



SUITS &
SEVENS
SERIES

MR. BLUE
SKY

USA TODAY BEST-SELLING AUTHOR
ISLA OLSEN

MR BLUE SKY

Suits & Sevens

Book 4

ISLA OLSEN


Moonwalker Press

Copyright © 2023 Isla Olsen

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, distributed or transmitted in any form or by any means without the express written permission of the author, except for the use of brief quotations in an article or book review.

All people, events and places featured in this book are products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious context. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Cover Design © 2023 Michele Catalano
Cover Photography by Wander Aguiar

 Created with Vellum

About This Book

Jackson

Skyler Mason has had me wrapped around his little finger since we were seven years old. It doesn't matter how ridiculous the situation, how inconvenient it might be for me, or that ninety-nine percent of the time the mess is one of Skyler's own making, one flash of those puppy dog eyes and it's Jackson to the rescue.

Bringing him a fresh pair of underwear at work? Check.

Scaring off clingy hook-ups? Check.

Taking a week off so I can look after him when he's sick? Check.

But now something's happened, and for the first time in our friendship, I don't know how to fix it.

There's no WikiHow on what to do if your best friend suddenly realizes he has feelings for you. And even if there were, I doubt it would help; because no one else is like Skyler and me.

"Best friends" isn't even the right word for it. We're just us.

Or, at least, we were...

All I want is for everything to be how it used to. I don't want Skyler to tense up when I go to touch him. I don't want him sitting halfway across the room when we should be cuddling on the couch. And I sure as hell don't want him staying out the whole night and not even texting to check in.

If I could snap my fingers and suddenly be attracted to him, I'd do it without question. But I know that's not a realistic option. I've never been attracted to men. Truthfully, I've never been attracted to anyone... Not in that way, at least.

Love, on the other hand? That's something I know a hell of a lot about.

Mr Blue Sky is a co-dependent best friends to more romantic comedy with an adorably clueless playboy, and an equally adorable and equally clueless acey. Tropes: Best friends, roommates, asexual-awakening, reformed player.

Chronology

The *Suits & Sevens* series is set in my *Love & Luck* universe (aka the Kellyverse) and there is some cross-over between the books. It's not necessary to have read the earlier books, but if you'd like to read the books from this world in chronological order you should start with *Fake it 'til You Make Out (Love & Luck #1)*

Chronology

Fake it 'til You Make Out (Love & Luck #1)
Virtually Screwed (Love & Luck #2)
Crazy Little Fling (Love & Luck #3)
The King and Jai (Royal & Reckless #1)
Hopeless Bromantics (Love & Luck #4)
Three's a Crown (Royal & Reckless #2)
Two Men and a Baby (Love & Luck #5)
Can't Get You Out of My Bed (Love & Luck #6)
Mr. Big Shot (Suits & Sevens #1)
Mr. Right Now (Suits & Sevens #2)
Mr Nice Guy (Suits & Sevens #3)
Whiskey Tango Foxtrot (Patreon Serial)
O Come, All Ye Kellys (Love & Luck #7)
Sex, Tries, and Videotape (Love & Luck #8)
Mr Blue Sky (Love & Luck #4)
Text Me Up (Love & Luck #9)

**More information about all these books and other stories by Isla Olsen can be found at islaolsen.com*

Real Good Looking Boys

(AKA Spencer's rugby team)

Spencer Cox [Fly Half] 35, *dating Will (Book 1: Mr. Big Shot)*

Charlie Campbell [Scrum Half] 38

Cole MacCaffrey [Wing] 34

Sullivan Stapleton [Prop] 34, *engaged (in theory) to Drew (Book 2: Mr Right Now)*

Deacon Stapleton [Hooker] 27, *dating Tanner (Book 3: Mr Nice Guy)*

Aaron Wells [Prop] 35, *married to Kylie, father of Brandon and Daisy*

Bryce Kennedy [Center] 31, *dating Emme*

Jackson Downey [Reserve Forward] 28, *dating Skyler (Book 4: Mr Blue Sky) THIS IS HIS BOOK*

Skyler Mason [Reserve Back] 28, *dating Jackson (Book 4: Mr Blue Sky) THIS IS HIS BOOK*

Pax Greenwood [Occasional Practice Ringer] 47, *father of Daley*

**As of end of chapter 26*

For all the romantic aceys out there - I hope you find your Skyler xo

Trigger Warning

Child neglect: Touches briefly on experiences of childhood emotional neglect

Poverty and Food insecurity: Touches briefly on past experiences of poverty.

Contents

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Isla & Her Books](#)

Chapter One

Jackson

“I NEED TO GET LAID,” I SAY WITH A GROAN AS I SLUMP ONTO ONE OF THE sofas my friends are currently occupying at some trendy bar in Chelsea that I’ve completely forgotten the name of.

“Why do you always make that sound like it’s some kind of chore?” Deacon asks with a chuckle.

Umm...because it is? Unlike my best friend, Skyler, whose libido doesn’t seem to have an off-switch, I really don’t get all horny like this that often. Which is probably why I’m not any good at all the flirting and flattering crap. Why bother developing a game if you’re never going to play it, right?

“No,” Drew says with an eye roll, “why do you always have to announce it?”

“Hey, leave him alone,” Skyler demands, jumping to my defense like usual. “Jackson hardly ever hooks up. Not like the two of you, rolling around with your billionaire boyfriends every second of the day.”

That might be a *slight* exaggeration of the facts, but it wouldn’t be wrong to say we’ve seen a fair bit less of both Deacon and Drew since they each settled down with their respective guys at the end of last year. I still see Drew at work every day, of course—we co-own a luxury auto-repairs business—and Deacon still puts in an effort on the weekends, but apparently weeknight drinking ends when you get into a relationship.

Deacon’s brows shoot up at Skyler’s comment and he shares a look with Drew. “Did we just get slut-shamed by *Skyler*? Mr. Hit-It-and-Quit-It?”

“That’s what it sounded like,” Drew says with a smirk. “Is that hypocrisy or irony? I totally sucked at the SAT verbal.”

“Definitely hypocrisy,” Deacon says with a nod.

Skyler lets out a dramatic huff. “I can’t help it if guys just happen to trip and fall butt-first onto my cock the second they catch sight of this beautiful face.”

“Yeah, that sounds like an accurate interpretation of events,” Deacon says dryly.

Skyler shrugs. “True story. This face, and this body...they’re like moths to a flame.”

“Moths catch fire when they fly into flames,” Drew points out.

A suggestive smile spreads over Skyler’s face. “Yeah they do.”

Drew exchanges a curious glance with Deacon. “What’s supposed to be sexy about insects burning to death?”

“I just heard “catch fire” and assumed you were talking about the epic experience of having sex with me. The Kings of Leon wrote a song about it, you know.”

You’d think listening to Skyler brag about all the sex he has with men would be enough to kill my buzz, but I’m so used to his antics after more than twenty years of friendship that I’ve become completely desensitized to this kind of thing.

And I know from experience that nothing’s going to get rid of this itch except actually getting laid. I don’t care who it is—I’ve never been all that fussy when it comes to women—all that matters is that she’s over twenty-one, she has decent hygiene standards, and she’s cool with a quick fuck in the bathroom. Just call me Prince fucking Charming.

I consider leaving the group and making my rounds through the crowded bar, but it’s so packed in here...and dark...and loud. Shockingly, not all that many women like it when a guy who looks like he just stepped off the set of *Sons of Anarchy* rubs up against them in the dark and yells an invitation to screw in their ear. It’s easier in the low-key places we usually hang out at, because I can generally count on a woman to approach me, rather than the other way around.

“What are you doing?” Skyler asks curiously from over my shoulder as I scroll through my phone.

“Looking for a hook-up.”

I open one of the rarely used apps on my phone, set the radius to five hundred feet and start swiping.

“If you want help finding a hook-up, I can come with you to talk to girls,” he offers, making my lips curve up. I appreciate the offer, but Skyler would be my wing man for about two minutes before spotting some hot guy in the crowd and disappearing for the rest of the night.

“I’m good,” I assure him.

It only takes a few minutes for me to set something up with a match—definitely better than trying to find someone in the crowd.

Getting to my feet, I slip my phone back in my pocket. “Alright, I’ll be back in a bit.”

“Do you need me to come with you?” Skyler asks.

“You know, you don’t have to do *everything* together,” Deacon says wryly. “Pretty sure Jax knows where he’s supposed to put it.”

Skyler rolls his eyes. “I meant because we’ve never been here before and he doesn’t even know where the bathrooms are, or what the set-up is. This is a fancy place—there might be an attendant in there or something. I might need to charm them so Jax can get down to business.”

I let out a soft breath of laughter. “Thanks, but I’ll be fine, Sky. If I run into trouble I’m sure I’ll figure out a plan B.”

“Okay, well just text me if you need help getting the condom off again.”

“Uhh...what?” Deacon asks, brows shooting into his hairline.

I give a wry shake of my head. I know our friends think the lack of boundaries in our relationship is weird, and I’ve heard the word ‘co-dependent’ thrown around a few times, often paired with exasperated amusement. So I’m not surprised by Deacon’s reaction. I could do without re-hashing the memory at this present moment, though.

“Sky, that was one time...three years ago. And the memory of the circulation to my dick being cut off isn’t feeling great right now, so I’m going to go.”

As I walk away, I hear Skyler filling the others in on the condom incident. “I saved his life, you know. These hands are *magic* hands.”

“I can’t believe Jackson let those hands touch his dick,” Drew says dryly. “I hope he sanitized afterward.”

“Who would you rather be treating your dick in an emergency, Drew?” Skyler says. “A dick novice, or a dick expert?”

I let out a soft laugh, shaking my head as their voices are drowned out by the loud music in the bar.

BY THE TIME I’M DONE WITH MY LITTLE RENDEZVOUS WITH JAYNE—“WITH A Y”, because that’s important apparently—I’m feeling a hell of a lot better, and I can rejoin my friends and relax for the rest of the night. I’m not surprised when I get back to the group to find that Skyler is missing. And one questioning look in Deacon’s direction gives me the confirmation I need.

“Where do you think he went?” he says with an eye roll.

“He’s allowed to have fun,” I remind him.

Deacon holds his hands up in a placating gesture. “I know. I’m not judging. But it’s a good thing you didn’t need help with the condom after all, because I doubt he would have seen your text.”

I groan and slump back against the sofa. “You guys are never going to let me forget this one, are you?”

Drew smirks at me. “That’d be a firm no.” He’s about to say something else but is fortunately distracted by his phone. Pulling it out of his pocket, he reads the screen and smiles. “Sully and Spencer and Will just got here.”

Sullivan Stapleton—Sully as we generally call him—is Deacon’s older brother and one of the players on the amateur rugby team Deac, Skyler, and I play on. He’s also Drew’s fiancé. The billionaire one, who—according to Skyler—Drew’s been rolling around with every second of the day since last November.

Spencer is the captain of our team and one of Sullivan’s best friends, and Will is Spencer’s boyfriend.

“Damn, I wish they’d got here earlier,” Deacon says with a frown. “I have to go.”

I blink at him in surprise. “It’s just after ten. On a Friday.”

A faint blush hits Deacon’s cheeks as he explains, “Yeah, but Izzy’s staying with Piper tonight and Tanner just texted me that he’s finally done with work.”

“So you’re ditching us for sex?” Drew questions, a teasing brow raised.

“Not just sex. A whole night of sex,” Deacon points out unapologetically.

“You could just move in already,” I suggest. “Aren’t you getting sick of booty calls?”

“They’re not *booty calls*,” Deacon shoots back, hitting me with an uncharacteristically hard look. “But yes. The second the school year ends I’m moving into the brownstone.”

“Is it really that big a deal that you’re Izzy’s teacher?” Drew asks. “Surely you can’t get fired for dating a parent...”

“It’s not really the school,” Deacon explains. “It’s more about Izzy. It might be confusing for her if I move in while I’m still her teacher.”

Tanner’s daughter is six years old and has Down syndrome, so I guess I can understand the need for extra caution. And I also get why he’d want to take advantage of Tanner’s kid-free house while Izzy is at a sleepover with her much older sister.

“Wait, so I’m going to be the fifth wheel?” I ask, only just realizing that Deacon’s departure and Skyler’s disappearance makes me the odd man out amongst the couples.

“Well, it’s not like we’ll be sitting around making out,” Drew says, before adding, “much.”

No, but if the last few times are anything to go by, I’ll have to sit here and try to look interested while they exchange recommendations for couple stuff like bed and breakfasts and brunch spots. *Fun.*

“Maybe you should go find whatshername from the bathroom?” Deacon teases.

I send him a flat look. We’ve been friends long enough for him to know that once I’m done with a hook-up, I’m done.

I try to work out in my head what time Skyler must have left and if he’ll be home anytime soon so we can hang out. I guess it depends on how good the sex is and how far from our place the guy lives. I can only figure out one thing for certain, however, and it’s that he’ll definitely be home before morning—Skyler does not do sleepovers.

I run a hand over my shaved scalp, hesitating for a moment before finally saying, “I think I’m going to take off as well.”

“But it’s just after ten. On a Friday,” Drew parrots teasingly.

I narrow my eyes at him. “I don’t remember you being this much of a smartass before you got engaged.”

“Engaged *in theory*,” Drew corrects stubbornly, prompting both Deacon and me to roll our eyes.

“It was there just under the surface,” Deacon says wryly.

I just grunt and retrieve my phone so I can bring up the Lyft app.

Deacon and I both stick around to greet Sullivan and Spencer and Will, and then we split—Deacon to Tanner’s brownstone only a few minutes’ walk away, and me back to my place in Brooklyn.

When I get up to the ninth floor of my building, I can hear the noises before I even open our apartment door. I glance around discreetly, glad there aren’t any kids living on this floor. Those moans have to be traveling through floorboards, though...

Maybe I should have just stayed at the bar...

I let out a sigh of resignation and unlock the door, pushing my way into the apartment. The grunts and moans and whimpers that are the unmistakable sounds of my best friend banging the absolute fuck out of some guy are much

louder now. It's definitely going to be one of those noise-cancelling headphones nights.

This isn't the first time I've come home to find Skyler fucking some guy, but it doesn't happen all that often. He usually prefers to hook up at their place so he can be the one to bail. I'm not sure what's special about this guy, but I'm guessing I'll find out sooner or later.

Chapter Two

Skyler

“THAT WAS INCREDIBLE,” JERSEY COYOTE GASPS OUT AS HE FLOPS BACK against the mattress, his breathing ragged and face all flushed from his recent orgasm. Another happy customer. “Seriously—you’re so good at that.”

I just smirk at him. Tell me something I don’t know, buddy.

Just to avoid any confusion and disgusted reactions, I didn’t *actually* just fuck a talking coyote. It’s just I can’t remember this guy’s name. All I know is he’s hot, eager for cock, and lives in Newark, which is why we’re back at my place instead of the other way around like I usually prefer.

“You mind if I just crash here?” he asks me, already shifting up the bed to settle his head on one of my pillows, before pulling the sheets up to cover himself. Well, someone’s a bit presumptuous...

“Uhh...” I hesitate, really not liking the sight of him getting all comfortable in my bed. I don’t do sleepovers. That’s something Deacon was absolutely right about earlier tonight. Mr. Hit it and Quit it—that’s me. And there’s absolutely nothing wrong with that as far as I’m concerned. I always tell the guys I hook up with I’m only interested in sex, and I always make sure they get a fucking good deal out of it. There’s no such thing as a one-star review here; every guy I’m with is left a hundred per cent satisfied.

“You’ve totally worn me out,” Jersey Coyote persists with a wry smile. “I can barely even move right now, let alone get myself back home.”

Damnit. If I’d actually stopped to think things through it probably would have occurred to me that if it would take me an hour to get home from his place, it’d be the same going in the other direction.

Finally, I let out a resigned sigh and nod. “Yeah, okay, fine.” I hunt around on the floor for the boxer briefs I peeled off him earlier and toss them to him. “Put these on, though, or I’ll just end up fucking you again.”

He chuckles and tugs the briefs on. “That wouldn’t be the worst thing.”

I guess that’s true... I dig in my underwear drawer for a fresh pair of boxer briefs for myself and pull them on, considering my options. I could go bunk in with Jax, but I have no idea if he’s even home yet, or if he’s brought anyone back with him. I doubt the latter, however; Jackson’s not exactly one to linger over sex. But that doesn’t rule out the possibility; I diverted from my

usual habits tonight, so who's to say Jax hasn't as well?

And then there's the possibility of more sex... It might be a little strange to share my bed with a trick, but if there's a chance of getting in that ass again...

As is often the case, I let my dick lead the way and pad over to the side of the bed Jersey's left free, slipping under the sheet and settling onto my back.

This isn't the side of the bed I'm used to; I'm not particularly picky, but Jackson likes the left, so I'm always left with the right.

But I'm glad this guy didn't take the left side; it'd make things even weirder if he were in Jackson's spot.

I don't really notice it happening, because my thoughts have switched to Jackson and the events of tonight. I hope he got what he needed from Bathroom Girl—scratched the itch, or however the hell he puts it. I'm not sure why he always waits for it all to just build and build until he's finally so hard-up that only a quickie in a public bathroom can relieve the craving. It'd make a hell of a lot more sense for him to just have sex more often. But it's his life and I'm not going to judge. That's not something we do.

“Mmm...night, Sky.”

Thoughts of Jackson are washed away by the intrusion of the semi-strange voice, and the feel of an unfamiliar body clinging to me like a fucking barnacle.

What. The. Fuck?

I glance down to see Jersey Coyote has shifted to his side and is snuggled right up against my body, his head nuzzling against my shoulder and his arm thrown across my chest.

“Dude, no, we are *not* cuddling,” I say firmly, doing my best to maintain a level of politeness.

He doesn't answer, though, instead just snuggling in closer and mumbling something I can't make out.

I give him a little nudge, starting to get really annoyed now. “Hey...um —” Shit, what the hell is his name? Boyd...? Or Lloyd...? Or Troy...? Damn, it was so loud in that bar, and frankly I didn't really care enough to pay attention when he introduced himself.

“Seriously, you need to move. This is really not cool,” I growl. “Haven't you heard of personal space?”

But then I realize the reason he's not responding is because he's already asleep.

Fucking hell.

I consider shaking him awake and telling him to back the fuck off, or get the fuck out, but I really can't be bothered dealing with whatever his reaction is going to be. Either he'll be embarrassed, or he'll think I'm overreacting, or he'll try to make a move—which I'd probably respond to because my dick seems to suffer from amnesia. Whatever the outcome, I don't want it. I just want to bail on the hook-up like I usually do, and like I should have done ten minutes ago.

I carefully pry Jersey's arm from my chest and slowly shift my body away from him until I'm clear enough to set his arm down on the mattress and climb out of bed. I glance back and see he hasn't woken, and is now snuggling against the pillow I was just using instead. Works for me.

I tiptoe across my bedroom and slip out the door, breathing a sigh of relief once I'm on the other side. I cross the living room to Jackson's door and push it open a crack, peering inside to double check that he's actually alone.

The room's dark, but there's only one figure in the bed and definitely nothing remotely X-rated happening, so unlike me he didn't change up his usual routine tonight.

I enter the room and close the door behind me, stepping quietly over to the bed and getting in on the right side—my side.

Jackson's on his side, facing away from me, so once I'm under the covers I snuggle in against his back, linking my arm around his bare torso and hugging gently.

"Isn't there a guy in your bed?" he mumbles.

"That's why I'm in yours."

"That makes sense."

"He wanted to cuddle after I fucked him," I explain, unable to keep the distaste from my voice. "It was so gross."

"Says the guy currently spooning his best friend," Jax says in a dry tone.

"You're different. And I didn't just cum in your ass," I point out. "Sex and cuddling don't go together. Sex is for hook-ups. Cuddling is for us."

"You might be onto something. Although I think Deacon would disagree," he says wryly.

This is true. I've been friends with Deacon since our first year of college and it's always both baffled and amazed me how avidly he equates sex with intimacy and emotional connection. Or maybe I'm the weird one for thinking

sex should just be sex. But why would I need it to be anything more? If I need an emotional connection, I have it right here.

“That’s because Deacon doesn’t have a Jackson,” I say, nuzzling my forehead into Jax’s back.

“Hmm...”

“What?” I ask, my brows furrowing in response to that thoughtful noise. I wish I could see his expression right now.

“It’s just...Sky, do you avoid actually getting serious with guys because of me?”

Okay, now I’m glad I can’t see Jax’s expression. He’ll be wearing his guilty face, and I fucking hate his guilty face. Mainly because it usually comes out when he has absolutely nothing to feel guilty about.

“I don’t want anything from guys except sex, Jackson,” I assure him. I want to leave it at that, but we’ve always been one hundred per cent honest with each other, so I add, “Maybe it is because I already have you, but that’s not a bad thing. It means I get the best of everything.” Then a thought occurs to me, and I give myself a mental slap for not thinking of it earlier. “Am I holding *you* back? Jax, I don’t want to ever do that. If there’s someone you want to date—”

“Sky, calm down,” he says gently, cutting off my rambling. “There’s no one. I’m not interested in dating and all that.”

I frown, not entirely convinced. Jackson’s never shown any interest in wanting to settle down or anything like that, but he doesn’t sleep around like I do, either. “Are you sure?” I ask uncertainly. “I wouldn’t want you to sacrifice something like that for me, Jackson. And don’t say you wouldn’t because you always do.”

I’ll admit, I do sometimes take a little too much advantage of Jackson’s willingness to indulge my whims, but I’d never let him give up an entire part of his life for me.

“There’s no sacrifice, Skyler, because I *don’t want it*,” he says firmly. “If I can believe you, you can believe me, okay?”

I draw in a deep breath and nod, hugging him tighter. “Yeah, okay.”

“Go to sleep, Sky. You must be exhausted after what I heard,” he says with a soft chuckle.

“You heard us?”

“Skyler, everyone in Brooklyn heard you,” he says dryly. “Which begs the question—why didn’t you just fuck him at his place so you could bail like

you usually do?”

“Urgh... He lives in *Newark*,” I grumble, unable to keep the annoyance from my tone. “It would’ve been, what—forty minutes or so to get out there, and then an hour at least to get home? Way too far. I would have fucked him in the bathroom at the bar, but there were people using it,” I add pointedly.

“Ah, so it’s *my* fault?”

“I was nearly killed, Jackson,” I whine. “Suffocated in the death grip of an unconscious New Jerseyite whose name I can’t even remember.”

“I think you might be exaggerating slightly.”

“I hope Bathroom Girl was worth it,” I mutter.

“Jayne with a Y? Well, she wasn’t quite as vocal as your koala bear...”

“Yeah, he was enthusiastic, I’ll give him that. And eager as fuck...” I pause for a moment as I mentally replay some of the highlights from my romp with Jersey Coyote. Up until the post-orgasm part, it had been fucking spectacular. I could definitely go for a repeat. “Maybe I should go wake him up and see if he wants another go?” I muse. “He’s so fucking hot, Jax. And his ass is incredible. Seems a bit like a wasted opportunity not to get inside him again.”

“So go fuck him again,” Jackson says through a yawn.

“Yeah, but then he’ll want to cuddle again.” My words come out in a sulky tone, and I don’t even care. Stupid Jersey Coyote and his stupid cuddling fucking everything up. “And if he’s that clingy after one round, imagine what it’ll be like if I fuck him twice in one night. My dick has addictive properties, you know.”

“Mmmhmm...I’m sure it does,” Jackson says, sounding bored as fuck. “Right now it’s stabbing me in the ass, so maybe you can either get up and go fuck the guy in your bed, or start thinking about something else.”

Whoops. I let out a wry chuckle and shift my hips back a bit, so my erection is clear of Jackson’s ass. “My bad. You want to be the big spoon instead?”

Jackson lets out a breath of amusement and starts shifting around, so I do the same, sighing in contentment as he wraps his arm around my middle and pulls me back against his hard chest.

“Do I need to get the potholders?” he murmurs wryly, his thick beard brushing over my ear as he talks.

Probably. We both know the reason I wanted to change position is because this boner’s not going anywhere anytime soon; I mean, there’s a hot,

practically naked man in my bed who's made it perfectly clear he'd be up for seconds if I wanted it.

Ah, fuck, that was definitely the wrong thing to think about. I shift around a little as my cock throbs, just barely resisting the instinct to reach down and wrap my hand around it.

Yeah, I really need the potholders. But I know if I get up now, I won't be going to the kitchen, I'll be going straight to my room and waking Jersey Coyote so he can wrap those pretty pink lips around my dick.

I let out a soft groan at the thought, squeezing my eyes shut as I try to get a fucking grip. "I'm good," I assure Jax.

He lets out a soft chuckle. "Just make sure to add the *Febreze* when you wash my sheets tomorrow. I want them to smell like a spring garden," he says through a yawn, as though the idea of me jerking off in his bed is about as interesting as tomorrow's weather forecast.

"You have no faith in me," I pout.

"I have history on my side," he says wryly.

Fuck, he might have a point there. Self-control has never been my strong suit. "Maybe I should go get the potholders," I suggest, and start shifting away.

Jackson pulls me back against him, though, not letting me get very far. "Just got to sleep, Skyler. And if you need to, you need to. How many times have I told you I don't care?"

But I care, I think with a frown. And I have no idea why that is. It's not like we've never jerked off in front of each other before. We do it all the time when we're watching porn together, and we share a bathroom, so interruptions are inevitable. But this is different for some reason; I'm not entirely sure why, it just feels...strange. And nothing about Jax and me is supposed to feel strange. So, I take preventative measures, much to Jackson's amusement and mild exasperation.

I sigh and let my eyes fall closed. "Okay, sleep. I can do sleep."

"Thank god," he mumbles through yet another yawn. "Night, Skyler."

"Night, Jax."

Chapter Three

Jackson

SKYLER'S STILL ASLEEP WHEN I WAKE UP THE NEXT MORNING. AND, AS usual, I've ended up on my back, with Skyler sprawled out like a starfish on his front, his head and shoulders propped on my stomach. It's probably a good thing he prefers not to do the whole sleepover thing with any of his hook-ups, because I can't imagine the wide-open mouth, pools of drool, and quiet snoring would be remotely attractive to anyone.

I hear a clattering noise out in the kitchen, causing me to jolt in alarm.

"Hmm? What...huh?" Skyler mumbles, reacting sleepily to my movement.

"There's someone out in the kitchen."

I make a move to get up, but he wraps his arms around my torso and nuzzles his head against me. "Probably just Rocket getting some breakfast."

I grunt at the thought of the orange tabby tearing up the kitchen. "That fucking cat..."

"Or maybe a burglar," Skyler murmurs through a yawn.

"Yeah, that'd be better," I say dryly.

Then I remember the reason Skyler crashed in my bed last night and I relax. "Oh, it's probably just your guy from last night."

Suddenly, it's as though I've just told him armed militia have stormed into our apartment and are planning to hold us for ransom. He bolts upright, his face a mask of fear mingled with dread.

"No, no, no, no," he chants, shaking his head. "Make him go away Jax."

My protective instincts are immediately on alert, and I sit up as well, my jaw tensing as I register the desperate panic in Skyler's dark eyes. "Did he *do* something to you?" If that asshole hurt Skyler in any way, he'll be heading back to Jersey with a black eye and a broken nose. If he's lucky.

"I already told you he tried to suffocate me!"

I sigh in exasperation, relaxing a little. "I mean *apart* from the cuddling, Skyler."

"What more do you want? He's probably out there making...*breakfast*," he says with a curl of his lip, as though that kind of gesture is as distasteful to him as scraping dog poop off his shoes. "The next thing you know he'll be

telling people we're an *item*."

I let out a soft chuckle as I remember a conversation we had with Deacon back when he and Tanner were having some issues. Unlike me, Skyler was absolutely certain Tanner was the real deal, based on the sole fact that he'd made Deacon breakfast. So I can definitely see why he'd be freaked out by the idea of one of his hook-ups taking that initiative. Like cuddling, breakfast is something Sky only does with me. I'm sure one day he'll meet someone who'll change his stance on that, but clearly that's not today, and not this guy.

"I think you might be overthinking things a little, Sky. You screwed the guy one time, then disappeared for the night," I remind him. "He woke up to an empty bed and—" I cut off as I catch a guilty expression crossing Skyler's face. "What?" I ask him, my voice full of suspicion. "What did you do?"

He bites his lip and averts his gaze, the way he always does when he thinks he's in trouble. "Well, I was trying to go to sleep but my...*situation* wouldn't go away. And I didn't want to do that in here, so I figured I'd just go to the bathroom and take care of things. But I had to go past my room to get to the bathroom, and somehow—through no fault of my own—I ended up in there instead. And some things happened..."

"What kinds of things?"

"Uhh...some blow jobs, and some sex...and some kissing," he adds with a wince. I know Skyler doesn't consider kissing to be anything particularly meaningful or intimate, but there are a lot of guys who do and I'm guessing that's a thought that is only occurring to him now in the light of day.

"Jesus, how long were you gone for?" And how the hell didn't I notice he wasn't in my bed anymore?

He shrugs. "An hour or two, maybe? And then he fell asleep again."

I nod. "Okay, well, you still left him alone in the room—" I break off again, letting out a huff of frustration. "What did you leave out?"

"Umm...well, I think I might have given him the impression that I wanted to see him again."

"How did you do that?"

"Well, he said something like "We should definitely do this again" and I said something like "Yeah, sure." And then I told him to go to sleep and I'd be back once I went to the bathroom. And then I came in here and went to sleep until just now." He says this spiel in a rapid clip, as though it'll sound better if he just gets it out quickly.

I roll my eyes. “Skyler...”

“You know I’m not good with confrontation,” he says defensively, his bottom lip forming a pout.

“Well, you’ve chosen the right career path then,” I say dryly. He’s recently graduated from law school and will officially be starting life as a first-year associate on Monday.

“Work is different,” he says with a wave of his hand. Then he turns those puppy dog eyes on me. “Please, Jax. Can you just get rid of Jersey Coyote for me?”

I arch a brow at him. “Jersey Coyote?”

“I can’t remember his name,” he explains, then frowns. “I’m regretting that nickname, though. He’s totally ruined *Coyote Ugly* for me.”

“I’m sure we can recapture the magic,” I say wryly. “We can do a sing-along re-watch and annoy the shit out of Deacon and Drew.”

Skyler’s eyes light up. “Yes! And we can add *Crossroads* as well.”

Fortunately, there’s more banging and clattering coming from the kitchen—louder this time—and it distracts Skyler enough that he doesn’t think to add *Glitter* to the list as well. I’d like to think I’d do pretty much anything for Skyler, but even I have my limits.

He sends me another pleading look and I sigh, climbing off the bed and digging around in one of my drawers for a pair of sweats.

“Be careful, Jax,” Skyler warns me as I reach for the door. “He’s blindingly hot—how else do you think he ended up here? And he’s wily as well.”

“Don’t worry, I’ve got my guard up,” I say with a wry shake of my head. I’d suggest that next time Skyler should try thinking with his brain and not his dick, but we’ve been through scenarios like this enough times to know that’s unlikely to ever happen.

I step out of my room and cross the living room to where our small kitchen is located. The folding partition doors between the half-wall and the breakfast bar that we usually leave open are currently closed, blocking off my view into the kitchen.

In what is probably a bit of an over-the-top move, I sweep the doors aside and peer into the kitchen, getting my first view of Skyler’s “Jersey Coyote,” who jumps at the interruption, almost sending the bowl of eggs he’s whisking flying all over the place.

Eggs? Seriously? Who said he could use those? Has he seen the price of

eggs these days?

“Who the fuck are you and what are you doing in my kitchen?” I demand, as I sweep my gaze over him.

He’s definitely an aesthetically appealing guy, with the kinds of features a modeling agency would look for, and I can see why Skyler finds him so hot. But to me he’s the guy invading my house, making my best friend want to hide in my bedroom, and stealing my eggs.

“Um...I—” He seems a little lost for words as he stares at me, wide-eyed. And I can’t really blame him for that. A six foot two, thickly muscled, tatted up guy with a shaved head, thick beard and a bunch of piercings is probably going to be a scary sight if you weren’t expecting it. Especially considering I haven’t been able to stop glowering at the guy since I saw him stealing my eggs.

“Who are you?” he asks nervously without answering my question.

“I’m Jackson. And I’m seriously losing patience. What the fuck are you doing in my apartment?”

At the sound of my name, the tension eases out of his body and he lets out a breath of visible relief. “Oh, Jackson—you’re Skyler’s roommate, right? Jesus, I seriously though you’d, like, broken in and were going to kill me or something.”

“Wow, you don’t stereotype much, do you?” I grumble. “Are you ever going to tell me who the fuck you are? And what you’re doing in my kitchen using my eggs?”

“Oh, I’m Tim,” he says with a nervous smile. “I just wanted to make Skyler breakfast—I didn’t think it’d be a big deal to grab a few things from a fridge.” He hesitates for a moment, then adds, “Sorry if I overstepped.”

I let out a rough chuckle. “Dude, you didn’t just overstep. You fucking moon jumped.”

His eyes widen. “Um...I’m really sorry. I can buy new eggs.”

I roll my eyes. “I’m talking about Skyler. He doesn’t do morning after shit with his hook-ups. But, yes, you can buy me new eggs—free range and organic, please.”

He just blinks at me for a moment before shaking his head. “I think you’ve got the wrong idea. I’m not like, a one-night stand or something. We’re...a thing now.”

I arch an eyebrow at him. “A *thing*?”

He gives a determined nod, my skepticism prompting him to double-

down on his confidence for some reason. “Yeah.”

“So you’re, like, his boyfriend now?”

“Yeah...I guess you could say that.”

I can’t help smirking as I ask, “Shouldn’t Skyler’s boyfriend know that he’s allergic to eggs?”

Jersey’s—fuck, what the hell was his name again?—face turns bright red, and he bites on his lip, clearly hesitating about how to justify this development. “I guess we haven’t got to that yet...”

My brows creep up. “You mean because you only met last night and fucked a couple times and didn’t even sleep in the same bed?”

Fuck, I really want this guy to just get the message and leave. I don’t want to have to hit him over the head with the truth bat. I hate when it comes to that.

His face burns brighter, brow creasing in confusion, or maybe it’s just stubborn denial. “I...that’s...we slept in the same bed.”

I sigh. “Skyler doesn’t do sleepovers,” I say as gently as I can, because this guy looks like he’s about to cry. “He’s a bang and bail guy. He rarely even brings guys back here, let alone allow them to actually stay the night. He only made an exception last night because you live so far away. But he crashed in my room.”

“Jesus, that’s fucking harsh,” he says in a bitter tone, eyes averted. “He could have just been upfront with me.”

“He *was*,” I say defensively. That’s one thing I have no doubt about; Skyler might screw around a lot, but he always lets his hook-ups know the score. “He would have told you when you met at the bar he was just after a hook-up.”

“Yeah, but...”

“Yeah, but nothing. You’re the one who kept pushing things further. You can’t blame Sky for wanting to stay behind the line he drew.”

“Well, I guess I won’t be needing these anymore,” he mutters, glowering at the bowl of whisked eggs in his hands. And then to my absolute horror, he strides over to the sink and washes the bowl out before I have a chance to say anything.

“Dude, what the *fuck*?” I demand, throwing my arms up wildly. “Jesus, I can’t believe I was starting to feel sorry for you.”

Jersey turns back to me, wide-eyed and confused. “What?”

“Just get the fuck out of my house, egg-waster.”

“But you said...” The lightbulb goes on in his head and he winces. “Oh, shit. Sorry.”

“Out,” I growl, pointing to the door.

“I can replace them,” he says in a small voice. “Free range, right?”

“Just get your ass back to Jersey and don’t come back here, not even for eggs,” I tell him.

He nods quickly and starts to move, before hesitating. “It’s just...can I at least grab my phone? It’s charging in Skyler’s room.”

I roll my eyes. “Of course you can grab your fucking phone. *Jesus.*”

He dashes out of the kitchen and over to Skyler’s room, moving in a weird zig zag pattern as though he’s expecting me to take a shot at him. He vanishes into Skyler’s room for a moment before emerging, holding up his phone as if to prove that was indeed the reason he needed to go in there.

“Okay, um...bye, I guess.”

I hold my hand up to wave him off as he leaves the apartment. “Nice meeting you, Jersey.”

“Yeah, sure.”

As soon as the door closes, Rocket appears from his little corner near the window, shooting the door a disgruntled look on the way to his water bowl. “Yeah, that’s helpful,” I mutter dryly. Then I call out to Skyler, “You can come out now.”

“I told you he was trying to kill me,” Skyler says as he enters the living room, a dramatically grim expression on his face.

I roll my eyes. “You owe me eggs.”

“I’m not the one who wasted them,” he protests.

“You’re the reason they were wasted.”

He gives a huff of resignation. “*Fine.* What was he going to make me anyway?”

I peer into the kitchen and take note of the other ingredients Jersey had taken it upon himself to remove from the fridge. I shrug. “Omelet, I guess. There’s cheese and tomatoes and mushrooms up there.”

Skyler’s face screws up. “*Vegetables?* It’s bad enough he was making me breakfast, but he was making me breakfast with *vegetables?*”

I can’t help a little snort of amusement. Skyler’s a generally pretty healthy eater, but when it comes to cooked breakfasts, he’s all about the bacon.

“I think the real deal-breaker here is that it was a breakfast that could

have killed you,” I point out.

He waves that concern away as though potential anaphylaxis is a mere nuisance. “Well, yeah, but seriously—who makes breakfast with *vegetables*?”

“Well, technically tomatoes are a fruit and mushrooms are a fungus, so...”

“Try telling the grocery stores that, Jackson,” he says with a pout.

Skyler’s one of those super intelligent people who has a habit of dumbing himself down. It started as a protective instinct when he was a kid, and he’s never quite grown out of it despite his incredible academic achievements. He hates it when I correct him, though, so I’m not surprised to see him getting sulky now.

“Are there any eggs left at all?” I ask. “Or did Jersey Shore waste all of them?”

“Jersey *Coyote*,” Skyler amends. “Although maybe Jersey Shore is better. I never watched that so it can’t be ruined.”

“Well, if history’s anything to go by I can’t imagine you’ll spare too many thoughts for this guy in the future so giving him a new nickname seems a bit like overkill.”

Skyler shrugs before rounding the breakfast bar and stepping into the kitchen. “True.” He studies the items on the counter, his expression one of obvious distaste. “There’s still two left,” he tells me. “I can make your pancakes and get more later.”

I nod. “Sounds good. I think we’re running low on a lot of shit, actually. We should probably make a list.”

