked, startled.

Liam scrambled away, banging his hip on an end table and nearly flying over the couch as he ran.

The detective struggled under Jakob again, but it seemed to be a feeble effort; to all appearances, almost as if he was giving up.

Jakob wasn't fooled. He didn't relax an inch.

"I can't get my wallet right now," Jakob explained slowly, feeling as if he was watching the entire scene from the corner of the room while also being front and center. "But you hear that sound? It's his lung. You need to put something over the wound to seal it, quick as you can."

"Here."

Alex glanced up in surprise as Liam tapped him on the shoulder with a card sleeve from their game. He took the piece of flexible plastic, lifting the now-bloodied hoodie to press it against the gunshot wound before covering it with the sweatshirt again.

"Good. Better. Now — *really* lean into it, alright?" Jakob told them both as reassuringly as he could. He kept one ear on Cassie, listening as she talked to the emergency operator on the other end of the line.

Meanwhile, he could feel his mind spinning out, filled to the brim and beyond with worry and anxiety about Ethan. About being able to hold Detective Martin in place long enough until help arrived. If it would even be help that arrived, and not just more of Martin's cop buddies to make the situation even worse.

Jakob drew a deep breath. Cassie had help coming. Alex would tell them who could be trusted. Jakob just had to keep himself in check for the kids' sake.

For *Ethan's* sake.

"Just — just keep doing that," Jakob told Alex; firmly, calmly. Knowing the kids were watching him, their eyes so wide wide *wide*. "Liam, I need you to go flag down Nash. He served as a nurse; make sure you tell him to bring the big emergency kit. Then you get back here as quick as you can in case Alex gets tired and needs you to take over, alright?"

Liam nodded quickly, already half out the door.

"I won't get tired," Alex protested with all the eagerness of youth; wild, penny-bright eyes flashing in the reflected lights of the Christmas tree as he shook his head.

"Good," Jakob told him, meaning it. "But are you willing to bet Ethan's life on it?"

Alex's face went ashen, as he shakily shook his head *no*.

"Hopefully help won't be long in coming," Jakob said, almost as much to Alex as to himself; counting the seconds ticking by with every beat of his heart as it lay there, bleeding on his floor. "We just gotta hold on..."

Chapter 34

"Are you sure?" Frank asked over the music of steel pan drums that was coming from somewhere in the background on his end of the call.

It was a strangely cheerful sound given Jakob's surroundings, clashing starkly with the potent scent of antiseptic and pure distilled *waiting* that seemed to hang in the air.

"Yeah, I'm sure," Jakob replied, his eyes fixed on the steady rise and fall of Ethan's chest, trying not to imagine how close he'd come to losing him all over again. "Think it'll be a good direction for the ranch, and... You ever have one of those moments where you can just feel the right choice staring you in the face, even when you — you know it's going to be hard?"

There was a long silence from the other end of the phone, punctuated only by the steady soft beeping from the hospital's monitors nearby.

Jakob shifted in the hospital chair, trying to find a more comfortable position and knowing by now it was no use.

"Yeah, Jakob. Think I do at that," Frank finally answered, his tone thoughtful. "Mine came in the form of a lost little boy with the biggest green eyes you've ever seen."

There was a ragged inhalation from Frank's side of the phone, a match to the lump that'd found its way into Jakob's throat.

"Alright — if that's what you want to do with the place, you follow your heart. I trust you. 'Sides, it's practically yours now, anyway. We'll get the lawyers on the horn for next week; make sure you're as protected as we can manage beforehand though. If you're going to go charging off like one of

those old knights from the stories you always used to love so much, all dead set on riding off into battle, then let's at least be certain you've got some decent armor first," Frank said, chuckling at his own joke.

Jakob smiled at the memory.

There was a soft noise from the bed, the twitch of a hand.

"Hey, he's waking up. I gotta go."

"Give him my best," Frank told him with a warm note in his tone. "And tell him I expect to see him *and* this new kid you've picked up when I come for Christmas!"

"I'll do that," Jakob promised, grinning fondly. "And... Frank? Thanks. For... for *everything*."

There was silence again. And then Frank's voice came through the line strong, "Proud of you, Jakob. You've grown into a fine man. Don't ever doubt that. Now you keep me updated on Ethan, alright?"

Jakob stared up at the ceiling tiles, blinking rapidly as he cleared his throat to answer. "Yeah. I will. Talk to you soon."

"Hey," Jakob said, pocketing his phone and turning his attention to a newly awake Ethan.

"Heeeeeeey there, darlin'," Ethan slurred, his warm brown eyes unfocused and hazy from the medicine the doctors had put him on after the surgery. "Where... Where am I?"

"San Morado Memorial Hospital. You, uh — got shot. Been out a couple days. Do you remember any of it?"

"Not... not really," Ethan answered, frowning as he tried to concentrate. "There was... someone at your door, maybe? Gets a bit... *fuzzy* after that."

"That's... probably for the best," Jakob said, reaching out to take Ethan's hand. He struggled not to recall all the hours they'd all spent gathered in the emergency department's waiting room to hear the news, stomach churning from anxiety and awful coffee. Blinking, barely comprehending as the

surgeon went on and on, telling them about missed arteries and massive tissue damage. Seeing Ethan laid out in the hospital bed, his mighty frame all swallowed up and reduced by the stark white sheet and tubes...

Jakob was trying his best not to think about it. He wasn't sure he was succeeding.

It hadn't been anything like in the movies; the hero shrugging off a gunshot wound as easy as a splinter to hop over the bar with a corny one-liner as he casually took the bad guys out. The doctors had said Ethan would be a long time recovering; that there could possibly be lasting impairment, might not ever regain his full range of motion.

For Jakob, it had all sounded far too familiar.

Ethan smiled up at him in that vaguely cheerful way of the drugged or drunk, giving Jakob's hand a squeeze back.

"Can hear the — the gears..."

"The gears turning in my head, right?" Jakob finished for him with a fond smile. "The docs — it's going to be rough the next couple weeks, I won't lie to you. You lost a lot of blood; lotta damage in there, they said."

"How bad?" Ethan asked, a faint frown passing over his face, his brow wrinkling.

"Surgeons spent a long time patching you up. Told me you're missing some of the upper bit of your right lung. Might be some nerve damage too, said they weren't sure to what extent yet. I hate to break it to you, Ethan, but your fastball has likely lost its heat."

Ethan snorted at Jakob's poor attempt at finding some humor in the situation. "Never was much of a pitcher."

"Oh, I'm gonna have to disagree there," Jakob smirked, physically incapable of leaving such a perfect joke just lying there.

Jakob could feel Ethan's thumb rub the back of his hand as Ethan's smile turned into more of a leer in response, tugging at his hand...

"Unfortunately, doc implied it'd be awhile before anything like *that* as well," Jakob warned him with a rueful grin. "Need to take it easy for a bit. Let someone else care for you. I... told them you might come stay with — with us... With *me*. If... If you want to."

"One condition," Ethan said, pointing vaguely in Jakob's general direction with the hand not holding Jakob's; the IV and monitor lines trailing as he gestured. "You gotta promise to wear a nurse's outfit. One of the old British ones — with the little hat and the watch and the heels..."

"I'm already regretting the offer," Jakob huffed, rolling his eyes.

"Hmm," Ethan hummed, the cheerfulness dropping from his face and the worry lines returning. "The uh... the school — um — They say anything?"

"Only that they want you to return — and I'm quoting — 'at your earliest convenience, once you've sufficiently recovered', and that 'your students all miss you terribly'," Jakob grinned, happy to be able to give some good news. "They've sent over three entire bank boxes of 'get well' art. It's all waiting for you at my place. Oh — and your Principal told me to let you know that there's a special 'Welcome Back Mr. Hillsman!' celebration being planned for when you *do* return, but that you're to make sure you act surprised about it for the kids' sake."

"I — uh — *hmm*," Ethan trailed off, his eyes looking suspiciously bright at the news. "And uh... And Alex? How's he doing?"

"Doing as well as can be expected," Jakob answered. "Been in here as often as the doctors will let him. Got him and Cassie set up with a therapist just as soon as the Christmas break is over."

"Why, what happened?" Ethan demanded, suddenly fully alert.

"Ethan... They saw you get *shot*," Jakob reminded him. "That's not an easy thing to just forget. Even before all this... He could do with someone to talk to about it all. Help him process."

"Yeah," Ethan sighed, relaxing slightly as he squinted up at Jakob. "Makes sense. But, really — he and Cassie are okay? They didn't get hurt?"

"Yeah, they're alright physically. You should've seen how well they kept it together. Cassie was on the line with the 911 operator, and Alex kept pressure on your shoulder while I took care of his dad. Listened to make sure your lung didn't collapse; Docs said he saved your life. Hope you weren't planning on flunking him this year."

"Actually, think this might qualify for extra credit," Ethan grinned. "He around?"

"You just missed him, actually. Liam took him home about half an hour ago."

"Who's Liam?" Ethan asked, his brow furrowing in confusion.

"Brother to one of Cassie's friends, goes to some university on the east coast. Helped Alex keep... keep you alive." Jakob swallowed, reaching up his free hand to brush an errant spec of — of *something* from Ethan's cheek. It was the thinnest of excuses to touch him, Jakob would be the first to admit it; to reassure himself that Ethan was alright, that he had survived.

"Oh, I'll... I'll have to track him down. Thank him somehow..." Ethan trailed off, the exhaustion thick in his voice.

"You won't have to work too hard to find him," Jakob told him. "He's been playing taxi cab between classes, bringing the kids here and back to see you. Not to mention I think him and Alex... Well, if they aren't dating yet, it's probably just a matter of time."

"Our Alex, dating a college boy? Don't know if I approve of that." Ethan said with an exaggerated sniff.

"Not sure you get much say in it," Jakob informed him with a wry chuckle. "Only a freshman, though. Got a good enough head on his shoulders, kept it during the incident. And Alex likes him, so that's that. They'll be glad to hear you woke up. Alex especially. He's been... He's been worried about you. We all have," Jakob said, unable to help the rasp creeping into his voice; his throat constricting around the words, threatening to choke them off.

"Hey — s'okay," Ethan said as he gave Jakob's hand another squeeze again. "M right here."

"I know, I *know*. I just... You very nearly weren't," Jakob tried to swallow past the lump in his voice box, struggling to explain it all. "After everything — I'd finally found you again, had a chance to do things right this time. I spent so many years making the wrong choices, going the wrong way — " "Didn't go the *wrong* way. Just... sometimes you — you gotta go the long way." Ethan's voice was tender but worn as he rubbed his thumb over the back of Jakob's knuckles; the warmth of his broad hand in Jakob's own was a reassuring presence. "We were headed here the whole time. Just didn't know it, did we? But we made it, in the end."

"Ethan, I thought — thought after everything, that... I almost *lost* you." Jakob squeezed his eyes shut as he felt tears pricking hot and sharp at the corners; not even caring as he felt the warmth of one sliding down his cheek.

He blinked, startled when Ethan's hand left his. Only to feel the light brush of the back of Ethan's fingers trailing against his jaw; closing his eyes at the sweep of Ethan's thumb as he wiped away the moisture from Jakob's cheek.

He opened his eyes again, only to find Ethan's fond smile directed at him; hardly able to breathe around the thorny knot of emotion churning within his chest.

"Naw," Ethan mumbled. He gripped Jakob's hand in his own once more, fingers squeezing tight before slackening. "Couldn't have lost me. Here's where you are."

"But — "

Ethan's eyes started to flutter shut. His jaw looked fit to crack around a massive yawn as exhaustion began to sink its claws into him once again, pulling him back into the rest his body needed to heal.

"Just got you back, darlin'," Ethan murmured. His voice was thick with sleep; his hand still solid and warm. "'M not going anywhere else..."

Chapter 35

Hero Teacher Shot Saving Students From Home Invader

By Zach Strait

SAN MORADO (WP) — A local teacher is being hailed as a hero after reportedly being shot protecting four teenagers from an off-duty police officer operating outside his jurisdiction, San Morado County Sheriff's Office reported Monday.

Police have identified the shooting suspect as Lou Martin, 37, a Detective Third Grade with the San Morado Police Department. The SMPD has declined to comment at this time.

San Morado County Sheriff Leland Bishop said Monday Martin faces multiple gun and assault charges; including aggravated battery with a deadly weapon, six counts of felony aggravated assault, unlawful discharge of a firearm, reckless conduct, criminal negligence, and endangerment of minors.

Authorities report further federal charges are pending a full investigation into the suspect's activities; including stalking of the victim, forgery of foreign documents, multiple counts of fraud both international as well as domestic, criminal conspiracy, and Martin's possible misuse of his power and position as a police officer.

Further investigation revealed unlawful tracking devices reportedly placed in the victim's coat and vehicle. Authorities say Martin is also a suspect in the breaking and entering of the victim's house, as well as committing several counts of vandalism to the victim's property that same evening.

A series of hacked e-mails and leaked documents have been released by an anonymous transparency activist group calling themselves 'Good Trouble', suggesting that Martin has had illicit dealings or been involved with numerous criminal elements under at least two separate assumed names, including with the notorious organization known only as 'The Syndicate'.

A witness identified the shooting victim as Ethan Hillsman, 39, a well-respected art teacher at San Morado High School and beloved member of his community. He was later taken to a local hospital to be treated for his injuries.

Witnesses report that Mr. Hillsman was visiting the home of a friend when an agitated Martin identified himself as a police officer before illegally forcing his way into the house where children were present.

A single shot was fired, and the homeowner suffered minor injuries during the scuffle to subdue Martin after Mr. Hillsman was shot. No one else was reported injured at the time of the shooting.

In light of the severity of the case and due to the allegations made against him, Judge Anna Hernandez ordered a \$2 million bond for Martin, declaring him a flight risk and that if he pays bond, he will be forced to wear a monitoring device until the conclusion of his trial.

Judge Mewitt has also granted an ex parte order of protection against Martin on behalf of Mr. Hillsman, restricting Martin to stay at least 1000 feet from Mr. Hillsman, as well as from his home, job, and car.

On Wednesday, authorities reported Martin remained jailed in San Morado County, where he has been placed in solitary confinement for his safety.

This is an ongoing investigation.

Chapter 36

Carefully, Jakob shut the door to the oven again, the rows of tree-shaped sugar cookies inside not yet *quite* the color of gold he was looking for.

He could practically hear Frank's voice yelling at him to stop wasting the heat and leave it closed until the timer went off. But Jakob didn't trust the slightly amber tint of the oven's window to tell him if the cookies were ready, or if there was simply a date with a bottle of oven cleaner in his near future.

Plus, getting to enjoy that whiff of baking cookies? Worth it.

He glanced at his phone as it dinged, grinning at the single emoji Cassie sent him of a rather surprised-looking reindeer.

Humming along with Elvis as he sang about his *Blue Christmas* over the kitchen speaker, Jakob looked around for something else to keep him from peeking into the living room.

The results of that might not be as harmless as his intrusion upon the cookies had been.

For lack of better options, Jakob began unloading the dishwasher. Which — it happily turned out — came with the bonus of the noise helping cover the sound of Alex's voice drifting in from the next room that Jakob had been trying so hard to ignore.

Soon enough, the timer dinged, offering Jakob a temporary respite from his chore. He cursed under his breath as he searched for the oven mitts, finally finding them in a drawer of all places, grouching to himself about whoever had put them there.

The slam of the cabinet drawer, while satisfying, also covered all traces of Alex entering the room. Jakob jerked his head up, hand reaching instinctively for —

He grimaced, forcing his body to relax once he realized the sound had only been Alex dragging one of the kitchen chairs out and falling into it with a sulky slump, not...

Guess I'll be taking Dr. Miller up on that offer for an extra session next week, after all. Jakob thought, eyeing the bullet hole in the ceiling still framed by the red police tape from when his house was considered a crime scene. And wasn't that a weird notion? *Need to remember to ask Owen about patching that up. Doubt he'd have time before Ethan gets here, but maybe he can squeeze it in soon.*

"Hey," Jakob greeted Alex once he'd gotten his breathing back to something approaching normal, and his hands had stopped shaking enough to pick up the tray of cookies without risking any falling overboard.

PTSD, the gift that keeps on giving. Just when you think you've finally worked through it...

He shut the oven door, careful not to let it slam before setting the hot tray of still piping hot cookies on the hot pads that were laid out and waiting for him on the kitchen table.

"Give 'em a minute or you'll burn yourself," he warned Alex, seeing the kid's fingers already reaching for the tray.

With a guilty look, Alex retracted his hand, though the scowl never once budged from his face.

Uh oh.

"So..." Jakob prodded over the sound of the sweet nectar pouring as he topped off his coffee mug. "How'd it go? You all ready for this afternoon?"

But Alex just sighed. Which... was answer enough, really.

"Fuck, I'm sorry," Jakob told him as he set down a conciliatory plate of snowball cookies in front of Alex; taking one for himself as he dropped into the opposite chair, careful not to slosh his coffee. "What'd they say?"

"Mom's having a bad day. It's — " Alex gestured vaguely towards the cooling tray of Christmas tree cookies with a heavy sigh, "It's all the holiday stuff

they've got going on at the home for the other residents, like we thought. Said they'll be taking down the decorations start of next week, so... maybe Wednesday?"

Jakob glanced at the slowly growing pile of crumbs building under Alex's fingers as he absentmindedly picked the cookie apart.

"Wednesday then," Jakob nodded decisively. "Be better for you and her anyway, right? None of this holiday pressure. It can be just you and your mom, catching up."

"I... yeah," Alex muttered, blinking at his crumb-covered fingertips as if wondering where his cookie had gone. "Was only... I dunno, feeling the Norman Rockwell holiday bullshit, I guess. But between Ethan not getting released from the hospital until the day after Christmas and this... Fuck me for trying, right?"

"Don't repeat that where Cassie can hear you talking like that," Jakob warned. "Or we'll all be corralled into a full Christmas movie marathon that won't let up until well after New Year's."

Jakob tilted his head, reconsidering his words. *Actually, that doesn't sound half-bad...*

It got a half-hearted chuckle from Alex, at least. "Yeah, she's a regular Santa's elf, isn't she?"

"Her mom and I have made a lot of mistakes," Jakob admitted. "But I think one of the things we did right was our annual Christmas Truce."

"Still can't decide if it's brave of you or foolish, you inviting your exes down for Christmas dinner," Alex muttered, the corner of his mouth twitching up into the ghost of a smirk. "Especially with you and Ethan..."

"Oh, foolish! No question," Jakob chuckled, lifting his coffee cup in mock toast. "Still, it's important to Cassie, and besides — they're family. Cassie's mom and her Papa Reed might not always bring a gift for *me* when they visit, but the thing that matters is that they *visit*. Christmas is a time for peace, and family, and telling embarrassing stories about each other over a plate of cookies and a mug of something warm."

"Sounds nice," Alex muttered, his entire face shuttering as that dark look returned.

"It *is* nice," Jakob agreed, carefully keeping his tone light. "As you'll find out

tomorrow. Everyone's looking forward to meeting you, especially Frank."

"Me?" Alex asked in a small voice, his eyes wide in surprise. "You — You told them about me?"

"Course I did. Told you, Christmas is about family. You're family too."

"But — I *have* a family," Alex protested. "It's just... messed up."

"So's mine," Jakob told him, looking Alex in the eyes. "Until Frank adopted me. And Ethan too, sorta. And Sophia and Reed and Owen and Nash and even a few of Cassie's friends. And now we're adopting you. Call it a family tradition. Sorry, I don't make the rules."

Alex sniffed, glancing away quickly. Though not before Jakob saw something glinting in the corner of Alex's eye. He was silent for a long moment, his breathing loud and uneven in the little kitchen, and Jakob cringed as another of the snowball cookies went the crumbly way of the first. Jakob grimaced, but nudged the plate of cookies toward the kid; trying to remember if he had enough flour to make a new batch...

"What — What am I supposed to do about Mr. Hillsman?" Alex whispered, so quietly that Jakob had to strain to hear him.

"Ethan?" Jakob blinked. "What about him?"

"I don't... What if he..."

Jakob took pity on the kid. "He's gonna be glad to see you, too."

"Not so sure about that," Alex frowned; his eyes focused on the little pile of crumbs in front of him, and the doodle his fingertip was tracing in their remains.

Now it was Jakob's turn to frown. "How so?"

Alex just looked at Jakob as if he'd announced he was taking off to study penguins in the Antarctic. "He got *shot* because of me."

"He got *shot*," Jakob countered, "Because someone decided they had the right to do whatever they liked to whoever they didn't like, and cared about their wants more than the lives and safety of those around them. That the shooter was a cop makes things that much worse. That he was your *father*... means absolutely fuck-all, Alex. You aren't responsible for him or his choices."