After the insanity of studying for the Bar, Skyler decided to take a couple weeks to regroup before starting his new job, so we’ve been going through groceries way quicker than we would if he were spending his days at school or work. And it’s not just the extra meals he’s eating here; he seems to have developed a hobby of making shit with food. And I don’t mean cooking, or baking. I mean, like...*art*. If you can call it that. I came home the other day to find him muttering and cursing because the corn syrup he was using for glue wasn’t holding the Dorito and breadstick sculpture in the place he wanted.

On the plus side, he seems to have let go of his apparently hopeless dream of getting Rocket walking on a lead.

“Oh, yeah...now that I think about it, I’m not sure we have any whipped cream left,” Skyler says. “I used it the other day on a project.”

I cringe at the thought of him using a perishable item like whipped cream on one of his “art” pieces. It is *definitely* time for him to start work.

“I’m sure they’ll be just as delicious without the decoration,” I say with an eye roll. Skyler’s decoration = whipped cream dicks. “Syrup will be fine. Unless you’ve used all of that too?”

“Nah, maple’s too runny. It’d never work as a sticking agent,” he explains, sounding like he’s competing on *Baking Impossible*. “But are you sure you can handle Mrs. Butterworth’s?” He flashes a teasing smirk. “I can get the potholders.”

I groan and toss my head back. “Fuck, that was one time.”

Skyler’s face spreads into a broad grin, his eyes dancing with levity as he holds his hands up. “Hey, I’m not judging. You know I don’t care...about that, or the David Attenborough special with the baboons, or the Olympic table tennis...”

“Can we please stop listing all the weird things I’ve jerked off to?” I ask with an eye roll.

“It’s not weird,” Skyler protests. “It’s...quaint.”

I offer a skeptical look. “That’s a synonym for weird.”

He shrugs. “Everyone’s got their thing. So, pancakes?”

He turns away from me to grab the frying pan from one of the cupboards and I’m left with a bunch of familiar thoughts swirling in my head.

I have no fucking clue why I sometimes get aroused by weird shit like that. It’s not like I’m actually attracted to a syrup bottle; and I sure as fuck don’t want to have sex with baboons. I have no doubt the ladies on the Croatian and South Korean women’s table tennis teams are lovely people, but from my vague memory of that incident, there were only one or two cameras actually on the game and the ball was the focus, not the players. It was the grunting that got my attention.

And those aren’t the only examples. I don’t know if it’s a brain thing or a body thing, or what...it’s just that for whatever reason, shit like that often causes the same arousal response as porn.

Usually, I just ignore it and it passes. But sometimes it doesn’t, and I just need to go for it.

That’s one of the reasons I’m not a fan of Skyler’s whole potholders thing. If there’s anyone who knows about inappropriate masturbation, it’s me.

“Oh, good news—looks like we ran out of Mrs. Butterworth’s,” Skyler says, brandishing a fresh bottle of syrup he’s just dug out of the pantry. He

hits me with an arched eyebrow. “Do I need to worry about you with this one?”

I glance at the label, glowering when I see the illustration of Aunt Jemima at top. “Just give me the fucking syrup.”

Chapter Four

Skyler

“WHERE IS HE? WHERE’S MY BABY?” I HEAR A FAMILIAR VOICE DEMAND excitedly when I step out of my bedroom on Monday morning, fully dressed for work.

“I thought I was your baby?” Jackson asks, pouting at the phone he has held up in front of him.

“You’re my beautiful boy,” I hear Steph, his mom, saying. “Although I’d prefer it if I could actually *see* your beautiful face and not just your beautiful head,” she adds wryly. “Seriously, that beard is getting out of control. You look like you’ve got something growing on your face.”

“I do have something growing on my face,” Jax says dryly. “It’s called facial hair.”

I’m unable to hold in a snort of laughter, and that prompts Steph to let out an excited squeal. “*Skyler!* Come over here so I can see you all handsome for your first day.”

“You know, I could just move the phone,” Jackson says, but I’ve already started moving.

“Ooh, nice choice,” Steph says with a nod of approval as I strut toward the phone like I’m on a catwalk. “Love the tie. Do a spin for me.” I oblige her and she applauds, continuing with her enthusiastic gushing. “Love it! Oh, I can’t believe it’s my little baby’s first day of work! I feel so old!”

“Jesus, Mom, it’s not like he’s never had a job before,” Jackson says.

“But he’s a proper lawyer now,” she says with a beaming smile..

“Not quite,” I remind her. “I haven’t got my Bar results yet.”

She gives the camera a dismissive wave. “Oh, you’ll pass. You’re such a smart boy, and you’ve worked so hard for this, Skyler. I’m so proud of you.”

I feel myself blushing furiously under the lavish praise. But it also feels pretty amazing; I’d probably deny it if anyone actually asked me, but a huge reason I’ve worked so hard all these years was for this exact moment: to make Steph proud. Next to Jackson, Steph’s my absolute favorite person in the world. I mean, no offense to Deacon—he’s an amazing friend and I couldn’t live without him—but Steph’s just...special. It’s not an exaggeration to say she saved my life. Probably multiple times.

I left home for college when I was eighteen and haven't said a word to my parents since. But Steph I talk to at least once a week. She's just the fucking best.

"Jesus, Mom, are you crying?" Jackson asks.

"No," she squeaks, wiping a hand over her eyes.

I let out a soft chuckle, a broad grin spreading across my face. "Hey, if it makes you feel any better, Deacon's dating a guy, like, five years older than you," I tell her.

She blinks at me. "Huh? Better about what?"

"About being old."

She tosses back her head with a tinkling laugh. "Oh my god. Is this your way of telling me I should look for a twenty-five-year-old boyfriend?"

I shrug. "Sure."

"No," Jackson growls "And we've talked about this."

I have to purse my lips together to stop them from twitching. He and I might not have any boundaries, but his mother's dating life is a completely different story. The fact that there's only a sixteen-year age gap has led to a lot more openness as we've gotten older, and a lot more discomfort on Jackson's part.

"Oh my god, Jackson. I just realized who you remind me of with this whole shaved head and beard thing," Steph says excitedly. "Oscar Isaac in that weird movie with the robots."

I can't help my face from screwing up in incredulity as I take a step back to scrutinize Jackson. Oscar Isaac? I don't think so. Oscar Isaac is hot. Jackson's...Jackson. "Yeah, I don't see it," I say with a shake of my head. "No offense, Jax."

Jackson rolls his eyes. "Yeah, I'm devastated you don't think I look like a creepy billionaire who fucks AI."

"Well I do," Steph says with a smirk. "Just stay away from all the computers and stuff, please, babe. You know...so I don't worry."

Jackson shakes his head in exasperation while I let out a bark of laughter.

IF YOU'D ASKED ME A FEW MONTHS AGO WHERE I'D BE SPENDING MY FIRST year out of law school, I wouldn't have hesitated for a beat before answering,

“Campbell Nixon.” It’s one of the most prestigious firms in New York, and I’ve been working there part time as a paralegal for the past couple years while I finished up my studies. Oh, and Charlie Campbell—one of the name partners—is one of my buddies from the amateur rugby team I play on with Jackson and Deac. So nepotism for the win.

But then Tanner—Deacon’s billionaire boyfriend—suggested it’d be good for me to branch out and get some experience outside my usual sphere, and offered to introduce me to his own lawyer, Leona Fisher. I was hesitant at first, but ultimately decided to take the advice. With one slight alteration: I sent my application through just like any other first year would. I figured there wasn’t much point stepping out on my own if I were just going to have the job handed to me. Tanner still put a word in, but it’s not as though other graduates didn’t have their own referees calling contacts at various law firms across the city on their behalf. That’s just the way it works.

So I’m now a first year associate at Reyes Carter Loeb, where Leona is a junior partner. Charlie wasn’t exactly thrilled—evidently he and Leona have a long and acrimonious history—but he wants me to be the best lawyer I can be, and apparently if that means *temporarily* sacrificing me to the “she-devil” he’ll get on board.

I let out a deep breath as I step off the elevator onto the thirty-second floor of the firm’s Lexington Avenue office building. I’m only a few blocks away from Charlie’s building, so my day really hasn’t felt all that new and different so far. But now that I’m walking through the unfamiliar reception area and approaching the desk with the stranger sitting behind it, I’m definitely starting to feel those first day nerves kick in.

I hover a little awkwardly about ten feet away from the desk, waiting for the receptionist to finish up a conversation with a young woman who’s currently propped casually against the desk, sipping a coffee.

“Oh my god, I didn’t need to hear that, Becca!” the woman groans, running a frustrated hand through her long brown hair. “Do you know how long it took to get that fucking stuffy out of the toilet? And then, of course, he still wanted to sleep with it afterward. I’m like, “no, devil child, you do not get to keep the stuffed bear you drowned in the toilet!””

“Aww, the poor thing,” Becca, the receptionist, says. “A kid needs a stuffy, Cait.”

“Well, Miller is now his new stuffy,” the woman—Cait, I guess—says. “On the bright side, Dylan can’t throw him in the toilet. But it’s really put a

kink in our sex life.”

“Lucky for you, you’ve got a spare,” Becca says with a grin.

“Umm...sorry to interrupt,” I finally say after determining that this conversation is in no way related to work.

Both women glance up at my interruption, staring wide-eyed as though they hadn’t expected to see anyone at the front reception desk of one of Manhattan’s top law firms.

“Were you just standing there eavesdropping?” Cait asks, green eyes narrowed in suspicion.

I arch an eyebrow at her. “I was waiting patiently. You were the one talking about your sex life for the whole reception area to hear.”

“Who are you here to see?” Becca asks with a smile.

“I’m Skyler Mason. I’m—”

“Oh, shit—you’re one of mine,” Cait says, downing the rest of her coffee and shooting it into the trash bin like an NBA pro. “Okay, come on baby lawyer,” she says with a gesture to me, then strides off in the direction of the interior offices.

I hesitate for a moment. “Wait—what?”

“Good luck,” Becca says, waving me away.

Um. Great. That was helpful.

At a loss of what else I should do, I hurry to catch up to the brash, dismissive girl who claims I’m “one of hers.”

“Um, what’s going on right now?” I ask her. “Where are we going?”

“Jesus, I figured you’d have to be smart to graduate second in your class,” she mutters. “Especially at Columbia.”

“How did you know I graduated second?” I ask, a little taken aback.

“Through the power of reading.”

My brows draw together in confusion. “Who *are* you?” For some reason, she looks really familiar. I’m pretty sure I’d remember if I’d ever met this woman before, but there’s definitely something about her features that’s tugging at my memory. I’m probably being ridiculous, though; there are tons of women with dark brown hair and green eyes.

“I’m Cait Kelly,” she tells me. “I’m one of Leona’s paralegals, which means I have the joy of babysitting the first years. Yay.”

“You don’t sound enthusiastic, about that.”

She casts me an unimpressed look. “Baby lawyers. You all think you’re top shit, until the work and the pressure and the hours pile on and you end up

dumping half of it on your friendly neighborhood paralegal,” she says dryly, holding a hand up.

I wince, because I know exactly what she’s talking about. Fortunately, I was saved the worst of it because I was only part-time when I was at Campbell Nixon, and because Charlie tended to keep me working on his own stuff rather than assigning me out to other lawyers at the firm—like I said, nepotism has its perks. “Well, I won’t be doing that,” I assure her. “Because I *am* top shit.”

She rolls her eyes. “Ooh, goody. We’ve moved onto the lame pick-up line portion of the tour.”

My brows shoot up. “Pick-up line?” I was just telling the truth. Damn, I really need to find a way to stop exuding my charisma all over the place. I don’t want to make my new colleagues uncomfortable because they’re so overwhelmed by my charm and beauty.

I’m about to open my mouth to apologize and explain my lack of interest, when Cait pauses in her step and spins to face me, a stern expression on her face. She’s a few years younger than me, I’d say, and she doesn’t even come up to my shoulders, even in high heels; but, damn, she is not someone I’d want to meet in a dark alley. I bet she does mixed martial arts or something like that. The thought is scary as hell.

“Before you get any ideas about re-enacting a whole Mike and Rachel scenario between us, you should know I’m spoken for—twice over—and also, I have eight brothers who would all happily kick your ass.”

My brows shoot up. “Duly noted. But before you call in your attack dogs, you should know I’m gay. And even if I weren’t, I don’t shit where I eat—way too complicated.”

She grimaces. “Thanks for that...graphic clarification.” Her face clears and she studies me speculatively. “So that wasn’t a line?”

I offer a wry smirk. “Sorry to disappoint. I was just stating a fact. I really am top shit.”

She rolls her eyes. “Well, at least I know I’m not going crazy.”

“You’re not?” I quirk a brow at her. “You just threatened to set your entire family on me.”

She gives a dismissive wave. “It wouldn’t have come to that. Trust me, I’m perfectly capable of taking care of myself.”

“Yeah, I get that impression.”

“But the pack of brothers threat is a good way to keep guys with that look

at bay,” she adds with a shrug.

My brows draw together in confusion. “What look?”

She waves a hand in the air around my face. “You know, that look that says “I’m so amazing and charming. I’ve screwed half of New York and my sole mission in life is to get through the other half. Don’t you want to find out how great I am in bed?””

I shrug. “If by half of New York you mean the male population then, yeah, I guess that would be a fair estimate. But I don’t do this on purpose,” I explain, gesturing to myself. “My natural charisma just flows all over the place. I have no control over this. I’m the real victim here.”

Amusement flickers through Cait’s eyes and her lips twitch in a poor attempt to hide a smile. Well, at least she has a sense of humor—that’ll be handy if we’re going to be working together.

“Just for the record, the whole playboy charm offensive thing might be great while you’re single, but when you actually meet someone you want to settle down with they’re not going to find it remotely attractive. I know this from first-hand experience,” she says with a nod, making me curious about her two partners.

“Thanks for the advice, but it’s not necessary,” I inform her. “I’m not planning on “settling down”.”

“Yeah, that’s what they all say.”

“No, I’m serious, Cait. My life is perfect the way it is. I don’t need a boyfriend, or a husband or whatever.”

She shrugs, still looking skeptical. “Okay. But I remember my brother used to say something *really* similar until he met his fiancé a few years ago. And he was forty-two when that happened—who knows what you’ll be thinking in fifteen years.”

“Well, if it’s the same as it is right now I’ll be thinking “my life is perfect and I’m not changing a thing.””

She rolls her eyes. “Skyler...”

Something clicks in my brain, and I stop in my tracks. “Wait, what did you say your name was again?”

“Cait...” she responds, looking at me like I have cotton wool between my ears because I only just addressed her by name a few moments ago.

“Your surname,” I clarify.

“Oh...it’s Kelly. Cait Kelly.”

“And your brother—the one who settled down a couple years ago—is that

Shay Kelly?”

She stares at me, wide-eyed. “You *know* him? Oh, god, please don’t tell me you’ve slept with him. I mean, our family aren’t exactly prudes—as much as Mom probably wishes we were—but I don’t need those kinds of details.”

I let out a soft laugh. “No, I didn’t sleep with him. I mean, he’s totally hot, but I get the feeling we wouldn’t be all that compatible if you get my meaning.”

I waggle my eyebrows at her and she groans, running a hand down her face. “Why did I open that door?”

I just smirk at her, taking in her features once again. No wonder she looked so familiar; I should have picked up on it when she gave me her surname, or at least when she mentioned her eight brothers, seeing as I’ve met most of them.

Shay is the captain of another rugby team in the same league as ours, and for reasons nobody can quite remember, he and Spencer don’t get along. Which makes it a bit awkward that their fiancés are best friends.

As for the rest of the Kelly brothers, I’ve met several of them in the past when we’ve played casual rugby scrimmages. They’re supposed to just be for fun, but certain people—not naming names—tend to take them more seriously than others.

“I’m friends with Will,” I tell Cait, finally offering an explanation as to how I know her brother. Technically, I’m friends with Spencer and Spencer is engaged to Will, but I think I can call Will a buddy after knowing him for six months and going head-to-head in several videogame bouts, so it doesn’t feel like a lie.

“Oh, okay, yeah. That makes sense,” she says with a nod. Then she pauses and stares at me for a long moment, her eyes slowly narrowing in suspicion as a thought no doubt occurs to her. “Oh my god. You’re on that fucking rugby team, aren’t you?”

Chapter Five

Jackson

“I NEED TO THINK OF A PRESENT FOR SKYLER,” I SAY TO DREW AS I carefully inspect the engine of the Porsche that was brought into our garage this morning. It’s only here for general maintenance, not repair work, but I want to make sure I don’t miss anything. “Any ideas?”

“How about a gallon-sized bottle of lube?” he calls out with a muffled laugh, and when I glance in the direction of his comment, I realize he’s currently underneath the Lexus we’ve been working on for the past few days.

Drew and I co-own an auto repairs business, which we established about five years ago. We specialize in luxury cars and even though it’s still a young business, it’s become a successful one. Drew will never admit it, because until he and Sullivan got together last year, he held pretty tight to his belief that all rich people are assholes, but I know a big reason for our early success is because the wealthy businessmen I happen to play on a rugby team with brought their cars in when we first opened and then raved about us to all their friends and clients.

I know all of those guys—Spencer, Cole, Charlie, Pax, Sullivan—would have been more than willing to step up again last year when the retail part of our business experienced some significant financial issues thanks to a bad storm and an asshole insurance company, but Drew is a stubborn bastard and he wasn’t willing to take any money from them. At least, not without giving something in return. So ultimately I guess that turned out for the best, otherwise he and Sully never would have ended up together.

“It’s to celebrate his new job, asshole,” I grumble at Drew in response to his jibe.

I can’t believe I didn’t think about this sooner. Mom was right to make such a fuss this morning—this *is* a huge thing. Even though Skyler won’t actually get his Bar results until next month, the career he’s been dreaming about and working toward for over a decade is finally getting off the ground, and I want to do something special to commemorate it.

Drew rolls out from under the Lexus, flashing a wry smirk. “In that case, get him *two* giant bottles of lube. And blister pads for his cock. I have a feeling he’s going to need them.”

I roll my eyes and toss a greasy rag at Drew, smiling with satisfaction when it lands right on his face. “Don’t be an ass. And he doesn’t have blisters on his cock. I would know.”

Drew swipes the rag off his face, his brows practically in his hairline. “I was joking. But how the fuck would you “know”?” he questions, lifting one hand to make air quotes.

I shrug. “I’ve seen his dick tons of times.”

He just blinks at me like I have two heads. “Jesus Christ. I knew you guys were super...you know—” he waves his hand in a casual gesture that could honestly mean anything. “But I have to admit my mind is being blown right now.”

I cross my arms over my chest, fixing him with an irritated look. “What is so mind-blowing about two guys watching porn together?”

His expression morphs into a thoughtful frown. “Well...nothing, I guess. It’s just a little strange considering you’re into different things...”

I shrug. “We watch group stuff.”

“*Skyler* watches porn with women in it?” Drew asks, his tone and expression full of skepticism.

“And men,” I remind him.

Drew rolls his eyes. “Yeah, I kind of assumed that much. But still...he gets grossed out if he even *hears* the word ‘vagina’. He must really love you if he’s willing to watch porn with naked girls in it.”

I’m hit with a pang of guilt, because this is something I was already aware of. I know *Skyler*’s under the assumption that I make the same sacrifice for him, but that’s not exactly true. I might not be attracted to the men in the videos we watch, but I’m not repulsed by them either. I’m pretty neutral about it, to be honest. And compounding the guilt further is that I’m also pretty neutral about the women in the porn we watch. Truthfully, porn is something that confuses me. I don’t know why I can get aroused and jerk off when I don’t even find it that sexy.

“He does really love me,” I say simply. It’s a well-known fact, so I’m not sure why Drew’s even questioning it. “Which is why I need to get a really good new job present.”

Evidently giving up on getting back under the Lexus for the time being, Drew clammers off the creeper and gets to his feet, brushing himself down. “I don’t know why you’re asking for my help,” he says. “I love the guy, but our relationship is based around sitcoms and a shared respect for Bernie Sanders.”

You know him inside and out and back to front—surely you can think of something?”

“Yeah, but I want it to be special,” I insist.

Ordinarily, I wouldn’t be twisting my brain around like this. Skyler’s not a particularly difficult person to buy for; he’d be just as happy with a selection of SpongeBob boxer briefs as with a Rolex. But this is a little different.

“Special as in sentimental?” Drew asks. “Or special as in expensive?”

I consider the question for a moment, tapping my fingers against the surface of the Porsche. Even if I could afford the expensive option, I doubt that would be the way to go. Skyler knows how to dress the part, but in reality he’s not particularly materialistic.

“Sentimental.”

Drew shrugs. “Well, my knee-jerk response is *The Golden Girls*, but you can’t exactly give that to him, can you? I mean, do they even sell DVDs anymore? And where would you play it?”

“Not exactly the kind of sentimental I was going for,” I say with an eye roll. “And my mom still has a DVD player.”

“That she *uses*?” he asks incredulously.

I nod. “She gets them second hand from junk sales and eBay and stuff. Her collection’s huge now—you walk past her bookshelves and it’s basically like you’re in a real-life Netflix catalogue.”

“Yeah, but with Netflix you don’t have to get up to change the disk after a few episodes,” Drew points out. “It just keeps playing.”

I give a wry shake of my head and turn back to the Porsche. I think I’ve wasted enough time chatting; Skyler’s present will have to wait.

“WHAT ARE YOU THINKING?” DREW ASKS, HANGING BETWEEN THE TWO stainless steel doors of the enormous fridge that sits inside the enormous kitchen in the enormous apartment he now shares with Sullivan. He studies the contents with the same assessing frown he always wears when inspecting the damage on a car, his tongue poking out to flick at his lip ring. “Looks like there’s microwave pizza, or...microwave pizza. Fuck, we really need to get some groceries.”

“Well, I guess I’ll have microwave pizza,” I say dryly. “Or we could order an actual pizza?”

Drew snaps the doors closed and turns to me, one eyebrow arched. “I thought you were tired of take out?”

And I hadn’t lied. It’s been a busy week for both me and Skyler—him in particular—so we’ve pretty much been living off pizza, burgers, and Chinese food. We will definitely be doing a proper grocery run tomorrow. Or at the very least order an Amazon Fresh drop off.

“Yeah, well, I said that before I realized Old Mother Hubbard was inviting me over,” I grumble. “You’re engaged to a billionaire—how do you not have any food in your fridge?”

“Engaged in theory,” Drew corrects, prompting me to roll my eyes. “And there’s food...if you’re interested in quinoa and cranberry salad? Or cauliflower rice? Or curried vegetable patties?”

My brows creep up in curiosity. “What the hell is all that doing in your fridge?” I’ve known Drew for ten years and I’m pretty sure if someone was holding a gun to his head demanding that he spell “quinoa” he’d be dead before he actually got it right.

“Technically, it’s the freezer. Sully never has much time for cooking, so he gets Mirabel—that’s the housekeeper—to make up those side dishes and put them in the freezer, and then he just cooks a steak or some chicken or something to go with it,” he explains.

“But you’re here now,” I point out. “And you like cooking.”

Drew shrugs. “Yeah, but it’s nice not to have to do it every night.” He opens one of the fridge doors again, retrieving two beer bottles. Then he stalks over to the living room and hands one to me, before collapsing in the armchair opposite to where I’m seated on the sofa.

“Are you ever going to let Sully out of his misery?” I ask him. “You’re clearly happy here.”

Drew and Sullivan have been “engaged in theory” since November; it’s some lame-ass term Drew thought up based on something he saw on that old tv show with Ryan Reynolds—*Two Guys and a Girl*—and is apparently used when someone is freaked out about the massive commitment they’re making. Although, from memory, the blonde girl only made Nathan Fillion wait a few days, whereas Drew’s been holding out for months.

But to be fair, he and Sullivan didn’t have the most conventional, or romantic of courtships considering the whole thing started out as a complete

ruse. Drew didn't even realize he was attracted to men when Sullivan hired him to pretend to be his boyfriend for his sister's wedding weekend. Somehow they came out of that weekend as not simply pretend boyfriends, but pretend fiancés. And things just kept going from there...

In response to my question, Drew's lips curve into a slow smile. He starts shifting around in his chair, glancing up at the ceiling and in the space around and behind him, as though he's expecting to find hidden cameras or something. Then he leans forward, eyes lit with excitement. "I've started looking at rings."

"Well it's about fucking time," I drawl.

"I didn't want to rush it," he says defensively.

"Drew, glaciers have melted faster," I say dryly, taking a sip from my beer. "I mean, we're almost ready to reopen the shop."

"Yeah, but we thought we'd be closed for six months, so we're ahead of schedule," he says with a smug smile, as though that makes all the difference.

I let out a soft huff of laughter, shaking my head. "Whatever, I'm just glad it's finally happening now." I reach out with my beer bottle so I can clink it against his. "Congrats, man."

Drew grins broadly, before fixing me with a stern expression. "You can't tell anyone. I want it to be a surprise."

"I think *relieved* is the more appropriate word if we want to predict Sully's reaction," I say with a chuckle. "But, sure, no problem. I won't tell."

His eyes narrow on me. "I mean it Jackson—not even Skyler."

I hold my hands up to proclaim my innocence. "Not a word." Obviously, I'll be telling Skyler, but I know he won't say anything.

Drew eyes me skeptically for a long moment before finally nodding and relaxing back in the armchair. "Did you come up with a present?" he asks. "Or are you going with my lube idea?"

I ignore the last remark, grinning with excitement as I tug my phone from my pocket. "I thought of something. Here, take a look." I scroll to the confirmation of the purchase in my email app so Drew can see the picture, then hand my phone to him.

"It's an old book," he says, sounding both unimpressed and confused.

"It's a first edition," I inform him, even though that information is right there in the sale confirmation.

"It's *brown*..."

I roll my eyes. "It's from 1968."

“So...does he, like, collect vintage books or something?”

“No...” Although that does seem like something Skyler would be into. Maybe he’ll start now... “I got him this one because it’s his favorite. I thought he’d like the first edition copy.”

Drew glances at my phone again, then back up at me, eyes wide with incredulity. “His favorite book? Of all time?”

I nod. “Yeah. Why is that—”

“*Skyler Mason?*” he interrupts, incredulity making way for obvious amusement. “The guy who pulls a new trick every other day? Who just graduated from Columbia Law? You’re telling me his favorite book of all time is *Ramona the Pest?*”

A surge of irritation rushes through me and I lean forward to snatch my phone from Drew’s hands. “Yes, that’s what I’m telling you. I didn’t realize how ridiculous it apparently is,” I grate out through a clenched jaw. “But I swear to god, Drew, if you make fun of him for it we’re going to have a problem.”

Drew’s eyes widen in obvious shock. “Shit...I’m sorry, Jax. I was just a little...surprised, that’s all. I mean, it’s a children’s book...”

“My mom gave it to him when he was seven,” I explain, feeling my hackles recede. I’ve never been very good at holding onto anger, and it’s not Drew’s fault he doesn’t know the full story. “It’s been his favorite book ever since.” I’m not going to mention the part about how it was the first book Skyler had ever owned; that’s his story to tell.

Drew nods, looking extremely contrite. “That makes a lot of sense. And if that’s really his favorite book then I think the first edition’s a great gift.”

I smile and slip my phone back in my pocket. “I already knew that, but thanks.”

Chapter Six

Skyler

IT'S NOT UNTIL THE FRIDAY AFTERNOON OF MY SECOND WEEK THAT I FINALLY get invited to Leona's office to "touch base."

I'm a little nervous about the one-on-one meeting, although I don't know why I should be. So far, I think things are going well. I've managed to make it through the first week without screwing anything up, so that's a relief. Not that I anticipated dropping the ball, but it's always a plus to come out swinging.

Did I just smash together two conflicting baseball metaphors? Whatever—the only thing I actually like about that sport is when the camera zooms in on the catcher's ass in those tight pants.

The week has been busy as hell. There's no such thing as a grace period for the first year associates, that's for sure. And I have to admit, even though I'd never actually say it to his face, I'm glad I decided not to take Charlie's offer and instead started out at a new firm where I'm on equal footing with all the other "baby lawyers" as Cait calls us. At least now I know whatever advancements I make, or privileges I'm awarded I well and truly earn through my work performance, and not just because I'm "Charlie's Boy." My old colleagues were nice enough, but I wouldn't blame them if they're relieved to see the back of me. It would have been difficult not to notice the blatant favoritism Charlie bestowed on me, and I'm sure the thought that Charlie and I might be sleeping together crossed a lot of people's minds at least once or twice. Being amongst the first years now, I can imagine a fair bit of resentment building up toward anyone having such close ties with one of the partners, so I think I might have dodged a bullet there.

Something tells me I'm not going to have that issue with Leona...

"Do you know why I hired you?" she asks, stalking around her office on sky-high heels. I've seen her coming and going a few times this week and I keep getting the impression she's someone who doesn't like sitting still.

She's young for the position she holds in the company—late thirties, maybe? I'm not a good judge of women's ages, though, so for all I know she could be forty-five and just takes really, really good care of herself. I kind of want to ask her what her skincare routine is, because her dark complexion is

flawless. I'm not sure that'd go over too well, though.

"Um...because Tanner Grimsey asked you to?" I really hope that's not the reason, but I feel like I need to hear it.

She pauses in her step, her straight black hair swishing around her shoulders as she turns to arch a brow at me. "Of course he didn't *ask* me to. We hire on merit at this firm, Skyler," she says pointedly. "Not because of who someone might know."

Well, there's a dig if I ever heard one.

"He mentioned that I might want to find a few minutes to take a look at your resume," she clarifies. "That was all. Tanner's not someone who usually makes suggestions like that. He doesn't like to interfere in how other people run their business. So, obviously, I was curious. I was impressed by your resume, which is why I asked to meet you. And you excelled in your interview, which is why I decided to hire you." She starts walking around again, and I can't help being impressed at the way she's able to maneuver on those heels. "I'm telling you this to make sure you're aware that here at Reyes Carter Loeb we only hire quality. Every single one of your colleagues has come to this firm with a resume just as impressive as yours. Each one of them is just as smart, just as capable, just as dedicated."

I nod. "I've seen that for myself already."

"We expect a lot from our associates," she continues as though I hadn't interrupted. "And I, in particular, expect a lot from the first years. And I'm not just referring to the workload." She halts again and issues me with a level look. "Don't feel as though I'm calling you out, Skyler. I've had this exact conversation with each one of you, and, trust me, no matter how brilliant and shiny you seem, you all have *something* that could cause you to buckle, and it's part of my job to prepare you."

"I really don't—"

She holds a hand up, cutting me off. "I have no concerns regarding your ability, or your tenacity. You're clearly incredibly driven, and ambitious, and dedicated—those are all good things, Skyler. But your Achilles heel is that ego of yours."

I feel heat touching my cheeks. "Um..."

She rolls her eyes and waves a dismissive hand at me. "Stop freaking out, it's not a big deal. This isn't a judgment on your character, and from everything I've read, it's well-earned," she adds with a slight smirk. "Trust me, it'll serve you well when you start climbing, so don't do anything stupid

like take some whacked-up spirt journey or have a near-death experience that puts everything into “perspective,” she warns me, lifting her fingers to make air quotes.

My brows shoot up. “Uh...okay, I’ll try.” *Not to get myself nearly killed...*

She sighs, shaking her head. “Look, my point is that right now you’re a first year associate who hasn’t officially made it into the Bar yet, which puts you rather low on the pecking order.”

I nod, feeling a little confused. Is she having another crack at Charlie? She must be aware that he’d been fully prepared to fast-track my journey up the ladder, but if I’d wanted to take the shortcut I’d still be at Campbell Nixon. “I know. I’m aware of that.”

Leona quirks a brow at me. “I hope you are. I want you to succeed here, Skyler, so I hope you’re prepared for the years ahead of biting your tongue and swallowing your pride. I know I sure as hell wasn’t.”

I blink at her in confusion. “You...weren’t?”

Her lips twitch in a barely-there wry smirk, and I get the strange feeling I’ve been caught out somehow. “Kind of dumb, right? I was a scholarship kid, a woman, and a Black woman at that. And I spent my entire school life from kindergarten to law school graduation learning to harden myself against all the bullshit that comes with that. And I did that by being the best. I worked harder than everyone else, I learned more, I performed better. Because test scores were something definitive I could hold up as proof whenever anyone tried to insinuate I wasn’t worthy.” She pauses for a moment and offers a wry smirk. “And, yeah, it was fun kicking all that rich white boy ass when I got to law school—just ask Charlie Campbell why he was only ever number two.”

Well, that answers the question about her age, I guess. And, damn—has their rivalry been going for, like, fifteen years? That’s insane.

“But when I came here, fresh out of Harvard, I thought things would be different. I mean, this is a diverse firm. We have two POC and two female name partners, and when I started here twelve years ago at least four of the other equity partners were Black. I was a brand new associate who’d just bossed my way through law school, and I was certain I had the ability to crush anything or anyone that got in my path. So you can imagine the kind of reality check I had to go through once it became obvious that I wasn’t the queen of my own destiny—I was at the bottom of the food chain. And here I

am, twelve years later, still clawing my way up that chain.” She says the words simply, as though she’s merely stating a fact, but I can hear a rueful tint in her tone.

“You seem pretty majestic to me,” I say with a smile. Yeah, okay, that’s laying it on a bit thick. I can’t help it, though; she’s cool. In a scary-as-fuck, don’t-get-on-her-bad-side kind of way. I get why Cait loves her so much. And why Charlie doesn’t. It has nothing to do with her gender or race; they’re just both very strong personalities. There’s a reason they don’t put lions and tigers in the same enclosure at the zoo.

Leona lets out a breath of amusement. “You’re sweet. But are you getting my point, Skyler? I assume you know what happens to animals at the bottom of the food chain?”

“They get eaten by predators?”

“Exactly. All you associates are just gazelles doing what you can to survive, and the partners are the lions circling, ready to tear out chunks of your flesh.”

“Should I be flattered that you called me a gazelle?” I ask. “They’re very beautiful creatures.”

She rolls her eyes, muttering, “Tanner warned me about this—I thought he was exaggerating...”

“Sorry,” I say a little sheepishly. When someone starts referencing “The Circle of Life”, it’s a little hard to remember you’re in a serious business meeting with your boss.

She shakes her head. “I suppose I’ll have to get used to it. But let’s just can the metaphors for now.”

“That’s probably a good idea, because I have this image in my head from an Attenborough special where a gazelle fell behind the rest of its migrating herd and was torn to strips by a pack of cheetahs, and now I’m really confused about where this whole food chain thing is going.”

Her lips purse together in what I think is an effort not to laugh. “As an associate, you’ll be working very closely with many of your superiors. This is a large firm, and it has a number of specialties, so you could be called on to assist with anything from criminal defense, to finance, to family law, to issues involving state and local government, to corporate litigation and so on...and of course you’ll have your dedicated pro bono hours, the same as everyone else in the company.”

I nod. I’m aware of all of this. We discussed it at length during the

interview, and I got another run down from Cait while she was showing me around the firm's three floors of office space. In my short week here I've already been assigned grunt work in a divorce case, and I sat in on depositions for a suit against one of our big cyber clients. I can't wait until I get my Bar results and can actually get into the court room. "I know. It's one of the reasons I wanted to work here. To get experience in so many fields of law."

She offers a soft smile. "And that's admirable. But what you need to be prepared for while you're getting all this fabulous experience is that you'll be doing the vast majority of the grunt work, but getting none of the credit. None of the accolades. None of the rewards. You'll also need to allow for more pro-bono hours, because the partners and senior associates will certainly dump a fair share of theirs onto you."

My mouth parts slightly and I just stare at her, feeling stunned. What. The. Fuck? It's not like I'd expected to just swan in here and become a name partner within a few years—but how am I supposed to get anywhere up that ladder if I can't take credit for my work?

"Ah, so not quite so aware after all," Leona says with a knowing look. "But at least now you know, and I hope you'll be able to handle it better than I did."

"You're still here," I point out. "You're a partner now. You can't have handled it that badly."

She lets out a rueful chuckle. "I'm here because I have a very loyal client whose company's revenue happened to skyrocket at the exact right moment. He would have followed me wherever I went, and the partners wanted a piece of those billables, so they decided not to fire me after all."

My brows shoot up. "*Fire* you?"

Leona waves a dismissive hand. "It's a long story, and trust me, it'd bore you to tears."

"What should I do to...handle things better?" I ask her.

She considers me for a moment and then says, "There are a few things that I think might help. Firstly—expectations management. That's what we're doing right now, and I think it'd be a good idea to continue with this as your career progresses. Of course, we don't want you to end up going to opposite route where you end up constantly aiming too low, but I think you're smart enough and logical enough to be able to assess your situation and develop reasonable and realistic goals."

I nod. “Yeah, I guess I can do that.”

“Secondly, try to reverse your reward perception if that’s at all possible. If a senior lawyer in one of the country’s top firms wants to put their name to your work, that’s a *good* thing. But if they’re distancing themselves and telling everyone you were the one handling the case, that’s when it’s time to worry because you’ve clearly fucked something up.”

I wince at the mere thought of being called out in such a negative way. “Okay, yeah. That makes sense, I guess.”

“And I guess the last thing is just to keep in mind that even if you’re putting in all this grunt work and not getting any of the recognition you were hoping for, there are still plenty of other rewards to reap from every case you’re assigned to. Even if they don’t acknowledge it, your supervisors will remember how you conduct yourself on each case, which can be very handy down the line. You’ll also have the opportunity to argue in court, and you’ll make yourself known to prosecutors and lawyers from other firms. And clients, of course,” she adds with a soft smile. “This isn’t exactly *advice*, but I’m just putting it out there—there will likely be a client here or there who recognizes the time and effort you put in on their case and decides to show their appreciation by joining your client list.”

I nod slowly as I consider all her suggestions. “Okay, thanks. That’s all great advice.”

To be honest, I don’t really agree with Leona that my ego is my Achilles heel. That’s not what I’m concerned about here. For one thing, I’m not as egotistical as she seems to think I am. And for another, the ego I do have isn’t fragile enough to be shattered by something like this. If it needs a bit of stroking there are plenty of other ways for me to go about that. My problem is that I can’t stand feeling invisible. Or unwanted. And the only way I know how to avoid that in any kind of work or team environment is through working my ass off and making myself invaluable. And call it childish if you want, but I need to hear confirmation that my effort is appreciated. I agree with Leona as far as academics go—test scores tell the story. But with work, or group projects, or extra curriculars—even the rugby team—it’s all so subjective. It’s not that hard to say “good work” or “well done” or “thank you,” is it?

“Can I ask a favor that might seem a little weird?” I ask with mild hesitation.

She eyes me curiously. “You can ask...”

“I’m hearing what you’re saying, and I’m going to do everything I can to manage my expectations so I don’t explode,” I say with a wry smile. “But... can I check in with you every now and then? To make sure I’m actually on the right track, I mean. If I’m not getting much from the partners I’m working with, how will I know if there are things I could be doing better?”