"But — "

"Ethan's the *last* person who'd suggest you should serve sentence for what your dad did. He ever tell you about that scar on his lip?" Jakob inquired, knowing the answer even as Alex shook his head *no*. "Go ask him for that story, and then you try telling *him* how a son is guilty for his father's actions."

Alex was silent for a moment, chewing that over.

"And... What about my mom?" Alex finally asked in a small voice that hardly broke at all.

"It isn't about what you do on a specific day, Alex," Jakob told him.

"Christmas is about the people you spend your time *with*. The feeling you get when you're celebrating with your loved ones. And your mom will love spending time with you just as much on Wednesday as she would this afternoon."

"But — "

"December 25th was a number on a calendar chosen by priests to celebrate the solstice eons ago," Jakob explained gently. "Historians say the *Christ* in Christmas might've actually been born in June. And Norman Rockwell? That was an ideal of Christmas. *His* ideal, or at least his editor's at the *Saturday Post*. Not a lot of diversity on those covers, is there? So why should we let those folks tell us when and how we're allowed to be happy? Shouldn't it be enough that we *are*?"

Alex chewed his lip, his fingers toying with another cookie.

"You don't think Cassie will mind?" he asked before taking a bite. "Feel bad asking her to change her plans just to drive me somewhere."

"You kidding?" Jakob chuckled, picking up his mug. "Bet she'll be happy to have an excuse to take my truck off the island. Not that a small bribe wouldn't help your cause."

"A bribe?" Alex repeated incredulously. "What've I got to bribe *her* with?"

"Well..." Jakob considered the matter a moment as he sipped his coffee, before grinning. "She's a fiend for snickerdoodles?"

Chapter 37

"Anybody heard from Cassie?" Jakob asked as he came out of the kitchen and into the main room.

At seeing four equally startled expressions on the faces of Frank, Alex, Nash, and Owen, he felt vaguely guilty; obviously interrupting... whatever it was they had been talking about.

"She offered to run to the store for a can of cranberry sauce for dinner tomorrow," he explained. "But that was nearly two hours ago. If I'd have known it would take her this long, I'd have told her to forget it."

"Maybe they were out?" Nash suggested. "If she's checking over on the mainland, it'll take a while to get across the bridge and back."

"You tried texting?" Alex asked.

"Or calling," Frank added, with the expression of someone who'd rather eat a live fish than text.

"Of course, I've texted her," Jakob said, *trying* not to huff at the help, but... C'mon — that was the *first* thing he'd tried, well over an hour ago. "She's not picking up. She knows she's not allowed to leave the island without permission, either."

"I'm sure she'll be fine, Jakob," Frank told him.

Jakob sighed. "I know. It's just... It's dark, it's cold, it's late, and — and it turns out we don't need it anyway because I just found an extra can tucked in the back of the pantry. Not sure how she missed it this morning when we were double-checking our supplies. I *told* her I'd gotten some at the store last

week..."

Jakob trailed off, his eyes narrowing. Over in the corner, Alex was trying to casually hide behind the older — and more importantly, *shorter* — Frank, a very suspicious expression of total and complete innocence pasted rather poorly on his face...

"Well, then we'll just have two," Cassie's mom declared as she walked in behind Jakob. "What's the big deal?"

"The big deal is that everyone's *here*, Sophia. You know how much she looks forward to this, and now she's missing out," Jakob frowned. "I know she's anxious to lend me a hand, and that she wants everything to be perfect to make up for Ethan not getting discharged from the hospital until after Christmas Day. But a can of cranberries isn't going to make or break Christmas dinner."

"Neither is her getting held up at a busy store and running a few minutes late," Frank told him. "I'm sure she'll be along any moment. Maybe she had some last-minute shopping to do?"

"Maybe," Jakob sighed, rubbing tiredly at his temple. "It's just... she always puts in the seasoning for the Christmas Eve crab boil ever since she was little. It's *tradition*. But I can hear y'all's stomachs rumbling from the other room. I need to start the pot boiling, or at this rate, the crabs are all going to scuttle away."

"I don't mind waiting a mite longer," Frank told him. "I'm sure whatever's keeping her, she's got a good reason for — "

He stopped at the sound of someone coming up the steps outside, footsteps loud on the wooden boards.

"Oh, *finally*," Jakob muttered, relief flooding through him as he moved to open the front door. "No one tell her about the extra can, alright? No sense upsetting her on Christmas Eve, making her think she's wasted all that time..."

But his words were drowned out by a booming voice coming from the other side of the door as it opened; the sound alone stopping Jakob dead in his tracks as it rumbled out a —

"HO HO HO!"

Chapter 38

Jakob froze, arm still outstretched as he reached for the door, by the booming "**HO HO HO!**" coming from just the other side.

And that voice —

That voice was familiar, achingly so. But — But he wasn't supposed to arrive until *after* Christmas Day...

"*Ethan?*" Jakob asked in disbelief as he opened the door, only to be treated to the sight of the very man in question.

The sling was a stark white against the red suit, though not as bright as the white fur trimming. The black boots and red hat were a nice touch, as was the wide black belt with its shiny golden buckle.

The fluffy white beard might be a bit much, however, at least in Jakob's opinion. It was too tickly against Jakob's own scruff as he grabbed a fistful of that cheesy Santa costume and hauled Ethan in for a thoroughly *naughty* kiss.

"Merry Christmas, Dad. Nice to see you too," he heard Cassie saying somewhere off in the distance.

He broke the kiss, ears flaming with embarrassment as he realized he and Ethan had an audience — a third of which was Jakob's exes — for that very public display of affection.

Oops. Acting like a ho ho ho indeed.

"Sorry," he grinned sheepishly. "You, uh — You caught me off guard. I thought your nurses told me you weren't due to be released until after tomorrow?"

"Out early on account of my good behavior," Ethan beamed down at him, his hand warm on Jakob's hips. "Said my tests all checked out, no reason to keep me over the holiday. *I* think it was the cookies your daughter bribed them with before she sprung me."

"Just call me Santa's Little Helper," Cassie laughed as she handed a waiting Alex the bag of groceries she was carrying, as well as the small black duffel they'd brought to Ethan in his hospital room.

She certainly looked the part of Santa's elf; dressed in a green turtleneck, a matching green elf hat trimmed with a spiky red crown perched jauntily on her head.

"Looks like you two put some thought into this escape," Jakob told her, throwing an arm around her shoulders and dropping a kiss on her forehead. "Should I be on the lookout for Nurse Ratched to show up at our door next?"

"If you do, give a yell," Ethan said, widening his eyes to look nervous. "Maybe throw some milk and cookies her way while I flee out the back."

"You two are cute and all, but this elf just drove for three hours today and now I am *starving*," Cassie teased, wearing her oh-so-innocent smile.

"Where's eats, pops?"

"I was waiting for you to get back," Jakob told her. "Grab yourself a cup of eggnog while I carry everything downstairs and we can get it all going. Everyone alright with eating in about an hour?"

"Y'know, I'm pretty confident I remember how to boil water," Frank told him. "Jakob, how 'bout you and Ethan stay up here setting things up? I'll teach the new kid the finer points of island cuisine while the rest of you grab the fixin's. Bring down whatever drinks you care to, and I bet we can have dinner ready in half that time."

"You sure?" Jakob asked, despite the small feeling of relief he could feel threading through him at not having to repeatedly navigate those stairs in front of everyone after such a long day.

"Naw, go on. We've got it," Owen assured him as he picked up one end of the cooler waiting by the door and waved Nash over to take the other. Together, they picked it up as easily as if it wasn't full of ice and beer and sodas; its contents sloshing loudly as they headed for the door.

"C'mon, Seagull," Frank said, slinging his arm around Alex's shoulders as he

turned them to follow. "You and that young back of yours can carry the pot once we've filled it with water."

"I'll find the seasoning mix if you and Mom will get the bowls with the taters and corn?" Cassie asked Reed and her mom. Sophia nodded, turning to trail after Reed as he disappeared into the kitchen.

Jakob caught Cassie's arm before she could disappear, too. "Thanks, kiddo. Not sure how much doing all this took, but..."

"You always said Christmas is a time for family, whatever shape that is," she smiled. "Plus, Ethan still owes me 'loads of embarrassing stories' about you, and I intend to collect!"

Jakob groaned as she gave him a quick peck on the cheek, before following after her mom and Papa Reed, her laughter trailing after even over the slamming of the back porch door.

And so the ragtag crew was marshaled, laughing and chatting as they pulled on thick jackets to head downstairs where Jakob had set things up for the crab boil.

They'd bring the whole mess right back up once it was done to do the actual eating, of course. Still, no sense making the entire house smell like crab boil for the next week. Not when half the fun was standing around the fire, jawing and drinking and warming your hands over the boiling pot while they cooked.

Grabbing a handful of the Santa costume, Jakob dragged Ethan out of the way, pulling him over to the doorway that led off toward the living room and into the house beyond.

"Sorry," Ethan grinned ruefully after they'd gone, their excited chatter occasionally drifting up from the back deck below. "Didn't expect so much traffic on the bridge getting in. We had to go the long way."

"Seems we always do, don't we?" Jakob whispered, smoothing his hands over the cheap red fabric and white faux fur. "Nice duds, Santa. Always did say red was your color."

"Yeah, Cassie's idea. You've got a good kiddo there. I, uh — " Ethan swallowed nervously. "Hope it's alright, me surprising you like this."

"Must admit, might give a guy the idea you intend to keep surprising him for quite some time to come..."

"Long as you'll let me, Jakob," Ethan murmured. "I told you back then — I'd give you everything. All you ever had to do was ask."

"M asking now," Jakob said, fisting his hands in Ethan's costume and pulling him close. "For *keeps* this time."

He tipped his chin up to indicate the sprig of plastic mistletoe someone had taped over the doorframe, flanked by strings of blinking chili pepper lights and jute twine he and Cassie had once strung with seashells; traditions old and new, hanging just above their heads.

"Careful now, darlin'," Ethan whispered, hands coming up to grip Jakob's hips. "A man could get used to this."

"*Good*," Jakob told him firmly as he drew Ethan in for a kiss, his *entire* heart in the word.

Epilogue

The next morning, it was like something out of a movie. One of those kind Alex could only half remember because he'd watched it so long ago; everything familiar, and yet so very strange at the same time.

Cassie had waited until at least the late and lazy of six a.m. before she'd crept downstairs in search of coffee. The squeak of the floorboards as she'd tried to tiptoe past where Alex was sleeping on the couch had been enough to launch him into full wakefulness as well.

She was sharing her room upstairs with her mom, while Frank had claimed the guest room Alex had been using the previous couple of weeks. Jakob's ex-husband Reed had been *supposed* to take the pullout couch in the office that took up the other half of the upper level. But Alex had spotted him hopping into Owen's pickup truck last night when the handyman had left to head back to his own home. He hadn't returned before Nash had headed out for the night and Alex finally fell asleep on the couch, so... Even odds which bed Jakob's ex would wake up in, Alex supposed.

Briefly, he wondered if Liam was awake yet this morning...

He took the cup of coffee Cassie cheerfully held out in his direction, gratefully mouthing a quiet 'Thank you,' at her in return for the caffeinated bliss.

It had a small chip in the side and bore the name of some place called '*Pearl's Po'Boys*', featuring a cartoon of a dapper octopus blowing a kiss.

Alex snorted, then winced, rolling his shoulders in an attempt to work some of the stiffness from his back. He'd been tempted to see if Reed's absence

meant he could trade up from the couch for the night, but...

Cassie had put on the Rudolph movie after dinner last night, and they'd all gathered around to watch. Alex had only been half following along, scrolling through social media on his phone and trying to avoid any spoilers for the newest Relict Saga book.

Somehow, he'd accidentally started listening in on Jakob talking with Ethan, something about swapping the office with his guest room down to the main level. None of Alex's business, really; though he figured offering to help move furniture if Jakob did decide to swap was the least he could do for all the — the *everything* Jakob had done for him the last few weeks. Jakob *said* it was to make things easier on him on account of his leg, and that — that part was fine.

Normal, even.

But *then* Jakob had followed that excuse up by immediately asking Ethan if the school would have any issues with Alex staying at his teacher's place so he didn't have to change schools in the middle of his senior year; or if Ethan thought Alex might rather move in here permanently — or, at least long enough to finish out his school year before moving off to university dorms...

Alex'd had to excuse himself a minute, escaping the picture-perfect scene of holiday bliss in exchange for the quiet of the bathroom in order to get himself back under control. After an entire lifetime of his dad making it pretty fucking clear what a burden he considered Alex to be, especially once his mom's health took a sharp turn; forcing Alex's dad to stop pretending that they were still the most perfect family in the whole suburb...

It had... It had just been a *lot*, alright?

And now here was Alex's teacher, and his teacher's new/old boyfriend, and apparently their entire patchwork family that by all rights *shouldn't* work. Except that somehow it did, and they — they were telling Alex they wanted him to be a part of it too?

What the fuck was he supposed to *do* with that?

(He'd say yes, of course, if they asked. He wasn't *stupid*.)

Alex scrubbed a hand through his hair, trying to put all thoughts of the future out of his mind. The present was already enough to think about, even with everyone over the age of twenty in the house still asleep. He didn't want to

spoil whatever equilibrium he'd managed to claw together over the past few days, worrying how he was supposed to ever repay Jakob and Ethan for their help.

That sounded like a *tomorrow*-Alex problem, at least. Right now, it was Christmas Day Alex's turn.

A Christmas Day Alex who quickly found himself drafted into assisting Cassie and her bottomless sweet tooth; baking chocolate-chip muffins for breakfast in lieu of pancakes, after she'd realized they were out of maple syrup. *Woe and calamity.*

"I still don't get how this all... works," Alex prompted as he dutifully filled the muffin tins with little candy cane stamped paper cups, just as ordered by the Christmas Elf herself. "Jakob, your mom, Reed — I thought exes were supposed to hate each other's guts?"

"I mean... maybe the first year or so was rough," Cassie allowed, measuring out the muffin batter into each cup, careful not to overfill. "But I was so little... I didn't know, did I?"

Alex followed behind her, adding a couple more chocolate chips to the top of each she filled; earning himself an approving smile for his efforts.

"Mom and Dad — they've always been so determined to make sure I knew that whatever shape it took, my family was always there," Cassie told him as she slid the first of the muffin trays into the oven. "That was something Dad never had — not until Grampy, I mean. And sure, it can be a bit too intense sometimes with how hard they try. Which — *Don't* tell them I said that, yeah?"

Alex quickly tried to stamp down the brief flare of jealousy her words had set to twisting in his gut.

"I won't," Alex promised her instead, as green eyes flicked in his direction.

She grinned gratefully back at him as she let the oven door fall shut, the sound loud enough in the sleeping house to make Alex reflexively wince. He was sure the noise had to have woken everyone up, just as he was *almost* as sure that had been the point. But he covered it quickly, pasting on a small smile in return.

"Thanks," she said; pouring some of the chocolate chips straight into her hand, before tipping the bag in Alex's direction. "Poison check?"

"I...What?" Alex blinked at her, confused.

"You can never be too careful when baking," Cassie informed him primly, popping a chocolate chip into her mouth. "Have to sample the ingredients. Make sure we aren't about to poison everybody with the final product, right?"

Her tone might be utterly serious, but her grin as she jiggled the plastic bag at him somewhat gave the game away. Also the fact that the only ingredient she had sampled so far, had been the one made of milk chocolate.

"Right," Alex agreed as he accepted the bag; his grin much more enthusiastic this time around as he eagerly helped himself to a palmful of the little chocolaty morsels.

"Anyway, Mom's dad passed away before I was born, and her mom's an alcoholic," Cassie continued as she leaned against the counter, setting a timer on her phone. "At least, that's what I've pieced together."

"Yeah, that can be rough," Alex muttered, glancing away.

"Guess so. I've never actually met Mom's mom," she told him with a shrug. "Though there was this one time... They tried, she didn't, and eating at a Carolina Fried Chicken place at ten p.m. makes about the saddest Christmas dinner experience you can imagine, the end. I think that was when they decided to always do Christmases here. Together. Even after the divorce."

"And Reed? I mean... he's famous, he's got to have, like, a bajillion holiday parties he gets invited to, right?"

"He's *internet* famous," Cassie corrected. "Don't let the social media feed fool you — when he's not in front of a microphone, he kinda sucks at peopling."

"He seemed fine when I talked to him last night, though."

"Well, first off, he says family doesn't count as peopling — not the kind of family we've got here, I mean. Papa Reed... He's an only child of only children. I think he got used to having some quiet spaces in his life, before he learned to fill them. But you can't keep up that kind of energy without needing a recharge once in a while, right? I think he likes the annual break from the 'always going, always on' day-to-day of his regular life. Maybe that's the part of my Dad he said 'I do' to, back in the day."

"And second?"

"Did he talk about 'the state of pop music' and hot takes on trending topics the

whole time? Or did you manage to crack his shell and get him to nerd out on old radio dramas?"

"Old radio dramas?" Alex echoed, confused. "I mean... the first, I guess — he was going on about Taylor Swift and... Why old radio dramas?"

"Because that's what got him interested in audio, and eventually music. He wanted to be a Foley artist."

"A what?" Alex asked just as the muffin timer went off.

Cassie tossed him a pair of mismatched oven mitts; one with a jolly snowman and a second, slightly more battered mitt covered in line-dancing reindeer.

"You know," she told him as he fetched the muffin tray from the oven. "Back when they did radio plays and they'd use coconut halves to make the clipclop of horse hooves, or shake a baking pan for thunder? That."

"Oh," Alex said, tilting his head as he watched her poke a muffin with a toothpick. "Um... How do you get into something like that?"

"No idea," she laughed over the screeching of Alex loading the second tray into the oven. "The funny thing is, neither did he. I mean, movies obviously need sound effects, and now there are podcasts and video games too. But he still wasn't sure how to break into something like that, though; so he just began making music with his sounds instead and put them online. Somehow he found an audience, and... I think all the rest kind of surprised him."

Alex shifted out of the way as she leaned over to grab one of the steaming muffins from the tray on the counter beside him. Bouncing it between her hands as she tried to peel the paper cup off without burning herself, Cassie looked a bit like a cartoon character. Her expression turned rapturous as she took a small bite — for about five seconds before frantically fanning her mouth and reaching for a nearby glass of water.

Studiously keeping his face diplomatically neutral, Alex tore off pieces of his own muffin so it would cool faster before he took a bite. He *didn't* account for the pockets of melted chocolate still being so hot, however, huffing and swearing until a cold glass was pressed into his hand.

"Thanks," Alex wheezed at a smirking Cassie after he'd drained it dry.

"No worries," she told him, already peeling the paper off her second — still steaming — muffin. "Anyway, Papa Reed says he likes being able to celebrate something honest and real with people he cares ab— "

They glanced up as one at the sound of Jakob's door cracking open, footsteps faintly padding towards them down the hall, heralding Mr. Hillsman's arrival. He was still in sleep pants and a T-shirt, his hair looking like a hedgehog's nest.

Rubbing his bleary-eyed face, he blinked at them both for a moment before huffing. "Nothing in the world as loud as a teenager trying to be quiet," before heading back in the direction of the bedroom. There came the sound of a door closing softly shut behind him, and then the bolt of a lock sliding firmly home.

"So, uh..." Alex glanced up to check Cassie's expression. "What do you think they're — "

"Nope," she said, shaking her head. "Nopenopenope, not going there. Just shut up and eat your muffin."

"Si, tía," Alex grinned, doing just that.

Nervously, Alex watched as Cassie carefully sorted through the tiny presents, handing them out one by one as she spotted the names written on the side.

"They aren't much," he muttered as he felt his ears flush, now furiously sure he shouldn't have bothered. "I, um... didn't know what everyone might like, so..."

Cassie squealed as suddenly Alex found himself with a face full of copper hair as he was pulled into a massive hug.

"You got Shadow perfectly right!" she marveled, turning the little miniature around to show Jakob. "Look Dad — he's painted her back left stocking and the crook in her blaze!"

"Careful," Alex murmured. "Had to change the base figure a bit; the ponytail and cowboy hat are a bit of an after-market job..."

She cradled the tiny vaquera figurine he'd painted of her in her palm, her grin practically splitting her face.

"OMG, yes — I will, I promise. Thank you, Alex, I love it," she said, dropping a kiss on his cheek before bouncing over to show the figure to her

mom.