She smiles. “That doesn’t seem remotely weird, Skyler. You’re a first year, I’ll be overseeing your progress as you establish your position in the company. You’re *supposed* to check in with me if you have issues or concerns.”

I blink in surprise. “Oh, okay. So...if I want to know what the partners are saying about me...?”

She hits me with a pointed look. “Oh, yeah, that’s not going to happen. I can offer advice and I can advocate for you but I’m not going to spy.”

I sigh ruefully. “Yeah, okay. Thanks, Leona.” I step toward the door and reach for the handle, glancing back just before I open it. “You’re really cool—not even remotely as evil as Charlie said.”

She lets out a disgruntled snort, then shoots me a wry smile. “Well, it’s good to have confirmation that you can think for yourself.”

Chapter Seven

Jackson

“FUCK, JAX—GET THE BALL IN,” DEACON GROWLS, HIS USUALLY PLACID demeanor giving way to his competitive streak as we battle it out against Drew and Will on the virtual basketball court.

“I’m trying,” I mutter, stabbing at the controller with my thumbs. Fuck, I’m so bad at this. Give me an engine and my hands can do magic; but I can never seem to co-ordinate my thumbs with the action on the screen when it comes to video games.

“Ser-wish,” Will cries, flashing a cocky smirk as one of his and Drew’s players score another three-pointer.

“Not fair,” Deacon grumbles. “You’re a computer guy.”

Will shrugs. “Haven’t played this one before, though. I’ll have to add it to the shortlist for next month. You’re lucky you can play all these games whenever you want, Deac.”

Deacon scoffs. “Trust me, the last thing I’m usually doing when I’m here is playing video games.”

No further explanation necessary. We’re currently at Tanner’s penthouse, which is where he and Deacon spend a lot of their *private* time seeing as how they’re still trying to keep things on the downlow due to the complicating factor of Tanner’s five-year-old daughter being one of Deacon’s kindergarteners.

Tanner’s pretty cool about letting us hang out here, and considering the place is equipped with a giant TV and four-player PS5—not to mention a shit ton of games—it’s become our go-to locale for video game night.

“Why next month?” Drew asks, shooting Will a curious look before shifting his attention back to the screen. “Why don’t you just get it now if you want it?”

“Oh...well, Spence kind of made a rule about “over-nerding” after Jamie and I went a little nuts at a con a few months ago. Apparently getting my own unlimited credit card isn’t a license to *spend frivolously*,” he says in a flawless imitation of his fiancé, prompting me to let out a snort of laughter.

“And here I thought *you* were the boss in that relationship,” Drew teases.

Will chuckles, not remotely bothered by the allusion to his and Spencer’s

sex life, which only last year was made the topic of very public intrigue when a tabloid not only outed Spencer as bi, but also revealed his preference for being dominated in the bedroom. “Only when it really matters. But I’ve made him cut down on his designer shopping as a compromise so at least he’s suffering alongside me.”

“Guaranteed this nerding restriction or whatever the hell it is will end as soon as Tom Ford brings out the summer collection,” Deacon says wryly.

Will smirks, his blue eyes flashing with levity. “It’s already out. I’ve been taunting Spence with the catalogues—it’s been fun.”

Will’s only recently become a regular feature at these hangouts; despite the fact that he and Spencer are engaged now, he’s only been around for about six months, so it feels like we’re still just getting to know him. But the more time I spend with the guy, the more certain I am that he’s absolutely perfect for the prickly, uptight captain of our rugby team. I wouldn’t say Spencer’s *mellowed* since they’ve been together, but he’s at least become a bit less like a drill sergeant.

And it’s always fun watching Will and Skyler do battle in whatever the game of choice is for that night. Will’s the only one who can really give Sky a run for his money—with the exception of Tanner, maybe, but he rarely joins in—and it always amuses the hell out of me to see Skyler getting all sulky.

My eyes find the clock on the wall in the kitchen and I let out a heavy sigh. It’s almost nine pm and Skyler’s still not here. He’s been working so late since he started his new job. I know it’s supposed to be really tough, but surely there has to be a limit.

“Jesus, Jackson—*concentrate*,” Deacon growls.

I blink to see I’ve just let Will snatch the ball from one of our players and his guy is now bounding down the court. *Fuck*. “Sorry. I was thinking about Skyler. This is way too late for him to be working.”

“Long hours are kind of part of the gig, Jax,” Drew says, before letting out a little whoop as his player accepts a pass from Will and scores a basket.

“It’s Skyler,” Will says with a shrug. “Maybe he’s hooking up with someone? I mean...not that I’m judging or anything,” he adds with a wary glance in my direction.

I let out a huff of amusement. Yes, I’m very quick to jump to Skyler’s defense in any number of circumstances, but if I got offended every time someone mentioned his sex life I’d have a permanent chip on my shoulder.

“No, he would have texted me.”

Will’s brows shoot up. “He texts you when he’s planning to hook up?”

I shrug. “Yeah, of course.”

“Okay...”

Drew gives a dramatic sigh, shaking his head. “Dear, naive William. Don’t worry, you’ll learn soon enough.”

“Learn what?” Will asks curiously.

“Not to be surprised by anything Jackson and Skyler do.” Drew shrugs.

I roll my eyes. “Says the guy who almost gave himself a concussion last week.”

Drew lets out a reluctant sigh. “Okay, fine. I was a *little* caught off guard by the porn thing.”

“You didn’t know that?” Deacon asks, sounding caught between surprise and amusement.

“I don’t usually take much of an interest in my friends’ porn habits,” Drew says dryly.

“Someone want to buy me a vowel?” Will asks, an eyebrow cocked in question.

My brow furrows and I glance sideways at Deacon and then at Drew, finding them both staring at Will in equal confusion. “Huh?”

Will lets out a soft chuckle. “Sorry. Grew up on *Wheel of Fortune*—you want to fill me in? What porn thing?”

“Oh.” Drew’s face clears into comprehension. “Just that they watch porn together.”

Will’s brows shoot up. “That’s it? Damn, I thought it was something totally scandalous.”

I gesture at Will. “*Thank you*. It’s not a big deal, I don’t know why Drew’s all weird about it.”

Drew gives a wry shake of his head, lips quirked in amusement. “I’m not *weird* about it. I was surprised, that’s all. But if you tell me you and Skyler shower together as well that might be my limit,” he jokes.

I roll my eyes. “Of course we don’t shower together. Skyler waits in the bathroom with his coffee and talks to me while I’m in the shower.”

Three heads snap in my direction so fast it’s a wonder they don’t tear off their respective bodies. All three of my friends stare at me as though I’ve just ripped off my face to reveal a blue-skinned demon creature with tentacles for eyes and a furry trunk for a nose.

“*What?*” Deacon finally asks, looking both stunned and amused.

I frown in confusion as I scan my gaze across their faces. “What the fuck? Why are you all being so weird?”

“*We’re* being weird?” Drew presses, pierced brows flying into his hair. “I’m not the one who can’t leave my best friend alone for two minutes so he can shower.”

“Which I appreciate, because that *would* be weird,” I say with a smirk. But as tight as we are, my relationship with Drew is completely different to the one I have with Skyler. “But I don’t want to be alone when Skyler can be there. That feels like wasted time to me.”

Will flashes a megawatt smile, his hand held to his chest. “Okay, that was really sweet.”

I knew I liked him.

Deacon gives an exasperated shake of his head before returning his attention to the TV screen. “I think I’ll leave this one alone.”

Drew’s about to say something, but he’s interrupted by the sound of the front door.

I perk up, a swoop of joy rushing through me at the thought of Skyler finally arriving to join us. But it’s quickly dampened by the realization that it’s Tanner at the door, not Skyler. I try not to look too disappointed, especially considering how generous Tanner’s being letting us use his apartment like this.

“Hey, babe!” Deacon beams at his boyfriend, tossing his controller onto the sofa and wasting no time striding across the room to meet Tanner. He wraps his arms around Tanner’s neck and drags him in for a deep kiss that goes on long enough that I start to feel like I’m intruding.

“Well, I guess that’s our cue,” Drew says wryly.

Will responds with a snort, using his controller to turn off the game.

“You guys don’t have to go just because I got here,” Tanner says once his lips are finally free from Deacon. He offers a generous smile, piercing blue eyes sparkling.

“Yes, they do,” Deacon says firmly. “Unless you want to give them a live demonstration of your cock-riding skills.”

“Looks like I got here right on time,” I hear a familiar voice say from behind Tanner and Deacon.

And suddenly the room seems brighter, and feels warmer, just because Skyler’s in it.

“Actually, everyone was just leaving,” Deacon says.

Skyler strides past the couple, shrugging off his suit jacket as he makes his way toward the sofas.

“Skyler, why are you taking your jacket off?” Deacon demands in exasperation. “Don’t sit down.”

Skyler ignores him and sits in the armchair right next to me.

“Do *not* make yourself comfortable,” Deacon warns in the same kind of voice he uses for his kindergarteners.

Skyler, of course, wastes no time slumping back in the chair and getting comfy.

Deacon lets out a groan of frustration. “Jackson, do something—you all need to be going.”

Skyler sends me one of his puppy dog looks, bottom lip jutting out in a pout. “But I’m hungry. And tired. And I need a cuddle.”

“Fucking hell,” Deacon grumbles, clearly exasperated. He must *really* want sex because it’s rare to see him get this agitated about anything.

I have no doubt Skyler’s deliberately trying to wind Deacon up for the sake of amusement, but I’m also aware of how wrung-out he looks. And I have no idea whether or not he’s even eaten tonight. “I’m sure you can wait half an hour while he grabs something to eat.”

Deacon narrows his eyes at me.

“Actually, I wouldn’t mind eating,” Tanner says. “I didn’t get dinner tonight.”

And with that simple statement, Deacon’s entire demeanor changes. After gently chiding Tanner for not taking better care of himself, Deacon whips out his phone and places an order for delivery.

“Don’t I get a say in what food we’ll be eating?” Skyler asks.

Deacon smirks at him. “Nope. You can either stay and eat what I’ve ordered, or you can go and get something yourself.”

And so that’s how we all end up sprawled around the coffee table eating—or in Drew’s and my case, choking down so as not to seem rude—plant burgers.

But if Deacon thought this choice of take out would be some kind of punishment for Skyler, he really should have thought it through more. Thanks to his egg allergy, Skyler’s pretty accustomed to soy substitutes, so a burger like this is hardly anything daunting.

“You going to finish that or just hold it all night?” Skyler teases, quirking

a brow at the half-eaten burger in my hand.

“You can have the rest if you want,” I tell him, passing the burger to him. “I ate dinner already.”

Skyler smirks knowingly. “Mmmhmm...”

“Damn it,” Drew grumbles, picking at the tomato inside his bun. “Why isn’t Sully here?”

“Uh, I don’t think Sully would have even made it that far,” Deacon says with a chuckle, eyeing the three small bites Drew managed.

“Stop picking at it and pulling all the good bits out and I’ll eat yours once I’m done with this,” Skyler tells Drew sternly.

“*Three* burgers?” Will asks, brows in his hairline. “I mean, they’re good, but...”

“This is the first thing I’ve eaten since breakfast,” Skyler explains, taking another massive bite of what had been my burger. “And they’re not good—they’re *great*.”

I rear back a little, fixing him with a hard look. “What do you mean you haven’t eaten anything since *breakfast*?” Which was only coffee and a bowl of cereal, like always.

A guilty flush touches Skyler’s cheeks. “I was completely slammed all day. I didn’t have a chance to go get anything.”

“Can’t you put food orders in and have an intern or someone sort it out?” Will asks. “That’s what we do.”

Skyler nods. “Yeah, there’s usually a couple people going around in the afternoon to grab orders from anyone who still needs lunch, but I was in a meeting with Leona at the time. And it was a complete madhouse by the time that wrapped up anyway—a settlement deal fell through so now it’s going to court and pre-trial starts Monday. I barely had a chance to piss, let alone eat,” he says with a heavy sigh, scrubbing a hand through his dark hair. “And the only reason I get the weekend off is because I’m not in the Bar yet. Silver linings there.”

I lift my hand up to gently brush through Skyler’s hair, enjoying the feel of the silky strands sliding between my fingers and the way the tension seems to ease out of him at my touch. “I’m going to pack lunch for you next week. Just in case.”

Chapter Eight

Skylar

JUST IN CASE.

The words go straight to my heart as I'm momentarily taken back in time. I tilt my head slightly, sending Jackson a hopeful glance. "Peanut butter and jelly?"

The corner of his mouth quirks up. "Of course. I'll even go hunting for the shitty ninety-nine cent store peanut butter to make it really authentic if you want."

I'm aware of the others looking at Jackson and me as though we're speaking a foreign language, but I'm not about to translate. I've never felt the need to share the less-than-pretty details of my past before, so why start now?

"I think I can make do with a modern reproduction," I say with a smile. "Just remember to draw the smiley faces on the bag."

Jackson lets out a soft breath of laughter. "That goes without saying." Then he ducks his head to press a kiss to my temple as he continues to stroke my hair.

I sigh in contentment and snuggle in closer to Jax, resting my head against his shoulder. This is what I needed after the insanity of today. A nice Jackson cuddle.

"Okay, yeah, I get what you were saying now," Will whispers to Drew, who's sitting right next to him. Or, at least, he attempts to whisper. The words are loud enough for people down at street level to hear.

"Saying about what?" I ask curiously.

Will hastily glances away, his cheeks burning red. "Nothing."

"So, Skylar—you had your first meeting with Leona today? How did that go?" Tanner asks me.

I have a strange feeling he's deliberately changing the subject, but I decide to go with it anyway because I'm in the mood to vent. And because Tanner's just not the kind of person you can ignore. He didn't build his billion-dollar media empire on looks and charm alone. Not that he's lacking there.

Sitting up again, I let out a frustrated breath before launching into my summary of events. "She thinks I have an ego problem—can you believe

that?”

The question is met with several pairs of raised eyebrows, and a few knowing looks dart around the table.

I narrow my eyes at Deacon and Drew—the main offenders of the silent commentary. “What?”

Drew shrugs. “Nothing. Just...she probably has a point.”

“I do *not* have an ego problem,” I say indignantly. “I can’t help being this naturally beautiful, you know. And it’s hardly my fault I’m smarter than everyone else. It’s not like I *try* to be brilliant.”

“Oh, yeah, there’s no ego on him at all,” Will says with a wry chuckle.

“Do you think I have an ego problem?” I ask Jackson, suddenly feeling a little uncertain.

He shakes his head in absolute certainty. “Nope.”

Across from us, Deacon rolls his eyes so dramatically I’m surprised they don’t fall out of his head. “That doesn’t count. It’s Jackson.”

Jackson lets his hand slip from my hair so he can fold his arms over his broad chest. With his thick muscles all tensed, his tattoos on full display, and the flinty expression he’s sending Deacon—not to mention the shaved head, beard, and piercings—he suddenly looks uncharacteristically intimidating. Less of a teddy bear and more like a grizzly. “Why don’t I count?”

“Because you’re completely biased,” Deacon explains. “According to you Skyler can do no wrong.”

Jackson scoffs. “Skyler can do plenty wrong.”

I let out a dramatic gasp, placing a hand against my chest. “*Moi?* When have I ever?”

Jackson eases back into teddy bear mode, letting his arms fall to his side as he turns to me, his expression caught between affection and exasperation. “Do you really want me to start listing off some of your less-than-stellar decisions?”

I smirk at him in return. “Bit rich coming from you, Speedy Gonzales. At least I’ve never broken the law.”

“You’ve never been *caught* breaking the law, you mean,” he teases. “And is a speeding ticket six years ago really the best you can come up with for me?”

I let out a frustrated sigh. “Yes. You’re incredibly boring, Jackson. You need to get out and get in trouble with the cops more often so I can represent you and rack up my billables.”

Jackson's eyes widen with mock hurt. "You'd make me *pay* for legal representation?"

"Of course not, but the partners at my firm don't need to know that," I say with a dismissive wave.

"Does anyone else feel like we could just leave and they wouldn't notice?" Will comments.

"You get used to it," Drew says dryly. Then he turns to me, holding out the carton with his discarded burger. "Did you want this or not? The smell is grossing me out."

I roll my eyes and take the burger from him. He's being way too sensitive about the whole plant burger thing. I won't say it tastes like a real meat burger, because it doesn't, but it's from one of the best vegan restaurants in the city—nothing but the best for Tanner, obviously—so it's fucking delicious. And I can guarantee that if Drew didn't know it was meatless he'd have gobbled the whole thing up with no complaints.

"Why is Leona worried about your ego?" Tanner asks curiously.

"What ego?" Deacon says with a soft chuckle. "Didn't you hear? According to Jackson he doesn't have one. He's as modest as a mouse."

"I never said he didn't have one," Jackson clarifies. "Just that it's not a problem."

Jackson logic right there. I cast him a fond smile before getting back to my burger.

"I have to agree with Jackson," Tanner says with a shrug, before turning to Deacon and explaining, "Babe, there's a reason you're a kindergarten teacher and not a banker or a lawyer or something else in the corporate world. You're too nice and way too humble. That's why I'm surprised Leona thinks Skyler's ego is a bad thing. I would have thought someone with his kind of confidence and assertiveness is exactly what they're looking for."

My brow creases as I try to figure out whether or not that was a compliment. Was he saying I'm *not* nice or humble? Shaking my head, I decide to just let it go and answer Tanner's question. "She said those things would be useful... eventually—when I'm higher up in the firm. But she's worried I'm going to crack under the pressure or something because apparently when junior associates work their asses off for a case the only time they actually get acknowledged for it is if they fuck something up. Otherwise, it's the partners or senior associates who swoop in at the last minute to finish things off who get all the credit," I say with a scowl.

“And I can see by your expression she has absolutely nothing to worry about,” Drew says in a flip tone.

I shoot him annoyed look. “Despite what you all think, my ego isn’t so fragile that it needs to be stroked every five seconds. But I would actually like to be recognized for the work I bust my ass doing. I get that I’m paying my dues or whatever, but it still sucks giant balls.”

I feel Jackson’s hand on my nape. I didn’t even realize I’d tensed up so much until it all starts easing as he gently rubs my skin. “You’re not invisible, Skyler,” he murmurs in my ear, softly so only I can hear it. “You’re the brightest light in the sky. If they can’t see you it’s because they’re blind.”

I swallow hard and nod. Of course Jackson knows why I’m so agitated about Leona’s reality check today. He always knows.

I let out a heavy sigh and reach for my bottle of water on the coffee table, gulping down and few generous swallows.

“You’re right, it does suck,” Tanner says, offering a commiserating smile. “And I could tell you that in a few years you’ll be a senior associate and the shoe will be on the other foot, but I doubt that’ll help right now. But do you remember what you said to me when you told me you’d decided to interview with Leona?”

I stare at the cold, half-eaten burger in my hand as I think back to the end of last year and that conversation with Tanner. I’d told him thanks but no thanks when he first offered to set up the meeting with Leona. I was happy with Charlie and really hadn’t considered starting my career anywhere other than Campbell Nixon. But then, during my last week of classes, I was talking with one of my professors and he expressed some curiosity about my job situation; I got the impression he was surprised he hadn’t heard from any potential employers, because he’d written a pretty glowing reference for me earlier in the year. He was obviously relieved when I told him I was all set, but he also said something that stuck with me: “It’s a good thing self-doubt’s not part of your vocabulary. I was dating the daughter of the dean who gave me my first academic posting way back when, and I still wonder sometimes whether I actually earned all this or if it was just handed to me.”

He was a good professor and I have a lot of respect for him, but he never actually knew me outside of school. It’s easy to be confident and self-assured when you’ve got facts, and precedent, and the law to back you up. But relying on your own brain and your perception of the people and events happening around you is another story. It occurred to me that I didn’t want to

have a fight with my brain every time I make any kind of career advancement; so I called Tanner and told him I'd changed my mind.

"I said I want to earn my way up," I murmur. "No shortcuts. No special treatment. When I get up the ladder, I want to know for sure it was all me."

"Wow, that was really empowering," Will says. "It felt like that moment in *Batman Begins* when he finally embraces his fear."

"If *Batman Begins* was anything like that it would have been a fucking boring movie," Drew quips in response.

I glance up to see Deacon rolling his eyes and Tanner smiling indulgently. Then Tanner fixes his gaze on me again, his expression one of encouragement. "Just keep that in mind and you'll be fine. And if it helps at all, clients remember which lawyers put the real time and effort in on their cases, even if they're not the one who closes it out."

I nod, a small smile touching my lips. "Thanks, that does make me feel better."

"Are you done with that thing?" Deacon nods at my burger as he starts gathering up the takeout boxes. "It must be stone cold by now. And it looks all soggy and gross."

"Yeah, I'm done." I toss the remnants of the burger into the container he holds out for me. "You got any ice cream?"

"You cannot possibly still be hungry," Drew says, staring at me with incredulity.

I narrow my eyes at him. "Are you dessert-shaming me, Drew?"

His hands fly up in a gesture of innocence. "Wouldn't dream of it."

"I think we have ice cream," Tanner says wryly. Then he slides an innuendo-packed glance Deacon's way. "Not sure about topping's though."

Deacon's lips press together as he attempts to hide a smile, but his reddening cheeks give him away. "Um, yeah. I think we're out of topping."

I wave a hand. "That's okay, I won't turn down bareback."

"He said, surprising no one," Drew mutters with an eye roll.

I ignore him and keep my [?] gaze on Deacon and Tanner. "Now, tell us all about this topping fun. Paint a word picture," I add, waving my hand slowly across the air.

Tanner clears his throat and rises to his feet. "I think I'll get Skyler his ice cream."

"No, babe, you don't need to do that," Deacon says irritably. "Skyler we are *not* painting you a word picture."

“I’ll do it then,” I suggest. “I’ll say the words and you tell me how accurate I am.” Before he has a chance to protest, I lift both my hands and spread them across the air as I list off my words. “Messy. Dirty. *Sticky*. Cream—I bet there was cream squirting all over the place, right?”

“Who the fuck puts cream on top of ice cream?” Drew asks quietly.

“Shh, this is golden,” Will hisses back. “And there a tons of desserts that have ice cream *and* cream.”

“What about nuts?” I ask. “Oh, and we can’t forget the big, long...*banana*.”

“Fucking hell, I’m never going to be able to eat a banana split again,” Drew grumbles, prompting Jackson to shake with laughter next to me.

“Why?” I ask, genuinely curious. “I would have thought throwing a naked Tanner on it would make it even more enjoyable.”

“For god’s sake, Skyler,” Deacon growls. “How many times do I have to tell you not to hit on my boyfriend?”

I clutch a hand to my chest, adopting an indignant expression. “I have never once hit on him. I was merely complimenting him, and if you don’t like it you really only have yourself to blame, Deacon. You’re the one who decided to date a guy who’s so freakin’ hot. What am I supposed to do, *not* comment?”

From behind us, I hear a rumbling chuckle and I know Tanner has returned with my ice cream just in time to hear me make my case.

“Oh, god, don’t laugh,” Deacon says with an exasperated groan. “You’ll only encourage him.”

Tanner sets a bowl of ice cream on the coffee table in front of me and hands me a spoon before making his way back to the other side of the coffee table, pressing a kiss to Deacon’s hair as he resumes his seat. “I’m two months off fifty, babe. Just let me have this.”

Chapter Nine

Skyler

I GLANCE AROUND THE CROWD GATHERED AT SULLY AND DREW'S PLACE FOR their "unofficial" engagement celebration, letting out a sigh when I once again fail to catch any glimpse of Jackson.

"All good?" Deacon asks me, one eyebrow arched.

I shrug one shoulder. "Yeah, fine. I just want Jackson to get here. It sucks he had to stay late because some rich, pretentious asshole decided they want to take their Porche out on the weekend, and god forbid they get into car trouble and have to seek help in the wilds of Upstate," I grumble. "Why should Jackson have to be the one dealing with that?"

Deacon's brows creep up slightly as his lips twitch with barely contained amusement. "Would you expect Drew to handle it and miss his own party?"

"They're having another party in two weeks," I point out. "He could stand to miss this one." Apparently when you have an unofficial engagement before the real engagement, you also have to throw an unofficial party before the real party. Or, at least, that's how Sullivan and Drew seem to be handling things now that Drew's finally made his move and put Sully out of his misery.

Deacon doesn't try to hide his amusement at what I would consider to be a very reasonable argument; instead, he tosses his head back with a loud bark of laughter.

I let out a huff of frustration and take a sip of my drink, gazing around the party again. Still nothing.

"Oh, come on, Sky—quit with the sulking," Deacon cajoles as though I'm one of his kindergarteners. "I'm sure he'll be here soon. He's just held back at work, it's not like he's gone off to 'Nam."

"It just sucks. We've barely seen each other all week—I had to work last weekend, and I've been late home the last few nights. Now I finally get off early for once and *he* has to work late. I really miss him."

"Well, I can sympathize there. Tanner's away this whole week and it sucks. I won't get to see him until Wednesday."

I eye Deacon critically. I get what he's trying to do, but it's not really helping. "But...apart from not being in the same place, has the actual amount

of time you have for each other decreased?”

“Well...no.”

“So, it’s basically just the sex.”

He sends me a flinty look. “It’s more than that and you know it—stop being a dick.”

I avert my gaze with a contrite nod. “Sorry.”

“Look, why don’t you do something to distract yourself?” Deacon suggests, back to his usual genial manner. “Go flirt with some of Sully’s friends. They’re not Manhattan-based so I’m going to make the assumption you haven’t slept with any of them yet.”

I shrug. “No guarantees—I’m well-travelled.”

It’s not hard to work out which guys Deacon’s referring to, because they’re the only guests at this little celebration that I don’t already know. They’re in their mid-thirties—which I guess makes sense if they’re buddies of Sullivan’s from high school—and they’re each reasonably attractive. Nothing mind-blowing, but I wouldn’t turn any of them down if they approached me at a club.

It’s been an exhausting week, though, and I’m not really up for making the effort right now. Plus I’m not sure how thrilled Sully would be if I hooked up with one of his friends.

I shrug and turn back to Deacon. “Yeah, I don’t know. I’m not really feeling it tonight.”

Deacon’s brows shoot up. “Seriously? It’s...” he tugs his phone from his pocket to check the screen. “Just after nine thirty on a Friday night and you’re not “feeling it”? Usually by now you’d have found yourself a trick and disappeared in a cloud of smoke.”

I offer an irritated frown. “Yeah, well, like I said—I’m not really in the mood tonight. The last few weeks have been fucking exhausting and I’m totally wrung out.”

He chuckles. “Wow, I’ve never seen this before. You’re never not in the mood.”

“Jeez, way to make me sound like a sex addict,” I grumble, taking a sip of my drink.

Deacon sighs, looking immediately apologetic. “Sorry, I didn’t mean it to sound like that. I’m just surprised, that’s all.” He waggles his eyebrows at me. “Maybe there’s more to it than just being exhausted?” he suggests. “I mean, I’ve seen you practically comatose multiple times after pushing

yourself to the max during exams, and you never avoided sex. So maybe this is something else...”

I stare at him in confusion. “What are you talking about?”

He shrugs. “Well, maybe this is your subconscious telling you you’re ready to stop screwing around and actually look for something real.”

I groan in exasperation. “Fucking hell. I go a couple weeks without sex and you start hearing wedding bells? Talk about making something out of nothing.”

Deacon’s eyes widen dramatically. “Weeks?”

“Don’t look at me like I just proved your point,” I scowl at him. “It’s not a lack of interest, it’s a lack of opportunity. But even if I lived like a monk for months, or even years, that still wouldn’t be some secret signal that I’m looking to “settle down,”” I tell him, forming air quotes with the hand that’s not busy holding my drink. “My life is perfect as it is. I don’t need anything more.”

Deacon lets out a beleaguered sigh. “Why do you always act like being in a relationship would be akin to torture? Maybe if you actually looked you could meet the love of your life, like I did.”

“I already met the love of my life when I was seven years old.”

Deacon just stares at me, looking stunned.

I mentally play back what I just said and realize it probably sounded a little weird. “You know what I mean,” I say with a wave of my hand.

His brows shoot up. “Do you know what you mean?”

I let out a grunt of frustration. “All I mean is this whole idea you have in your head that my life is somehow lacking because I don’t have a billionaire boyfriend is ridiculous.”

“I never said you needed a billionaire boyfriend,” he says with a roll of his eyes.

“But you think I need *someone*,” I press. “You think my life isn’t complete. You think I’m going to die a lonely old bachelor who yells at kids for making noise in the hallway after eight pm.”

Deacon lets out a soft chuckle. “Actually, I think the more likely scenario is that you’ll die in your bed during a three-way with guys about a third of your age.”

I smirk at him. “Sounds like a pretty good way to go.”

“Skyler...”

“Yeah, well, the only reason you think all that is because you never had a

Jackson. If you had a Jackson you wouldn't need Tanner."

"Jackson's not a thing to have, Skyler. He's a person."

"He's *my* person," I say stubbornly.

"Oh my god." Deacon stares at me, looking completely awe-struck. "Oh my fucking god. You're in love with him."

I start coughing as a sip of my drink goes down the wrong pipe. "*Excuse me?*"

Deacon shakes his head slowly, running his hand through his hair in the way he does when he's overwhelmed by something. "Fuck. How the hell did I never notice this before? It's *so* obvious."

"It is *not* obvious," I say with an eye roll. "I'm pretty sure if I were in love with Jackson, I'd know about it."

"Well, clearly you don't." He shakes his head, still looking awestruck. "Fuck, I can't believe I didn't see it until just now. I mean, I remember thinking you guys were together when we first met in college, but once that was cleared up it didn't cross my mind again."

"Yeah, because we're not," I remind him. I mean, *duh*.

"Skyler, you've personalized his ringtone to "I Like Me Better",” Deacon says, as though that's damning evidence of this outlandish theory.

I shrug. "Yeah, so? I do like me better when I'm with him."

A curious expression touches Deacon's face. "Does Jax have one for you? I don't think I've ever heard you call his phone before. You always text."

"Of course he does. It's "Smile" by Uncle Kracker."

Deacon quirks a brow at me. "Umm...Willow and Dean picked that one for their first dance at their wedding."

I nod. "Nice choice. It's a good song."

He rolls his eyes. Then he rears back a little, letting out a soft sigh as he studies me curiously. "I'm sorry, Sky—I should have put all this together ages ago. I feel like I've been a really fucking judgey friend, giving you shit about your lifestyle and for not wanting to get serious with anyone and all that. The reality is you've been in a committed relationship most of your life."

I stare at him in utter confusion. I've never needed an apology from Deacon, and I've never felt like he judged me or my lifestyle. We have different views on romance and commitment and crap, that's all. But what he's saying now just makes no sense whatsoever. "You haven't been a judgey

friend. And I never cared about you giving me shit about my sex life—I’ve shoveled plenty back about the weird obsession you have with intimacy and romance,” I point out.

“Also known as love,” he says dryly.

I shrug. “Whatever. But I seriously don’t understand this epiphany of yours. I mean, he’s *Jackson*,” I state, screwing my face up. In all our years of friendship, I’ve never once thought of Jax in any kind of sexual way. I’ve seen him naked more times than I can count, because we just don’t care about that kind of shit. I see his dick hard whenever we’re watching porn together...or most of the time, at least; sometimes he’s not that into it, which is fine by me—it’s *his* dick. I’ve even been required to touch his cock a few times, both when flaccid and erect—for purely platonic reasons, obviously. And never—not even once—have I felt even a zip on the radar. He’s *Jackson*.

“Why does your face look like that?” Deacon asks, brow furrowed in concern.

“Because it’s *Jackson*. You’re weirding me out with this.”

“You say that like the thought’s never even crossed your mind,” Deacon says, looking completely baffled.

“What thought?”

“Of hooking up with Jackson,” he says with a shrug.

“Why the hell would *that* thought cross my mind?”

“Because you’re a gay man and he’s a hot guy. Don’t you guys, like, watch porn together and shit? Are you seriously telling me you’ve never sneaked a glance and thought “Yeah, if he was into it, I’d have a taste of that.”?”

“Um, firstly, Jackson is not hot. He’s Jackson. And secondly, god no—why would I want to suck his dick?”

Deacon’s brows creep up. “Skyler, you want to suck every guy’s dick. The fact you’ve made an exception for Jackson speaks volumes. And, *yeah*, he’s fucking hot. Here, I’ll prove it.” Then he plucks my empty glass from my hand and sets it on the bookshelf behind us, then he grabs my arm and steers me across the living room toward Sullivan, who’s standing with his arm around Drew amongst a little cluster of our friends that includes Spencer, Will, Cole, and Paxton.

“Oh good, all the queers are here,” Deacon says brightly.

Pax offers a wry smirk. “Get used to it.”

Deacon lets out a soft laugh before posing his question. “Seeing as how you’re all attracted to men I want to ask you a theoretical question...”

Our friends exchange some curious glances before nodding and shrugging in agreement.

“As long as it’s not about sex,” Sullivan grumbles. “I don’t need to know what you and Tanner get up to.”

Deacon shoots Drew a flinty look. “*Likewise.*”

He still has my arm in his grip, so I yank it free and fold my hands over my chest, communicating my disapproval with this entire endeavor.

“So...hypothetically,” Deacon continues, “if you were at a club or somewhere and you saw a guy who looked exactly like Jackson—would you be interested?”

Understandably, the question is met with a whole bunch of raised eyebrows.

“Why are we answering this?” Cole asks awkwardly.

“It’s purely hypothetical,” Deacon reiterates.

Charlie lets out a disdainful snort. “No it’s not. Just ask what you actually want to know—do we think Jackson’s hot? The answer is yes. Absolutely.”

“Seriously, dude, be *more* adamant,” Sully drawls.

“What, I’m supposed to lie?” Charlie protests. “It’s not like I’m *actually* attracted to him, but I’m not fucking blind.”

“Yeah, I have to agree,” Paxton says, rubbing a hand thoughtfully over the silver stubble covering his jaw. “He’s a hot guy. If I didn’t know Jax and I saw this hypothetical doppelganger out somewhere, I’d be interested.”

“I’m not sure I’d want to actually go there—hypothetically, obviously,” Cole rushes to clarify, “but I can definitely see the appeal.”

“Same,” Sullivan agrees. “Not my type—way too big and bulky and tatted up—but objectively he’s an attractive guy.”

“He says as his six foot tall, two hundred pound, pierced and tattooed fiancé is standing next to him,” Drew says wryly.

Sully offers Drew an adoring smile. “I keep telling you, babe, you’re the exception. And I think one beard is enough in any relationship.”

Spencer turns to Will, eyebrow raised in question. “Am I allowed to answer this?”

Will just shrugs. “Go for it, I’m going to—he’s fucking hot.”

Spencer lets out a soft laugh and leans over to press a kiss to Will’s bright blond hair “Okay, then. If we’re talking hypotheticals, then yeah—if I saw

someone who looked exactly like Jax at a bar or something before I met Will, I'd have definitely been interested. But the real Jackson is like a marshmallow-eating teddy bear, which is very unappealing to me."

"I'm not a teddy bear?" Will asks, his face arranged in mock-hurt.

Spencer just grins at him. "Babe, you eat teddy bears for breakfast."

"And let's not forget the real Jackson is straight," Cole points out.

Finally, I've had enough. "Fucking hell, stop objectifying him," I growl, glaring at each one of my friends in turn.

The response is a bunch of wide eyes and awkward glances. At each other. At Deacon. But no one is looking at me.

"Um, okay, sorry...that probably ran away from me a bit," Deacon says. "But it proved my point, so thanks for your help."

"And what point was that, exactly?" Will asks.

Deacon offers a dismissive wave. "It's kind of a long story. Come on, Sky, let's go get a drink."

I send some more frosty looks around the group, prompting Cole to raise his hands in innocence, proclaiming, "Hey, I said he *wasn't* hot."

I told my arms over my chest and narrow my eyes at him. "Oh, so he's not *good enough* for you? What's wrong with him? Do you not like amazing guys?"

"Okay, come on, Skyler," Deacon cajoles, grabbing my arm and dragging me away while Cole stares around helplessly, getting a few commiserating pats on the back from the other guys.

"Here, drink this," Deacon practically orders, grabbing a beer from the ice bucket that's sitting on the dining table and shoving it against my chest.

I don't really feel like another drink, but I shrug and snap the cap off, taking a generous swig. "Why did you do that?"

"Because you wouldn't believe me when I said Jackson's a hot guy," he says simply, guiding me back into the corner near the bookshelf we were occupying earlier.

"Yeah, well, I didn't need to hear about how all my friends are desperately lusting after him," I pout.

Deacon sighs in exasperation. "Skyler, come on. That's not what they were doing."

That's sure as hell what it felt like. When Will so casually mentioned how attractive he thinks Jax is I wanted to grab him and tackle him to the ground, pummeling his gorgeous face until it was barely recognizable. I'm not a

violent person; I left all that shit back in high school when I finally realized Jackson kept taking the blame—and the punishment—for all the fights I was getting into. But damn; in that moment, my gut reaction was just visceral. I hated the way everyone was talking about Jax. Objectifying him like he's some random guy, or a famous person rather than one of their best friends.

I shake my head, still scowling. “Whatever. I didn't like it. And you knew I wouldn't—you shouldn't have done it.”

He sighs, offering a contrite nod. “You're right. I'm sorry. But have you considered that you didn't like it because you actually have feelings for him?”

I let out an exasperated huff. Not this again. “No—because unlike those creeps, *I'm* not attracted to Jackson.”

Deacon considers me carefully. “But how do you really know?”

I scoff. “Please, I think I would have figured it out by now. Do you know how many times we've spooned in bed? Or how many times we've jerked off together? There's never even been a blip of attraction,” I argue. “He's just... Jackson. I mean, come on—if I wasn't even remotely interested seeing him actually have sex I think we have the answer.”

Deacon's eyes widen. “You *watch* him have sex?”

“Of course not. There are boundaries, you know.”

Deacon rolls his eyes.

“But it's not my fault if I want to go cuddle in his room and don't realize he has a girl in there until the door's already wide open. And there was one time I had to interrupt because of a life-threatening emergency,” I explain. “Those were the only times. But he doesn't hook up that often, and it's really rare for him to bring someone back to the apartment. Same with me, actually. Neither of us really like having strangers invade our space.”

“What the hell was the life-threatening emergency?” Deacon asks, his expression a mix of exasperation and concern.

I grimace at the memory. “Oh, god. That was a long night. There was a food truck near school that was always a bit touch and go,” I begin. “That day I decided to take the gamble and get a burrito, because the food's great, even if you sometimes have to pay for it later. If I knew Jax was going to have a hook-up over, I wouldn't have taken the chance, obviously, but I did... and luck wasn't on my side. I held out as long as I could, but ultimately I just had to give in and let it rip.”