"This... is the view from the back porch, right?" Nash asked, and Alex tried not to wince, not for the first time wondering if it hadn't been too much of an ego trip, giving his little paintings and miniatures as gifts.

After everything Jakob and Ethan had done for him, he knew there was no way he could show his face this morning empty-handed. The thing was, he didn't have much else on him to make presents for everyone. Nor had he known enough about the eclectic group to know what each person coming would like. So...

He'd tried his best, and that had to count for something, right?

Mr. Hillsman had been easy. Sometimes he would come by the library where Alex and his friends would be playing a game of Towers & Terrors, bringing along his paladin character as a temporary support boost. Alex had bought the little knight figure months ago with this in mind, but hadn't been sure how to paint him until last week. The red hair and scruff of a beard had been an obvious choice. Changing the sword he leaned on to a cane had been a last-minute adjustment, but still quick enough. The emblem on the shield had been the bit Alex had been stuck on, though. Right up until last night, in a fit of inspiration, he'd painted it in a wash of bright blue, a seagull soaring across its face.

He wasn't sure Mr. Hillsman would get it. To be honest, he had butterflies squirming around in his belly at the prospect of having to explain, but... Alex thought Ethan might appreciate it all the same.

And really, wasn't that the important thing?

Jakob had been somewhat harder. But after spending the last few days riding with him back and forth to the hospital to visit Mr. Hillsman, Alex had noticed the way that the little lines around his eyes had relaxed just as soon as his ranch came into view. Alex thought he could sort of understand the feeling. That first glimpse the day Jakob and Ethan arrived to rescue him was still pretty fresh in his mind.

So Alex had painted that onto one of the blank hex cards he had in his miniatures kit; the ones he and his friends sometimes used in their games as spare land pieces, or points of power. The curve of the glittering ocean, the open blue sky above, the lip of the ridge with the road winding up to draw the eye to the ranch itself; sitting pride of place by the old red barn, horses

grazing around it as seabirds flew above.

Vincent had approved, at least, when Alex had sent him a photo of the piece when he was done. Still, Alex's friend had never laid eyes on the ranch before. The real question was, would *Jakob* like it... ?

Frank and Reed and Cassie's mom he didn't know well enough to personalize their gifts. But it was their family Christmas he was crashing, which meant he needed *something*. Alex figured they must all be coming back to the island for a reason though, so he decided paintings of different views around the property were probably a safe enough bet. Maybe it was a little trite, but — Who didn't enjoy a scene with a glimpse of an ocean or the beach? It seemed good enough for a last-minute Christmas gift, at least.

After all that, Cassie's vaquera had been the present he'd been the least anxious about gifting, all told.

"Look, he caught that gleam she gets when she's focused," Cassie's mom said, smiling as she gently held the vaquera out for Jakob to examine.

"Is yours from the barn, looking back at the house?" Reed asked a nodding Frank, peering at his miniature painting and then down at his own. "Then... I think mine's from the opposite direction; from the upper deck and out across the bay towards San Morado, right?"

"OMG, *Ethan* — Your paladin even has a little white stripe in his beard just like Dad's got!" Cassie giggled excitedly.

"Told you he was good," Alex heard Ethan murmur to Jakob as he held out the red-headed paladin for inspection.

"Good?" Nash huffed. "If soccer doesn't work out, you've got a solid fallback here, Alex. This detail is amazing."

"You said you paint too, right Ethan?" Cassie's mom asked. "Your kid seems to be a regular chip off the ol' block. You must be very proud."

The rebuttal prickled in the back of Alex's throat almost instantly. But then he heard Mr. Hillsman's quiet, "I am," along with the grin beaming like a lighthouse on his face, and...

Alex flushed, swallowing the words down and allowing himself to simply enjoy the glowing feeling spreading through his chest *that* had sparked, unwilling to spoil it by correcting them both. Maybe... maybe he could pretend, for just a while then. Surely that couldn't do any harm? Spend the

morning imagining what it would be like to really be a part of *this* family, instead of...

"Thank you, son," Frank said, his voice low and raspy as he threw an arm around Alex's shoulders; nodding at the miniature painting in his hand. "The seagull's a nice touch."

"It's not too much? I — I added it last night. Was afraid the paint might not dry, but..."

"It's perfect," Frank assured him, a twinkle in the corner of his eye.

"It's so good!" Cassie chirped, coming up behind them to peer over Frank's shoulder at the painting. "And now everyone can have a little piece of the ranch with them, even when they're away!"

"An Alex original, too," Reed said, examining the back. "Don't let me leave here before you've signed this. These are really fantastic. You be sure and tell me if you ever take commissions, all right? This would make a great album cover... *If* I was willing to let loose the social media mob on Jakob's horses, that was; trampling over everything all trying to take the perfect selfie, which — *no*."

"Much appreciated," Jakob muttered, looking grim just at the prospect.

"But the *style*..." Reed glanced up, the little painting held gently between his fingertips. "Do you think you could paint a scene of the boardwalk downtown, or the docks over by Chance's Beach?"

"I... could try, Mr. Reed," Alex told him. "I'd have to see it first."

"Oh, of course!" he said, his eyes widening in surprise. "You haven't been over there yet? It's usually the first place people go when they come to the island. There's a fantastic little cafe down by the statue of Captain Chance. Does these soft-shelled crab po'boys that are just to *die* for."

"It's been a bit... exciting around here," Jakob explained, a rueful grin teasing at his lips. "And Pearl won't be putting soft-shelled crabs on the menu until spring; March or April, usually."

"She still open?" Ethan asked, looking surprised and not just a little wistful. "I remember she used to serve up the best gumbo..."

"We should go for lunch tomorrow," Cassie's mom suggested. "It's been a while since I've been by, and she makes the most amazing beignets I've had

outside of New Orleans. Plus, I like her oyster po' boys better than the crab, anyway."

"Nooo," Cassie mock-wailed, the effect rather overridden by her laughter. "Such sacrilege, and from my own mother! What utter betrayal!"

Alex grinned at their antics, feeling like something was unfurling in his chest he hadn't realized was tucked so tightly away. He chewed his lip, wondering if he could paint this moment; the warm glow of the room, the grins on everyone's faces, the splashes of color from the bits of gift wrap debris strewn everywhere, all bathed in the blinking lights of the Christmas tree.

There wasn't any way to capture the laughter though, the Christmas music playing softly in the background. How could paint convey Cassie's movements as she told a story using her vaquera to illustrate the tale; jumping the little figurine high over some obstacle as her parents — *all* of her parents, and her Grampy too — watched her with a soft look on their faces?

It was a damn sight better than the cold Christmases he'd had the last few years. The ones his dad made such an effort to ignore; volunteering for the holiday shifts, before coming home and falling right into the bottle.

Alex wasn't sure, but he knew he didn't want to forget this moment either. He might not know what the future had in store for him, or even where he'd be this time next year, but...

He had this, at least. Now. Today. He would drink it in and hold it close, and maybe... Maybe it could be enough to see him through whatever was to come after.

"Jakob," Frank said softly, so low Alex almost didn't hear.

Almost.

But he did, and Jakob did too; looking up to follow his stepfather's gaze, a wide grin abruptly splitting his face as he spotted whatever it was he was searching for.

"Nearly forgot something," he announced, attention turning Alex's way.

"Alex, there's two more presents under the tree, there in the very back. Get them for me, would you?"

"Um, sure thing," Alex said, suddenly feeling all the eyes in the room on him. The reactions to his gifts had been... well, pretty overwhelming, really. He

wouldn't mind a minute or two in his own head to just... process that; rather than getting artificial pine bits up his nose and in his hair. But it's not like it was easy for Jakob to reach all the back here under the tree, was it? Not with that knee of his.

"Got 'em!" Alex finally said, snagging both boxes and pulling himself out from underneath the tree.

"They were both *really* wedged under there," he told Cassie, sitting back on his heels. "No wonder we missed them earlier."

"Who are they for?" she asked in a tone so innocently sweet that Alex immediately narrowed his eyes, quickly searching each of the gifts for a tag.

"Um... me?" he answered her, unsure. "There's no 'From' name though..."

"Who cares?" Frank chuckled. "Open it Seagull. Don't keep us all waiting."

"I, uh... Okay?" Alex weighed both boxes, feeling the heat flushing up his neck from all the scrutiny.

"Green box first," Jakob told him, his voice sure and low as he nodded at the flat rectangular box in Alex's right hand.

With a jerky sort of nod, Alex tucked the smaller box wrapped in sparkly gold paper under his arm, before carefully opening the present Jakob had indicated.

It felt like the entire room was holding its collective breath as he pulled the red ribbon free and tore through the green paper patterned with tangoing polar bears. The box inside took him a moment; one of those kind that fit into the other, but with a stubborn bit of tape that refused to come away in one piece. He ended up slicing it with the side of his thumbnail, opening it to reveal —

Alex swallowed, looking up at a beaming Jakob, then at Cassie and — and Frank and —

"Go on then," Reed whispered. "Show us what you got."

It... was truly hideous, really. Something no one with eyes could possibly look at and think 'Oh, yes — I simply *must* have that on my mantle.'

Somewhere in the glued-on array of googly eyes and glittery metallic pipe cleaners, amidst the tiny bells and beribboned fringe and fuzzy, fluffy balls; someone had written his name in big block letters with neon yellow puff

paint, right at the very top.

It was a stocking.

It was a stocking that looked like a craft store barfed on it.

It was a stocking that definitely, certainly, one hundred percent was nothing no one would ever in a million years would *choose*.

And right at that moment? It was the thing Alex wanted most in the entire world.

"Dad said he wasn't sure if you'd prefer Alex or Alejandro," Cassie said, kneeling down next to him as she cast a weather eye over her handiwork.

"But you use Alex, and I'll be honest — I wasn't sure I could center the longer version, and I needed to go pick up Mr. Ethan. So..." Cassie trailed off as Alex turned, staring at her.

"Um... Is it okay?" she asked, biting her lip. "I — I think I can change it if you want it to say Alejandro, inst— *oh!* Oh, we're hugging, are we?"

Yes, they were hugging, because Alex wasn't certain he trusted himself to speak right at that moment. He sure didn't trust himself to keep looking at her anxiously hopeful face. Or the soft looks that Jakob and Mr. Hillsman, and — and *everyone* was giving him right then, watching as Alex unwrapped the ugliest stocking on the planet that — that looked —

"It's just like all of ours," she whispered, gesturing towards the others' stockings all pinned in a line halfway up the big bay window looking out over the ranch and the ocean beyond. "See?"

"Yeah," Alex told her. He did see.

None of the stockings are perfect, Jakob had said. They aren't supposed to be — because none of us are perfect. But she made each of them just as unique and special as the people they're for, and... I've always thought that makes them pretty magical, all together like that.

And, sure — it was just as corny now as it had been the first time, but —

"Wait," Alex said, frowning. "There's — There's something hard in the toe..."

He tipped the stocking over, shaking it two or three times before he couldn't take it anymore, reaching inside the stocking to pull out —

"A... A key?" Alex asked, looking up at Jakob.

Jakob glanced over at Mr. Hillman where Alex's teacher had his arm across the other man's shoulders, then turned back to Alex with a grin.

"Not sure if you have plans for your spring semester yet. Figure you, me, and Ethan should sit down and talk over your options in the next couple of days. But whatever you choose to do, you've got a place here if you ever need it, for as long as you care to stay." Then Jakob's mouth twitched up in a grin.

"Just let me know if I should make a store run for extra coffee and stuff before you arrive if you can, alright?"

Alex nodded shakily, sniffing as he rubbed his nose.

Fucking dusty in here all of a sudden...

"What's the other gift?" Mr. Hillsman, leaving Alex to blink at him blankly for a moment as his brain tried to figure out what he meant.

"Oh!" Startled by Cassie's tapping on the present in question, Alex pulled it out from under his arm, welcoming the distraction. Carefully, he set the box with the stocking down beside him, pocketing the key in his jeans before tearing into the second gift.

He braced himself as he opened the box, ready for some new level of —

"A star?" he asked, picking the item up from its cushion of red tissue paper and examining it curiously. It was large and painted golden, with a swirling sort of tapered spring at its base, like...

"Newest addition to the family always puts the star on the tree," Frank told him, leaning back into the couch and looking pretty pleased with himself.

"Them's the rules."

"But — But *Mr. Hillsman* — " Alex protested, gesturing with the star toward his teacher's arm in its sling.

"Handed his turn off to Owen and Erik ages ago," Mr. Hillsman said, shaking his head. "Even before Cassie came along."

"Well, but *she* — "

Alex turned, looking for help, only to find Cassie smirking delightedly at him. "Passed my turn over to Papa Reed..."

"Who was quite happy to relinquish the deed to Nash two years ago..."

"And now I get to induct *you*," Nash finished, grinning widely.

There really was no arguing with them, as it turned out. Which was how a mystified Alex found himself balancing on one of the old wooden kitchen chairs; Frank steadying him as he lifted up to his tiptoes to crown the tree with the Christmas star.

The whoop Mr. Hillsman made once it was on startled Alex enough to nearly send him flying. Frank's surprisingly strong grip and the back of the chair under Alex's fingers had been the only anchors that kept him from falling, and possibly busting his ass.

Good thing too. That would have been fucking embarrassing after all the attention today. Alex was feeling pretty well top-loaded at this point. Any more and he might roll over and crash into a blazing inferno of pure mortification.

Still, as he helped Cassie clean up the living room; listening to the sound of Reed and Cassie's mom harmonizing with Frank's baritone, all singing carols together as Jakob finished the final touches on their dinner? Everyone all laughing and talking, like — like —

*Like a real family. Like a **real** Christmas.*

Like a damn far cry from any of the previous Christmases Alex could remember.

Absently, he watched Mr. Hillsman duck into the kitchen, then glanced away quickly as he stole a kiss from Jakob when they thought no one was looking. Mock-scowling at Cassie as her wadded-up ball of wrapping paper hit Alex dead center of his head, listening to her laugh...

Alex couldn't help but grin as a sense of satisfaction wove its way through his belly; the shape of the key in his pocket warm and anchoring. There was an odd feeling slowly washing through his chest too. Something strange and beautiful and precious, for all that it was so new and fragile too. And yet, still it threaded through him all the same. A feeling that, though his path had meandered the long and winding way; maybe, possibly, he just might have found that he was finally —

Home.

Want to see why Alex and Cassie make pretty good wedding planners? Read
the bonus epilogue: To Have and To Hold

A Sneak Peek from

Rules of Play

A CHANCE'S HARBOR NOVEL

AJ PINES

Rules of Play
A Chance's Harbor Novel
(Sneak Preview)

Quarantine Day 4

Ian

"*We're not fucking,*" Alex mumbled that morning into his pillow when Ian woke him up; running his knuckles along Alex's bicep until he was lucid enough to answer Coach's text requesting the team's breakfast orders.

"*We're not fucking,*" Alex grunted when he'd caught Ian staring; fresh out of the shower with only the hotel's tiny excuse for towels clutched low on his hips; the swell of his ass a hypnotizing curve as he'd rooted around in his duffel for the cleanest of his remaining clothes.

"*We're not fucking,*" Alex replied in lieu of an answer when asked if he wanted Ian's soda at lunch; though he'd still accepted the cola that had been left with their food just outside the room door, instead of the lemonade Ian had ordered.

Ian had woken up that morning hard enough to drive nails. Maybe harder than he'd ever been before in his *life*. He'd washed the visions of dark hair and plush lips and wry smirks from his eyes along with the sleep, but the effects had remained long into the day.

So Alex's constant reminders of what Ian *couldn't* have; especially after now having learned what lay so temptingly in reach?

Not. Helping.

He'd been fine when Alex was just another guy, just another teammate, just another...whatever this fucked up quarantine situation made them.

Roommates? Sure. *That* had been fine, too.

It's not that Ian hadn't *noticed* Alex. It was hard not to. He sure wasn't some shy wallflower; when he had an issue with someone on the team, he wasn't exactly quiet about it. Bitingly sarcastic from the sidelines, occasionally explosive, devastatingly accurate in pinpointing a person's insecurities? Not usually something Ian would find hot, but... The way Alex had practically weaponized it, and *then* treated that weapon as something to only be used as a last resort when a teammate was truly being an ass?

Sure, maybe that shouldn't do it for Ian. It's not like he's ever claimed to be well-adjusted.

Not to mention that Alex was what Ian's friend Malcolm once referred to as 'sex on legs', though he'd been describing some girl he'd hooked up with at a party the night before. The term still fit Ian's tastes in partners well enough, even when said legs were of the less dainty and more masculine variety.

With all the running they did, Alex's legs, in particular, were very well-muscled indeed. Of exactly the sort Ian was currently trying not to imagine wrapped around his waist; firm and flexing under Ian's hands as Alex straddled his lap, interrupting Ian's poor attempts at meditation as they...

Well. He was nine kinds of Ian's type, is the point — if Ian *had* a type. He didn't find attraction as...nuanced as some of his classmates seemed to. Vanessa had called him "pathetically desperate for connection" during one of their many fights, but Ian? Unless the person was obviously a complete dumpster fire, there was usually *some* appealing quality or other about them Ian could easily be tempted by.

Alex didn't walk around preening like a lot of folks did, something Ian had found a total turnoff in some of his previous relationships. He was clever, funny, determined... And all wrapped up in a package like *that*, able to keep Ian on his toes on or off the pitch?

Hng. He had appealing qualities in *spades*.

Which is why, maybe, Ian had generally kept his distance from the new kid, even as team captain. Because he knew that when he fell, he fell hard.

But Alex was — or so Ian had thought — safely *straight*. Right up until their mutual revelations last night, Ian had found security in that knowledge. That despite being thrown into quarantine together like this, sharing such a small space for so long; there was no chance, he'd told himself. He's just the same as any other guy on the team.

But now? All that had been turned on its head. Now Alex was possibility *itself*. Was it any wonder Ian was finding it hard to get his center back?

He glanced over at Alex's bed, where he was lying on his stomach, tongue between his teeth, as he typed away on the laptop in front of him. Neither one of them had bothered to shave since this whole thing had started, and the black scruff that he was starting to grow... It worked for him, actually.

A sudden curl of curiosity kicked hard through Ian's belly, the wordless question of how that scruff of a beard would feel on Ian's inner thighs...

"*We're not fucking,*" Alex muttered without ever looking up from his screen.

Hurriedly, Ian snapped his eyes front and center and tried to look as if he hadn't been staring. Again. As if he'd never broken his meditation the whole while. In his lap, his cock twitched unhelpfully; hard and heavy against his thigh.

Not. HELPING. Ian huffed quietly at it.

He rolled his shoulders and stretched his neck, before trying *once more* to clear his mind of distractions. *Especially* those sorts of distractions that, only a few short hours ago, had admitted — quite explicitly — just how much they enjoyed taking cock.

Ian huffed again. *Yes*, he was finding it hard to get his center back. He glanced down at his lap, and the obvious tent there.

Very, *very* hard.

No. He could do this. He could find that place inside himself, the one that was peaceful and quiet — he'd done it a thousand times before. He just needed to close his eyes, see the green leaves lightly dancing in the treetops overhead; sunlight playing gently across the dappled canopy, watch them swaying with each breeze, growing towards the sun, absorbing and nourishing...

*What if Alex isn't warning you away, though? a stray thought intruded. What if he's trying to convince **himself**?*

Ian's eyes flew open.

NOT. FUCKING. HELPING.

Ian sniffed at his shirt, then at the one in his other hand. Even doing nothing more than sleep and study in their hotel room, his clothes were starting to reek. He'd only packed for two days after all; his game uniform, and then what he'd worn on the plane.

Well, shirtless it was then. Boxers posed a bit more of a problem; their uniform shorts were comfortable enough to go free balling, but with the new kit design this year it was closer to Free Willie. Normally Ian wouldn't care, but... Not much about the last few days had been exactly normal.

"Hey Alex," Ian said, turning towards —

Hng.

Fucking hell, he really needed to get a hold of himself. This 'no jacking off' bet of theirs was ruining his brain. Alex wasn't even doing anything particularly suggestive, just...playing a damn video game.

Creatively.

~Yeah — upside down on the bed, flat on his back, head hanging off the mattress right at cock height, knees up and splayed with his feet planted wide...~ whispered a little voice in the back of Ian's mind.

At least four positions sprung instantly to Ian's mind, and with another five minutes and a bit of imagination, he was pretty sure he could double that count. Maybe triple.

Ian knew he was allo as fuck, but there was absolutely no call for Ian's cock to so constantly be a dick about it. It was just... It was this damn bet. Had to be. Or...the constant proximity. *Boredom*, even — take your pick.