Deacon screws up his face in obvious disgust. “Okay, first of all—not

life-threatening, or an emergency. And second—how does this relate to seeing Jax have sex?”

“Oh, because they were doing it in the bathroom.”

Deacon just stares at me, wide-eyed, for a moment before shaking his head. “Jesus Christ. How the fuck haven’t they made a reality show about you?”

I grin at him. “Because reality shows are fake and I’m a hundred per cent natural, baby.”

He rolls his eyes. “What the fuck did the girl do? Please, for the love of god, tell me they didn’t just keep going while you sat there spewing out of your ass?”

“Ew. No, Jackson would never do that to me. The girl ran out screaming like she’d just seen the devil or something, and then Jax fed me Gatorade while I sat there spewing out of my ass.”

Deacon grimaces. “Jesus, he’s a fucking saint. Not going to lie, I don’t think I’d even do that for Tanner.”

“Yeah, obviously. You’re all in love with Tanner, and you think he’s like, the sexiest guy ever. Watching him shit his guts out would totally ruin that beautiful illusion. I mean, that’s all you’d be able to think about the next time you rimmed him.”

Deacon groans, rubbing a hand over his face. “*Seriously*, Sky? You really had to go there?” He moves his hand and hits me with a firm look. “Let’s get something straight, though: I don’t love Tanner because he’s super-hot, or because we have great sex. I love him for *him*. Maybe I’m wrong, maybe you’re not *in* love with Jax, but you said yourself he’s the love of your life, and that’s how I feel about Tanner. Now, apart from the fact that I very much doubt Tanner would even *want* me around in a situation like that one, there are a ton of other things I could do to help him if he were sick that don’t involve hovering and spoon-feeding him a power drink, which he’d be more than capable of drinking on his own if he wanted. And, for the record, I don’t need to worry about the illusion being ruined, because it’s not an illusion.”

I’m caught between feeling chastened and annoyed. I didn’t mean to insinuate that Deacon’s relationship is merely superficial, but let’s call a spade a spade—the only reason Deacon was interested in Tanner in the first place was because the guy’s sexy as hell. And the only reason either of them stayed in it long enough to fall in love is because the sex was apparently “epic.”

I'm not suggesting that because Jackson and I have a far longer and deeper history, and way fewer boundaries between us, that it somehow makes our bond better or stronger or whatever. But it's real. It's organic. It didn't evolve out of epic sexual chemistry. We didn't let our dicks lead us.

I don't doubt Deacon, and all my other friends as well, are in happy, stable, committed relationships full of genuine love, and that they'll all live happily ever after. And I'm thrilled for them. But it's not the same. Not better. Not worse. *Different*.

I sigh. "Sorry, that wasn't cool. I know it's not an illusion. But can you please do me a favor?"

Deacon nods. "Yeah, what?"

"Don't try to compare your relationship of less than five months to me and Jax." I hold up a hand to halt Deacon's protest. "I'm not saying you guys aren't the real thing, or doubting your commitment, or suggesting you won't make it in the long run—I was the one pushing you to get back together, remember?" I remind him pointedly. "All I'm saying is it's not comparable. The data doesn't match. You're only going to give yourself a headache and frustrate the hell out of me."

Deacon sighs, running a hand through his hair. "I'm sorry. You're right. It's just, you guys act so much like a couple. It's hard not to compare."

I let out a grunt of exasperation. Seriously, the couple thing again? Just because we cuddle all the time, and hate being away from each other, and text every few hours, and use the bathroom at the same time, and have special breakfasts on Sundays...

For once, however, rather than going on the defensive about this whole couple thing, I decide to go on the attack. "That makes it even worse. If you think we act like a couple, why the fuck do you and Drew and everyone keep comparing us to your little baby duckling relationships that haven't even flown off the ground yet? We've been together twenty years for fuck's sake. Do you know how much shit we've been through together in that time? All you guys know is sex and rainbows and unicorns."

Deacon's eyes widen in shock, his mouth parted but no words coming out.

I bite my lip, feeling my cheeks heat as I mentally play back my outburst. "Sorry...I told you I was bound to get frustrated."

The shock finally clears from Deacon's face, and he lets out a wry chuckle. "Yep. You did warn me. But in answer to your question—no I don't

have any idea how much shit the two of you have been through. To be honest, I know shockingly little about your life before college.”

I give a one-shouldered shrug. “Jax and Steph are the only things worth knowing from my life before college.”

Deacon eyes me with concern. “I don’t even know how you and Jackson met.”

“Another time, maybe.” I sigh and run a hand over my face. “I’m fucking beat.”

“Sky…”

“You know what? I think I might go flirt with one of Sully’s friends after all. Or maybe I should just use one of my apps—wouldn’t want things to be awkward at the wedding.”

“I thought you were tired?” Deacon asks, his expression marred with concern.

I smirk at him. “Which is why I could use a bit of a pick me up.”

What I really want is Jackson. Specifically a Jackson cuddle. But he’s still not here and I know once he finally does manage to get here he’ll want to put in a bit of an effort considering Drew’s his best friend and he’s going to be the best man and everything. It’ll be better if I just find a little distraction to pass the next few hours and then see Jax at home.

Chapter Ten

Jackson

IT'S ALMOST TEN THIRTY BY THE TIME I ACTUALLY GET TO DREW AND Sully's. If it were any other occasion I probably would have just come straight from the garage in the t-shirt and jeans I wore into work this morning, but considering we're celebrating their engagement I figured I should probably make an effort. So, even though I was able to finish up the job that kept me back after closing—a last minute service for one of our VIP clients—before nine pm, that detour home to quickly shower and change has made me so much later than I hoped.

"You just missed him," a familiar voice says, snapping me out of my search of the party. Well, it's not really a *party*—that big event will be in a couple weeks—this is just a little get-together with the guys on the rugby team, the partners of the guys in relationships, and a few guys I don't know—I'm guessing they're friends of Sully's. There's one person missing, though.

I turn to Deacon, accepting the beer he's offering me. "Hmm?"

Deacon just lets out a soft laugh. "Skyler. He left about fifteen minutes ago."

"He went home?"

Deacon's only response is to arch a pointed brow.

I let out a wry chuckle. "Right." Wanting to double check and reassure myself, I tug my phone from my pocket and see I have a new text I somehow missed. "Lower West Side," I tell Deacon. "Says he won't be late."

I feel as though Deacon wants to say something, but he just shakes his head, a mildly bemused smile touching his lips.

I glance around the party again, searching for Skyler out of habit even though I know I'm not going to find him anywhere. My gaze catches Cole's—one of the older guys on our team—and I offer a smile and greet him with a salute of my beer. We're not training at the moment because it's off-season, so I haven't seen him for a while.

I'm expecting a friendly wave in response, but instead his eyes widen, and he starts glancing around frantically, agitation pouring off him in waves. Well, that's weird. The guy's a smooth-talking entertainment lawyer who's built a business around managing and de-escalating celebrity scandals. I've

never seen him so unraveled.

“What the hell’s with Cole?” I ask Deacon. “He’s all jumpy. Was there some big scandal I missed?” Although I don’t see how I could have. It’s not my particular area of interest but Skyler’s usually all over it, which means I can’t avoid hearing about it when a famous couple breaks up, or a musician gets arrested, or a former child star ends up in rehab...

“I don’t think so,” Deacon says, evading my gaze for some reason. “But who knows? It’s awards season—I bet a whole heap of shit is going down and Cole’s busy keeping it under wraps.”

I shrug. “Yeah, maybe...”

I shake off the weirdness and press further into the gathering, greeting more of my friends and catching up on their news. It’s great to see the older guys again; I see Sully and Spencer a fair bit because of my friendships with Drew and Will, and Skyler is close to Charlie so we catch up with him relatively regularly as well. But I haven’t seen Pax, Aaron, Bryce, or Cole at all so far this year.

“It’s a boy!” Bryce announces proudly, shoving his hands in his pockets and puffing out his chest.

I can’t keep the grin off my face. Last time I saw Bryce and his girlfriend, Emme, was at Thanksgiving last year, where they were traumatizing Skyler with very detailed descriptions of their reproduction efforts.

“Wow, that’s awesome! Congrats, man,” I tell him, slapping him on the shoulder.

“He *wants* it to be a boy,” Emme corrects, her face a mask of long-suffering affection as she gazes at Bryce. I have a feeling that’s what our friends must see whenever I’m attempting to rein Skyler in during one of his more...fanciful moments. “The test was inconclusive, so we don’t know anything yet.”

“I’m just going with the odds, babe,” Bryce says with a shrug. “Odds say boy.”

Emme puts her fingers to her temples and closes her eyes for a moment, drawing in a deep, steady breath. “Thank god you’re not a gambler.”

I can’t help the sputtering laugh that escapes my lips. These two are going to make interesting parents, that’s for sure.

I’m distracted with my conversation, so I don’t sense anyone approaching me until I feel a hand sliding over my head, causing me to flinch in surprise. Snapping my head around, I see Sully with his hand outstretched.

His expression is part apologetic, part amused. “Sorry. Just curious.” Turning to Deacon, who’s standing to Emme’s left, he asks, “Can I change my answer? I’m kind of liking the hair.”

I have no idea what he’s talking about, but it can’t be that important because Deacon just rolls his eyes.

“Ooh, yeah, I like it too,” Emme gushes. “Are you growing it out? I think that’d look great. I can style it for you, if you’d like—maybe keep it buzzed on the sides but longer on top. That’d really suit you.”

I run my hand over my head, feeling a little self-conscious as Emme tilts her head back and forth, scrutinizing me with her hair-stylist’s gaze. “Uh... no, I’m not growing it. It’s just a bit longer right now because Skyler didn’t have a chance to shave it last week.”

Emme’s face falls. “Oh.”

“You couldn’t just do it yourself?” Drew asks. “Or go to a barber? Aren’t there like five on your block?”

“I like it when Skyler does it.”

“Stop staring at me, cat,” I grumble, giving Rocket the side-eye as he perches on the arm of the sofa, his demon eyes fixed on me as though he’s trying to read my thoughts. I shift my attention back to the TV but find it difficult to concentrate on what’s going on. I can’t help but feel self-conscious under that penetrating stare, which is absolutely ridiculous—it’s a cat for fuck’s sake. “Jesus, what the fuck do you want?” I demand, losing patience.

I should probably just go to bed and let the damn cat have the run of the apartment. It’s almost one in the morning and I’m pretty beat. But I’ve been in bed before Skyler got home every night this week and I’m kind of over it.

The apartment door opens, and Rocket finally gives up his study of me, bounding from the sofa and prancing across the living room to greet Skyler with a figure eight around his legs. And, honestly, I can’t blame the little guy for his jubilant reaction because if I were that spry I’d do the exact same thing.

“Everything okay?” Skyler asks, one brow raised in curiosity.

I grin at him. “It’s great now. Although that cat’s fucking weird,” I add in a grumble.

He lets out a soft laugh. “You think all cats are weird.”

“He’s always staring at me. It’s creepy.”

“Well, you are kind of interesting to look at, Jax.”

“Gee, thanks,” I say dryly.

Skyler just grins and strides over to join me on the sofa, stretching his long body out and resting his head in my lap. Unsurprisingly, Rocket jumps up into Skyler’s lap, curling up with a soft purr. I send the cat a narrow-eyed look. I don’t particularly like having to share my Skyler cuddles, but at least the demon creature’s not staring at me anymore.

Doing my best to ignore the cat, I lift a hand to sift through Skyler’s hair, prompting him to let out a soft murmur of approval, his eyes falling closed.

“You smell like sex,” I comment.

“You want me to go shower?”

I shrug. “It’s fine.” He’s comfortable now; I don’t want to make him move. And it really doesn’t bother me anyway.

“I missed you,” he murmurs. “I shouldn’t have bothered with the hook-up. It wasn’t great sex. I should have just stayed at the party.”

I decide not to tell him we only missed each other by about fifteen minutes—according to Deacon, at least. That knowledge won’t make him feel better. “I’ve missed you too.”

We fall quiet and I turn my focus to the TV. I’ve missed most of the episode thanks to the dumb cat distracting me, so I’m a little lost and have no idea how that Audi got wrapped around an electricity pole, but the sight of it makes me want to cry. I know it’s fiction but, *that beautiful car...*

“Do you think I’m in love with you?” Skyler murmurs.

I jolt in alarm, partly because I thought he’d fallen asleep, but mainly because it’s the last thing I would have ever expected him to ask me.

“Huh?”

His eyes flutter open, and he hits me with a look full of apprehension, mingled with agitation. “Deacon thinks I’m in love with you.”

I blink at him, stunned. “Um. Okay. Do *you* think you’re in love with me?”

His face screws up in a confused frown. “I don’t think so. I’m not attracted to you or anything—no offense.”

I chuckle. “None taken. Why does Deacon think you’re in love with me?”

He lets out a heavy sigh. “Well...he was giving me shit about, you know, settling down and finding a boyfriend and whatever. And he said if I gave it a

chance I could find the love of my life. And I told him I already found the love of my life, and that made him think I'm in love with you."

I nod, unable to keep my lips from twitching. "I wonder how he made that leap."

"I know, right? Talk about jumping to conclusions."

I can't seem to stop the twitch from morphing into a full on grin, which causes Skyler to glower up at me. "Don't laugh, it's not funny. If Deacon's right it'd be horrible."

I quirk a brow at him. "Being in love with me would be horrible?"

He doesn't reply, but the confused scowl doesn't leave his place.

I sigh, offering an indulgent smile. "Skyler, I think you're getting worked up over nothing. You said yourself you're not attracted to me," I remind him. "And if it helps...you're the love of my life, too."

He stares up at me, looking awe-struck. "Really?"

I let out a wry breath of laughter. "How could you be surprised by that? I mean, yeah, I probably wouldn't have used those exact words myself...but it's true. You're the single most important part of my world, Sky. The best thing about my life is that you're in it. And considering I can't even fathom the possibility of ever meeting someone who could match that, let alone surpass it, then, yeah, I guess that does make you the love of my life," I finish with a shrug.

He offers a fond smile. "That's some good logic."

"So I don't think you have anything to worry about," I assure him. "Deacon just..." I sigh, shaking my head. "He's never had a Skyler or a Jackson so he doesn't get it."

"Yeah, I told him the same thing," Skyler says with a smirk.

Chapter Eleven

Skyler

“WE SHOULD HAVE DONE THIS LAST WEEK,” I MUSE, RUNNING MY FINGERS over the dark fuzz covering Jackson’s scalp as he sits in front of me on the kitchen chair I dragged into the bathroom.

I actually kind of like his hair like this; it’s so nice and soft. But Jackson prefers an all-over clipper cut—as close as you can get with an electric razor. And we usually shave it weekly, so it’s rare to see it any longer than your standard army issue buzz cut.

We missed last week, though, so now it’s all soft and smooth. And I should probably stop touching it “It’s gotten longer than you like it.”

“You were busy last week,” he reminds me. “And it’s okay like this. It still feels nice.”

“It does feel nice,” I murmur, still dancing my fingers over his hair. “It’s so soft.”

“I meant...” He breaks off, shifting his head around to look up at me. “I can keep it like this if you like it better?”

I let out a breath of wry laughter. “Jackson, it’s *your* hair. You like it shaved close, so we’re shaving it close.”

“Yeah, but—”

I finally tear my fingers away and grab the razor from where I left it charging on the shelf above the basin. “Turn around. Let’s do this.”

Jackson shrugs and turns his head while I check to make sure the razor’s actually charged properly and then remove the guard.

I’ve done this so many times it’s like muscle-memory now; one hand maneuvers Jackson’s head around, while the other guides the razor. I don’t even need to think about it.

“Mmm...” The noise that falls from Jackson’s lips as I slide the razor up the back of his head is close to a groan. A hum of pleasure loud enough to hear over the buzzing of the razor, and enough to make me jolt slightly as a slight flare of heat ripples through me.

“Everything good?” he asks me.

“Yep. Fine,” I rush to reassure him. I draw in a steadying breath, letting my eyes fall closed for a moment before getting back to the task at hand.

Fuck, that was weird. Not the noise Jackson made—half the reason he shaves his head is because he finds it so pleasurable; I’m well aware of that. But my reaction to it? That’s sure as fuck never happened before.

I decide to just push it out of my mind. It’s nothing. It was just a weird blip. It’s been a few weeks since the last time we did this, that’s all.

It sure as hell doesn’t have anything to do with that outlandish theory of Deacon’s, or all the stuff Jax and I talked about last night.

He’s the love of my life, I’m going to stand by that; and the fact that he feels the same about me makes me all warm and gooey and fuzzy inside. Nothing wrong with that. But I’m not *in* love with him. And I’m not attracted to him.

And I know this for sure because I tested it.

Deacon seemed so shocked that I’d never “wondered” about Jackson before. So last night I decided to “wonder” and it. Was. *Weird*. I wanted to be absolutely sure, so I didn’t hold back at all, even though it was an incredibly strange and uncomfortable experience. I tried to imagine fucking Jackson the way I would any other guy, and it felt so... *wrong* I couldn’t even get hard from it. First time *that’s* ever been an issue.

“Mmm, that feels nice,” Jackson murmurs.

It’s not until I hear the words of approval that I register what I’m actually doing—the razor is off and I’m leaning over Jackson’s head, gently blowing loose hair away. “Oh, shit. Sorry,” I mumble, rearing back and giving my head a sharp shake. What the fuck was that?

“No, I liked it,” Jax insists. “Can you do it again?”

I hesitate for a moment, but when it comes down to it, I can’t say no to Jackson. “Um. Sure, okay.” I drop to my knees behind the chair and reach out to guide his head down a little so I can get to his nape.

As soon as I start blowing away the hair there, Jackson lets out a soft groan that prompts me to pause for a moment so I can gather myself.

Jesus, this is getting ridiculous. What the hell is wrong with me today?

“No, don’t stop,” Jackson urges. “Keep blowing. It feels so good.”

Fuck, he’s going to kill me. But even as a queasy kind of dread starts to form inside me, I can’t bring myself to stop doing something that Jackson is so obviously enjoying.

“There’s just this one little bit left,” I tell him, which is the truth. “Then you can finish getting the rest off in the shower.”

I lean in again and am just about to blow, when Jackson says, “So you’re

not going to blow me until I finish off?”

My puff of air comes out in a quick rush as my surprise gets the better of me and I choke on a laugh. “Alas, my expertise lies with a different kind of blowing,” I say wryly. I puff a little more air over his nape to dislodge the few remaining loose hairs, and then get to my feet. “All done.”

“No...do more,” Jackson urges, butting his head back like a dog wanting a pat.

I let out a soft huff of laughter. “Jax, the hair’s gone. Now it’d just be me kneeling behind you blowing softly on your neck.”

His head stills and he sits there quietly for a moment before turning back to catch my gaze, forehead furrowed in concern. “Was that...weird?”

I shrug. “It was fine.”

It was fucking weird.

Not so much the act itself; I mean, if you think about it, blowing on Jackson’s neck isn’t all that much different to the way he likes to run his hand through my hair when we’re watching TV. Or spooning. Or really anything Jackson and I do that our friends seem to think is strange for some reason. And if it were a week ago I wouldn’t have felt anything odd at all. It would have all just been completely normal. I would have laughed about blow jobs and wondered why I hadn’t thought to do this before.

But it’s not a week ago. It’s today. And today feels all...charged in a way nothing ever has with Jackson before. I feel all hot, and tingly. And my cock keeps twitching like it’s confused about what to do right now. Join the fucking club.

I run a hand over my face and take a step back from the chair to gain a bit of breathing room. I think the situation through logically for a moment and come to the conclusion that I’m freaking out over nothing. This weird reaction has nothing to do with Jackson. I’m just a bit out of sorts because of that completely unsatisfying hook-up last night.

To be honest, I don’t really like speaking ill of the guys I hook up with. I’m not going to say the guy last night is a bad lay just because the sex between us wasn’t great. I’m sure there are plenty of guys out there who would find him to be exactly what they need. But not me. He just wasn’t very responsive, or appreciative, or...engaging, really. Sure, I came, he came, it was fine. But I may as well have just gone home and fucked my Fleshlight. Definitely not the way to end a two-week drought.

And now, here Jackson is, responding more vocally to the sensation of

me blowing hair off his neck than the guy last night did when he had my cock in his ass—it's no wonder my body's all confused and out of sorts.

But at least I know how to fix it now. I just need a good hook-up and then everything will be back to normal. Easy.

“Okay, we all good?” I ask Jax, eager to get out of here now I've developed my plan. “You want to check it in the mirror?”

“Um, I think you missed a step, Christian,” he prompts.

I let out a soft chuckle at the familiar *Next Top Model* reference and nod. “Right, sorry. My bad.”

I reach for the mirrored cabinet above the basin and tug it open, retrieving the tube of lotion Jackson uses to keep his scalp hydrated. “Make sure you put more of this on after you shower,” I remind him.

I know he doesn't actually need the reminder—he's been shaving his head for almost six years now, so he knows the drill back to front—but it makes me feel better to issue it. And of course Jackson just goes with it, nodding dutifully in agreement rather than pointing out how ridiculous my coddling is.

I notice a few more stray hairs resting on the left side of Jackson's head, about an inch and a half above his ear. And because I'm apparently in a mood for self-torture today, I lean in and blow them away, prompting him to groan softly and shiver as the puff of air glides over the top of his ear.

“Just a few strays,” I explain, trying to keep my voice even. “All gone now.”

“I'm not complaining,” he murmurs.

I stare at the tube in my hand for a long moment before finally flicking the cap open and squirting some of the lotion onto Jackson's scalp. I set the tube on the shelf above the basin and then just stand there, hesitating.

Fuck, this is so stupid. Why the hell am I hesitating? This is Jackson. I've done this so many times I've lost count. I *like* doing this. I like doing anything that makes Jax feel good, and he's the same way with me. But I know what's going to happen as soon as I start massaging that lotion into his scalp, and my cock's going to get all confused again.

I draw in a deep breath and give a sharp shake of my head. I'm having a weird day, that's all. I'll be fine in an hour or so once I find a hook-up and have a really decent fuck. And then my dick will stop trying to turn completely innocent, unsexual situations like this one into something they're not just because it's feeling a bit meh about the last guy it got hard for.

Okay, the sooner I finish up here, the sooner I can start scrolling my apps. I wince as the thought hits me, because I've never put sex above spending time with Jackson before. I might hook up *a lot*, but it's never been my top priority.

But I'm going to have to make an exception today, because if I don't get this reset thing happening soon I'm going to go crazy.

With that in mind, I reach out and start rubbing the lotion into Jax's scalp, the way I have countless times before. And Jackson responds the way he has countless times before.

"Mmm...that feels so good," he murmurs on a soft groan, tipping his head forward so I can massage the base of his skull. "*Fuck, yeah...*"

Jesus Christ.

"Jax, have you ever realized you get more into this than jerking off?"

"Hmm?"

What the fuck, Skyler? I screw my eyes shut, shaking my head sharply as I internally berate myself. Why the hell did I decide to go there?

It's true, though. Jackson always gets really into this, but when we're watching porn and he's jerking off he's generally pretty quiet. And maybe that's why he's never so much as blipped for me. If he were making these kinds of noises while I was actually aroused, I imagine some curiosity would have piqued a while ago. But this is a completely non-sexual situation and my cock is just being a dumbass.

"What do you mean?" he presses in mild curiosity. His head shifts to the side, giving me a glimpse of his closed eyes and relaxed face. Anyone seeing his expression out of context would probably think he's experiencing some kind of exclusive, insanely expensive treatment at a luxury spa.

"Just that...um...you seem to really, *really* enjoy getting your scalp massaged."

"I do really enjoy it."

"More than jerking off?"

The blissful expression cracks into one of confusion. "They're two different things. I mean, this isn't sexual—I'm not hard right now."

"Yeah, of course," I agree. "Yeah."

He's quiet for a long moment, then says, "It's only this good when you do it. That's probably why."

My hands still as, for the briefest of moments, my mind flashes to the thought of me jerking Jackson off and making him groan like this. But then I

snap out of it, tensing my jaw in frustration. That's not what he was suggesting, and it's not what I want. I tested all that last night, and the answer was a firm no.

"Okay, that's it. All done," I announce, drawing my hands away and moving to the basin to wash up.

"That didn't seem thorough enough," Jackson protests.

I give a wry shake of my head. "It was plenty thorough. Besides, you'll need to put more on after your shower anyway."

Jackson shifts around in his chair and offers me a beaming smile. "You mean *you'll* have to put more on after my shower."

"Nope, sorry. I'm going out."

His brows shoot up. "What? Where? I thought cat yoga was next week."

"Catercize," I correct.

Jackson gives an indifferent shrug. An hour of stretching and bending while a bunch of cats wander all over the room around you is pretty much his version of hell.

"Yeah, that is next week. I actually don't know where I'm going now," I say with a shrug. "Somewhere I can get laid. I need that guy from last night out of my system."

A dark expression crosses Jackson's face. "Did he do something to you? Are you okay?"

I smile and reach out to run a hand over his head. "I'm fine. He didn't do anything, it just wasn't good sex. Now I feel all...I don't know—off."

Jackson nods in understanding and I let my hand slip away. "Yeah, okay. I'll see you later on then."

"Remember to use shampoo and conditioner," I remind him as I brush past him toward the bathroom door. I catch his eyes rolling in response to my unnecessary comment, but he says nothing.

Chapter Twelve

Skyler

OKAY, I'LL ADMIT IT, THIS PROBABLY WON'T WIN THE CROWN FOR THE smartest idea I've ever had.

"I was surprised to hear from you. Did your roommate decide he wants his eggs replaced after all?"

I arch an eyebrow at Jersey Coyote, letting him know the scowl isn't appreciated. "You mean, to replace the eggs you wasted in your attempt to kill me?"

He winces and glances away, a faint blush touching his cheeks as he mumbles something that sounds like, "*Honest mistake...*"

The plan had been to scroll through my apps and find a new guy to get me out of this weird funk, *not* track down an old hook-up and schlep out to Newark; I don't do repeats, and I especially don't do repeats with clingy weirdos who try to kill me and upset Jackson. And I rarely, if ever, travel anywhere close to an hour just for sex. There are plenty of options way closer to home.

But as soon as I started scrolling, I couldn't seem to get a big, blaring thought out of my head—what if this next guy turns out to be a bummer just like the guy last night?

I figured sometimes it's better the devil you know, and even though he's borderline crazy, Jersey's also one hell of a fuck.

"So what are you doing here?" he asks, looking confused for some reason.

My brows creep up. "I texted and said I wanted to fuck. You told me to come over..."

He runs a hand through his dirty blond hair, still looking confused. "Yeah, but I wasn't sure if you were actually serious...I mean, after the way your asshole roommate threw me out that morning, I kind of figured you were done with me..."

I narrow my eyes at him, jaw tight with displeasure. "Jackson is *not* an asshole."

Jersey's eyes widen and he holds his hands up in surrender. "Okay, shit. I'm sorry. I'm just a little confused right now. What exactly are you asking

me for? Have you changed your mind? Do you want to date after all?”

I choke out a scornful laugh. “God no. Look, man, you’re a clingy, crazy psycho, and I should have started looking for a new place the second Jackson kicked you out of our apartment, because frankly, the thought that you know where I live is quite unsettling. *But,*” I say firmly, just as he’s opening his mouth ready to rebut, “you’re also the best fuck I’ve had in months. And I really need a good fuck right now. So *that’s* why I’m here. That’s the only reason I’m here.”

He just stares at me for a long moment, looking almost shell-shocked. He finally masters his expression, sending me a flat look. “Wow. You should write Valentine’s cards.”

I shrug. “Just making sure there aren’t any misunderstandings.”

I want to just get on with this so I can fix this weird funk already, so I unzip my hoodie and shrug it off, then I tug my t-shirt over my head.

I’ve just unfastened my fly and am starting to tug my jeans down when Jersey speaks, “Maybe I don’t want to fuck. I mean...you weren’t even that good.”

Despite his words, unmistakable heat flickers in his gaze as it fixates on my crotch.

I smirk at him, one eyebrow arched. “I’d be insulted if I didn’t know you’re a pathological liar.” I let go of my jeans and move my hands to rest casually at my hips. “But if you’re really not sure, we’ll keep the jeans on.”

He tears his glance away for a moment, jaw tense as he curses under his breath. Then his eyes return to my body, running up and down every inch of me with avid appreciation.

I let my eyes fall closed for a brief moment, soaking that in. My friends—except for Jackson, obviously—all think I’m a borderline sex addict. And maybe, in a way, they have a point. It’s not the actual sex I’m addicted to, though; it’s this. Don’t get me wrong, sex is awesome, but the physical pleasure is more like the cherry on top. It’s the desire and appreciation and praise and acknowledgement—and undivided attention—that make up the actual sundae. It’s why I don’t get a whole heap of satisfaction from guys who don’t get super into it—like the one I was with last night—and why I always prefer to keep a light on, and why the one time I tried a threesome it was perhaps the most disappointing sexual experience of my life. It’s also why I’m an exclusive top.

In terms of physical pleasure I don’t actually have a preference, and I love

fingering myself or using anal toys when I'm alone. But when it comes to sex with a partner, I'm way more likely to get what I need from a bottom—it's just how it goes.

I'm sure there are plenty of psychologists who'd have a field day analyzing my behavior and poking and prodding at all my sore points. But I prefer not to think about all that shit. This is just something I need. End of story.

Jersey lets out a loud sigh of resignation, letting his eyes fall briefly closed. "Damn it! I forgot how fucking hot you are."

"I find that hard to believe," I say with a smirk.

He narrows his eyes at me. "I didn't realize what a narcissistic asshole you were."

I gasp in indignation. "I am charming and affable."

Jersey shrugs. "Sure, when you're chatting guys up you're charming as hell. But that's not the real you, is it? You're like one of those candies that start off sweet, but turn sour after a while."

My jaw drops practically to the floor. "Hell, no. If I'm candy then I'm Wrigley's Double mint—double the pleasure, double the fun."

Jersey just stares at me, unimpressed.

I let out a frustrated sigh. Clearly this isn't going to happen, so I fasten my fly and grab my t-shirt off the floor.

Fuck, what am I even doing here? This funk is playing havoc with my whole sense of reasoning. I should have known this wasn't going to be a simple case of repeating the great sex we had last time. Jersey obviously still has a chip on his shoulder about the way Jackson summarily booted him from our place a few weeks ago. And I can't imagine calling him a crazy psycho earned me any Prince Charming points.

Yeah, he still finds me attractive, but that's not going to be enough. I don't think I could be with someone who so openly dislikes me. I've never done that before. Part of the bang and bail thing, I guess—all of the guys I've hooked up with have found me sweet and charming. Which I am, damn it.

"So now we're *not* going to fuck?" he asks, looking all bewildered again.

"You just called me sour on the inside," I remind him.

His brows shoot up as a look of incredulity crosses his face. "And that offended you? You called me a psycho."

Yeah, I need to get the fuck out of here. I hastily tug my t-shirt over my head and draw in a breath. "I apologize for that. That's a serious medical

condition that I shouldn't have tossed around in a hyperbolic spiel. And I'm not offended—you're welcome to your opinion. I just don't want to have sex with someone who doesn't like me. Where's your kitchen?"

His forehead creases. "Huh?"

"Your kitchen—where you keep your food..."

"Uhh...it's through there..." He points to a door off the living room, his expression still bewildered.

Without bothering to explain myself, I stride to the door and push it open, finding myself in a small but tidy kitchen. I tug open the door to the fridge and grin when I see a carton of free range eggs on the bottom shelf.

"What are you—"

"I'm taking these," I tell Jersey, retrieving the eggs and slamming the fridge door closed.

He frowns at me. "There's eleven eggs there. I only used four."

I shrug. "Consider the rest damages. For emotional distress from you almost killing me."

He gives a dramatic eye roll but waves me out of the kitchen, allowing me to take the eggs.

"YOU'VE BEEN GONE FOR AGES," JACKSON MURMURS WHEN I FINALLY CRAWL into bed next to him on Saturday night.

I got home a little while ago but I wanted to shower the weird day off first. Three attempts at a hook-up. Three sure things. Three epic fails. I let myself off the hook for Jersey, obviously. And after that, when I couldn't really get into it with a guy I found on one of my apps, I figured I was just having the same bad luck I had last night...

But then I hit up a club and picked up an incredibly hot guy I was sure would break whatever curse has been put on me, but... I don't know. I really can't explain what happened. I just wasn't into it. Eventually I decided to just give him a BJ and leave it at that. I give epic blow jobs so obviously he was going crazy and piling on all the praise that I usually eat up with a spoon. But tonight it just felt so...wrong. And meaningless. And pathetic.

I wrap my arms tight around Jackson's hard, warm body and squeeze gently. "Sorry. I wasn't planning to be gone so long."

“Why did some Uber guy drop off a carton of eggs with one missing?”

“That’s kind of a long story. Not important.”

He mumbles an agreement and I can tell he’s pretty much zoned out, on the verge of sleep.

I brush a soft kiss to his neck and nestle in close, making myself as comfortable as I can while my brain churns all over the place.

I really want to write today off as just a weird set of circumstances resulting in a disappointing outcome. That’s possible, right? It doesn’t really mean anything.

So I would have way preferred spending that time hanging out with Jackson—what does that prove? I always prefer to spend my time hanging out with Jackson.

I let out a sigh, scowling into the darkness as though Deacon is here for me to rail at. Why did he have to go put this ridiculous idea in my head and throw me all off-kilter? It’s completely insane. And impossible. I *can’t* want Jackson that way. I just can’t.

I choke on a breath and draw away from him a little as I try to soothe the knot of dread forming in my gut; it’s the kind of feeling I’ve never, *ever* had in association with Jackson, because I’ve never had any reason to fear losing him. But this...

I shake my head sharply and let out a huff of frustration. No, I tested this. The results were conclusive. This whole crazy idea of Deacon’s shouldn’t be bothering me this much anymore.

But as I gaze over Jackson’s sleeping form, it occurs to me I might have been using the wrong algorithm for my test. I can’t compare him to my random hook-ups; it’d be like comparing Steph’s home-baked bread, fresh from the oven to a Big Mac.

I’m not really sure where this leaves me, though. Except incredibly confused and twisting with anxiety. As I try in vain to figure things out, I absently trace my finger over the ink on Jackson’s back. It’s been there for close to a decade, so I’m very familiar with it, but I don’t think I’ve ever actually taken the time to really *appreciate* it before. At first glance, the design appears to be vines reaching out from the ink on his biceps, but when you look closer you can see little symbols and lyrics from songs in place of some of the leaves. It covers his shoulder blades and then narrows down his back, twisting off at the base of his spine. Like a pin point on a map.

I jerk my hand away as the thought hits me. What the fuck? Could I be

any creepier right now? I try to banish the thought from my mind, but now it's there, it's really hard not fixate on just how low that tattoo goes.

Fucking hell.

"Don't stop," Jackson murmurs. "I like that."

I jolt in surprise. "You're awake?"

"Mmm...just. Can you keep tracing my ink? It feels nice."

Just like today with the hair, I find it impossible to say no to the request. So I settle behind him again and start running my finger over the vines on his back.

Except...I don't stick to his back. I start tracing the ink on his bicep, and down his arm. And then, somehow, I end up with my hand on his chest, my fingers greedily exploring all the ridges and planes and ropes of muscle while I nuzzle into his nape, breathing fire on his back.

Of course I'm well aware Jackson is ripped, and this is hardly the first time I've ever touched his abs. But it's never been like this.

Jackson's response is similar to this afternoon, and hearing those soft groans of unabashed pleasure is doing more for me than any of the guys I attempted to hook up with today. I'm hard as fuck, and I don't think I can put it down to my cock being confused this time. It's all Jackson.

I lower my head and start laying kisses over his back—all across his ink. He seems to enjoy this as well, and lets me ease him onto his front as my lips move farther south.

By the time I get to the bottom of that tattoo, it's taking all my self-control not to start grinding into the mattress. But then a thought hits me and I feel like I've been doused in cold water—what the fuck am I doing? What the hell's the plan now? Am I going to tug down those PJs and lick him out? Put my cock in him? *What the fuck is wrong with you Skyler? He's not even turned on by any of this!*

I feel like I've been hit by a freight train as that reality slams home. Jackson might have found this pleasurable, because he's Jackson and it's just how he is—I'm pretty sure he was the only kid who ever actually *liked* having sunblock put on him—but he wasn't into it the same way I was, and that thought is utterly mortifying.

"I'm, um...going to go to the bathroom," I mutter, climbing off the bed and quickly striding for the door.

"Everything okay?"

"Yeah, it's fine. Go to sleep. I think that's enough of...that."

Jackson lets out a soft chuckle and rolls back onto his side. “Night, Sky.”

I watch him for a moment after his eyes close, a sob catching in my throat as my heart starts to crack. I already knew I loved him with every breath in my body, but the attraction? I genuinely thought I was safe there.

Now I feel like I’m witnessing a rare, precious gem get ground down into something completely unrecognizable and far less amazing.

Everything’s going to be different now. We’ll still be *something*, but we won’t be *us*. We can’t be.

Chapter Thirteen

Skyler

“*SKYLER?*” DEACON ASKS WHEN HE OPENS THE DOOR OF HIS APARTMENT TO my persistent knocking. He brings a hand up to wipe over bleary eyes. “It’s, like, two in the morning—what the fuck are—”

“Why did you do this to me?” I demand in a desperate whine. “Everything was perfect. Why did you ruin it for me?”

Deacon drops his hand and takes a moment to scrutinize me, his mouth falling open as surprise slowly registers on his face “Jesus, fuck, Skyler. Are you crying?”

I know he’s only posed the observation in the form of a question because he’s so stunned. There’s no way he’s missed the tears streaking down my cheeks, or the puffy eyes, or the snotty nose.

I swipe at my eyes with the sleeve of my hoodie—Jackson’s hoodie—which is already completely gross from the amount of times I’ve done that on my way over here.

“Why did you do this to me?” I sob. “*Why, Deacon?*”

He just stares at me, clearly stunned. “I...I don’t know what’s going on. Sky, I’m sorry if I’ve done something. I definitely didn’t mean to hurt you.”

Between all the fear and dread and emotional turmoil, I’m suddenly finding it difficult to stay steady on my feet. The second Deacon utters the word “sorry,” I slump forward and throw my arms around him, burying my head against his shoulder and sobbing uncontrollably.

“Fuck, Skyler.” Alarm is clear in his voice as he gently pats my back. “What the hell’s going on? It’s like you’re fucking grieving or something.”

Because I am, I realize. For everything Jackson and I have shared. For the lifetime we were supposed to spend together. I know he’ll say it doesn’t change anything, but it will. It already has.