Maybe Malcolm's right. Maybe I should just cough up the money for the cleats and go rub one out, before I go completely crazy.

~You know he'll never let you live it down if you do.~ the voice sneered.

Not sure I'll survive much longer if I don't, Ian scowled.

"*Ian,*" Alex said, with the irritation of someone who was repeating themselves. "You need something?"

Yeah, you, Ian swallowed back as unhelpful.

"Just...you gonna mind if I do some laundry in the bathroom?" he asked instead.

Alex's answer was obvious from the disgusted expression on his face. Ian didn't even need to hear the "*Ew.*" that went along with it to recognize a solid veto when he got it.

"Keep your tighty-whities out of our sink. *Gross,*" Alex replied, before his features smoothed out, turning thoughtful. "Where're you going to dry them? They'll take forever just hung up in the bathroom."

"Was planning on using the tub, asshole," Ian frowned. Still, Alex had a point. The room's window was bolted shut. No doubt for some safety precaution, and not the conspiracy to deprive Ian of anything close to fresh, unrecycled air that it *felt* like. Still, it meant there would be no hope of hanging their laundry out, even if they had something to use as a line to dry it on.

"Y'know, I could use fresh stuff too," Alex mused, flipping over onto his stomach as he considered Ian's puzzle. "Didn't bring much with me. About out of toothpaste; only brought one of those shitty travel-sized ones. Bet that goes for the whole team, actually."

"Maybe Coach has a plan?" Ian offered.

"Text him," Alex shrugged, turning back to his video game. "Let's find out."

Quarantine Day 5

Alex

"Alright, thank you," Alex said mechanically as the masked hotel staff member walked away with the mesh bags holding their laundry.

It turned out Coach did have a plan. One he'd let them all in on during last night's team video meeting; telling them to send him a list of any specific needs, but that they could all look forward to a care package this morning — including a few treats from home.

Ian had let out a whoop even as Alex's heart sunk; feeling strangely untethered as he watched the grid of his teammates all hooting and hollering at the news.

Alex stared down at the box in his hands, brightly done up all in the team's colors. That same oddly unmoored sensation flashed through him as his mind absently noted the toiletries and treats within, nestled all cozy in their crimped paper nest.

"Oh hey, you got...doubles?" came Ian's voice over Alex's shoulder, that last word coming out particularly curious. "*Huh.*"

"Yeah," Alex forced out, just as he forced his feet to move him out of the entryway to sit on his bed.

It wasn't... He wasn't ungrateful. Someone had obviously put in the effort to make their care packages festive, even cheerful; packed it with general necessities, school swag, junk food, jerky, and enough sweets to launch him firmly into a sugar coma. It's just...

*¡Feliz cumpleaños míjo,
Te amo mucho!*

Happy Birthday, my son, said the typed note that had been left on the top of the box's contents. *I love you very much!*

It was February. Still cold enough that when whoever had put these boxes together had called up his mother's nursing home for ideas, she must have thought it was for his birthday. In December.

At least they spelled everything right. That wasn't always a given, even in Texas.

Wonder if they tried to call dear ol' Dad? Must've been a shock to get the prison.

With twenty-nine other players on the team, all no doubt getting their own care boxes from home, whoever in the booster club had organized this thing probably hadn't done more than call the contact numbers listed for each player's parents on the school forms for ideas. Alex had only been able to list Ethan and Jakob as his emergency contacts, and it wasn't as if this would have counted as an emergency.

At least...he *hoped* no one had called them. Hoped this wasn't their idea too.

It's not like he didn't know what to expect, was it? It's not like it was a surprise that when it came to Alex's parents, a lot was left to be desired.

But he'd seen the other box when he'd taken it from the staff member to pass it back to Ian's waiting hands. Felt how heavy it'd been too; piled so high you couldn't see the paper bedding at all, wrapped in plastic and tied with a bow to keep it all from falling out.

He hadn't gotten any doubles that Alex had noticed. Ian's care package hadn't needed *filler*.

"Here, you've got to try this," Ian said, the mattress bouncing under him as he dropped to sit right next to Alex. *Right* next to him; so close his thigh was touching Alex's own, skin warm on bare skin.

Very bare skin, Alex realized, abruptly waking up to the fact that Ian was...

"Why are you *naked*?" he very much did not squawk, fuck you.

"Laundry day," Ian shrugged. As if that explained anything.

When Alex had passed along Ian's laundry to the hotel staff member, he hadn't really been paying attention to his roommate. Or rather, he'd been trying furiously *not* to pay attention. As if it hadn't been bad enough having to watch Ian prancing around mostly naked yesterday; the lean lines and muscled planes of his body on full display like a walking advertisement of everything Alex wanted but couldn't touch...

Not to mention the shorts from their kits did *nothing* to hide the fact Ian was going commando as a way to deal with his clothing shortage. And it...it

really shouldn't have made a difference. They'd both been wandering around and sleeping in their underwear the past few days.

But even in only his boxers, Alex couldn't see Ian's cock when he was sprawled out in the room's single chair. In his kit shorts — slumped low, laptop on his belly, one foot planted on the bed as he typed with his knee bent at just the right angle — Alex got an entire eyeful of what Ian was packing if he wasn't careful.

It had been...*impressive*, even soft. For the sake of his own sanity, Alex was trying not to imagine what it would look hard. What *Ian* would look like, with that same intensity he showed on the field, suddenly all focused on Alex as he...

Alex swallowed, staring so firmly at the wall across from the bed he was surprised there weren't any char marks starting to form; *feeling* his eyes slide almost unwillingly towards the side where Ian sat, unable to resist a glance.

Holy. Fucking. Shit.

He shifted, his body enthusiastically weighing in *its* opinion on the subject extremely close to — one now very sweaty — hand.

"Come on," said the entirely too naked man next to him currently trying to ply Alex with...

"Peanut brittle?"

"Yeah. Mom gets it from these two ladies who come to one of the seniors' classes she holds at her yoga studio," Ian answered. The fondness was so clear in his voice, that it made something in Alex's chest grow warm.

"They've been dropping off a batch every week since she hosted their thirtieth wedding anniversary at the studio last year. I think they still feel bad for knocking over her plant or something. Apparently, the party got pretty wild."

Alex bit his lip, considering. Before reaching for a piece from the tin Ian was holding out; the navy and white snowscape and sleigh design somewhat incongruous here in February.

But then, Alex paused.

"We're...We're not fucking," he rasped out, the words becoming a flimsier defense each time he said them; worn so thin now Alex felt as if he could probably see daylight through the meager scraps that were left.

"I *know*," Ian huffed; rolling his eyes so hard his head came with them, face tilting to throw Alex a *Look*. "Don't worry. You've made it completely clear how repulsed by me you are. Usually, while you're sprawled out like some sex kitten on your bed, I'll add, which is *stupidly* unfair. I'm well aware I've got no chance with your magnificent ass. It's only peanut brittle. No strings attached, I promise. Just... *try* it, alright?"

Alex stared at him in shock.

Not only was that the *most* words Alex thought he'd ever heard Ian string together at once speaking to him, but... This was *Ian* they were talking about; Mr. Green Shakes and Yoga Breaks, always so fucking perfect and on time, not even a hair out of place if he doesn't want it to be. Calls every shot, makes every pass, gets any girl that he could wish on the whole damn campus.

Or...or *person*, it seemed, which was *still* doing Alex's head in. Ian... He and Malcolm were practically the hetero poster boys, leading an entire team full of them. Alex would honestly have been surprised they hadn't also pledged a fraternity, if between practice and classes and practice and sleep and yet even more practice, any of them had ever had the extra time.

He wasn't supposed to be anything like Alex — He wasn't supposed to *like* anyone like Alex. All joke-that-wasn't-really-a-joking aside, Ian wasn't actually supposed to be *interested* in...

"We're not fucking," Alex found himself repeating in a low voice, his mouth gone wholly dry shaping the words now slipping free of his tongue. "*But* — " Out of the corner of Alex's eye, he could see Ian's head whip around to him at that. But he kept his focus on the tin still being held out, gingerly taking a piece of the peanut brittle with fingers now strangely numb.

"*But?*" Ian breathed softly next to him.

"But if we *did*," Alex said, testing out the words as his thumb traced along the sharp and broken edges of the treat. "If... if that's something you'd even *want*, I mean — "

"I want," Ian interjected with the speed and conviction of the truly horny.

Boldness surged within him then and Alex allowed himself to turn, to openly appreciate the man sitting next to him. No longer restricted to furtive glances; eyes roaming over every inch of him, drinking Ian in. And — just for a moment — he let himself wonder... What might it be *like* to be wanted? Not

merely endured or shoved into a shape someone found useful; to be *chosen* out of more than simply curiosity, or boredom, or convenience?

He bet *Ian* knew all about being wanted. This close; those intense brown eyes focused solely on him, thigh warm and firm against his own, the curve of his body as he waited — *listening* to what Alex had to say?

Alex was having trouble imagining why anyone *wouldn't* want Ian.

Was having trouble, right at the moment, remembering why *he* shouldn't want Ian.

Aw, fuck it.

"Then... " Alex licked his lips. "There would have to be some rules..."

Alex's story continues in...

Chance's Harbor:

Rules of Play

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If you enjoyed *Chance's Harbor: Go the Long Way*, be sure to tell your friends so they can discover the story of Jakob and Ethan too.

No matter where you picked up your copy of *Chance's Harbor: Go the Long Way*, if you leave a review there, on Amazon, Goodreads, or on your own blog, I would love to read it! Email me on the contact page as ajpines.com or just come say "Hi!" Reviews are how readers like you find this book, and they give me the confidence to write more for you to read. It's like a digital high five! (And who couldn't use a high-five now and then, right?)

I really do appreciate that out of all the books available out there, you chose to read mine. Every time someone picks up one of my books, it helps me save up for those little luxuries in life like an assistive listening device or, well, *food*. Ah — the glamorous, jet-setting life of an indie author, am I right?

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*# Rivals to Lovers, There Was Only One Bed, Geek/Jock
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There's a thin line between loathing and lust. Turns out it's about the width of a hotel bed. When Alex is forced to share a hotel room with the stuck-up captain of his university's soccer team, he knows it'll be pure torture. He's right, of course - but for all the wrong reasons. Turns out, Ian's not the man Alex thought he was. Confident, experienced, and sexy as all hell; Ian shouldn't be interested in a geek like Alex. Now if only someone would tell *Ian* that...

(coming Spring 2024)

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Cowboy, take me away... What's a city boy to do when his dreams are filled with a whiskey-smoke drawl and warm brown eyes? With a voice as deep as the ocean and heart big enough to match?

A chance encounter with house-flipping handyman Owen has Zach's heart singing a whole new tune. But Owen? He's been burned too many times before. A quick fling is one thing, but opening himself up to anything more? He'll sit this dance out, thanks. The island's quaint old houses are easier to fix than a broken heart.

That's fine, Zach tells himself. Totally fine. *Really*. Their no-strings-attached situation is enough for him. But a single phone call is all it takes to send Zach's new life crashing to the ground, and it's Owen's doorstep he turns up on looking for help. Can Zach convince Owen what's been building between them is real, or will Owen decide Zach's past is more than he can handle?

(coming Summer 2024)

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ALSO BY
AJ PINES
WRITING AS

J.A. Skald

RELICT SAGA: SONGS OF WINTER (TRILOGY)

[RELICT SAGA 1: THE DANCING TREE](#)

Fae Mischief, There Was Only One Bed, Opposites Attract, Hurt/Comfort, Epic Dark Fantasy Romantic Thriller

Look – It wasn't supposed to go like this, alright? Humans were trouble. Life had beaten that lesson into Sebastian often enough. But just because people say the specialized exorcists-for-hire called Relicts are as heartless as the monsters they hunt, it doesn't actually make it true. Would've saved him a whole heap of trouble if it did.

Saddled with an utter scoundrel of a bard as a guide, Sebastian's itching to ditch his new travel companion the first chance he gets. Too chatty, too fuckin' *pretty*, and with absolutely no concept of personal space; the human calling himself Ryndalon is a walking pile of trouble-with-a-capital-T through and through. Seriously, what kind of name is that, anyway?

But it turns out, this isn't even the first time the bard's gone and made Sebastian's life hell. *Or* that it's the end of Ryndalon's secrets...

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[RELICT SAGA 2: THE SHATTERED ISLES](#)

Fae Mischief, Opposites Attract, Hurt/Comfort, Epic Dark Fantasy Romantic Thriller

Rule one making Deals with the fae? DON'T. It's not like life as a monster hunter is exactly glamorous. The pay's shit, the clients are usually shittier, and the monsters themselves? Yeah — those aren't exactly a delight either. When Ryndalon stumbled into his life,

Sebastian wasn't expecting much. So imagine his surprise that — for a moment there? He'd actually dared hope that somehow he'd finally chanced across something truly good for once in his miserable life. Of course, that's when he had to go and screw things up, right?

[\[Read it HERE\]](#)

RELICT SAGA 3: THE HOLLOW PALACE

Fae Mischief, Opposites Attract, Hurt/Comfort, Epic Dark Fantasy Romantic Thriller

Sebastian messed up - *bad*. But he's not about to go let his ~~erstwhile~~ *love friend* pay for his own mistakes. Even if he has to bargain with backstabbing fae, eldritch monsters, and chasing after some Lost Prince all the way into the Fae Realm; to the very heart of the Court of Winter itself.

Ryndalon better appreciate this...

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RELICT SAGA: ANTHEMS OF SPRING (TRILOGY)

RELICT SAGA 4: THE SUNDERED KEEP

Friends to Lovers, Slow Burn, Mistaken Identities, Epic Dark Fantasy Romantic Thriller

How can you tell a mage is lying? His mouth is moving. Destan knows they're plotting something, locked away in their lofty tower. He just can't prove it — *yet*. Did they have something to do with Sebastian's disappearance? Or are the mages planning something bigger; something that threatens all the unsuspecting Relicts sworn into their charge?

The fate of Eldfäst rests on the secrets Destan carries, but time is

running out. What is this fascination that Jacek seems to have for him? Destan might have saved the bard's life, but how can he trust that the human is truly on his side? Do Jacek's happy-go-lucky antics hide far deeper secrets; secrets that could rival the Bear Relict's own? Will he prove to be Destan's doom —

Or his salvation?

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[RELICT SAGA 5: THE CRIMSON SEA](#)

Friends to Lovers, Slow Burn, Mistaken Identities, Epic Dark Fantasy Romantic Thriller

The Order of the Cranes has fallen. Until Destan crossed his path, Jacek thought his chances of finishing his training as a Relict had been sunk alongside the rest of the Crane Fleet. So what if his new mentor seems strangely overprotective? Jacek can't exactly blame him. He'd heard the stories years ago — the betrayal, the destruction of Eldfäst, the fall of the Order of the Bear. Destan allows Jacek to travel alongside him; the last of their kind, alone together. It could be enough.

If only Jacek had made sure Destan understood exactly what the strange, human-seeming bard he'd saved had *actually* been asking of him...

[\[Read it HERE\]](#)

[RELICT SAGA 6: THE BUTCHER'S PASS](#)

Friends to Lovers, Slow Burn, Mistaken Identities, Epic Dark Fantasy Romantic Thriller

The Golden Year is coming. Madness. It must have been sheer madness that seized Jacek that day. He'd only meant to save Destan's life. Jacek never dreamed it would thrust him onto the front lines of a brewing civil war. As a Crane, as a Relict, he should have known the price was too high. But to a man in love? There's no price he wouldn't

pay to keep his Bear safe.

But now — with time running out to save an old friend's son, magical assassins closing in on his trail — Jacek can't help but wonder, who's looking out for *him*?

With Destan's life hanging in the balance, could Eldfäst hold the answers Jacek seeks? What other secrets might he find hiding within those ancient, abandoned walls?

[\[Coming Spring 2024\]](#)

OTHER BOOKS IN THE RELICT SAGA

[RELICT SAGA: THE WITCHING WOODS](#)

Fae Mischief, Curses, Epic Dark Fantasy Romantic Thriller

Keep sharp your claws, child

Pray be luck-kissed

For the old gods hunt

Out there in the Mist

They say a witch lives in the woods in her little chicken-legged hut; both of them as old and gnarled as the Mist that pools beneath the ancient trees. If you travel deep enough into the forest, you might even find her. But only the truly desperate — or the truly stupid — would do so willingly.

Mercy is such a human concept, after all.

When a village scandal leads to a pair of would-be sweethearts going missing, it's up to Sebastian and Ryndalon to uncover what became of them. But neither monster hunter nor fae expects to get so caught up in their latest adventure, or that they'll each be forced to reveal their deepest secret...

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AUTHOR'S NOTES AND SPECIAL THANKS

Y'all, I promise this was supposed to be a short writing exercise. A couple thousand words or so at most of no- to low-angst, coffee shop meet-cute/reunion between two old friends that had fallen out of touch.

Sorry, not sorry?

Sweet baby Joseph on a pogo stick, I owe so many people thanks for their part in bringing this story to life, without whose encouragement and support this book wouldn't even exist. I am truly touched by the response it has received right from the outset of its creation, on through the path to publishing, and now beyond.

I never thought I'd be a writer. An artist, an Olympic runner, a professional juggler — sure, these were obviously achievable goals any eight-year-old should aspire to. But a *writer*? Those were important people, who used important words, to tell important stories; something I had never felt even the slightest bit qualified for. Knowledge only further cemented with each subsequent school assignment I got returned with "*so much potential!* :(" scrawled across the top in red ink.

Then I discovered a group of people that — get this — *wrote for the fun of it*. Can you imagine such a thing?

And yes, many of them did have important things to say, and many did use important words, and they are all very much beloved and important — at least to *me*. They taught me that it's okay to write something silly, something

to make another person smile, something sexy, something scary, something that's an utterly dripping mess after you've gone and bled a little (or a lot) onto the page.

Fucking *enablers*, all of you. (affectionate)

For reasons of personal safety, many have asked to not be identified either individually or collectively. Instead, I shall simply thank my horde of angst gremlins and pocket friends here — you know who you are.

I have been approved to give special thanks to *The Patron Saint of Not Being Perceived* for all the invaluable details involving proper police procedures and law enforcement attitudes; versus the shady and less-than-legal methods a corrupt officer such as Alex's dad might choose to use in the scenarios you've found between these pages. There are several parts I wish had been more fiction than fact, and I'm grateful to this individual for showing me where I actually hadn't taken this story *far enough* to match real life.

But while I've tried my best to work with expert sources, and researched the heck out of any topics that fall outside my own areas of experience, I'm under no illusion that I (or this book) are perfect. Any mistakes you might thus find are ultimately my own.

Some portions of this book were also drawn off (or at least extrapolated from) my personal, lived experiences. This includes a few I was injured during, or that my memory is otherwise now blurred for. I admit that means they might be somewhat unreliable (and definitely biased). However, this book is ultimately a work of fiction; so I can only hope in that grand tradition, any minor inaccuracies will be excused for the sake of trying to tell a good story.

It's difficult sometimes to know what might shock someone else whose 'normal' doesn't match your own, especially when you're so close to the subject matter. Help from readers like you has been invaluable in making sure this book is as enjoyable as possible for everyone. If you came across something within these pages you believe should be on a "tastes and sensitivity list" but isn't, *or* is just plain wildly incorrect despite my best attempts, then please visit ajpines.com to let me know so I can fix it.

And last but certainly not least: Thank *you*, dear reader, for spending your time here with me and the whole Chance's Harbor crew. These days there are a ton of books out there to choose from, and I'm grateful you picked up mine.

I hope you enjoyed reading this story as much as I enjoyed writing it for you.

Oh - also **very important!** Please know that Jakob's mare (the bay who got spooked by Ricky Maddox's car at the beginning of the book) was only frightened and annoyed. Once she was calmed down, she was perfectly fine and well cared for. Not even scratched, I promise. Nash took over her training as a personal project, naming her Ember. And yes, now that she officially has a name, there's a fair chance we'll be seeing her again in a future book. :D

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For HHJ
who gave me the courage



For my readers
who showed me what was possible



For my Patrons
who sustained & supported me on my journey



For the bakers of the Cakeshop
who welcomed me home



And especially for all the dreamers out there;
for anyone who has ever felt they don't quite fit

you are seen
you are needed
you are loved

Your light shines even further
than you could ever know



A serial immigrant, AJ Pines traded life in a small American town for that of a small village in the UK.

When not writing or hiking around the countryside, AJ can usually be found brewing cider, cooking, playing tabletop games, and chewing through a massive stack of books. Failing that, you might try checking down at the local pub.

You can find out more at ajpines.com

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