“Jackson,” I murmur.

“*What?* What about Jackson?” Deacon demands. “Is he hurt? Did something happen?”

“He’s at home. He’s asleep.”

“*Jesus Christ, Skyler.* You scared the shit out of me,” he grumbles. “Come on, let’s get inside.”

He takes a few steps back and I let him lead me inside the familiar apartment and over to the couch.

“Here, why don’t you take a seat, buddy,” he says gently, guiding me down onto the sofa. “You want some water?”

I shake my head no and shuffle down the sofa a bit, lifting my legs up so I can curl around on my side, sniffing into the sleeve of Jackson’s hoodie.

“Well, I’m at least going to get you a tissue,” Deacon mutters. “That hoodie is gross.”

“It’s warm,” I murmur. “And it smells like Jackson.”

“It’s still gross,” Deacon repeats, handing me a box of tissues, which I grudgingly accept before setting them on the carpet in front of the sofa. “Jackson’s not going to be impressed with what you’ve done to his hoodie.”

“He won’t mind,” I say quietly. “He never minds.”

“Sky, please just talk to me,” Deacon says. “Come on, what’s going on? Maybe I can help?”

I give a slow shake of my head, once again wiping my face with Jackson’s sleeve. “You can’t help. Not unless you have a DeLorean and a flux capacitor and can go back in time and punch yourself in the face before your ruined my life.”

Deacon’s brows shoot up. “How did I ruin your life?”

“Why did you have to tell me?” I moan. “About...the feelings...”

Realization finally flashes across Deacon’s face and he lets his eyes fall closed for a moment, breathing out a soft, “*Fuck.*”

“Everything’s ruined now,” I sob.

“Come on, Sky...it might not be.”

I nod. “Yes, it is.”

“This is Jackson we’re talking about. He’s not going to stop being friends with you because you have feelings for him.”

“I know that,” I say in a harsh growl, glaring at Deacon. This isn’t some silly fight between friends, or even a break-up. The fundamental nature of the relationship that is the centerpiece of my existence is changing; I know it’s not going to be for the better, so that can only mean it’s for the worse. For the first time in our entire relationship, Jackson and I aren’t on the same page. We’re not in sync with one another. And we won’t ever be again. “I know he won’t friend-dump me,” I say a little more softly when I register the alarm on Deacon’s face. “He won’t want anything to change.”

“And that’s bad...?”

“You can’t unsee the Monopoly guy’s doppelganger on the Pringles can, Deacon,” I grumble. “Everything *has* changed. We can’t even cuddle anymore.”

Deacon’s brows shoot up. “He doesn’t want to cuddle you?”

“Of course he wants to!” I grumble, growing frustrated. “I said we *can’t*. Tonight I started...doing things...” I bite my lip as a flush of shame hits my cheeks.

“What do you mean?” Deacon asks warily, his expression uncharacteristically tight.

“We were cuddling and I...I don’t know, I guess my hands just got curious all of a sudden. It was like I just couldn’t stop touching him. All over his chest and abs. And then I started...um...kissing his back...”

“And he didn’t like that?”

“No, the opposite,” I clarify. “He *really* liked that.”

Deacon blinks at me in obvious surprise. “I don’t get it. If he liked it, what’s the issue?”

I push myself up into a seated position so I can look at Deacon properly. “The issue is he wasn’t turned on by it, and he had no fucking clue that I was. It’s creepy and weird.”

Deacon arches a skeptical brow. “Are you *sure* he wasn’t? I mean, if you were kissing his back and he told you he liked it...”

I let out a soft sigh, shaking my head. “It’s Jackson. He’s...” I wave a hand in the air as I search for the right word. “Sensitive, I guess. There wasn’t anything sexual about his reaction. We may as well have been at the beach with me slathering him with sunblock.”

Deacon nods in comprehension. “Got it. But you...”

I let my eyes fall closed, wincing at the knowledge of how close I came to completely annihilating the most precious thing in my world. “I was so close,” I whisper. “If I hadn’t stopped when I did, I think I might have...”

I feel Deacon’s hand settle on my knee in a gesture of calm reassurance. “But you did stop, Sky. And, for what it’s worth, I don’t think it’s a matter of a lucky close call. You’re just simply not capable of doing anything that might hurt Jackson. It’s like it’s written in your DNA or something.”

I shrug half-heartedly. “Maybe...”

Deacon sighs and gets to his feet. “I’m really sorry this is happening, buddy,” he murmurs regretfully. “I honestly didn’t realize what the fallout might be when I had that epiphany last night.”

I give a brief nod of acknowledgement and shift around so I'm lying down again, snuggling deeper into the couch and wishing it was Jackson's hard, warm body I was cuddled up next to. But then I'd just get horny all over again.

Deacon pats my hair affectionately. "You going to be okay here for the next few hours? Sorry I can't offer you a bed—I never got around to furnishing Drew's old room."

"Here's fine."

"Cool. I'll grab some blankets and a pillow. You want anything else?"

I let out a forlorn sigh. "A cuddle."

Deacon just stands there awkwardly for a moment. "Yeah...I feel bad, but let's not go crazy."

"Not from you," I grumble. "You're probably bad at cuddling anyway. You probably want to always be the big spoon."

Deacon folds his arms over his chest, an indignant expression crossing his face. "I am *not* bad at cuddling. I'm an excellent cuddler. Better than you, I'd bet."

"Doubtful. You're a casual cuddler at best." I lift a hand in a shooing gesture. "Go back to the juniors, rook. You can't compete with the big boys."

Deacon rolls his eyes, muttering, "How the fuck do I get trapped in these conversations with you?"

It's clearly a rhetorical question because he doesn't give me the opportunity to answer before he turns and disappears down the short hallway where I know the bathroom and linen closet are located. He returns a moment later, unceremoniously dumping a pillow and waffle blanket on top of me. "There you go. And—" He steps away again as I shove the pillow under my head and toss the blanket haphazardly over myself, resulting in most of it pooling on the floor. Whatever.

This time when Deacon returns, he's brandishing a three-foot long stuffed alligator. "Will this work as a cuddle buddy?"

I stare at the stuffed animal in mild curiosity. "Why do you have a giant stuffed alligator in your apartment?"

"He's not an alligator," Deacon corrects. "This is Curtis the Crocodile. He's my kindergarten class's special friend and it's my weekend to take him on an adventure. We went to the Promenade yesterday."

"Wow. Lucky Curtis," I deadpan.

"Do you want the crocodile or not?"

“Yes, please.”

Deacon hands Curtis to me and I cuddle him tightly. It’s not even remotely an adequate substitute for Jackson, but it’s better than nothing.

I DIDN’T THINK I’D BE ABLE TO GET TO SLEEP AFTER DEACON SHUT OFF THE living room light and returned to bed, but clearly I managed it, because I wake with a stiff neck to the sound of someone arriving at the apartment door.

“Fuck, thank god,” Deacon says to whoever just arrived.

I perk up a little—is Jackson here?

“What the hell’s going on? It’s seven in the morning. On a Sunday. That’s tasting menu blow job day, Deacon. *Tasting menu blow job day.*” It’s Drew’s voice. Not Jackson’s.

I drop my head back onto the pillow, huffing out a sigh of disappointment.

“I have no clue what that is, but have I mentioned how much I love it when you share stuff about my brother’s sex life?” Deacon drawls.

“Then you’d better tell me why I’m here instead of at home with my dick in your brother’s mouth,” Drew quips.

“*Fucking hell,*” Deacon groans. “It’s Skyler. He showed up here at two am—*crying.* And he’s been thrashing around on that sofa for the past few hours, whimpering and moaning in his sleep, and clutching that fucking crocodile like it’s a life preserver. I just didn’t know what to do.”

“Call Jackson, obviously,” Drew says simply.

“It’s *about* Jackson.”

“Fuck it, just get him here, Deac—they can work out whatever it is later.”

“Where’s Jackson?” I murmur.

“See,” Drew says, before coming over to sit on the coffee table right in front of me. “Text him, Deac.”

“Okay, I’m texting,” Deacon says. “But I don’t believe for a second your motives are a hundred percent pure, Drew.”

“Of course they’re not,” Drew says with a shrug. Then he lets out a wistful sigh, staring off at nothing. “Sully’s at the gym right now. Definitely want to be home before he has a chance to shower...”

“Can we get back to the matter at hand, please?” Deacon prompts.

The corner of Drew’s mouth quirks in wry amusement, then his expression shifts to one of concern as he scrutinizes me. I can only imagine how disturbing a sight I must make right now, with the puffy eyes and the snotty jumper and the general aura of patheticness. “What’s going on, Sky?” he prods gently. “Deac said you came over here all upset last night?”

I nod, feeling myself choke up again as I try to explain. “Everything was perfect, and beautiful, and amazing. And now it’s all gone. Everything’s ruined. Came to yell at Deacon for wrecking everything.”

Drew glances up at Deacon in confusion. “I’m obviously missing something.”

Deacon winces and lifts a hand to rub through his dark blond hair. “Um... I sort of suggested he might be in love with Jax...”

Drew surges to his feet, putting his back to me as he rounds on Deacon. “You *told* him?”

“Wait—you know?”

“Of course I know, everyone knows,” Drew says with a huff of exasperation. “Well, except the two of them, obviously. And you.”

“What do you mean *everyone* knows?” Deacon demands indignantly. “I only figured it out yesterday. Why didn’t anyone tell me?”

“Because we knew you’d go all Deacon and fly into Cupid mode and something like this would happen,” Drew says, gesturing wildly in my direction.

“Well, obviously I didn’t *mean* for this to happen,” Deacon bites back.

“What did you think would happen? That they’d just skip off into the sunset together?” Drew hisses.

“You never know... You thought you were straight, so maybe—”

“Wake up, Deacon,” Drew says with obvious exasperation. “Haven’t you realized yet this is a two-way street? If Jax was in any way attracted to men they would have got together *years* ago.”

“*What*—how is that even...?”

“You know, you should really pay more attention to your sister when she tells you shit.”

Their conversation is making no sense to me. Something about road signs and Deacon waking up with his sister? I don’t have the energy to figure it all out. I just want Jackson to be here already.

Chapter Fourteen

Jackson

I WAKE TO THE NOW FAR-TOO-FAMILIAR SENSATION OF BEING SMOTHERED BY A warm, hairy, wriggly pillow. The fucking cat.

“*Get off me!*” I say in a muffled growl, turning my head and causing Rocket to meow in displeasure as he’s dislodged from his sleeping place. He bounds from the bed and stalks out of my bedroom, turning his head back once to issue me with a forlorn look.

“Don’t look at me like that, cat—you’re not going to make me feel bad for not wanting to choke on hairballs first thing in the morning.” I let out a sigh, running a hand over my face. I’m talking to a cat as though he can understand me. I’ve clearly gone mad.

My stomach lets out a loud grumble, and when I check the time on my phone, I see why—it’s after ten am. I wouldn’t necessarily call myself an early riser on the weekends, but I don’t usually sleep this late. The smell of breakfast cooking tends to wake me by about nine if I’m not up already.

But I can’t smell any of those delicious pancake and bacon scents this morning, and the apartment seems quiet. Maybe we were low on groceries again and Skyler had to duck out? But he would have texted me to let me know he was leaving the apartment, and there’s nothing on my phone.

Curious, I slide out of bed and tug on a pair of sweats before heading out into the living room, which I’m slightly alarmed to find is completely empty.

I frown as I wander around the apartment, checking Skyler’s bedroom, then the bathroom, then out in the hallway, my concern increasing with every unsuccessful search. I’m sure it’ll turn out to be something really dumb—he decided to hit the gym and forgot his phone, or something like that—but yesterday was kind of strange, and last night even stranger.

Not necessarily a *bad* strange, though; I actually really liked the feel of his hands running over me, and his lips brushing across my back. It was nice. Not arousing, just really, really nice.

I check the hall one more time and am just shooing Rocket back inside when my phone buzzes on the kitchen table. I practically fly across the room to get to it, assuming it’s going to be Skyler.

Deacon Stapleton: *Get here. Now*

Deacon Stapleton: It's Skyler

The second I see the text, I'm heading out the door, barely stopping to grab my coat and stuff my feet into the boots I'd fortunately left by the door. Deacon's not one for dramatics, so if he's telling me to come straight away I'm not going to waste any time.

"What the *fuck* happened?" I demand, the second I enter the apartment and catch sight of Deacon's stricken face, Drew's frown, and Skyler curled up in the fetal position, his eyes red and puffy.

"Dude, you could have changed out of your PJs," Drew tells me, offering the slight quirk of one brow.

"Deacon told me to get here, so I got here," I grind out. "What the fuck is going on?"

Before Deacon or Drew can answer me, Skyler lifts his head and gazes at me. "Jackson?"

I just stand there for a moment, completely stunned. Every one of his carefully crafted layers of defensive armor has been ripped away, leaving him flayed open and bleeding for everyone to witness. I haven't seen him appear this vulnerable since we were kids.

It only takes me a second to snap out of my stupor, and I rush to join Skyler on the sofa, slinging my arm around him and pulling him against me.

He clings to my coat and buries his face in my neck, sobbing freely as I comfort him as best as I can. I have no idea what's going on, but I know pushing him to talk won't help matters any. So I hold him against me, rubbing my hand over his back and murmuring reassurances while trying to pretend our two best friends aren't hovering awkwardly somewhere nearby.

"I'm so sorry," he murmurs once the sobbing has eased off. "I ruined everything."

"You could never ruin anything," I assure him. "Whatever it is, I know it's not your fault."

"It is," he insists. "It is my fault. Everything's a mess now. I don't know how the world's going to work now. Nothing will ever make sense. It'll be like it was before..."

My brow creases in utter confusion. And concern. Despite his love of hyperbole, Skyler's not really a doom and gloom kind of person. He can be cynical, but he's also logical. Catastrophizing like this isn't really in his nature.

"Sky, can you look at me for a second?"

With obvious reluctance, he lifts his head and fixes morose, red-rimmed eyes on me.

I lift a hand and gently thread my fingers through his hair, glad when I see some of his distress start to ease and his features relax. “Talk to me. Help me understand what’s going on.”

He doesn’t respond right away, but I’m not going to push. I just keep stroking his hair as I wait for him to find the words.

After a minute or two, I realize he’s probably not going to answer me. He’s so distracted by the petting I doubt he even remembers I asked a question. I consider stopping and posing my question to a more coherent Skyler, but I just can’t bring myself to do anything that’s going to make this calm, peaceful expression he’s wearing disappear.

“Stop,” Skyler chokes out, the calm on his features giving way to sudden distress.

Completely baffled by the rapid change, I act on instinct and continue stroking his hair. He loves when I stroke his hair. It always relaxes him. It’ll help.

“Please, stop,” he pleads in a near whisper.

“Jackson, stop,” Deacon orders, his voice cracking out like a whip, snatching my hand away from Skyler.

I sit there for a moment, completely dumbfounded as I stare at my hand. “What—?”

Before I can get a question out, Skyler shifts out of my embrace and moves down the sofa, grabbing a stuffed alligator of all things and clutching it to his chest.

“I don’t understand,” I murmur. “What’s going on? What just happened?”

Deacon and Drew exchange a look that tells me they’re well aware of the situation, but they don’t offer any insight. That’s okay; I don’t want to hear it from them.

I turn my gaze to Skyler, the sight of him huddled up tight, clutching that stuffy like his life depends on it is so reminiscent of the lonely little boy I first met all those years ago, it makes my heart crack open.

“Deacon was right,” he finally says, his gaze fixed on the floor.

“Right about what?”

“The thing we talked about the other night.”

I frown for a moment as I try to recall the last conversation we had involving Deacon. It was the one on Friday night...*ah*. “So...you have

feelings for me after all?”

He nods, dejection coming off him in waves.

Honestly, I don't see why this is such a big problem, but given Skyler's so obviously distressed I don't think downplaying it is going to get us anywhere.

“Sky, look at me.” He hesitates and I let out a heavy sigh. “*Please*, look at me.”

Finally, he turns his gaze to mine, giving me the opportunity to fix him with a look full of all the sincerity I can muster. “This ruins *nothing*. Do you hear me? Maybe some things will change, but we've always found a way to adjust and adapt in the past and we can do that now. Right?”

His eyes are full of both doubt and hope as he nods in silent acknowledgement.

“And I can guarantee one thing—it will never, ever be like the way it was before. *Ever*.”

I have a feeling I'll be making quite a few speeches like that before he finally gets it through his head that I'm not going anywhere. But if that's what it takes, I'll be happy to do it.

“You want to go home?” I suggest. “I can make you some bacon.”

He narrows his eyes at me, and I'm relieved to see him looking a little more like my Skyler. “*I'll* make the bacon. I'm not really craving charcoal today.”

I grin at him as I stand from the sofa. “Okay then, you can make me some while you're at it.”

Skyler shakes his head, but I'm glad to see his expression is close to wry than agitated or upset. Progress. We'll just take it one normal thing at a time.

We say goodbye to a very relieved-looking Deacon and Drew, and then make the walk back to our place.

It's not until we get through our front door that I realize Skyler is still clutching the alligator. “Where'd you get that?”

Skyler glances at the stuffy in his hand as though he's only just seeing it. “Oh. It's Deacon's. Shit, I didn't mean to take it with me.”

My brows shoot up. “Deacon has a stuffed alligator? That's... unexpected.”

“It's a crocodile, apparently. And it's from his classroom.”

“Okay, well I can drop it back there tomorrow if you want? His school isn't too far from the garage.”

Skyler clings tighter to the alligator—sorry, crocodile—and shakes his head. “It’s fine. I can do it.”

I let out a soft sigh, lifting one shoulder in a shrug. “Okay, then.”

I’m distracted for a moment as I remove my boots and hang my coat up, so I’m surprised when I hear Skyler’s voice coming from the kitchen. “It’s Sunday. You want pancakes?”

I flash him a broad smile. Another normal step forward. “Of course.” I move toward the kitchen, getting there just as my stomach gives a loud growl. “I think I might make some cereal first, though. I’m fucking starving.”

I take my cereal out to the breakfast table and eat as I scroll through my phone. Before long, the delicious scents of pancakes and bacon start wafting through the air and it actually starts to feel like a normal Sunday. I even have the damn cat staring at me.

The only thing out of the ordinary is Skyler’s mood. He still seems a little despondent and agitated—far from his usual bright, sunny self. Obviously I’m not expecting him to be turning cartwheels right now, but that doesn’t make it any easier to see him in pain.

Once I’m done with my cereal, I get up and head into the kitchen, brushing past Skyler at the stove so I can rinse the bowl in the sink.

“Fuck, Jackson—would it kill you to wear a shirt?” he exclaims, his eyes wild with distress, cheeks flushed with obvious agitation.

My brows draw together in a mix of concern and confusion. “What? Why?”

He blinks a few times before glancing back to the stove. “It’s just...this pan is really freakin’ hot. It could burn you.”

“It’s, like, two feet away from me.”

“Yeah, well, I like to practice safety in my kitchen,” he insists. “Can you go get dressed, please?”

It’s obvious he’s lying to me, but I’m not going to call him out on it. “Yeah, sure.”

As I step away, I see Skyler lower his head, his eyes shutting tight as he draws in a deep breath. “*Fucking hell,*” he mutters.

Instinct takes over and I reach out to touch his shoulder in what I intend to be a comforting touch. “Sky, it’s okay—”

He flinches away from me, causing me to take a hurried step back, fear and hurt twisting inside me. *He doesn’t even want me to touch him?*

“Can you please just ease my mind and go get dressed?” he all but pleads.

“Yeah, of course.” I still feel completely wrong-footed, but like I said earlier, we just need to make some adjustments and then we’ll be fine. And if one of those adjustments is something as simple as me being fully clothed around Skyler, I’ll happily do it.

I decide not to let myself think about what other boundaries this could throw up.

When I emerge from my bedroom, now dressed in sweats and a t-shirt, I feel a smile tugging at my lips as I see Skyler setting our breakfast plates on the table. Mine with two fluffy pancakes covered with whipped cream and blueberries plus a side of crispy bacon, and his with a mountain of bacon and avocado on toast.

It’s not until I take a seat and am about to dig in that the smile slips from my face. “Are those...flowers?” I scowl at the whipped cream and blueberries decorating my pancakes. They look completely wrong. “Where are the dicks? Your pancakes are supposed to have dicks on them.”

Skyler groans, running a hand over his face. “Jesus, Jax—can you please stop saying “dicks”?”

I run my eyes carefully over his face, feeling another knot of dread twist inside me. *Please don’t let this be another thing I have to give up...* “You don’t want me to eat dicks for breakfast anymore?”

I’m trying to tease him, but it’s a meek effort, and based on Skyler’s reaction, a very unsuccessful one.

“*Fucking hell, Jackson.*” He lets out a frustrated huff and pushes up from the table, abandoning his breakfast as he paces the living room in obvious agitation.

“Sky, come on, sit back down,” I urge. “Let’s have breakfast. The flowers are great—I love flowers.”

He finally stops pacing and turns to face me, my heart clenching and the look of utter dejection marring his face. “It’s always going to be like this, isn’t it?”

“Like what?”

“Like...” He lets out a strangled groan of frustration, scrubbing both hands over his hair. “It’s just all different now. You’re Jackson...*my Jackson.* I’m not supposed to get turned on when you stroke my hair. I’m not supposed to jump to dirty innuendo when I hear you talk about dicks. I’m not supposed to ogle your abs when I see you walking around shirtless. I’m not supposed to feel you up in bed. And I’m sure as fuck not supposed to rub one out while

I'm thinking about you," he finishes boldly, jaw tight with tension and cheeks stained red as he glances off toward the living room window.

"Well, I'm not supposed to eat shellfish but give me a pack of antihistamines and I'll go to town at Red Lobster."

Skyler flicks his gaze back to mine, his expression unamused. "This isn't a joke, Jackson."

"I'm not trying to make it one," I assure him. "But who made up these rules about what you're supposed to do and what you're not supposed to do? Why can't you ogle my abs?" I lift my t-shirt and give my abdomen a smack. "I work hard for these bad boys."

He cards a hand through his hair, letting out a weary sigh. "Jackson..."

"And I've seen you feel guys up—last night you were *not* feeling me up. It was just...freestyle cuddling," I say with a shrug. "Feel free to do it whenever you want because it was amazing."

His eyes bug out with incredulity. "Are you serious right now? You actually want me to do that again? Jackson, do you realize how close I came to—" he breaks off, shaking his head sharply. "It doesn't matter. Even without that it was still mortifying. *All* of this is mortifying. Me being turned on while we're cuddling, it's just..." he winces and shakes his head, as though the notion is too unbearable for words.

Knowing where his lips were when he suddenly called a halt last night, it doesn't take much for me to read between the lines, and I hate that he's beating himself up about something that a) didn't happen, and b) wouldn't have been a big deal if it had. There's no line Skyler isn't allowed to cross with me, and he should know that. If he did happen to accidentally go there, I would have simply called him out and we'd have had a good laugh about it. Or, at least, that's what would happen under regular circumstances—now I'm not so sure.

Maybe I'm being dense, but I just don't understand why this is so much worse than all the other times he's been turned on while we were cuddling.

"But why is *this* so mortifying?" I press, my face screwed up in concern. "It's not exactly a new thing, Sky. You've jerked off in my bed tons of times."

He grimaces, covering his face with one hand. "Awesome. Because I wasn't feeling humiliated enough already."

"Skyler, you have nothing to be humiliated about," I assure him. "Nothing has changed—that's what I'm trying to tell you."

He lets out a heavy breath, shaking his head. “I think I need to get out of here for a bit.”

Sudden dread spikes through me at the idea of him leaving while he’s upset like this. “And go where?”

“I don’t know. Just...somewhere. Somewhere else.” *Somewhere I’m not.*

Pain twists in my heart as I watch Skyler cross the living room to the door of our apartment, pausing only briefly to collect Deacon’s crocodile from the sofa.

“Do you want me to save your breakfast for later?”

He pauses with his hand on the doorknob, keeping his back to me when he lays the next blow. “You have it. I’m not sure when I’ll be back.” And then he’s gone.

Rocket ambles up to perch by my foot, issuing me with a disgruntled look.

“Don’t look at me like that, cat,” I grumble. “I didn’t want him to go either.”

Chapter Fifteen

Jackson

“JACKSON, *WHAT THE HELL?*” DREW DEMANDS, RUSHING OVER TO ME IN A wild panic. “Step away from the Lambo before you kill it!”

What the fuck? My whole face screws up in confusion, because I seriously have no idea what he’s talking about. I’ve just spent an hour removing the Lamborghini’s engine and am about to install the new one.

“Get that disgusting thing away from this beautiful creature,” Drew growls, inserting himself protectively between me and the car, glaring daggers at the engine I’ve just secured to the hoist.

Figuring he’s gone crazy, I continue securing the mounts. And that’s when I realize why he’s freaking out. I was about to install—or, at least, *try* to install—one of our stock engines into a hundred thousand dollar Lamborghini instead of the one we had specially sent over from Italy.

For the record, there is absolutely nothing wrong with our engines. But they’re not going to fit in this car, and trying is likely to cause more damage, than the Lambo came in with. I feel queasy at the thought of how much time and money Drew just saved our business with that intervention. Got to love foreign luxury cars...

“*Fuck,*” I groan, rubbing a hand over my head. “Shit, I’m sorry.”

“What the hell’s with you today?” he asks, the panic in his eyes now turning to concern. “You’ve been quiet as a mouse all day. You didn’t want lunch. Now this...”

“Skyler left yesterday and never came home last night,” I say miserably, my heart twisting as I hear the words out loud. Narrowing my eyes at Drew, I add, “And don’t give me the “what else is new?” shit—this is different.”

Drew holds his palms up in a gesture of innocence. “I wasn’t going to. But what happened? You seemed...well, not exactly *fine* when you left Deacon’s,” he says with a frown, “but it looked as though it *would* be fine.”

“It *was,*” I say in frustration. “Or at least I thought it was. I don’t know what happened. I don’t know what I did. We were just having a normal Sunday—you know, with pancakes and a movie. But it was different. He didn’t decorate my pancakes properly...they didn’t taste the same.”

Drew arches an eyebrow at me, mild amusement flickering in his eyes.

“You need dicks that bad?”

I send him an irritable look. “It’s not about the dicks. It’s about Skyler not acting like himself.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry,” Drew says, offering a contrite nod. “Then what? Why did he leave?”

“I don’t know,” I all but moan. “He said he needed...*space*,” I choke out the word, still finding it impossible to fathom a world where Skyler could want space from me. It just doesn’t make sense.

Clearly agreeing, Drew’s eyes widen in surprise. “From *you*?”

I nod miserably. “He didn’t even want to cuddle when we put the movie on. And he kept flinching away when I touched him. It was horrible.”

“He’s dealing with a lot right now,” Drew says reasonably, his forehead creased in concern. “Maybe he just needs time?”

I let out a heavy sigh, nodding as I reluctantly acknowledge his point. “Yeah, I know. But we should be working it out together,” I insist. “I didn’t sleep at all last night, and this morning was just all wrong and weird. The coffee I made myself was gross, and my shower was so lonely and quiet...I hated it.”

Drew’s expression turns mildly uncomfortable. “I have sympathy for you, but that whole shower thing is still weird to me. I don’t even do that with Sully.”

I offer a disgruntled frown. “How is that relevant? You guys are a couple, it’s completely different. You probably have sex in the shower.”

Drew shrugs. “Yeah, true. But still...what if he walked in there and you were, like, jerking off or something?”

“What of it?” I shrug. “We’ve seen each other jerk off like a million times. I mean, if I had to leave the room every time Skyler wanted to touch his dick I’d probably never see him.” A slight hum of amusement moved through me at that thought despite my current mood and I can’t help my lips from twitching.

A loud puff of air passes Drew’s lips, his eyebrows creeping up toward his hairline as he gives a wry shake of his head. “Wow. I knew there was something that had stopped all this from blowing up before now, but I didn’t realize exactly how...entrenched it was. I mean, if *normal* for you guys is sleeping in the same bed and jerking off together and touching each other’s dicks...” He shrugs. “It’s no wonder you’ve both been completely oblivious to your feelings all this time.”

“We don’t touch each other’s dicks,” I correct. “Well, I mean...there have been a couple times but it was purely platonic.”

Drew rolls his eyes. “Oh, yeah, I platonically touch my friends’” cocks all the time.”

I cross my arms over my chest and issue Drew with a narrow-eyed look. “You know what? You should be so lucky to have a person who’d wash your junk when you’re too sick to stand up properly in the shower. Or a person who’ll drop everything to come find you in a restroom in a bar in Hoboken because you got a too-small condom stuck on your cock.” I swallow hard as it occurs to me that right now, I’m not entirely sure Skyler *would* do that. He won’t even text me back—would he even read the SOS to know I was in trouble? “I don’t need you to judge me right now, Drew. I just need to fix things with Skyler.”

Drew sighs, offering me an apologetic look. “I’m sorry.” He moves away from the front of the Lamborghini and starts unfastening the stock engine from the hoist. “Look, I really didn’t mean to sound like I was judging you, man. It’s just...I’ve seen this coming for a *really* long time. And to be honest, until recently, I actually thought Skyler was aware of it and just really, really good at putting on a show. But then I realized that wasn’t the case. Trust me, I know exactly how easy it is to deny what’s right in front of you. To suppress those instincts and desires and urges to the point where the only way for them to surface is to be knocked over the head with it.” He pauses his work for a moment, glancing up at me. “Right now, Skyler’s going through a similar thing to what I did when I finally started to acknowledge my attraction to men.” He shifts his gaze to mine for a moment, no doubt anticipating my thoughts. “Yeah, I realize he’s been out forever. But this is something just as huge. Just as monumental. And for Skyler, maybe even more so. I didn’t know him when he first came out, but from what I know of his character, it wouldn’t shock me if he was the kind to just roll with it?”

I shrug. “He accepted it easily enough.”

Drew offers a soft smile and returns his attention to the hoist, while my mind wanders back all those years to Skyler’s butterfly-like transformation from the shy, awkward kid to...well, Skyler. I can’t help the grin that spreads across my face as the memories flood my brain. It wasn’t all sunshine and roses, obviously; we grew up in a small town in central Pennsylvania, and while it might not have been as bad as some other parts of the country, queer kids—queer people in general, really—were very much a minority species.

But bad attitudes never bothered Skyler the way they infuriated me.

I've never asked him about it, because I don't need an explanation. And, frankly, I don't even know if he's aware of his own past behavior. But I think one of the reasons—perhaps the main reason—he embraced his orientation so easily is because, for the first time, he could go to school and be something other than one of the trailer trash kids. He still got bullied and insulted, but at least people knew his name.

And, over time, he seemed to grow a kind of impervious shell around himself. A beautiful, luminous one that was impossible for people to look away from. By the time we finished high school he was one of the most popular kids in the class.

“Actually, he thrived after he came out,” I tell Drew. “I think, maybe, acknowledging his sexuality made him feel more...seen.” I shrug. “I don't know. I suck at psychology.”

“Yeah, that's what Skyler needs,” Drew says wryly. “Help being *seen*.”

I hit him with an unimpressed look. “You have absolutely no idea.”

A curious expression crosses Drew's face, but he doesn't ask any more questions about Skyler's past. It's not as though it's a secret or anything, I guess it's just not something that really comes up all that often. Our friends know Skyler and I first met when we were kids. I'm not sure if Skyler's ever mentioned that we met when my mom and I moved into the neighboring trailer. Or that the first time we ever cuddled was only about eight hours later, when Skyler sneaked out of his window and through mine to get away from his parents' yelling. Fortunately, my mom was cool and never said anything. She just set my alarm an hour early every morning to make sure Skyler had time to sneak back home and packed me an extra sandwich for school every day *just in case*.

Drew finishes unfastening the mounts and straightens up, hitting me with a penetrating look. “Jax...how do you actually feel about Skyler's revelation yesterday?”

“What do you mean how do I feel?” I ask incredulously. “I feel horrible.” And heart-broken and lost and like I'm going to die if I ever have to experience Skyler flinching away from my touch again.

Drew's mouth parts slightly, his eyes widening. “You feel horrible about Skyler being in love with you?”

I stare at him in confusion. “What? No, of course I don't.” I rub a frustrated hand over my face. “I don't care that he has feelings for me. I don't

care that he's attracted to me. I *don't care* that he wants to have sex with me. I *care* that he flinched away from me when I went to touch him, and that he doesn't want to cuddle, and that he stayed out all night and didn't tell me where he was, and that he won't return my texts now. I care that he wants space from me—we don't do space, Drew. That's not us. That's other people.”

Drew lets out a slow breath. “Jackson...have you considered the likelihood that you have feelings for him, too? Not just feelings, actually. Love.”

I toss my head back, letting out a pained groan. “Fuck, Drew. Do you even know how much I wish I was attracted to him? I want to be able to give him that but it's not how it works.”

Drew nods. “I get that. But it wasn't what I was asking. From where I'm standing—and I've been standing here, watching and waiting for a long fucking time—it's only his sexual attraction that you can't return. Not his love.”

I shake my head. “I don't really understand...”

Drew sighs. “Look...you know Sully and Deacon's sister Blair?” He waits for me to nod and then continues, “Well she and I hit it off pretty much straight away, and we've become pretty good friends over the past few months, and, well, it's definitely been an education,” he says with a wry smile. “She's pretty outspoken when it comes to correcting misconceptions about the different kinds of attraction. She's ace, and she hates when people assume that means she's a nun with no love life.”

“Ah, yeah, I think Deacon's mentioned her outspokenness,” I say diplomatically. He has actually complained about her oversharing, but whatever. “What's your point?”

“That there are different types of attraction, and that romantic attraction and sexual attraction are completely different,” he says. “I mean, people aren't always romantically attracted to the people they have sex with, right? So why is it automatically assumed that everyone will want to have sex with the person they're in love with?”

I shrug. “I think it's something to do with biology and evolution and procreation or something.”

“That's why libido and arousal exist—just like with every animal who procreates that way. But you don't need either sexual *or* romantic attraction to actually have sex.” He hits me with a pointed look. “I'm pretty sure we

both know that.”

My brows draw together in utter bewilderment. “What the hell are you talking about?”

Drew lets out a soft sigh, shoving his hands into the pockets of his coveralls. “Well...and I am in no way blaming you for this, so please don’t think that,” he says with a firm look that makes me frown. “But I think one of the reasons it took me so long to actually realize the truth of my sexuality is because our attitudes toward sex have always been very similar. There are a bunch of other reasons as well,” he quickly adds. “But one of the things that kept me from questioning myself too much was the thoughts, “Well, Jackson’s not super enthusiastic about sex,” and “Jackson doesn’t hook up that much.” Those kinds of things,” he finishes with a shrug.

My brows shoot up. “So...what? You think I’m gay too?”

He shakes his head adamantly. “Nope. I genuinely think if you had any interest in guys whatsoever it would have reared its head a hell of a long time ago and you and Skyler would probably be married with kids right now.”

I shift around awkwardly, kicking one of my booted feet against the other. The life he just described sounds...incredible. And I feel like someone who’s just been given a tiny glimpse of paradise, only to discover he’s bound for hell. Because I can never have that. Even if by some miracle Skyler and I manage to get back what we had, it’ll never be *that*. I can’t give him a future like that. He needs so much more.

“What the fuck are you saying right now, Drew?” I ask wearily. “Or are you just here to torture me with ideas of things I’ll never have?”

Drew offers a sympathetic look. “You never know...”

“I do know,” I growl. “I do know I’ll never be able to give Skyler what he needs. All our lives *I’ve* been the one to give him whatever it is he needs, no matter how fucking ridiculous it is, or how idiotic he was to get himself in the situation in the first place, I’ve been the one to help him. And now I can’t. He’s hurting and I can’t fucking do anything to help.” I rub my hands over my face, feeling like I’m about ten seconds from completely losing it. Drawing in a heavy breath, I look up at Drew and confess something I’ve barely even admitted to myself. “I’ve thought about it, you know.”

“Thought about what?” Drew asks, clearly concerned.

“Just...doing it. Letting him...” I lift a hand to gesture at my body. “But I can’t do it. Not with Sky. It’s different when it’s someone I don’t know. I can’t with Sky...”

“Because when it’s a stranger you don’t feel as guilty about not being attracted to them?” he suggests.

“I—I don’t know. I’ve just never been very picky...”

“Yeah, I used to say that,” he says with a wry smile. “*I don’t have a type.* Turns out my type is a six foot four, muscled, bearded investment banker.”

“I’m not gay,” I say with a huff. Fuck, why can’t I just be gay? Things would be so much easier right now if I’d just been subconsciously repressing an attraction to men.

Drew nods. “Yeah, I think you genuinely don’t have a type. In any gender. Sexually, at least—considering you’re desperately in love with Skyler, I think homoromantic’s a pretty good bet.”

“You’ll have to use some smaller words here, man. I have no idea what you’re saying to me.”

Drew lets out a soft breath of amusement. “Look, it’s not my place to label you. But I think you should look into asexuality.”

Chapter Sixteen

Jackson

I DON'T REMEMBER FALLING ASLEEP, BUT I GUESS I MUST HAVE BECAUSE MY iPad, which I'd been using to scroll through information on asexuality, is no longer in my hands and there's an annoying as hell crick in my neck. Probably because unconscious Jackson decided Skyler's pillow would be more useful as a snuggle toy than neck support. Makes sense.

I also have a blanket covering me, which I don't remember using earlier, and I don't think that's something my unconscious self can take the credit for.

Glancing around, I see a familiar figure sitting on the coffee table and a wave of relief washes through me. *Skyler*. My Skyler. He must have been home for a while—long enough to shower, at least—because he's wearing nothing but an old pair of sweats and his hair is wet. Predictably, Rocket is curled in his lap, purring contentedly as Skyler gently strokes his fur.

Lucky fucking cat.

"Is that my pillow?" he asks me upon realizing I'm awake.

"It smells like you," I tell him, hugging it tighter. "Why did you leave me? You didn't even answer my texts, or call me back. And Deacon and Drew had no idea where you were either. What if something happened to you?" I'm aware of how whiny I sound right now, but I can't help it. There's been a gaping hole in my heart since yesterday and I need to understand why Skyler did that to me. I understand, logically, that him being attracted to me is territory we've never had to venture into before, but I still don't understand why it has to change anything.

He casts his eyes downward, averting his gaze. "I just need some space, Jax. That's why I got Charlie not to say anything. But he would have if anything was really wrong."

Charlie. Fuck, why didn't I think of that? Of course he went to Charlie. Drew is too loyal to me, and Deacon wouldn't have it in him to lie when I asked. The fact that Skyler chose to stay somewhere I'd be unlikely to track him down is making me feel like my entire world has been ripped off its axis. It's like everything is just turning and tumbling and I'm slipping all over the place with nothing to hold onto; nothing to stop me from falling into

oblivion, because my tether to solid ground is moving out of my reach.

I sit up and swing my legs down, feeling myself settle by just a tiny sliver as the tips of our bare toes touch on the carpeted floor. He doesn't move his feet back like I'd half expected him to after the way he flinched away from me yesterday, but it still doesn't feel right... It still doesn't feel like us.

"You want space...from me?" I ask, my voice cracking with the inability to keep the hurt and confusion out of my tone. It's not like I'm unaware of *why* he didn't come home last night, but I still don't understand it.

Anguish and regret mar his features and immediately all I want to do is take that pain away. "Jackson...come on... You know why I stayed away last night."

I nod. "But it doesn't make sense."

He sighs, wiping a hand down his face. "I know. It doesn't make sense to me either. All these years... I've never even considered it. You aren't—weren't—just some hot guy I saw at a club and wanted to take a pass at. You were...Jackson. My Jackson."

Why is he talking in the past tense? Like I've suddenly ripped off my face mask and revealed my true alien features. I'm still me.

And that's not the part that doesn't make sense to me, anyway. Before I can correct him, however, Skyler starts talking again.

"I know you haven't *actually* changed," he says, as though reading my thoughts. "But my perspective has. You're different to me now. I can't unsee it."

"Pringles," I murmur.

He nods. "Yeah. Exactly."

I shuffle my feet a little closer, placing my toes right on top of his. Again, I half-expect him to pull his feet back, but he doesn't, and the relief is overwhelming.

I hate this. I hate how nervous I am about touching him. I hate how I'm assessing and overthinking every little movement. I hate that the simple fact of him not flinching from me is giving me so much relief. I've never had to be nervous around Skyler. I've never second-guessed anything. I've never had to worry about him not wanting me to touch him. Everything is wrong.

"I understand all that," I tell him. "The part that doesn't make sense is why you think you need to be away from me."

"Jackson..."

Giving up on all my careful movements and hesitation, I bend forward,

burying my head against his chest and nuzzling against him as my arms come up to link around his back. “Please don’t push me away, Sky. I know it’s selfish....I know you need things. But you need me too. And I need you.”

“Jesus, Jax...you’re the least selfish person on the planet,” he murmurs, running his hand over my scalp. “And I’m not trying to push you away, I would never want that.”

Rocket starts meowing, no doubt disgruntled about having his comfortable sleeping spot invaded.

I straighten up and hit him with a hard stare, pointing off toward his corner of the apartment. “Get out of here, cat.”

I swear he rolls his eyes before springing off Skyler’s lap and padding away.

I reach for Skyler again, cupping his nape as I rest my forehead against his. “Promise me you won’t ever leave again,” I murmur. “Ever.”

“I promise I won’t ever want to. Does that count?”

I shift my head slowly from side to side, breathing out a barely audible, “No.”

I lower my head to nuzzle into the crook of his neck, feeling tendrils of relief when his response is to wrap his arms around me and pull me closer. Even amidst the fear and uncertainty, I feel myself lighting up with a happy, golden glow. There’s nothing better than a Skyler cuddle.

Sensual attraction—that’s what the stuff I was reading about before I fell asleep called it. Pleasure derived from non-sexual touch. That’s something I’ve always felt in spades, and with Skyler it’s multiplied by a thousand.

But it’s not just his touch I enjoy; I also love holding him, nuzzling against him, feeling his heartbeat, and the heat of his skin. It’s not something I ever thought twice about before, but after my deep dive today, I can recognize all of that as a sign of emotional attraction. But “attraction” is probably the wrong word. It’s a connection. A bond we’ve shared since we were seven years old. And every time I hold Skyler and feel his heart beating I feel the strength of that connection wrapping around me, and I never want to let him go.

I don’t know if Drew’s right about the romance thing. It’s not something I’ve considered before. I do know I love Skyler with every breath in my body; whether that’s romantic or not, I don’t know, and I don’t think it matters. I don’t think sex really matters either. But I guess I’ve never really cared that much about sex. Not like Sky, who hooks up at least three or four

times a week.

“I don’t like being afraid to touch you,” I murmur. “I need to be able to touch you.”

“Shit, Jax...I didn’t mean...” He lets out a sigh and I feel his lips brush the top of my head. “I really didn’t mean for you to feel like that. I’m sorry. I’ve been a little...confused. And...oversensitive, I guess.”

I lift my head so I can stare into his eyes. “Drew says it’s probably similar to coming out all over again.”

He shakes his head. “Coming out was a good thing.”

“And loving me is horrible.”

He offers a barely-there smile. “I already loved you, Jax. It’s the rest of it that’s fucking everything up.”

“I still don’t understand,” I say with a frown, starting to get frustrated. “Sex has never been important. Why is it important now?”

“Because I’m in love with you now,” Skyler says with a huff, moving his hands from my back to my shoulders, as though preparing to push me away.

“And *I’m* in love with *you*,” I shoot back without even thinking.

Skyler stiffens, staring at me in wary disbelief. “What?”

I mentally replay my words, biting my lip nervously. Well, I guess that answers that question. “Drew can explain it better than me. About different kinds of attraction...”

Skyler’s eyes fall closed, disappointment playing across his features. “You’re not in love with me, Jax...”

“I know how I feel, Skyler,” I bite back. I might not have been sure earlier, but the second he said those words, it was like my heart exploded in an Oprah-style celebration full of glitter and rainbows and a full jazz band playing “Yakety Sax.” And I realize now why I’ve found it so difficult to understand Skyler’s behavior—it’s because I don’t view this situation as the end of the world scenario he seems to be envisioning. All I can see is possibility... If we can somehow figure out a way through this sex thing.

Even if I am ace—which I’m starting to think is pretty likely—it’s not as though I never get horny, or never have sex, or never get off. But I’ve always been pretty...indifferent. To the women I’m screwed. To the porn I was watching. To whatever other weird shit that spiked my arousal—which is apparently pretty common amongst asexuals, so that makes me feel less like a creep who gets off on monkey sex and maple syrup. Something about whatever it is in the brain that kick-starts the libido not distinguishing

between “desirable” and “undesirable” sexual imagery.

The point is, it’s not actually the thought of being sexual with Skyler—to whatever extent that might involve—that bothers me. I’m not grossed out by the thought of touching him, or seeing him naked, or watching him come. That’d be ridiculous considering the ship sailed on all of that a long time ago. I want to make him happy. I want to give him everything he needs. But I don’t think I could bear feeling indifferent with him. I couldn’t bear being physical with him and not being able to feel that familiar connection. And if any of the thoughts that sometimes cross my mind during sex—such as “I just want to get this over with and get out of here,” or “This could seriously be anyone right now,” or “Maybe I should have just rubbed it out earlier, I’m not in the mood for this”—hopped into my brain while I was doing stuff with Skyler, I’m pretty sure it’d break me.

“Jax...” He shakes his head slowly, face a mask of torment. “Please...”

At a complete loss of what to do, I tilt my head forward and press my lips to his.

He stiffens, and I pull back a fraction; still close enough for our foreheads to touch, for our breath to mingle.

“Jackson...”

“I’ve never lied to you,” I murmur in response to the wariness in his tone. “Why would you think I’d start now?”

I return my lips to Skyler’s, and this time he doesn’t tense up, he doesn’t pull away. His hands move from my shoulders, one cradling the back of my neck and the other sliding down my back as the pressure of his mouth against mine increases.

And I feel it. That happy, warm glow that always surrounds me whenever we’re holding each other. Which makes perfect sense, because we *are* holding each other. It’s just that our lips have decided to join in on the cuddling.

I feel Skyler’s tongue gently probe at my lips, and I part them for him, letting his tongue meet mine. And just like the meeting of our lips, this is completely different to any other time I’ve tongue-kissed someone before.

It’s not like I’ve always hated kissing. To be honest, it’s probably one of the things I enjoy most about sex—apart from the actual orgasm part, obviously—something to do with the whole sensual thing, I guess. But I’ve sure as hell never kissed anyone like this before. I haven’t cuddled tongues with someone. And I wouldn’t have wanted to. Not with anyone except

Skyler.

Skyler's tongue slips away, followed by his lips, and I feel a delicious wave of heat hit my face as he lets out a heavy breath.

"Jackson...what the hell?"

I touch my forehead to his, bringing my hands up to cradle the back of his neck, my thumbs brushing over the stubble on his jaw. "You didn't like that?"

"Of course I liked it. I just...why did you do that?"

"Because I wanted to," I murmur. I shift one hand to slide down his back and move my head to nuzzle into his temple.

"Since when do you want to kiss men?" he asks, confusion evident in his voice.

"You're different," I tell him, pressing my lips against his jaw. "You're Skyler. My Skyler. I don't want space from you. I want to be part of you."

I move my lips down farther, sighing softly when I reach the pulse point in his neck. His heartbeat. Right there against my lips. I give his skin a tiny lick before pressing my lips down again, sucking on his skin as though it might just be possible to take that heartbeat into my own body.

"Fuck...Jax," Skyler groans. *"Jesus."*

His hands move under my t-shirt and I bask in the touch like it's sunlight on my skin. His warm, familiar hands providing more comfort than any day spa or five-star hotel could ever hope to.

I only hesitate for a moment when he starts to pull my t-shirt off entirely, not really ready to give up my attention on his pulse point just yet. But if it means more of Skyler's touch on more of my skin, it's worth the minor sacrifice.

As soon as I'm free of my t-shirt, Skyler reaches for the back of my neck, dragging my face toward him and sealing his lips over mine again.

I breathe out a soft hum of satisfaction. More lip and tongue cuddling. More of this connection. More Skyler.

I still feel like we're not close enough, though. Even with our lips joined and our hands on one another's skin, we're not flush together like when we're cuddling in bed. That's what I want; to be so close it's like we're glued together.

I slip from the sofa and onto my knees, putting me right in front of Skyler, still seated on the coffee table. He spreads his legs wider, allowing me even closer, and I don't hesitate to take the invitation.

And that's when I feel Skyler's erection pressing into my thigh. It's hardly the first time I've felt him hard against me while we've been cuddling given his tendency to let his mind wander. but we've never cuddled like *this* before... And it occurs to me that Skyler is experiencing this interaction in a completely different way to what I am. And I'm a dumbass for not realizing that earlier.

This doesn't feel sexual to me, so I'm not remotely aroused; but this warmth I'm feeling, the happy glow that feels as though it's feeding straight into my soul—that's better than any orgasm I've ever had before.

Am I being selfish getting Skyler all worked up like this just so I can keep feeling like I'm basking in the sun on a perfect spring day while being hand-fed chocolate-covered strawberries? Fuck.

But then it hits me—maybe this is how we could do it. Maybe this is how we could solve the sex problem. The last thing I'm feeling right now is indifference; this is Skyler, and I want to take care of him. I want to make him feel good; and as much as I don't want to risk that feeling of apathy, I don't want him to have to forgo pleasure either.

I break the kiss and rest my forehead against his, moving my hand to the front of his sweats and gently rubbing his dick.

“Jackson...what?”

“Let me help you,” I murmur. “I want to, Sky. Let me.”

His expression is full of obvious desire, but there's a flicker of hesitation there as well. “Jax...”

I brush a light kiss to his lips. “Please? I want to.”

After a long moment of thought, he finally nods.

I smile softly and brush another gentle kiss to his lips before reaching inside his sweats and wrapping my hand around his dick.

He lets out a quiet hiss at the touch, his eyes falling closed, and I see his wary expression morph into one of pleasure and relief.

I rest my forehead against Skyler's again and watch in rapture as the pleasure I'm giving him plays across his face. I can't even describe the feeling I'm getting from being able to fulfil this need for him. It's different to the other glow—I'm still feeling that, through the touch of our foreheads, the feel of his hands on my body, the sensation of his hair sliding through my fingers; this is something more primal. He's my Skyler and I want him to be happy. More importantly, I want to be the one to make him happy.

“Jackson...god...*fuck*,” Skyler groans. His head falls to rest in the crook

of my neck, his heavy breath hot on my skin. “Let me...fuck, I need to...”

I have no idea what he’s talking about, but there’s no question as to what my answer will be. I duck my head to kiss his ear. “Whatever you need, Sky. You know I’ll always give you whatever you need.”

He nods, moving his lips to kiss over my neck. And then his hand starts moving down my abs.

Things don’t click into place until I feel Skyler’s hand on my dick. My totally soft, not at all interested in getting off right now dick.

And my beautiful spring day is ruined by a rainstorm that I really should have seen coming.

Chapter Seventeen

Skyler

I AM SUCH A FUCKING IDIOT. I CAN'T BELIEVE I ACTUALLY LET MYSELF HOPE that things might possibly work out with Jackson. That he might somehow feel the same way about me. Stupid fucking idiot. As though there was ever even the slightest chance Jax would discover some previously hidden desire for men the way Drew did.

“What the fuck, Jackson?” I demand, quickly shooting to my feet and taking several steps away from the coffee table. I remember my freakin’ dick is still hanging out, so I hastily tuck that back in my sweats, feeling a wave of mortification roll over me.

Fuck, I can’t believe I let that happen. What the hell was I thinking? Of course Jackson’s not attracted to me. I already knew that. But with the kissing, and the begging to jerk me off you can see how I might have gotten a little confused. I shouldn’t have, though... “*Let me take care of you...*” Yeah, same old Jackson.

“I don’t need pity kisses,” I tell him fiercely. “Or pity handjobs. Or—”

“None of that was pity,” he growls back, looking offended at the thought.

I wave a hand in the air. “Fine. *Obligation* then. Jackson to the rescue—just like always. “Let me take care of you,” I say using air quotes and a sardonic tone. “This isn’t a bully you can beat up, or an argument you can hide me from, or...food you can give me. I’m not that pathetic little kid anymore, Jackson...”

Jackson has never missed an opportunity to put my needs before his. I should have known it’d only be a matter of time before that instinct kicked in with this new turn of events.

Fuck, did he feel my hard-on and remember the half-starved little kid Steph had to make “Just in Case” sandwiches for? And I don’t mean that in a creepy “thinking about kids while touching a dick” way, it’s just...is that how desperate he thinks I am? That if he didn’t “take care of me” I’d be starving for the rest of the night?

“You were never pathetic,” he says firmly.

I glance away, shaking my head.

“Don’t dismiss me like that, Skyler,” he growls. “I told you I’ve never

lied to you and I never will. You were never pathetic, and I never did anything for you out of pity or obligation.”

I look back at him, eyeing him skeptically. “Sorry if I take that little declaration with a grain of salt given recent events.”

Even as I’m saying these words, I’m not sure I believe them. My confusion and hurt is getting the better of me right now, but deep down I know nothing Jackson has ever done for me has been out of pity, or obligation. If that were the case we would have grown out of this cycle a hell of a long time ago.

Even so, I can’t seem to keep the doubt at bay right now. I know Jackson is the one person in the world who has never judged me. He’s the one person in the world who has never asked me to be anything more or less than what I am. He’s the one person in the world who’s given me unwavering, unconditional love for three quarters of my life...

But he’s also the one person with the power to shred my heart into little pieces.

“Why? You think because I didn’t get hard just now it means I don’t love you?” he presses, jaw set in frustration.

I let out a heavy sigh, my eyes falling closed for a moment. “I know you love me, Jax. Evidently you love me so much you’re willing to kiss me and suck on my neck and rub my dick despite not being the slightest bit attracted to me.”

He stares at me for a moment, expression creased with confusion. “You already knew I wasn’t attracted to you, Sky. I don’t get why you’re so shocked and...angry right now.”

Ouch. I nod. “Wow. Thanks. I was feeling really dumb for thinking you were into that but I feel way better now.”

He grimaces. “No...that’s not—*shit.*”

I sigh and take a few more steps back, heading for the safety of my room. And, fuck, the thought that being away from Jackson is somehow safer than being with him makes me feel like my heart is being torn apart at the seams. But I need some distance right now. Because I know it’s only a matter of time before he does something to comfort me. And I’ll feel a million times better, because that’s how it always goes. And the cycle will continue.

It’s finally dawned on me that I’ve done this to myself. Not because of my naivety in thinking Jackson could possibly develop an attraction to me, or because I should have realized earlier that he had simply switched into

“Jackson to the Rescue” mode. It’s because I’ve always loved having him take care of me. I love that he puts me first. I love having someone who treats me like I’m the most important thing in the world. It makes me feel special.

I never hesitate to ask for favors. And I never refuse when he offers help.

So why the hell would he think this situation would be any different?

And, frankly, I don’t even know why it is different. It’s just that, despite Jackson’s intentions, the last thing I feel right now is special.

I take one last look at Jackson before turning for my room. Before I can take another step, however, I feel Jackson’s hard, warm body wrap around me from behind. And just like that, every ounce of agitation and frustration and despair seeps out of me and I feel my heart starting to stitch itself back together.

“No, don’t leave me again,” he says, a desperate note in his tone.

“Jax, I was just going to my room...” Which I should probably still do. I might feel safe, and warm, and treasured with his arms around me like this, but that doesn’t change the reality of the situation. This cycle needs to end.

I feel his head shake against the crook of my neck, and his warm breath on my skin sends a shiver through me. Yeah, I should really disengage ASAP. “No space,” Jackson says quietly. “Stay here with me.”

“Haven’t you ever heard the phrase ‘if you love something set it free?’”

He takes a moment to answer, his forehead rubbing against the back of my neck in a gesture that’s so familiar it makes my heart hurt.

“Do you want me to set you free?” he murmurs.

I let my eyes fall closed. I should say yes, but I can’t bring myself to do it. I’m too fucking selfish; I should be the one setting *him* free, but I just can’t—how the hell could I survive without Jackson? “No.”

“Well I wasn’t going to anyway, so that’s good.”

“But you can’t...do that again, Jackson,” I tell him. “You can’t act like you want me. I’ll get past this eventually, I’m sure of it...” Lie. I know without a doubt I’ll be in love with Jackson Downey until my dying day. “But that’s not going to help.”

“But I do want you,” he protests.

I sigh in frustration. “Jackson...”

“It might not be the way you’re used to,” he clarifies. “But I do want you, Skyler.”

What the hell does that mean? “I don’t understand...”

For a long moment, all I can hear is his soft breathing as his heart pounds

against my back and his breath heats my skin. I'm starting to give up on an answer and contemplate prying myself from his hold of my body. It's so nice and warm like this, though...his broad chest flush against my back, his large hands splayed over my chest, his forehead nuzzling into my neck. Damn it... I need to move.

But then Jackson moves his head and I feel his beard scratch my jaw as he murmurs in my ear, "You don't understand how I want you? I want your heart, Skyler. I want your soul. I want to hold you close like this and never let you go. I want to touch every inch of your skin. I want to cuddle you with my lips. And taste your heartbeat. I want to take care of you, and give you pleasure in whatever small way I can..."

I know there's a reason why I should be pushing him away and breaking free of his hold right now, but his words have left my mind in a state of blissful delirium, and the heat radiating from my body is reaching solar flare levels. As his lips start moving over my neck, and his hands wander my bare chest I start to feel like I could implode.

I tilt my head back to rest against his shoulder, giving him more room as he starts to suck on the skin over my pulse again. I'm going to have hickeys and beard burn on both sides of my neck after tonight, but I couldn't care less about that right now.

Acting purely on instinct, I tug down the front of my sweats and then grab Jackson's hand, guiding it down to wrap around my hard dick. I'm about to self-combust and I need to feel his hand on me.

I let out a loud groan as he strokes me, my hand covering his and guiding his movements. Not that he really needs it; we've jerked off in each other's company plenty of times, so I'm sure he knows what I like.

But I like touching him while he touches me. It's the same instinct that has me reaching up to rest my hand on his shorn scalp as he nuzzles into the crook of my neck.

"Jackson...shit...Jax...Jax..." His name just keeps falling from my lips amidst a series of panted breaths as I get closer and closer.

He lifts his head slightly, brushing feather-light kisses along my jaw before murmuring, "My Skyler...my beautiful Skyler."

I respond in the only logical way, lifting my head and dragging his face a little closer so I can claim his mouth for a "lip cuddle." I smile against his mouth at that thought. It's exactly the right word.

Everything is on fire now; my skin, my blood...my entire body. I tear my

mouth from Jackson's and let out a deep groan of pleasure as the inferno erupts and my cum spills over our joined hands.

I take a moment to just breathe, basking in the pleasure of the orgasm. But then the haze starts to clear from my mind, and I remember why I was hesitating earlier.

I glance down to see my hand covering Jackson's over my spent cock and feel gut-wrenching horror surge through me. I hastily shove his arm away and break free of his hold, tucking my stupid dick back into my sweats. Why the fuck do I always let that thing control me?

"Oh my god! Oh my god!" I groan in distress. "What the fuck? *What the hell, Skyler?*" I rub my knuckles over my head, as though that might somehow turn time back to the moment *before* I made Jackson touch my dick.

"Sky?" he asks, looking wary. "What's going on?"

"I *forced* you to jerk me off," I moan. "What is wrong with me?"

He shakes his head. "No...Jesus, Skyler. No, you didn't force me—I wanted to do that."

I give a doubtful snort. "Right. Because you just *love* touching other guy's cocks."

"You're not just some guy, Skyler. I promise you, I *wanted* to do that. I wanted to—"

"Take care of me," I finish for him, my mind clearing further to allow me to call back all the details of our previous conversation, along with my determination to end this fucking cycle we've been in since we were seven years old.

His lips curve up in a soft smile. "Exactly."

I let out a heavy sigh. Jackson might not see it that way, but I've still taken advantage of him—the way I always fucking do.

He steps forward, reaching for my face, but I move back farther, shaking my head. "No. I'm not letting you do it this time."

He stares at me with a mix of confusion and hurt crossing his face. "What?"

"I know you, Jackson. I know what you're like. It's your basic instinct to put me first, to give me whatever I need, even if it means sacrificing your own happiness. And I always fucking let you," I grate out, furious with myself for my own selfishness. "I let you do it because it makes me feel special, and treasured, and loved...and I'm too fucking selfish to give that

up.”

“Skyler...”

I shake my head adamantly, taking another step back. “No, Jax. Just let me be unselfish for once in my fucking life.”

I can take care of myself...right? I’m a grown-ass man; I have a law degree for fuck’s sake...which I managed to get because I had Jax pulling all-nighters to help me study, and burning his hand while making me Good Luck soup before tests, and calling in to work so he could cuddle on the sofa with me and watch movies he hated whenever I was upset about a disappointing grade...

Yeah, that sort of shit has to stop. He’s been putting my needs first no matter what it cost him since we were kids and I can’t let him do it anymore.

I can be a grown up. I can be less needy. I bet if I Googled it I can work out how to do laundry without my white clothes turning gray. And I’m sure I can figure out how to pay my phone bill.

And I can sure as fuck jerk myself off.

I’ll miss the lip cuddling, though. That was nice.

“No, wait—Sky...”

He holds his hand out to me but I take another step back, retreating closer to my bedroom. I can’t risk him wrapping me in his arms again and magically making all my concerns disappear.

“Please, Jackson,” I say, my voice pained as I stare at the tortured expression on his face. “Just let me do this. For once in my life, just let me not be that half-starved little kid desperate for love and affection.”

His face crumples further, and I see the beginning of tears glistening in his beautiful eyes. “If that’s what you need, Sky...”

I retreat into my room, closing the door and leaning back against it with a heavy sigh. It’s not lost on me that even in this he’s putting my needs first.

Same old Jackson.

Chapter Eighteen

Jackson

“I CAN’T SLEEP. HERE, PUT THESE ON.”

I have a brief moment to enjoy a feeling of blissful relief that Skyler’s first instinct when he can’t sleep is still to creep into my room and crawl into bed with me. But then I set eyes on the pair of potholders with the stuffed reindeer head sewn to each one that he’s presenting to me and the relief turns to confusion. “Huh?”

“Put them on, Jackson,” he insists, waving them in front of me.

“Why?” Despite my confusion, I sit up so I can take them from him and slide them onto my hands.

He shrugs as he climbs into the bed beside me. “Same as always. Preventative measures. ”

I let out a heavy sigh. “Sky, this isn’t necessary.”

“Are you telling me if you see me get a hard-on you won’t want to “take care of me”?” he asks, lifting his fingers to make air quotes.

“I’m not going to do anything you don’t want,” I assure him.

He frowns, glancing away. “Yeah, well, that’s the problem.”

A flicker of shame crosses his face and it breaks my heart.

Shuffling closer to where he’s lying on his back, I reach for his face with my ridiculous mitted hands and turn his head so he has to look at me. “You didn’t do anything wrong, Skyler. You didn’t force me. You didn’t take advantage of me. You weren’t selfish. You were perfect,” I tell him, sending out all the sincerity I can and hoping it finally penetrates. “What happened before was perfect. It was special. Beautiful.”

His eyes fall closed, lines of doubt still marring his face. “Jax...”

“I won’t touch you if you don’t want me to. That’s your call. But I’ll never stop taking care of you, Sky. And you’ll never be anything less than the most important thing in my entire life, no matter what you do to try to push me away. All that will accomplish is turning me into one of those creepy stalkers rom coms like to glorify.”

His eyes open and I feel my heart exploding at the hint of amusement I see in his gaze. “Where the hell are you going to find a boom box?”

I grin. “I’m sure I can track one down.”

I let go of his face and stretch my body out so we can cuddle. I let out what feels like my first breath of clean air for hours as I settle in against Skyler's body, half snuggling into his side and half splayed over his chest, my head resting against his shoulder.

I hate these fucking potholders, because I can't run my hands over his skin; but if it's what he needs to feel more comfortable, I'll gladly make the sacrifice.

"I'm not going to push you away, Jax," he assures me, wrapping his arms around me and immediately sparking that familiar, cozy glow. "I just think we need to break out of this cycle..."

He's still talking, and saying things I know are important for me to hear—if only so I can object to them and tell him he's an idiot for thinking anything needs to change—but I can't seem to get my brain to focus. I'm just so nice and warm like this, and sleepy. So sleepy...

I WAKE TO THE SENSATION OF THE MATTRESS DIPPING BEHIND ME AS someone's large body climbs onto the bed. Skyler. It takes me a moment to realize I'm in a completely different position now to the one I fell asleep in. I'm not sure if Skyler rolled me over, or I just naturally shifted—highly likely considering I always prefer to sleep on my side. But I wouldn't blame him if he gave me a nudge; it couldn't have been comfortable having nearly a hundred and eighty pounds of muscle lying on top of him.

"Where did you go?" I murmur as I feel him snuggle up against my back and wrap his arm around my torso. So familiar, and perfect, and us.

"Ah, Sleeping Beauty's awake," he says wryly. "You finally rolled off me, so I took the opportunity to use the bathroom."

"Sorry," I say a little sheepishly.

I feel his lips press a feather-light kiss against the back of my neck. "It's okay. It was nice."

"This is nice," I murmur. "I love having your arms around me. I've always loved it. Since that very first night when you snuck into my bedroom."

"I was a needy kid, desperate for affection," he murmurs. "You were kind enough to give it to me. I guess I never grew out of the neediness, did I?"

“It wasn’t kindness, Skyler. It was love. And that’s what it’s been every moment since.” I clasp his hand and move it over my heart. “Don’t you get it? I gave you my heart when we were seven years old. And you’ve kept it safe all these years. Why are you trying to give it back now?”

He’s quiet for a long time; all I can feel is his warm breath against my upper back as his forehead rubs over my neck. “I’m trying to protect it, Jax,” he says softly.

“By ignoring what it’s telling you?”

He lets out a frustrated sigh. “What it’s telling me doesn’t make sense.”

Damn it. Why does he have to be so smart, and logical? I *know* he can feel how much I love him. He’s not doubting me on that. But he just can’t seem to fathom that I could possibly feel the same way about him as he does about me; that I could want a genuine romantic relationship with him that involves dating, and marriage—and, yes...physical pleasure to some extent—after being so glaringly confronted with the reality that I’m not sexually attracted to him.

I try to put myself in his place for a moment. Really, *really* get into his mind. For the past few hours—not counting the time I was asleep, obviously—there’s been an annoying little thought niggling at my mind: if the situation were reversed, I would trust him. I’d believe him when he told me he loved me, and I wouldn’t doubt that any touch of his hands on any part of my body was sincere. But I realize now I wasn’t being fair. I was viewing the situation through my own eyes, my own thoughts, my own instincts.

But Skyler’s not me. He’s guarded, and cynical, and despite the cocky, carefree attitude he shows the outside world, he’s plagued by self-doubt and insecurity. On top of that, his relationship to sex has always been somewhat...distant. With good reason. He’s not going to see a handjob as anything more than a handjob—a simple act of sexual gratification. He’s never associated words like “beautiful,” “special,” “perfect,” or even “love” with sex; and I can’t imagine any of the guys he’s been with would have ever wanted to jerk him off for the pure satisfaction of bringing him pleasure, not expecting something in return.

Combine all that with his analytical brain and it’s no wonder he’s reaching for any rational explanation he can find to help him understand why I—a guy who has never shown interest in men before—could suddenly want to stroke his dick.

It was a mistake to get physical so soon; I can see that now. At the time I

was just so pleased to have found a way to make everything work between us. And then when he initiated things later, I was over the moon, figuring it meant everything was going to be okay. But we should have waited until things were more settled, until we'd had a chance to talk through everything and get on the right page. I was so caught up in what I wanted; I didn't stop to consider how it would impact Skyler—talk about irony...

“Do you know anything about asexuality?” I mumble.

“Uh...it's when someone doesn't have a sex drive, right?”

Before my talk with Drew and all the Googling I did today, I probably would have said something similar, so I'm not surprised at the response. I shake my head. “No. A sex drive is completely unrelated. There are gay and straight people who don't have a sex drive. Asexuals don't feel sexual attraction.”

“Isn't that—”

I know what he's about to say and I cut him off before he can finish the thought. “It's not the same thing, Sky. You go to a club, you see a hot guy, and you get turned on. I get horny and I don't give a shit who I screw as long as I can get off.”

He's quiet for a long moment, before finally asking, “What are you saying right now?”

“I'm still trying to figure it all out,” I admit. “But I think I'm ace.”

“Since when?” he asks curiously.

“Um...this morning.” It's only as the words leave my mouth that I realize how ridiculous that sounds. “I know, I know, that sounds insane. Like I said, I'm still figuring it out. I just wanted you to know.”

“What made you even think about this?”

“Drew brought it up. Then he sent me home because I kept fucking things up at the garage, so I spent the afternoon Googling,” I explain. “I didn't sleep at all last night, and my morning routine was all out of whack. I couldn't concentrate for shit today.”

Skyler rubs his forehead against my shoulder. “Sorry.”

“Just don't do it again,” I grumble.

“I still don't really understand,” he says. “If you're ace, how do you have sex? And how do you watch porn? I've seen you jerk off, and I've seen you screwing a woman—not that I meant to watch, but—”

“I know, I know. The burrito,” I say with a soft chuckle. “But it's like I said—sex drive, or libido, or whatever is irrelevant. Arousal isn't the same as

desire. I mean, for most people they go hand in hand, but not always—even for sexual people.” I try to think of an example that might be relevant to Skyler, and after a moment it comes to me. “You get morning wood, right? But you’re not having dirty dreams every morning.”

“Not that I know of,” he says wryly. “So...are you saying whenever you get hard it’s like morning wood? It just...happens?”

I rub at my face, feeling a little frustrated that I don’t have a better way to explain this. I wish I’d managed to do some more research, or maybe speak to Blair like Drew suggested before having this conversation. But that would have required me keeping a secret from Skyler, and even if it didn’t have a bearing on our current circumstance, I could never keep something this big from him. All I can do is try my best to put my experiences into words he can relate to. “Sometimes...I mean, my dick functions the same as any other guy’s, so yeah, I get morning wood and shower boners and all that kind of stuff. But sometimes I just get horny for no reason whatsoever—which I guess must happen to everyone, right?”

He lets out a soft breath of laughter. “Yep, definitely.”

“And then there are other times—like when I’m watching porn, for example—where I just respond to the sexual stimuli. It’s not the naked people on the screen that are doing it for me,” I explain. “I don’t think “fuck, that woman’s so hot, I’d love to come on those tits.” It’s just like something clicks in my brain and I get aroused. Which I guess explains the weird shit with the animal sex. And Mrs. Butterworth’s...”

Skyler lets out a soft chuckle, giving my torso a squeeze. “I told you, that stuff isn’t weird. It’s just...quaint. But if you get aroused by sexual stimuli, why didn’t you get hard earlier?” he asks curiously.

“Well, for starters...I don’t *always* get hard when there’s sexual stimuli,” I point out. “You know this. We’ve been watching porn before when I haven’t been remotely into it.”

“I just assumed it was the guys going at it that turned you off,” he murmurs.

I honestly couldn’t say what videos we were watching on the occasions when I wasn’t “feeling it” but considering everything we watch is at a minimum two guys and a girl, I can definitely see Skyler making that cynical assumption and completely forgetting all the times where I was hard while guys were going at it.

“Yeah, I don’t think so,” I tell him. “Or didn’t you notice all the times I

got off while guys were fucking on screen?”

“Yeah, but there was always a woman touching herself. Or two girls getting each other off or something,” he reasons, determined to miss my point.

“I’m pretty sure I’d have the same reaction to regular gay porn as I do to the group stuff we watch,” I say simply.

“But...you’re not attracted to men,” he says in obvious confusion.

I’m not sure whether to groan or laugh. I don’t think I can blame him for not being able to get his head around all this in one go. I’m still struggling with it myself, and while I may have only begun diving into everything today, in reality I’ve been living with this for fifteen years.

“I’m not attracted to women either,” I remind him. “Or baboons.”

He groans and rubs his forehead into my shoulder. “Fuck. I’m sorry. This is really fucking confusing.”

I sigh. “I know.”

I have to explain the rest to him if I have any hope of him understanding what’s happening inside my head, but I need to be able to look into his eyes for that part.

I shift over so I’m on my other side, still circled in his arms and with our faces inches apart from each other. “Can you promise not to get all sulky and offended at what I’m about to say?”

He pouts. “You love my sulkiness.”

“I love everything about you. But I don’t want you feeling hurt when there’s no reason to be.”

His dark brows draw together in obvious confusion. “Okay...”

I lift my hand to cup his cheek, but I’m thwarted by the stupid potholder still covering my right hand. “Fuck. Can I please take this off now?”

He considers the request. “You can have a temporary break for cuddling purposes.”

I let out an exasperated huff and yank the stupid-ass pot holder from my hand, tossing it across the room.

“Oh, be gentle with Dasher!” Skyler cries. “How is he going to help guide the sleigh if he loses his eyes?”

“I think his sleigh-guiding days ended when he lost his body in that freak accident at the potholder making factory,” I say dryly.

Skyler’s eyes widen slightly. “Do you think that really happened?”

I let out a soft chuckle and tilt my head forward to brush my lips to his.

“I like the lip cuddles,” he admits in a whisper. “I’m sorry I called them pity kisses. I know that’s not true. I know you mean them.”

I rest my hand against his cheek, running my thumb over his dark stubble. After a few more lip cuddles, I press my forehead to his, drawing in a deep breath. “I meant everything, Sky. That’s what I’m trying to tell you.”

“Jackson, it’s okay...”

I draw back a little, shaking my head. “No, just listen for a second, because I need you to understand this. The reason I didn’t get hard earlier is because it wasn’t a sexual experience for me. That’s why the primitive response in my brain or whatever it is that kicks in when I’m exposed to sexual stimuli didn’t react.”

“That’s what every guy wants to hear,” Skyler drawls in a way that tells me he’s trying really hard to keep his tone light. “That touching their dick isn’t remotely sexy.”

“When it’s the asexual who’s in love with them telling them this?” I say with a quirk of my brows. “Then, yeah, they should want to hear it.” Before he can say anything, I slide my hand back into his hair and tap my forehead to his. “I’m not sure there’s any way I can get you to understand this without somehow inceptioning you into my mind, but I’m going to try anyway. Before tonight, I would have said there is no more amazing feeling than holding you in my arms and having your arms around me. Now I know adding lips makes it better...”

He ducks his head for a brief kiss of my lips. “It does.”

I let out a breath of laughter, my fingers sliding through his thick, soft hair. “And I also know that watching the pleasure move across your face, and hearing you moan my name while I touched you gave me more satisfaction than any orgasm I’ve ever had.”

He eyes me warily. “Jackson...”

“I know you’ve convinced yourself you’re the selfish one here, but it’s the opposite,” I tell him. “I just took, and didn’t even think of how it would affect you. Because it just felt so good.”

“Jackson...no...” He rests his forehead against mine again, his hand coming up to run over my scalp. “You’re not selfish. You’re perfect.”

I give a slight shake of my head but don’t pull away. “If I were perfect I’d be able to give you everything you wanted.” I let my eyes fall closed and let out a heavy sigh. “God, you have no idea how much I wish I could give you all those things you want, Sky. All the things you need...”

“Jax...”

“I can’t give you everything you want,” I murmur. “But I can give you everything I have...and I’ll just have to hope and pray that it’s enough.”

Skyler’s quiet for a long moment, before finally murmuring, “It’s not just *enough*. It’s everything.”

He drags my mouth to his and I feel like I’m stepping into a beautiful hot bubble bath with aromatherapy candles set up all over the place and Adele playing through a Bluetooth speaker as our bodies wrap together and we lip cuddle and nuzzle against each other.

And then I hear Skyler whispering in my ear, and it’s like bright sunshine is streaming through the window, even though it’s still the wee hours of the morning. “You’ve always been everything, Jackson.”

Chapter Nineteen

Skyler

“WHERE’S THE CROCODILE,” DEACON DEMANDS AS SOON AS I JOIN HIM AT the high bar table he’s secured for our Saturday afternoon catch up.

We’re at a bar called *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot*, which is apparently owned by Tanner’s son. Deacon’s been encouraging us to come here for a while, but this is the first time I’ve managed it.

I wave Deacon off as I settle on a bar stool. “Relax, he’s right here.” Grabbing the backpack I have slung over one shoulder, I unzip it and retrieve Curtis, handing him to Deacon. “I’ve asked around, by the way, and the consensus is that he’s an alligator.”

Deacon sends me an unimpressed look. “Did you at least remember to take some pictures of him doing interesting things so I can show my class?”

“Of course!” I grin at him and tug my phone from my pocket, opening the photos app and scrolling through them to show Deacon. “Here’s Curtis making friends with Rocket. And here’s Curtis sitting in on an important business meeting. And here’s Curtis standing trial for murder.”

Deacon’s head shoots up, eyes wide. “What? Skyler, you took him to someone’s murder trial?”

I let out a soft laugh. “No, that would have been inappropriate. The court room was empty. But we can use our imagination, right? Look—here he is after he was found guilty and the bailiff is taking him away.”

Deacon sighs and swipes a hand over his face. “Well, thanks I guess. I’m not sure how many of these I can actually show the kids, but I appreciate the effort.” Then he runs his eyes over my face, scrutinizing me carefully. “You seem to be doing a hell of a lot better than the last time I saw you.”

I smile and am about to answer when an incredibly attractive young guy approaches our table.

“Hey, Deac. You guys wanting drinks?”

Deacon offers the guy a wide smile. “Hey Jazz, this is Skyler.”

Jazz turns to acknowledge me and I almost fall off my chair. I realized he was Tanner’s son the second I heard the name, but the resemblance is freaky. “Holy shit—is this what Tanner looked like before he got all sexy silver fox?” I ask Deacon.

He just shrugs. “How would I know? I didn’t know him then.”

I give Jazz another once over. Yeah, definitely hot, but not quite a match for his dad if you ask me—he doesn’t have Tanner’s piercing blue eyes. “Interesting. But no offense or anything, buddy, I think your dad’s way hotter.”

Jazz just smirks at me. “None taken, *buddy*. I think your friend’s way hotter,” he says with a nod at Deacon.

I clutch a hand to my chest, letting out a dramatic gasp. “You *lie!*”

Jazz laughs softly and hits Deacon with a questioning brow raise.

“Two whiskey sours, thanks.”

Jazz nods, the corner of his mouth quirked up. “Damon’s specialty. Good choice.”

Then he strides back to the bar and I find my gaze following after, a little intrigued.

“Do *not* go there,” Deacon says firmly.

“Huh? Go where?”

“My boyfriend’s son. It’s a no, Skyler. There are plenty of other guys you can hook up with—”

I snap my attention back to Deacon, frowning in confusion. “These words aren’t making sense right now. Why are you acting like me trying to pick that guy up is even a remote possibility?”

“Because he’s hot and queer and is only interested in casual sex—”

I hold a hand up. “Okay, if it were actually necessary for you to talk me out of this, you’d be failing epically right now. Fortunately for you, I’m not interested.”

“Because he’s not as hot as Tanner?” Deacon asks with an eye roll.

“Because he’s not Jackson,” I say shortly, starting to get a little irritable. I’m not sure why this is a thing; did I just imagine the events of last Sunday morning?

The confusion flickering over Deacon’s features is almost comical. “But...I thought...”

“What? That Jackson rejected me so I would just start catting around again?”

He shrugs and averts his gaze.

“I told you on Sunday—you can’t *unsee* something. The blindfold’s off now, and there’s no putting it back on. The mere thought of being with another guy just feels completely wrong to me. Besides, pretty sure Jazz is

spoken for,” I add with another glance toward the bar, where the younger man is currently engaged in conversation with a superhot bartender. The sexual energy surrounding them is so blatant they may as well be standing under a flashing neon sign that says “WE’RE BANGING!”

Deacon’s brows shoot up in obvious skepticism. “What? No he’s not. He’s even more of a commitment-phobe than you are. No way in hell is he in a relationship.”

I shrug. “If you say so. But for the record, I am *not* a commitment-phobe—I’m a hundred per cent committed to Jackson. That’s my future.”

Concern fills Deacon’s gaze. “But Jackson doesn’t...I mean...that could be a lonely life, Sky.”

I shake my head. “No it won’t be. I thought the way I felt about him was going to destroy everything we have. But what we have can’t be destroyed. We’re symbiotic beings. We need each other. So I can guarantee the word “lonely” won’t be in my future, because I’ll always have Jackson,” I say confidently. I know the situation isn’t exactly *ideal*, and I certainly didn’t handle everything brilliantly earlier in the week, but over the past few days as Jackson and I have explored this new aspect of our relationship further, and as I’ve learned more about asexuality a lot of my initial doubts have eased and I can now look forward to building a future—in whatever form it might take—with the person I’ve loved most in the world for two decades.

Deacon arches an eyebrow. “What you’re describing is co-dependence.”

I shrug. “Symbiosis sounds nicer.”

Deacon lets out a wry huff, shaking his head. “Okay, but, what about... you know...”

I quirk a brow at him. “Is this you clumsily trying to avoid calling me a sex addict again?”

He winces. “To be fair, I never called you one the first time.”

I shrug half-heartedly. “Whatever. I know it’s what everyone thinks, and it’s fine. I haven’t exactly provided much evidence to the contrary. But, honestly, all the screwing around—that started out as...kind of a security blanket, I guess you could call it, when I went off to college without Jackson there.” At Deacon’s puzzled expression, I explain, “It’s never really been about the sex. That was a fun bonus, but what I was actually looking for from those guys was...validation.” I avert my gaze to the surface of the table, watching my forefinger trace a small figure eight as shame prompts heat to rise in my cheeks. “Yeah, I know how pathetic that is. I wasn’t aware I was

doing it at first, and then after a while it became kind of addictive. And I didn't really see any harm in it, so..." I shrug, and then lift my gaze to meet Deacon's. "But no matter how much of a rush I got from all those guys praising me and desiring me and all that, it absolutely paled compared to the feeling of Jackson's arms around me, or his hands in my hair, or the sight of his face lighting up when he sees me. So that's how I know I don't need any of that shit anymore. I never really did in the first place, I was just...filling a void I guess."

Deacon's features take on a look of concern. "Okay, I think I get that. But, Sky...I feel like I'm missing a whole heap of information here. You're talking as though Jackson's the only person to ever cater to your emotional needs."

I nod. "He is. Well, him and Steph, I guess. But it's different."

"What about your parents? Your family?" Deacon presses.

"Jackson and Steph *are* my family."

Deacon hits me with a probing look that tells me I'm not getting off the hook this time.

Fortunately, a server approaches our table at that moment and sets our drinks down. If I have to tell this story, I'll definitely be needing a drink.

I bring my drink to my lips and take a sip, nodding in approval when I taste it. "Good choice. You know, there's a bar in Williamsburg that—"

"We were talking about your parents," Deacon prods.

I scoff. "No, we were fucking not. I never talk about them so that's something I can guarantee."

Deacon's face goes ashen, his eyes widening. "Fuck, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bring up bad memories for you. I didn't know—"

I groan, tossing my head back. "Fuck. Now I'll have to tell you, otherwise you'll let your imagination run wild and assume I'm one of the Turpin kids."

"Well, there were a lot of them," Deacon offers with the slight quirk of one brow.

I give a wry shake of my head and take a sip of my drink. "Okay, how about this? Let's make it a happy story but with a bit of fucked up shit thrown in," I suggest.

Deacon nods, offering a soft smile. "It's your story, Sky. Tell it however you want."

"You were asking last week how Jackson and I met," I begin. "We were seven, and he and Steph moved into the single wide next to us in the Fuck

Hole trailer park, Shitville, Pennsylvania.”

Deacon’s eyes widen with obvious surprise before narrowing doubtfully. “I’m going to assume those aren’t the actual names for the places.”

Okay, I know a lot of trailer parks—or manufactured home communities, or whatever else they’re called now—aren’t horrible places to live. And some of them are actually really nice—like where Steph is now, in Lehigh Valley. It’s right on a pretty lake, with lots of greenery around, and playgrounds, and a basketball court, and everyone is really friendly. And Steph’s house might be portable, but it’s as big as our apartment, and way nicer. I would have loved to be somewhere like that instead of the shithole I spent my childhood; although considering my family barely had two pennies to rub together, Steph’s place would have been about as conceivable as a mansion on Park Avenue.

I give a dismissive wave. “You don’t need to know the names. There’s no amount of money that’d make you want to go there.” Considering he’s dating a billionaire, there’s probably no amount of money that’d make Deacon do anything, but whatever.

His brows shoot up curiously. “It was that bad?”

I sigh. “I’ve probably built it up over the years to be way worse than it was, but it was a shithole, let’s leave it at that. And my folks were...not great,” I add with a grimace. “They weren’t violent, or into illegal shit or anything, but it was clear from a very early age that I wasn’t wanted. If I was in sight, I was a verbal punching bag—the reason everything was going wrong—and if I was out of sight, I was out of mind. Even if I was still in the same room. One of my earliest memories is from when I was, like, three or four or something, sitting on the kitchen floor eating potato peelings out of the trash while my parents screamed at each other about...whatever the hell the problem was that week, and then...made up....vigorously.”

“Jesus, fuck, Sky...” Deacon swipes a hand over his face, eyes swimming with a mix of anger, regret, shock, and sympathy.

I shrug. “Whatever. The important thing is Jackson and Steph moved in next to us when I was seven. That was my Big Bang moment.”

Deacon’s brows draw together. “Big Bang moment?”

“The cataclysmic event that created my universe,” I explain, although it should have been obvious. “Do you think I’d be sitting here now, *who* am now if that hadn’t happened?”

He studies me with a thoughtful expression for a moment, then asks. “So

how long did it take you and Jax to become you and Jax?”

“About five hours.”

Deacon lets out a soft laugh. “Love at first sight?”

I smile softly, vividly recalling that moment I first saw Jackson over twenty years ago, clinging nervously to Steph’s side while she smiled and introduced herself and Jackson to me when they came across me crawling around on the ground outside our trailer, chasing after a lizard. She’d just suggested Jackson might want to look at the lizard too when my dad came out and scared the shit out of all three of us, demanding to know who the fuck Steph was. By the time everything got cleared up, neither Jackson nor I were in a lizard-hunting mood, and the last thing I heard as I slunk back inside was Steph telling Jackson it was almost time for bed anyway, and did he want to read about Ramona or Jack and Annie? I’d read *Magic Treehouse*, but I had no idea who Ramona was and the curiosity ate me alive. I also remember feeling a visceral, bone-deep envy toward Jackson in that moment. I’m not sure if I’ve ever been more jealous of anyone in my life than I was hearing Steph talk about reading with him.

“More like love at first cuddle,” I say, letting out a wry breath of laughter at Deacon’s wide-eyed confusion. I tell him all about my first interaction with Jax, then add, “A couple hours later, my parents got into it again in the living room. And I knew it was only a matter of time before...things got *resolved*,” I tell him, screwing my face up. “That was the cycle: fight, sex, some modicum of peace until the next fight. So I knew once they started arguing I wouldn’t be getting out of my room for ages, and there’d be no chance of dinner—not that there was ever anything much anyway. And I’d have to lie there and try to go to sleep, trying not to hear them yelling at each other about shit like birth control and abortions and not needing another brat while they fucked on the kitchen counter. And all I could think about was the boy I’d met earlier and his nice mom who read books with him. And for one night I just wanted that life.”

Deacon groans, carding a hand roughly through his hair. “Fucking hell, Sky.”

My gut clenches at Deacon’s obvious distress. Fuck, I hate talking about this shit. And knowing Deacon, he’s going to want *all* the details. “It probably sounds a lot worse than it was, hearing it all at once.”

He sends me a skeptical look. “I doubt that. I think it’s more likely you’re toning shit down to protect my poor, sheltered mind with all its unicorns and

rainbows dancing around.”

“Dancing rainbows sound fun,” I say with a smirk.

“Come on, finish the story,” he prods, gently nudging my ankle with the toe of his boot.

I sigh. “Fine. Like I said, they were next door to us, and Jackson’s bedroom was right opposite mine. I’d been a total creeper earlier and watched Steph reading to him—I was so fucking jealous—so I knew his bed was right next to the window. And my dad’s truck was parked in the space between the trailers, so it was pretty easy to slip out of my window, scamper across the roof of the truck, and then knock on Jackson’s window.” I give a wry shake of my head. “I remember being so scared of my dad catching me on that truck... But obviously, he was occupied elsewhere, and once I was in Jackson’s room I was fine.”

“So, he just opened the window and let you into his room, no questions asked?”

I smile. “Well, questions weren’t really necessary because when he opened the window I said something along the lines of, “Hi, I’m Skyler. I climbed out my window because my parents are fighting and then they’re going to have sex and I don’t want to listen. Also is Ramona from a book? Because I like books.””

Deacon lets out a rumbling chuckle. “Not exactly the smooth-talker I met in freshman year.”

I let out a breath of laughter. “Understatement. Although I don’t think Jackson would have let the smooth-talking guy from college in.”

Deacon arches an eyebrow. “I would hope eighteen-year-old you wouldn’t be knocking on children’s bedroom windows...”

I roll my eyes. “Funny.”

“But obviously Jackson did let you in,” he prompts.

I nod. “He said I could hang out in his room, but it was after bedtime so we had to sleep. I didn’t even know what a “bedtime” was. I knew to make myself scarce of an evening, but it’s not like my parents would have cared, or even noticed if I’d stayed up all night in my room, or even if I crept out to watch TV at three in the morning as long as I didn’t wake them.”

“They sound amazing,” Deacon deadpans.

I shrug. “They were assholes who never gave a shit about me. Steph’s my real parent. She saved me.”

Deacon is eyeing me with a mix of curiosity and concern, but before he

can another question out, my attention is stolen by a figure striding towards our table through the crowded bar.

I feel myself light up at Jackson's approach. Everything's going to be okay now. Everything's always better when Jackson's here.

Chapter Twenty

Jackson

MY INSIDES LIGHT UP WHEN I SEE THE WAY SKYLER IS SMILING AT ME AS I approach the table he's currently sharing with Deacon.

This week has been...amazing. There's not really any other word for it. I don't think Skyler has been able to chase those niggling doubts from his head completely—he wouldn't be Skyler if he wasn't taking his time to assess the situation from every possible angle. But he's decided to put his faith and trust in me despite those lingering fears, and I've been walking on a cloud ever since.

And seeing that beautiful smile directed at me now It's impossible not to burn with happiness.

As I reach the table, Skyler slides off his stool and throws his arms around me, clinging tight as he nuzzles his head into my neck. I instinctively return the embrace, pulling him closer against me and running a hand through his hair.

“Not that I'm complaining, but is everything okay?” Sometimes Skyler just wants a cuddle, but sometimes it's more than that. And although our friends are pretty used to this kind of thing, it's not something we generally do when we're out at bars. But I guess Skyler doesn't need to worry about sending out single vibes now, does he? Because he's not. *We're* not.

I have a split second to contemplate that reality before Deacon answers my question. “He was telling me how you guys met.”

My eyes widen in shock. “He *was*?”

Skyler lifts his head and loosens his hold on me, claiming a little space. “I'm right here. You don't have to third person me,” he says with a scowl.

I stroke his hair and press a kiss to his forehead before lowering my hands to rest at his waist. “I missed you today.”

He continues to pout for a moment, and then his face rearranges into a soft smile. “Same.” Moving in closer again, he nuzzles his temple against mine. “I always miss you.”

I hold him close for a moment, ignoring Deacon's look of concern as I wait patiently for Skyler to gather himself.

Finally, he pulls away again, drawing in a breath as he casts his eyes

around our vicinity. I guess there must be a couple people watching because a faint blush touches Skyler's cheeks. He quickly adopts a neutral expression, shedding most of the vulnerability that had formed his expression only a moment ago. There's still a hint there in his eyes, though.

"I'm going to the bar," he announces. "Want something?"

I shrug. "Beer's good."

Skyler smiles and places a kiss to my cheek before slipping past me and moving toward the direction of the bar.

"Um, I'd like a beer, too, please," Deacon calls after him, waving his almost-empty glass in the air. "Thanks for asking."

I let out a wry chuckle and take Skyler's vacated stool at the tall table.

"What did Sky mean when he said your mom saved his life?" Deacon asks, brows knitted together in obvious concern.

"How much did he tell you?" I ask curiously. I'm surprised he told Deacon anything at all, to be honest. They've been friends for ten years and Skyler's never opened up about his childhood. I wonder what could have prompted it now?

"He got to the part about sneaking in your window only a few hours after you'd met," Deacon says with a wry smile. The expression slips into a scowl as he adds, "That was after he told me all about his *lovely* parents."

My jaw hardens and my fists clench as the visceral anger I always feel at the thought of those assholes shoot through me. "I'm sure whatever he told you was a watered-down version."

"I thought that, too," Deacon says with a sigh. "The key takeaways I got were that they resented his existence and ignored him most of the time, and there was a lot of arguing and make up sex."

I shake my head. "Not make up sex. It was more like hate sex. I swear, it was like screaming at each other was their kink," I tell him, my face screwed up in disgust. "And I don't give a shit what two consenting adults want to do together. If arguing and insulting each other does it for you, that's your deal—but don't fucking do it in front of kids," I growl. "You wonder why Skyler's always been so cynical about sex and intimacy going together—well, now you know why."

Deacon nods solemnly. "Yeah. There's a lot that makes more sense now."

Skyler returns from the bar with our drinks and I'm half-expecting Deacon to hurriedly change the subject, but he doesn't. "Wasn't Steph mad—or at least a little freaked out—when she found a strange child in your

bedroom?” he asks me.

I shake my head, my lips curving in a wry smile. “No. She thought it was cute.”

“How could she not?” Skyler says, ignoring the stool Deacon pulls up for him and instead coming to stand by me, his hand resting on my thigh. “I was every bit as adorable then as I am now.”

I let out a soft laugh and lean over to kiss his hair. Clearly, he’s used the brief sojourn to the bar to step back into the cocky, carefree skin he wears most of the time.

“You didn’t answer my question,” Deacon prompts me. “How did your mom save Skyler’s life?”

Skyler smiles, placing a hand over her heart. “By being an angel sent from heaven.”

“Yeah, that’s Mom,” I say dryly. “Super angelic.”

At Deacon’s expectant look, Skyler shrugs. “I already told you, she was like a real parent. She was a young, single mom with barely any money, but she still managed to make lunches for me, and get me books. She took me to the hospital the first time I had an anaphylactic reaction—”

“Worst fucking day of my life,” I mutter, shaking my head.

“I don’t really remember it,” Skyler muses.

I roll my eyes. “Because you were unconscious.”

He shrugs. “Yeah, well, I didn’t die, which is something I’m sure the men of New York were thrilled about...”

“Ahem,” I interrupt pointedly, sending him an unimpressed look.

His expression is all innocent. “I used the past tense.”

I roll my eyes, but it’s impossible to hold onto a scowl in the face of Skyler’s smile.

He leans toward me. “Can I have a lip cuddle?”

“You don’t need to ask every time, Sky,” I assure him, reaching for his face and drawing his lips to mine.

“Yeah, I’m really confused right now—are you guys together or not?” Deacon asks, interrupting us.

We break apart and turn to Deacon, both of us speaking at the same time. “Yes.”

Apparently this answer doesn’t clear anything up for him, because his expression is still one of utter bafflement. “But...I just...”

“We’re still ironing out some wrinkles,” I explain.

Deacon's brows creep up. "Because Jackson's straight?"

I turn to Skyler, arching an eyebrow in question. "You didn't tell him?"

He shrugs. "It's your thing. You should decide who to tell and when."

I offer a soft smile and lean over to kiss him on the cheek. Then I turn back to Deacon. "Because Jackson's ace."

He tosses his head back with a groan. "Ah, man. Now I owe Drew twenty bucks."

My brows shoot up. "You guys were betting on my sexual orientation?"

"More like Drew had a theory and I was skeptical about it," Deacon clarifies.

"Don't worry, Deac, you won't have to pay him a cent," Skyler says, his features arranged in a determined look. "The bet became invalid the moment Drew influenced the outcome by suggesting to Jackson that he might be ace."

I smile up at Skyler. "You're such a good lawyer."

Deacon nods, his brows arching slightly. "I have to say...I was always pretty impressed with your achievements, Sky. But knowing what I know now..."

Skyler lets out a dramatic sigh and slides a hand through his hair. "Yeah, I am pretty amazing. I think I want Zac Efron to play me in the movie."

Deacon catches my eye, offering a look of wry exasperation, but I just smile and shrug. Did he really expect Skyler would stop being Skyler after one conversation?

"Fucking hell, *fine*," Skyler grumbles, obviously catching Deacon's frustration. "You get the next hour to ask anything you want and then that's it, this shit is never coming up again—got it? So what else do you want to know?"

"Sky, we don't have to," I tell him, reaching my hand up to rub over his back.

He shakes his head. "Let's just get it over with."

I sigh and nod in agreement, retrieving my phone from my pocket and setting the time. Glancing up, I hit Deacon with a stern look. "One hour, then Skyler doesn't ever have to talk about this again."

Deacon eyes me curiously for a moment and I answer his unspoken question with a slight bob of my head. He can talk to me privately if he needs. Everything he thought he knew about his best friend is suddenly shifting, so I can understand if he might need some help getting his head around all this once this no holds barred hour is up.

Deacon lets out a fortifying breath and glances at Skyler. “I can ask anything?”

“You want to know how bad it was,” Skyler says flatly.

Deacon winces, biting his lip in hesitation. It’s obvious that’s exactly what he wanted to ask. “Only if you’re okay telling me,” he says. “Can we make that a rule? You said I can ask anything, but you don’t have to answer everything.”

Skyler shrugs. “Sure, whatever.” He pauses for a moment to take a sip of his drink, and I feel his free hand squeezing my thigh a little tighter. “Look, I already told you before it wasn’t *that* bad. Not as bad as you might be imagining, at least—there wasn’t any physical or sexual abuse—”

“Or any food,” I cut in, my jaw tight with anger at the incredibly low bar Skyler’s using to define his home life as “not that bad.”

He slides me a plaintive glance. “There was food.”

“Not every day,” I counter. “Not every meal.”

“More than a lot of people,” Skyler reasons, making my frustration grow.

Deacon arches an eyebrow in obvious skepticism. “Potato peelings?”

Skyler sighs and takes another sip of his drink. “I had the necessities.”

I scoff. “Barely.”

“*Jackson.*” Skyler hits me with an exasperated look, not appreciating my commentary.

I sigh and slide my hand over his, giving it a squeeze. “Sorry, I’ll zip it.”

“Look, I’m not trying to defend my parents—they were assholes who got accidentally pregnant, decided not to have an abortion, and then made no effort to hide just how much they regretted that particular decision while I was growing up. They preferred to pretend I didn’t exist, and when they were forced to deal with me for whatever reason they didn’t hesitate to remind me what a pain in the ass I was. In legal terms it would be called emotional neglect.” He pauses for a moment to take another sip of his drink before continuing, “But that was the extent of it. I mean, yeah, food was... unpredictable, but it wasn’t as though they were hoarding it all for themselves and making me go without, it was because there just wasn’t money for groceries that week.”

“What about...you know, food stamps and stuff?” Deacon asks.

Skyler’s head tilts in my direction, his mouth tugging up at the corners as wry nostalgia flickers in his eyes. “Steph was the expert on SNAP. They have these classes about making the most of your food budget and Steph went to

all of them—multiple times. Then she used the food stamps for things like growing vegetables, baking her own bread, and making jams. I swear, she could write a book full of all her tips and tricks—it'd probably be pretty popular these days as well,” he adds thoughtfully.

I nod in agreement. “She does love when she can use the words “budget” and “stretch” in the same sentence.”

Deacon lets out a soft huff of amusement before turning a more serious expression on Skyler. “But I’m guessing your folks weren’t quite so... innovative?”

Skyler nods regretfully. “You would be right.” He draws in a breath and lets it out in a loud puff. “Look, the thing you need to get is that they don’t make it easy for people to get assistance—of any kind. Whether it’s food assistance or healthcare or disability...whatever it might be, you’re going to have to go through hoop after hoop, and it can take months—or sometimes *years*—before you see any of the benefit. And when you’re struggling just to keep a roof over your head and pay final notice bills and shit like that, taking the time to fill out a bunch of forms and get all your documents together and go for government interviews just really doesn’t seem worth it.”

Deacon’s brow furrows. “You sound like you’re...I don’t know...letting them off the hook?”

I send Deacon a sharp look because I don’t like the hint of judgement in that question. But Skyler just scoffs. “Deacon, what I just said then was completely generic and could apply to thousands of people—probably more. Do you know how many people I met during my internship at Legal Aid in those exact circumstances? Although a lot of them actually had it worse, because there was often spousal abuse involved.”

Deacon’s brows shoot up. “Isn’t...um...that stuff you told me earlier considered spousal abuse?”

Skyler’s forehead creases. “You mean the angry sex?” He shrugs, grimacing slightly in obvious discomfort. “Well, it definitely wasn’t healthy, and it sure as hell didn’t foster a safe, positive environment for a child to grow up in. But no, I wouldn’t call it abuse. I certainly never interpreted it that way.” He huffs out a sigh and takes another drink. “I unfortunately bore witness to *far* too many examples of this behavior growing up, and as far as I could tell it was all consensual and there was no obvious power imbalance. They were just assholes who got off at screaming at each other.”

“Have you seen them—”

“Fuck, no,” Skyler declares before Deacon even has the full sentence out. “I haven’t seen or spoken to either of them since I left that shithole the day after high school graduation.”

“So...when we first met in freshman year and you told me you’d just spent the whole summer working at a Mexican restaurant...was that true?”

Skyler chuckles. “Hell, yeah. Three months of bussing tables—”

“—and singing happy birthday,” I add with a grin.

“Only because I was the only staff member who could pull off a glittery pink sombrero,” he says with a carefree wave.

“Please tell me you have pictures,” Deacon says with a grin.

I let out a soft laugh. “I think I might have a video somewhere. Or Drew might. He had his birthday about four times that summer.”

Skyler’s eyes light up. “Ooh, forget about the video of me, get some of Drew! That was back in his college swimming days when he was all super-ripped and didn’t have any tattoos or piercings.” Skyler’s expression turns wistful. “It’s a shame he didn’t know he was gay back then, we could have had some fun.”

“Ah-hem.”

At my pointed cough, Skyler flashes me a teasing grin. “You’re adorable when you’re pretending to be jealous.”

I quirk a brow at him. “I’m pretending?”

Lifting a hand to run gently over my scalp, he leans in to murmur in my ear, “Uh huh. I know you’re not actually jealous because you know I wasn’t remotely serious.” He presses a soft kiss to my ear and adds, “We both know I’m yours forever, babe.”

A slow smile spreads over my face as a familiar warm glow fills me from the inside out. Okay, maybe I was posturing a little for Deacon’s benefit. But Skyler’s right; it’s not necessary—even with some kinks still left to figure out, we both know where we stand in this.

I check the timer on my phone and glance up at Deacon, who’s watching us with a fond smile. “Fifteen minutes left. Anything else you want to know?”

Deacon’s expression morphs into a hesitant frown as he nods. “Yeah, just one more. You said that Steph was like your real parent?” he asks Skyler, who nods. “But I don’t get...” he sighs, shaking his head. “Look, I get you’re point that it wasn’t as bad as what some kids go through, but you were still seriously neglected. So why didn’t Steph ever contact CPS?”

Skyler bites down on his jaw, an obvious sign of frustration. When he speaks, however, his tone is calm and his expression neutral. “I don’t know the exact reasons, but I’m grateful she didn’t. I have no other family so if it came to removal I’d have ended up in the system. I’d have been separated from Jax, and unfortunately there are some not so great foster parents out there, so I could have simply been leaving one bad situation and entering another, except I wouldn’t have had Jackson and Steph. But, honestly, removal would have been incredibly unlikely. Like I said before—there was no physical or sexual abuse, and while they weren’t creating the healthiest of environments, they weren’t involved in anything illegal or dangerous. And they were providing for my basic needs—“

“—barely,” I cut in with a harsh scoff.

Skyler sends me another of those looks telling me to let him handle this. “I said *basic*,” he reiterates. “I was sent to school, I was kept clean, I was taken to the doctors for checkups. It was the bare minimum, but it was enough that no judge could have looked at me and seen a child in desperate need of removal from an unsafe situation.”

“But...you didn’t have food...” Deacon persists, his expression bordering on tormented.

Skyler lets out a heavy breath, running a hand through his hair. “Deacon, if they removed kids from every family that had to toss a coin between rent and food they’d need to build orphanages all over the country.”

Deacon leans back a little, running a hand over his mouth as his eyes fill with dismay. I’m not sure if it’s about this new perception he now has of Skyler, or the general realization of how sheltered his life has been, but clearly the conversation has had a profound effect.

“Two minutes,” I tell him, checking my phone again. “Anything else you want to ask?”

Deacon shakes his head. “No, I’m good. Just...” he looks up at Skyler, a concerned frown marring his face. “Sky, I’m just going to say this once and I swear I’ll never bring it up again. I think you should talk to someone about all this. A therapist, I mean. Because you know this is still affecting you, right? I just think that might be helpful...”

Rather than answering, Skyler peers over at my phone and watches the last few seconds of the timer run down. When the alarm goes off he glances up and Deacon, offering a broad smile. “Time’s up!”

Chapter Twenty-One

Jackson

“MORNING, JAX,” SKYLER SAYS BRIGHTLY WHEN I EMERGE FROM THE bathroom after my shower to find him standing at the counter sipping at his coffee as though that’s a perfectly normal thing to do.

“What the hell are you doing over there?” I grumble, feeling incredibly put out that my morning routine has been thrown out of whack for the second Monday in a row.

He shrugs. “Drinking coffee. Yours is sitting here. It should be the right temperature now.”

“I meant, why are you drinking your coffee out here?” I ask. “Why didn’t you come into the bathroom?”

“I...thought maybe you’d want some privacy?”

My eyes widen and I throw my hands out in an expansive gesture. “Why the hell would you think that?”

He lifts a hand to rub the back of his hair. “I just read something about... you know...boundaries being important. I thought, maybe—”

I let out a soft groan, rubbing a hand over my face. “This is an ace thing, isn’t it?”

“Well...I just...”

I smile softly and stride over to him, bringing my hands up to cup his face. “I love that you’re thinking about this kind of stuff, but it’s not necessary. We’ve never had boundaries before—we don’t need them now.”

“But you’re ace now,” he persists.

I offer a wry smile. “I’ve always been ace, Sky. It’s just now I know I am.” I lean in for a brief lip cuddle. “I don’t want boundaries Skyler. I’ve never liked being apart from you before and I sure as hell don’t want to start it now.” Drawing away a little, I catch his gaze, arching an eyebrow pointedly. “I would have thought spending every night over the past week naked in bed together would have been a pretty clear sign of how comfortable I am with you...”

He nods, offering a soft smile. “Fair.” Then a hint of anxiety brushes over his face, causing his forehead to crease. “I just...don’t want you to ever feel like I’m pushing you.”

“And I don’t want you to feel like I’m holding you back,” I say frankly. “But more importantly, I don’t want to feel like you’re *stepping* back. Anything that was okay before is okay now. Got it?”

The corners of his lips curve up. “So what you’re saying is it’s still perfectly fine for me to hang in the bathroom while you’re showering?”

“Of course it is. Hell, it’d be perfectly fine if you got in the shower with me,” I say with a shrug.

Skyler’s brows shoot up. “*With* you?”

I nod. “I bet shower cuddling would be really nice. With the hot water, and getting all sudsy.” I close my eyes for a moment and let out soft sigh of contentment as I imagine Skyler’s soapy hands running over my wet body. “I bet your hands would feel really nice running over my body like that...like a soapy massage.”

“Jesus Christ, Jackson,” Skyler groans. “Fuck, I just remembered the other reason I thought it’d be better to let you shower alone.”

My brows draw together in confusion for a moment, but then I catch a glimpse of the erection tenting his PJs and comprehension dawns. “You’ve been fine the last few mornings though...”

“No, I have not,” Skyler grates out, glancing away.

“Why didn’t you tell me? I would have helped.”

He lets out a sigh. “Jackson...”

I lean in and press my lips to his, quashing whatever doubt he was about to express. Despite the last week spent in bed together, with our naked bodies entwined and Skyler’s desperate groans vibrating against my lips as I brought him pleasure, he still seems to be oddly self-conscious about his reaction to me in the light of day.

I don’t think it’s because of my inability to return his sexual attraction—he’s been researching stuff on asexuality lately and seems to have gotten a pretty good understanding of it, even if it has led to some more cautious behavior than I’d like—I think it’s more to do with this attraction still being new to him. It’s been far easier for him to express his love—by words or gesture—and I’m sure that’s because we’ve loved each other for decades. How we love each other might have adjusted slightly, but the emotion is the most familiar feeling in the world.

Even though I can’t reciprocate, I want Skyler to know he doesn’t need to be self-conscious of his desire. Ever. I don’t want him hiding from me or denying himself pleasure.

Thankfully, the second our lips touch, his hesitation vanishes, his arms coming up to wrap around my body and draw me closer against him.

I sigh as our bare chests meet; the feel of our bodies pressed together while Skyler's hands slowly roam my back is like warm sunshine all around me.

I slide my hand down to his waist, delving inside his pajama pants and wrapping it around his hard cock. He lets out a soft groan at my touch and I feel a familiar rush of satisfaction swooping through me.

I'm getting ridiculously addicted to this feeling. The rush I get from bringing Skyler pleasure is intoxicating. Anyone would think *I* were the one getting off. I'm sure it has something to do with endorphins and dopamine or something like that; the mental and emotional payoff from being able to fulfill that primal instinct of providing for the man I love. I can't give Skyler everything he needs, but I can give him this.

"Fuck...*Jackson*," Skyler groans, burying his head in my neck as he slowly ruts into my hand. "*Jax*..."

I can't imagine ever getting tired of hearing my name fall from his lips over and over while I'm pleasuring him.

My towel slips from around my waist, but I don't care. I've never been self-conscious around Skyler before and I'm not about to start now.

"Is this okay?" he murmurs through a panted breath as his hands slide tentatively down past my lower back to land on my ass.

"It's fine," I assure him, adding, "That feels nice," as he starts running his large hands over my ass cheeks in a gentle massage.

"You have such a beautiful body, Jackson," he murmurs.

"So do you," I tell him. "I want to kiss every inch of it."

"I'm sure not *every* inch," he says in a soft, wry tone.

"Every inch," I insist.

To prove my point, I start kissing my way down his neck, then lowering my head so I can move farther down. And then I get to my knees.

"Jesus, Jackson—what are you doing?" Skyler demands, sounding alarmed.

"Kissing every inch of you."

"Uh...I don't...really think we have time for that..."

"I'll just start with this part then," I tell him. Then I take his cock in hand again and duck my head, pressing a soft lip cuddle to the tip.

"Jesusfuckingchrist," Skyler hisses out, reaching forward to rest his hands

on my head.

I continue pressing kisses down his cock while running my hand slowly over the length and nuzzling gently into his groin. Even now this doesn't feel particularly sexual to me; I'm just getting to know Skyler in a new way—exploring his body, tasting his skin, breathing his scent. But, of course, for Skyler it's a different story.

“Fuck, Jackson—are you trying to kill me?” he groans.

My cheeks flame and I send him a sheepish look as I draw back a little. “Sorry.” I was so caught up in my exploration I didn't stop to think how frustrating my little kisses and touches must be.

Skyler runs a gentle hand down my cheek, his eyes a mix of desperate heat and unwavering love. “Don't apologize. You can explore all you want when we've got more time,” he adds with a soft smile. Then he shifts his gaze from me to his throbbing dick. “You want me to finish off?”

I scowl in confusion. “Why the hell would I want that?”

Before he has a chance to answer, I close my mouth over his cock, sliding my tongue around the head.

“*Fuck,*” Skyler groans, his hands resting on my scalp again, fingers grazing softly in that way that always makes me shiver.

I feel his cock pulsing in my mouth and can't help groaning in response. One of my favorite discoveries from the past week has been the heady feeling I get from pressing my lips to the pulse points in Skyler's neck. It's as though I can actually taste his heartbeat. His life force. Right there under my lips. And right now that's being magnified about ten-fold.

Remembering I'm supposed to be getting Skyler off right now, instead of just sitting here transfixed by the pulse of his blood, I start swirling my tongue again, taking him a little deeper inside my mouth as I add some suction. I doubt it's remotely close to the best blowjob Skyler's ever had, but he seems to be enjoying it.

And I am too. I love the way he's touching me—the fingers of one hand grazing over my scalp, while he gently strokes my cheek with his other hand—as though this is just another kind of cuddling. Which I guess it is. And I love the way he keeps murmuring my name like a prayer.

“*Jax...Jackson...you need to stop now. I'm about to come...*”

I give a slight shake of my head and continue sucking and licking, although I do move one of my hands from his hip so I can give his balls a little cuddle.

“Jesus, fuck—Jackson,” he groans... “You need to—”

I shake my head again. I’ve never had a problem with his cum before, I’m not sure why he would think it would be an issue now.

“*Fuck*,” he groans again, this time sounding as though the word has been dragged from the bottom of his throat. His body tenses up for a moment, and then warm, salty cum is filling my mouth.

My eyes fall closed and I take a long moment to savor the taste of my Skyler before finally swallowing and letting his cock fall from my mouth.

I get to my feet and pull Skyler into my arms, pressing my lips to his.

“You...swallowed,” he murmurs, completely stunned.

“Of course I swallowed.”

“But...”

I quirk a brow at him. “Sky, I’ve been sleeping covered in your cum for all week—why would this be different?”

His eyes widen in shock. “You don’t clean off?”

My brows creep up a little in surprise. I didn’t realize he wasn’t aware of this, but considering he’s generally dead to the world straight after he comes I guess it’s understandable.

I shrug. “I don’t need to. I like having your cum on me.”

“You...like it?” he asks skeptically. “Gross, sticky—”

“Skyler,” I cut him off in a sharp tone, issuing him with a look I’m hoping will penetrate that usually very intelligent head of his. “I love you. And there is nothing about any part of you that grosses me out. Least of all your cum. It doesn’t...turn me on,” I clarify. “But I like it. And...” I glance away, blushing at what I’m about to admit. “I like the thought of going to work today with the taste of you in my mouth.”

“Jesus Christ, Jackson—you want me to get hard all over again?” Skyler groans, running a hand over his face.

I let out a soft breath of laughter. “My bad.” My eyes stray to the coffee sitting on the kitchen counter, which I’m sure has well and truly gone cold by now. I don’t think Skyler will have time to make me a new one, so I’ll just have to stop by somewhere on the way to work. It won’t be as good, but it’ll get me through the morning. “It’s getting late, we’d better get a move on.”

I turn in the direction of my room, and that’s when I notice Rocket sitting on the back of the couch, staring avidly at Skyler and me. “How the fuck long have you been sitting there, cat?” I growl. “Get a good show?”

Behind me, I hear Skyler let out a chuckle, then his hands come to rest

gently on my shoulders. “If I had to guess—around the time your towel fell down. Can’t say I blame the little guy,” he adds with a squeeze of my ass.

I turn my head back, sending Skyler an incredulous look. “You knew he was there?”

He shrugs. “I was going to say something, but then you started sucking my dick. Everything sort of became a blur...”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Skyler

“WOW, THEY’VE KIND OF GONE ALL OUT, HAVEN’T THEY?” I MUSE AS Jackson and I stroll into the chic, Hell’s Kitchen restaurant where Drew and Sullivan are holding their engagement party. It’s Sullivan all-over, that’s for sure. The decor is dark and refined, with slate gray floors, walls paneled in sleek, dark wood that looks almost black, and chandeliers hanging from sky high ceilings that give barely any light.

“I guess that’s what happens when you marry a billionaire,” Jackson murmurs wryly.

“I’m working on it, babe,” I say with a grin, giving his hand a gentle squeeze.

God, he looks fucking edible tonight. Jackson is really not a formal attire kind of guy, usually opting for jeans, t-shirts, and hoodies. He might occasionally pull a button down shirt from the depths of his closet if we’re going somewhere a bit trendier than usual, but the only other times I’ve seen him in a suit were my two graduations and Aaron and Kylie’s wedding.

He casts me a wary look. “You’d better not become a fucking workaholic like Sully and Spencer. I don’t see enough of you as it is.”

Fuck, isn’t that the truth. Even though we’ve been spending every night together this week, it still feels as though our time has been limited thanks to

the hours I've been putting in at work. The feeling was accentuated today when I spent most of the day in the office with the other "first year grunts" combing through the mountains of discovery in search of any tiny thing that could help with the firm's defense of one of our biggest clients, who is currently on trial for real estate fraud. It doesn't exactly make me feel wonderful to be putting all this time and effort into helping a guy that in all likelihood scammed a bunch of innocent people into pouring all their savings into what they thought would be their dream home in a brand new apartment complex but turned out to be a shoddy, barely standing, rat infested dump—especially when the time and effort takes me away from Jackson—but as my criminal law professor always said: everyone's entitled to a defense. And mega-rich assholes are entitled to be defended by one of the best firms in the country, apparently.

But I really shouldn't be complaining. If I were that bothered by it I'd quit my job and go work for the DA, or the Innocence Project or something. My high horse is really more of a Shetland pony when you think about it.

I shift to face Jackson, letting go of his hand so I can bring my palms up to cup his cheeks, leaning in to brush a soft kiss against his lips. "Never. I know things are crazy right now, but it won't always be like that," I assure him.

Jackson smiles and leans in for more lip cuddles, causing tendrils of warmth to spread out from my heart and through my entire body. "If I could spend every second of the day with you, I would," he murmurs. "But it's a nice consolation knowing you're finally living your dream. You've worked so hard, and I'm so proud of you, Sky."

The love and affection and pride shining in his eyes makes my heart swell like a giant balloon. I'll never get enough of that expression—the way his eyes light up when he looks at me. Any part of me.

He's not like all the random guys I used to hook up with in my desperate search for validation. He doesn't look at me with desire or hunger or need. With Jackson it's more. It's better.

I've never needed validation from him; his love for me has always been unerring and unconditional. When he looks at my body, it's like he's gazing upon something rare and precious. When he looks at my face, it's like he's lighting up from the inside. And when he looks into my eyes, it's like he's seeing his own soul reflected back at him. And I can see mine in his.

I pull him closer and kiss him again, wishing we could ditch this party

and go home to make up for the alone time we missed out on today. I don't even need to get off; I'd be happy just cuddling on the sofa and watching a movie. Jackson's strong arms around me, his warm skin heating my back, his hand threading through my hair...nothing sounds better than that right now.

"Fucking hell, do you two want to actually join the party at some point or are you happy just staying here all night stealing our thunder?" I hear Sullivan's deep voice growl.

I reluctantly pry my lips from Jackson's and turn to find Sully glowering at us.

"Cheer up, buddy. I thought this was a happy occasion?" I say with a smirk.

He rolls his eyes. "It *should* be. Drew *finally* decides he's ready to make this engagement official, and what do you two do? Give us all of two seconds to enjoy it before swooping in and stealing all the attention by finally getting together and being all adorable and coupley and shit."

"They were coupley before they got together," Cole points out, coming up beside Sullivan to join the conversation.

"That's not the point," Sully says, shooting his friend an annoyed look.

I quirk a brow at him, the corner of my lips curving up. "While I do enjoy being called adorable, I think this level of hostility is unwarranted considering your fiancé was the one who played cupid here," I remind him, gesturing between Jackson and me. "Also, you guys have been engaged for six months...*even if Drew was too chicken to admit it,*" I add in a murmur under my breath.

"What was that?" Sully asks, a suspicious look on his face.

"Nothing," I say, all innocent. "I just think if anyone could be accused of thunder-stealing here it's you and Drew. How do you think Jackson and I feel, after all these years we finally discover our love for each other and now we have to attend a party in celebration of someone else?"

"Fucking hell, you're such a lawyer," Sully grumbles, while Cole shakes with silent laughter.

"Hey, congratulations, man," Jackson says to Sully, reaching out to clap him on the shoulder.

Sullivan rolls his eyes. "Yeah, thanks."

"Come on, Jax—let's take our adorable, coupley selves into the party," I suggest, taking his hand in mine and heading toward the sound of music and conversation.

“You just had to make a thing of it,” I hear Cole say to Sully from behind us, his voice full of amusement.

There’s a small staircase that leads down to the section of the restaurant where the party is being held, and as Jackson and I walk down, hand in hand, I actually feel a little twinge of regret for brushing Sully’s annoyance off so easily. Because the reality is, it’s not entirely unwarranted—not if the way half the party pause mid-conversation to turn their gazes on Jax and me, as though *we’re* the guests of honor, is anything to go by.

“Why is everyone staring at us?” Jackson murmurs to me.

I flash a bright smile. “Because we’re so adorable.” Unable to resist, I lift my free hand to his cheek and turn his face toward me so I can press my lips to his.

A chorus of *awws* ripples across the party as Jackson and I break away from each other and take the last couple steps down to join the rest of the crowd.

“I don’t get what the big deal is,” I hear a gruff, familiar voice say, the words sounding louder than I’m sure was intended in the temporary lull of the crowd. “It’s not like anything’s really changed. It’s just now they’re banging.”

It takes me all of a microsecond to find Bryce amidst the partygoers, standing not too far away with Emme, Spencer, Will, and a teenage girl I’m surprised to see here—Paxton’s daughter, Kaley. Jesus, I swear this girl gets taller every time I see her. Or maybe it’s just the cute little heels she’s wearing for the fancy occasion..

I can tell from the genuine bafflement on his face that there was no malicious intent with Bryce’s words, but I feel my hackles rise anyway. I don’t like that people are making an automatic assumption that Jackson and I are having *sex sex*. *Fucking*. *Banging*. Whatever. I can understand why they would, but I still don’t like it. Or maybe I just don’t like that I don’t know how I’m supposed to handle what should have been quite a predictable development. We didn’t discuss this prior to arriving at the party, so I have no idea if Jackson wants to correct the assumption or not. I’m not sure if he’s okay with people outside the small circle or me, Drew, Deacon—and presumably Tanner and Sullivan—knowing about his asexuality. And he’s being no help whatsoever right now.

I decide to simply play the comment off like it’s not a big deal. We can talk about this when we get a moment alone. “Jesus, Bryce. Not everything is

about sex,” I say with an eye roll.

There are a couple of raised eyebrows among the other members of the little group, but Bryce looks like he’s been stupefied. He stands there just staring at me, slack-jawed, for several seconds before finally managing to shake himself out of his daze. “Um...are we sure this is actually Skyler,” he asks the others, his wary gaze still fixed on me. “He could have been replaced with an alien look-alike or something. You know, like in *Captain Marvel*.”

I give another dramatic roll of my eyes. “Oh, damn. You got me.”

Emme’s lips curve into a long-suffering smile. “Bryce, honey—I’m not sure Skyler was thrilled about that reductive comment you just made about his relationship.”

Bryce turns his puzzled gaze on his girlfriend. “What does reductive mean?”

I let out a soft breath of laughter and give Emme a sympathetic pat on the shoulder. “Well, at least the kid’s got a fifty percent chance.”

She quirks a brow at me, unimpressed. “Okay, *now* you two are even,” she says, waving a finger between me and Bryce.

I just shrug and offer a wry smile, while Bryce looks like he’s given up on trying to follow the conversation and is instead mentally replaying *Captain Marvel*.

“*Skyler!*” I hear a familiar voice call out and turn to see Judy Stapleton—Deacon and Sullivan’s mom—striding purposefully through the crowd, a radiant smile on her face. When she reaches me, she holds her arms out and I indulge her with a hug.

I’ve known Judy and the rest of the Stapletons for almost as long as I’ve known Deacon. I remember the first time I met them all I thought I’d stepped onto the set of a TV sitcom or something. One with happily married parents, two gay sons, and three daughters who couldn’t be more different from each other if they tried but managed to get along anyway, albeit with frequent bickering. And a dog. Of course, there was a dog. I honestly didn’t realize families like that actually existed in real life until then. I guess it’s no wonder Deacon was so shocked by the revelations about my childhood.

“Oh, this is so exciting!” Judy gushes, releasing me from the hug and stepping back to smile at both Jackson and me. “I’ve been wondering when you two would finally get your act together, so I was absolutely *thrilled* when Deacon filled me in. Honestly, it’s just the best thing to happen *all year*.”

My brows shoot up in a mix of surprise and amusement. “Um...thanks,

Judy. I'm sure Sully will be delighted to hear you say that."

She lets out a little huff, waving her hand dismissively. "I said it was the best thing *this* year," she emphasizes. "Sullivan and Drew have been engaged since October. Why they've waited until *now* to hold this party, I have no idea..." She sighs, as though at a complete loss. "I thought it was sweet them not wanting to steal Willow and Dean's thunder last year, but I think six months is pushing things a bit."

"I couldn't agree more, Judy," I say, offering a commiserating nod as I hear a few people around me try to disguise snorts of laughter as coughs.

Because of the whole fake engagement thing, there are only a handful of us that know Sully and Drew only *officially* became engaged a couple weeks ago. For the rest of the people at this party—including Sullivan's own parents, apparently—it seems the luster has well and truly faded.

"I didn't realize there was a time limit on these things," Will murmurs to Spencer, eyes wide with apprehension. "It's been three months already—we should probably get a move on with our engagement party plans."

Spencer lets out a breath of amusement and leans over to kiss Will on the cheek. "Whatever you want, babe. We might have to wait for some of the dazzle to fade from these two first, though," he adds dryly, gesturing at Jackson and me.

"You'll be waiting a hell of a long time," I say with a smirk.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Jackson

THIS HAS TO BE THE WEIRDEST ENGAGEMENT PARTY EVER. WELL, I GUESS THE one my mom went to a few years ago with the Revolutionary War theme might have been a little stranger, but I wasn't there so I can't confirm it. This is a different kind of weird, though. It's weird in the sense that the engaged couple's friends and family seem way more interested in fussing over Skyler and me than they are in anything that Sullivan and Drew are doing. And they aren't even trying to be discreet about it. It's no wonder Sully was so annoyed with us earlier. He could jump up on a table and start dancing the Can Can right now and hardly anyone would even notice.

"Should we maybe split up for a little while?" I ask Skyler when we finally get a moment to ourselves. We had to actually leave the main party and find a shadowy spot in an alcove near the bar in order to get it, but at least we can finally talk for a moment.

Skyler frowns at me. "Why?"

I shrug. "Maybe people will stop being so fascinated if we're not...you know...coupley," I suggest. Even if we weren't supposed to be celebrating another couple, the attention everyone's paying us is still fucking weird. Skyler might have taken exception to what Bryce said earlier, but I can't help agreeing—I don't get what the big deal is either.

"Is it making you uncomfortable?" he asks me, genuine concern written all over his features. "Having all this attention on us?"

I shake my head. "No. But Sully and Drew—"

The concern morphs into a dramatic sigh as Skyler cuts me off with dismissive wave. "Jackson, it's not *our* fault we're so damn adorable. It's not as though we *planned* to dazzle everyone senseless with the blinding glow of our love. But it's happened now, and us being less coupley is only going to disappoint the masses—is that really what you want?"

I roll my eyes, but can't help the corners of my mouth tugging up. He can be fucking ridiculous sometimes, but it didn't escape my notice that his immediate concern was for my comfort. He thinks I'm always the one taking care of him; he doesn't even notice the little ways he does the same for me.

"Was that an actual question, or was it rhetorical?" I ask him. "Because I

really don't give a crap about the masses. I'm glad I get to keep holding your hand, though."

Skyler's lips curve up and he leans toward me; I'm expecting him to go for my lips, but instead he nuzzles his temple against mine for a moment before pressing soft kisses to my ear. I blink in surprise when I feel his tongue sliding around the bolt in the top of my ear.

"Is this okay?" he murmurs, his breath hot against my skin.

"Yeah...it feels nice."

"You look so fucking sexy in this suit," he breathes. Then he stills for a moment before asking tentatively, "Is it okay for me to say that?"

I reach up and take his face in my hands, guiding his eyes to meet mine. "Of course it's okay. I don't want you to censor yourself, Sky. I *want* to know what you're thinking, even if it's about sex. No—*especially* if it's about sex."

He sighs. "Jax, I don't want you to feel like I'm pressuring you, or pushing you into doing things you don't want..."

I quirk a brow at him. "Didn't we have this same conversation earlier this week? If I'm remembering events correctly, I'm pretty sure *I* was the pushy one."

A slow smile spreads over Skyler's face as his eyes fill with heat. "Mmm yeah, now I remember. Consider yourself more than welcome to take charge any time you want, babe."

I let out a soft laugh, a mix of exasperation and affection flooding through me as I gaze at his lust-filled expression. "I've lost you, haven't I?"

"Huh? Wha—?" He gives his head a shake and blinks several times in what I'm guessing is an attempt to clear his head; judging by the glazed eyes and flushed cheeks I'm going to assume it doesn't work all that well. "No, you'll never lose me, Jax," he declares, his bottom lip stuck out in an adorable pout.

I shake my head wryly and bring my arms up to link around his neck. "Well, I already knew that—although I still love hearing it. I was talking figuratively."

His brows draw together in obvious puzzlement. "Figuratively?"

I let out a soft chuckle. "Yes, Mr. 790 Verbal."

Skyler groans, running a hand over his face. "I didn't have to take the SATs with that blowjob on replay in my head. Pretty sure I'd be bagging groceries right now if I had."

My brows creep up in surprise. “It can’t have been *that* good,” I reason. “I’ve never done it before.” I’ve never *wanted* to do it before...

Skyler shakes his head, reverence gleaming in his dark eyes. “Fuck, Jax, do you think I care about skill or technique or any of that shit? You were practically worshipping my cock. It was incredible.”

I feel my face flame and I let my hands fall from Skyler’s neck, averting my eyes. The wonder and awe in his voice is filling me with so much love and warmth, but I can’t help feeling apprehensive as well—because is he still going to think it’s so amazing once it dawns on him that I was treating his dick the same way I would any other part of his beautiful body? His neck, his hands, his hair...

“Jackson...” he presses, the desire sapped from his voice. “Not that I don’t find this blushing, lip-biting thing adorable, but care to share why you’ve gone into awkward, aversion mode? I thought you wanted me to say everything I was thinking?”

I glance back at him, letting out a soft sigh. “I do. Of course I do. I just...” I hesitate, biting my lip again. “You know I really liked yesterday, right?”

He bobs his head in a single nod. “I got that impression, yes.”

“But it wasn’t...” I let out a grunt of frustration and lift a hand to rub at my scalp. “I mean...”

“Jackson, are you trying to tell me you’re just not that into my cock?” Skyler asks, his lips twitching with barely contained amusement. “It’s not my cock, it’s you?”

I drop my hand and send him an unimpressed look. “Ha.”

The teasing expression morphs into one of wry affection as Skyler reaches for me and draws me into his arms. “Jax, I *know* you weren’t turned on yesterday. I’m an elephant, not a goldfish.” He leans in to claim my lips for some lip cuddles and I feel instantly reassured. I don’t hesitate in bringing my hands up to roam over the hard planes of his back, pulling him closer to me.

I’d really love it if I could get my hands on Skyler’s bare skin right now, but considering the party guests can hardly keep their attention off us as it is, I don’t think adding a shirtless Skyler to the mix would be the best idea.

“Just so you know,” he murmurs, tearing his lips away and pressing his forehead against mine, “I don’t need you to be turned on by my dick, or any other part of me. I don’t need you to be attracted to me. I don’t need you to

want sex. And I'm sorry for how I acted that first night...I didn't get it then. I get it now."

"So you don't think I'm giving you obligation handjobs or whatever anymore?" I press. Truthfully, this hasn't really been an issue since that first time when Skyler freaked out afterwards, before I told him about being ace, but we haven't actually discussed it since then either. Our friends' engagement party probably isn't the best place, but what the hell—the topic has presented itself so I'm going for it.

Skyler lets out a soft huff, puffing warm air across my cheeks. "Let's not kid ourselves, Jax—we both know a huge reason of why you're always so eager to pleasure me is because it's your instinct to take care of me. But that's not something that bothers me anymore—not since I started reading up on asexuality and the different kinds of attraction."

It didn't surprise me in the least when I learned he'd been researching. It's Skyler. When he doesn't understand something, he learns about it. I'm sure by now he's far more knowledgeable on the topic than I am.

"But I kind of figured you knew that, given...you know," he says, drawing his face away a little so he can quirk his eyebrow suggestively.

I shrug, offering a fond smile. "Just checking."

He leans in again and we're just about to kiss when a familiar voice intrudes on the moment.

"Well, if it isn't the happy couple themselves—what are you two doing hiding here in the shadows? Don't you know there's a whole party gathered over there in your honor?"

Skyler and I turn in unison at the sound of Charlie's dry comment, finding him approaching with Paxton flanking him on one side and Spencer on the other.

"We needed a little breather," Skyler says with a shrug. "It's exhausting being so adored."

"Tell me about it," Pax says with a wry grin.

"Yeah, but someone's got to do that one hour a day of sitting at a desk and looking nice and pretty while they read shit off a screen," Charlie drawls, slapping Paxton on the back. "Appreciate the sacrifice, man."

Good natured as always, Paxton just shakes his head with wry amusement. "For the record, I'm not the *pretty* cable anchor. I'm the *sexy* cable anchor."

Skyler's brows draw together as he scrutinizes Pax. "Dude, right now you

look like the *old* cable anchor. Are those my glasses?”

“I thought he stole them off Anderson Cooper,” Charlie says with a snort.

“No, they’re his foolproof disguise,” Spencer explains. “Just in case there are any pissed off Republicans around. No one will ever recognize him in those.”

Paxton rolls his eyes and slides his thick-framed glasses—which really are almost identical to the ones Skyler wears for reading—off his face. “*Or* I left my contacts in Raleigh today and didn’t get a chance to replace them before the party.”

“Why did you go to Raleigh if Kaley was coming here anyway?” Skyler asks in obvious confusion. It’s a valid question; the only reason Paxton ever sets foot in North Carolina is to visit his daughter.

Pax’s expression is a mix of exasperation and fondness as he explains, “It’s her birthday today so I made a quick visit down there as a surprise. And then she pretty much begged to come back with me so she could come to the party.” He turns his glance to Skyler. “Has she cornered you yet to talk your ear off about Columbia?”

Skyler shakes his head. “Nope. She’s probably the only person at the party who *hasn’t* cornered us.”

“I think she and Will are locked in a big *Doctor Who* discussion,” Spencer explains. “Top level, invite only stuff.”

Pax groans and rubs a hand over his face before setting his glasses back in place. “*Doctor Who’s* British isn’t it?” Several of us nod in confirmation, which causes Paxton to groan again, his face formed into a scowl. “Fucking England.”

“Did I miss a big news story?” Spencer asks, looking genuinely perplexed. “What did England do?”

Pax lets out an aggravated sigh. “England didn’t do anything. Except *exist*. On the other side of the fucking *world*.”

Charlie shakes his head in mock dismay. “Honestly, the gall of some countries. How dare it just exist like that?”

“Mark and Sean are moving there and they’re planning on taking Kaley,” Paxton grates out through a clenched jaw, throwing some much-needed clarity on the situation.

“*What?*” Spencer demands, his passionate reaction reminding me that this is his niece we’re talking about. “Pax, no! This *can’t* happen. Kaley can’t move to another country!”

“Thanks, I only kind of didn’t want her to go before, but now I *really* don’t want her to go,” Paxton shoots back in a tone jam-packed with sarcasm. Spence holds his palms up. “Just trying to be supportive.”

Pax lets out a heavy sigh, shaking his head. “Sorry. Just a little wound up right now.”

“Spencer’s right,” Charlie says, the levity gone from his expression as he launches into lawyer-mode. “It can’t happen. I mean it *literally* can’t happen if you don’t consent to it. Estranged same-sex parents—and I’m using that term in the legal sense,” he clarifies, as though waiting for us to call out the political incorrectness—“have the same rights in this area as estranged heterosexual parents. So unless Mark wants to be charged with kidnapping…” He trails off as a thoughtful frown touches his lips. “Or does she already have a passport? Because that could complicate things.”

“No, she doesn’t have one yet. And I already knew all that,” Paxton says, not sounding as happy as you’d think after that kind of reassurance. “I have no intention of signing anything. But then what? We’ve gone eleven years without things getting combative. We never needed lawyers, or any formal custody agreements. We just got on with shit and did what was best for Kaley. I don’t want to have to start fighting now.”

“At least if you do have to fight, you know you’ll win,” Spencer says with a determined jut of his jaw.

Paxton sends him a skeptical look. “I know no such thing.”

“You’re her biological father. Your name’s on the birth certificate.”

“And Mark’s been her primary caretaker her entire life and his name is on the adoption papers,” Pax points out.

Charlie nods. “It’s much of a muchness. Given her age, a judge would likely ask for Kaley’s input in this situation.”

“No one would be asking her anything because it’s not happening,” Paxton says fiercely.

“Maybe you should ask her,” I suggest with a shrug.

Pax frowns at me. “Huh?”

“Ask her if she wants to move here to live with you—that’s what you want, right? If she says yes you can use that to convince your ex not to take her to England. Or would he drag her there kicking and screaming?”

Paxton lets out a soft laugh, and I’m glad to see his usual good humor return to his face. “Oh, man. Mark would flip the fuck out if I suggested that. Especially if I got Kaley in on it.”

“Let him,” Spencer says. “Like you said—you don’t have any official custody agreements so why the fuck should he always get to act like it’s his way or the highway?”

Paxton nods, his whole demeanor appearing lighter than it did a few moments ago. “You’ve got a point there.” He flashes me a broad grin. “Thanks, Jax.”

I shrug. “No worries.”

I barely have the words out of my mouth when Paxton lurches forward, grabs my face, and plants a kiss right on my lips, drawing back with a huge grip. “You’re awesome, thank you!”

Swift as a flash, Skyler slides in between me and Paxton, fixing the older man with a hard look. “Hey, back off, buddy. Those lips are mine.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

Skyler

THERE WAS NEVER GOING TO BE MUCH CHANCE OF ME TURNING DOWN Jackson's suggestion of a sponge bath, but it's taken a little while for me to find the right opportunity. Sunday would have been perfect, but the engagement party ended up being a much later night than I think anyone had expected and by the time Jax and I crawled out of bed it was almost noon. Rocket kept giving me big, sad eyes, letting me know how much he'd missed me all day Saturday, and I knew if I didn't pile on the love and attention straight away I'd be getting the cold shoulder for days. So I said a temporary goodbye to my shower dreams and spent the afternoon doting on the cat, much to Jackson's chagrin.

But today is my chance. It's a rare weekday morning where I don't have to rush off to work. I have to be in court to assist one of the partners with pre-trial motions, so there's really no point in me going all the way up to the office just to come back Downtown for the nine thirty hearing. I still haven't got my Bar results—the big day is Friday, next week—so “assisting” really just consists of sitting down, shutting up, and passing the occasional note. I'm excited, though. It's the first time I'll be sitting there at the front of the courtroom as a member of the defendant's legal team.

And after next Friday, the next time I'm in a courtroom I might actually be arguing.

“What are you doing?” Jackson asks, flashing me a curious look when I follow him out of the bedroom and into the bathroom when we wake on Wednesday morning.

This is the part of the morning when I usually make our coffees and then hang out in the bathroom, chatting to Jackson while he showers.

“You wanted a sponge bath, remember?” I remind him with a grin.

He lets out a soft chuckle. “I thought you'd forgotten about that.”

I shake my head. “God, no. Just been waiting for the right opportunity. Late start today, so we can *linger*,” I say with a waggle of my eyebrows.

He lets out a breath of laughter before reaching to turn the water on. “You might have a late start. What makes you think I can afford to...*linger*?”

“The fact that you can't fire yourself,” I say wryly. “So do you want me

to run soapy hands all over that beautiful body or not?”

The question is unnecessary, of course. I’ve learned all about sensual pleasure recently and I know it’s something Jackson feels to an intense degree. We’ve always had a tactile relationship, but it’s reached new levels recently, with Jackson seeking out my touch at every opportunity he can find. And I’m always happy to give it to him. He might not want sex from me, but I can still give him pleasure and that’s what counts.

Once the water’s hot, Jackson steps into the tub and holds a hand out for me. I grin and join him under the luscious heat of the shower, belatedly remembering to tug the curtain closed so we don’t flood the bathroom.

For a moment I just take in the incredible sight of his gorgeous body: hard muscles, inked skin, and those strong arms that always know how to cuddle me just right.

I still can’t believe what an idiot I was all that time I managed to bury my attraction to him; how could anyone *not* find Jackson sexy as hell?

Needless to say, I’m hard as fuck. I woke up with a semi, and seeing Jackson climb out of bed and stride naked across the apartment did not help the situation whatsoever. Now I’m a hopeless cause.

And, of course, Jackson doesn’t miss a thing. “Let me help,” he says, reaching for my dick.

It’s so fucking tempting. Standing here under the hot water, holding Jackson in my arms while he jerks me off—that sounds like the best start to a morning ever. But this whole sponge bath thing is supposed to be about him and his pleasure.

“Not right now,” I tell him gently, grabbing his hand before he can get it around my cock. Then I lean forward and brush a soft kiss to his lips. “Let me take care of you for once, okay? Now turn around.”

He returns the kiss, murmuring, “You’re always taking care of me, Sky. And you don’t even realize it.” Moving back, he offers a broad grin. “But if you insist on rubbing soapy hands all over my body I’m not going to refuse.”

He turns around and I’m unable to hold back a groan as I’m presented with that incredible ass. Yeah, maybe front-on would have been better.

My reaction seems to amuse Jackson, if the way his shoulders are shaking is any indication.

“Stop laughing, it’s not funny,” I grumble.

“Sorry,” he says a little sheepishly, reaching for the watermelon-scented shower gel we use and passing it to me. “I just wasn’t expecting that sound to

come out of your mouth just then. It's the sound you make when you're really hungry and you smell bacon."

"Ah, fuck," I say on another groan, ducking my head to press against Jackson's nape.

"What?"

"I don't want to say."

"I want to know," he insists. "We talked about this. I always want to know."

I let out a resigned sigh. "You mentioned bacon, and I thought your ass is probably tastier than bacon."

He's quiet for a moment and then says, "That might feel...kind of nice..."

I shake my head from side to side, then move back, straightening up. "No. Maybe some other time, when you've actually had a chance to think about it. Not today."

"Sky..."

"Today's sponge bath day," I remind him, squeezing some of the shower gel into my hands and rubbing them together until I have some good foam happening.

"Mmm...I could definitely do this every morning," Jackson murmurs as I run my soapy hands over his torso while my lips press kisses onto the wet skin of his neck.

"Then we will," I say softly. "This can be our new bathroom routine."

"Mmmm...only two problems with that," he says.

"Problems?"

"Uh huh..." He doesn't speak for a while, instead letting out soft hums of pleasure as I continue to run my hands over him. Finally, he says, "Problem one—I don't want to give up our normal morning routine."

"Mmm, yeah. That is a conundrum. What's problem two?" I ask, giving my hands a momentary break from their roaming to squeeze a tiny bit of shampoo into my palm so I can wash his hair—what little of it there is.

"Time. We don't—*ahh*..." he breaks off with a groan as I turn my attention to his scalp. "Mmm...that feels good."

"We could get up earlier," I suggest, making the assumption that problem number two is the very same thing that's kept me from doing this until now.

"Huh?"

I chuckle and guide Jackson's head under the spray to rinse off, before

reaching for the conditioner. “You said we don’t have enough time. I suggested we get up earlier.”

“Yeah, but then we’d need to get up earlier,” he murmurs.

I snort and drop a kiss to his neck. “You make an excellent point. I guess it’s the weekend then” I pose. “Sponge bath and breakfast.”

He nods. “Mmm. Yeah. Sponge bath and breakfast.”

I finish up with the conditioner and lather up my hands with the shower gel again.

Jackson hums in satisfaction as I return my soapy hands to his chest. “Make sure you’re thorough. I want to be squeaky clean.”

I let out a soft laugh. “Noted.”

I duck my head and place kisses along the back of his neck as my hands glide down his chest, across his abs, over his hips. I hesitate for a moment when I get to his ass, but then I continue—he told me the other night he didn’t want me holding back and I’m going to trust that.

“You missed a spot,” Jackson informs me.

“Where?”

He reaches back to take hold of my hand, guiding my fingers to his crease. “There.”

“Jackson...”

“I just want you to be thorough,” he reminds me, shrugging casually.

I give a wry shake of my head and start gliding my soapy fingers over his crease, slipping between his cheeks. If he’s telling me he’s comfortable with this, then I guess I should trust it.

“Mmm, that feels good,” he murmurs, wiggling his ass around and causing my fingers to slip farther inside his crease.

Fucking hell.

“It...does?”

“Yeah,” he says with one of those familiar hums of pleasure. “It’s...I don’t know. Just...nice. It’s not arousing, but it’s good. Kind of like a massage, I guess.”

The corner of my mouth turns up and I bend my head to kiss him on the cheek. I guess it shouldn’t be surprising that this would feel somewhat pleasurable to Jackson, considering his heightened response to all kinds of touch. I already knew before we started all this that the main reason he shaves his head is because it feels so good when my fingers run over his bare scalp. I couldn’t tell you how many sensitive nerve endings there are on someone’s

head, but I know first-hand there are a hell of a lot around the crease and anus. “I’ll make sure to give it a really good clean, then,” I tell him. “But, Jax—you don’t have to keep reminding me you don’t find my touch arousing.”

“Sorry, I—”

“Don’t apologize,” I cut him off gently, pressing another kiss to his cheek. “If it makes you feel better to clarify, then by all means, go ahead. I just want to make sure you know you don’t *need* to. This isn’t sex. This is me giving my beautiful boyfriend a sponge bath, and I don’t expect you to be turned on by it. But I’m glad you’re getting pleasure from it,” I add.

He nods and then tips his head back to rest against my shoulder. “Mmm...yeah...pleasure. That feels so nice...”

I continue to slowly circle his rim with my finger, smiling wryly at his reaction. This is the kind of teasing that would usually result in desperate begging, and impatient demands, and insistent body movements; but Jackson is completely relaxed, humming and sighing, and letting out some of those soft little groans, as though he could just stand here under this heated waterfall with my finger “massaging” his hole forever. And I love that. Because I feel like I could do this forever too.

But I know that’s not a realistic possibility—not today, at least, when we have places to be even if we can afford to move a little slower than usual weekday mornings—so I reluctantly withdraw my fingers from Jackson’s crease and add yet more soap to my hands. We’ll need to stock up on shower gel if we plan to do this every weekend.

I crouch down so I can lather up Jackson’s legs, rising gradually as my hands move higher. Once I’m standing again, I slowly glide my hands over his hips, pausing before I reach his groin. “What about here?” I ask softly.

“I told you to be thorough,” he says.

“I just want to make sure,” I say, still hesitating.

“You’ve touched my dick before, Sky. I’ve never had a problem with it.”

True. But we didn’t know we were in love with each other then. And I didn’t know about my attraction to him. And Jax didn’t know about his asexuality. Which, of course, is the main reason for my hesitation.

He’s told me several times that he doesn’t want me hesitating or stepping back, and that he’s always been ace even if he wasn’t aware of it so there’s no reason for me to assume his comfort level has changed. I just can’t seem to help it, though. I’m sure once we’ve been together for a while the constant need to reassure each other will disappear, but right now everything is still so

new. And I'd much rather Jackson be frustrated with me for hesitating and checking in than simply plowing ahead and finding out too late that he's not comfortable.

"Okay. So...a quick scrub like the morning after that time you got blackout drunk and threw up all over yourself?" Definitely not one for the highlight reel. The four of us—Jackson, Deacon, Drew, and I—went to Atlantic City for some show one Saturday night a few years ago and somehow I ended up as the designated driver. I have no idea what Jax was drinking, but I've never seen him that wasted; he threw up about three times in the rental car on the way back to Brooklyn, and then again once Deacon and I had managed to get him into bed. I had to sit and watch him all night because I was terrified he was going to choke on his own vomit or something.

"Why does it sound like you're scared to touch my dick?" Jackson asks wryly, snapping me back to the present.

"I'm not scared. It was just a question."

"Well, I already told you to be thorough," he reminds me. "Like you were before..."

"Okay..." A cock massage it is. "Did you want more soap?" I ask softly, noticing the water has well and truly washed all the suds from my hands.

He nods. "Yeah. I like the soap."

I quickly lather up my hands again and then move them to Jackson's groin, gently massaging his flaccid cock and balls.

"Mmm...that feels good," he murmurs.

"I think your junk's pretty clean now," I say softly after a minute or so. "You want me to stop?"

He gives a little shake of his head. "No. Or...maybe not my balls. Just my cock. This feels nice."

"Okay."

I slip my hand away from Jackson's balls, moving it up his torso as I brush kisses to his neck.

"Mmm...yeah...that's nice..." he murmurs. I'm not sure if he's referring to the kissing or me touching his cock, although I guess it's not that important considering his pleasure response is similar to both.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, I feel Jackson's cock start to stiffen under my gentle touch. He might not be turned on, but manual stimulation is still going to cause an arousal response in most situations.

"Do you want to stop?" I ask him.

He's silent for a long moment, and I can sense that his body isn't quite as relaxed as it was just a moment ago. My hand falls still, but I continue to hold his now hard cock in a loose grip, waiting for him to tell me what to do. "I—I don't..." He lets out a heavy sigh. "Fucking hell, I was really liking that."

A few weeks ago I probably would have hit back with some kind of smartass response about it being obvious that he liked it. But I know better now.

As far as I know, Jackson has never been aroused while we've been intimate together. And I suspect he prefers it that way. He doesn't see what we do as sexual, and that's a huge part of why he enjoys it so much. But just because he's hard now doesn't mean that has to change. The last thing I want is for him to feel like he has to deny himself any kind of pleasure just because his body produces a completely normal, biological reaction.

I move my hand from Jackson's cock, but rest it against his inner thigh, stretching my forefinger out to brush gently over the base of his shaft. Back and forth. Back and forth.

Jackson lets out a soft sigh, and slowly starts to relax again. That's better.

"This still isn't sex," I assure him, running my lips over his jaw. "I'm not going to pretend I'm not enjoying the sight of your gorgeous dick standing to attention like that. But I know it's not putting on this parade for me. I'm just a fortunate bystander."

He lets out a soft breath of amusement. "My dick's in the Army?"

"Marines," I correct. "They're hotter."

"If you say so. I thought you liked Navy guys?"

"Jackson, if there's one thing we can be sure of, it's that your dick is *not* in the Navy."

He grins, his body shaking with a rumble of laughter.

I press a kiss to his cheek, glad to see him relaxing further.

"Do you want to just keep doing this, or do you want me to give your dick a cuddle?" I murmur.

"Cuddle...?"

I shift my hand from his thigh and back to his cock, gripping the shaft with loose, relaxed fingers.

Jackson lets out one of those soft hums. "Mmm...cuddle. Yeah..."

I smile and nuzzle my temple into his ear, continuing to fondle his cock with a soft hand.

"Mmm...that feels nice," he murmurs. "But I can't come from this, Sky."

“You’re not supposed to come from this, babe. You’re just supposed to enjoy it. Like cuddles. And massages.”

“Huh. I just figured...”

“That I’d jump at the chance to make you come the second I saw you with a boner?”

“Well...”

I drop a quick kiss to his temple to reassure him that I’m not offended by his line of thought. “Jax, that’s not something you ever have to worry about. Unless...do you *want* me to get you off?” I ask, the thought only just occurring to me.

He shakes his head. “No...I like this better.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

“More soap, please.”

I let out a wry chuckle and lather up my hands one more time before moving them back to “cuddle” Jackson’s cock.

Before long, it occurs to me that we’ve been in this shower for a lot longer than I’d originally planned. I’m sure I still have plenty of time before I have to leave for work, but I doubt the hot water system has much time left.

“We should probably get out of here before the water goes cold,” I suggest in a resigned tone, moving my hands away from Jackson’s cock and taking a small step back.

Jackson’s body slumps with obvious disappointment but he nods. “Yeah, I guess.” He half turns, glancing back at me with furrowed brows. “Wait—what about...” He darts his gaze downward, making his meaning clear.

“Jax, I’ll be fine,” I assure him with a gentle smile. I lean forward and brush a kiss to his temple. “Go get yourself ready for work. I’ll just be another minute, and then I’ll come out and make coffee.”

He sends me a knowing look, but doesn’t press the matter further. Or, at least, I thought he wasn’t going to press further...

But when I turn around to adjust the water, I feel him move up behind me, his arms wrapping around me in a tight embrace. “Let me help,” he murmurs.

“Jackson, it’s okay—you don’t have to jerk me off every time I get hard. You’re going to get carpal tunnel,” I add in a light tone.

“Not that,” he murmurs, his head shifting from side to side as he rests it on my back. “You said you liked...” I feel his fingers trailing down my back and then slipping between my cheeks, probing my hole.

I let out a harsh gasp in a mix of surprise and pleasure. “You want to...?” What *does* he want to do? Just finger me? Or is he still hard? Does he actually want to...?

“Not sex,” he murmurs. “Like you said—that’s not what it’s about. I just want to be a part of you. I *am* a part of you, Skyler...” He lets out a heavy sigh. “I want to go home. Just for a little while. Please?” He presses a kiss to my shoulder blade. “I want to *feel* you.”

I’m stunned. But I probably shouldn’t be. Only Jax could make anal penetration sound so...epic. “Of course,” I tell him. “If that’s what you want, Jax.”

He lets out a soft sigh and brushes another kiss to my back. “I’m not sure if you’ll get off from this,” he warns me. “I don’t want to...*fuck* you...”

“I don’t want that either,” I say firmly. “And I don’t need to come, Jax. But, god...feeling you inside me...” I let out a breath, shaking my head. I can barely comprehend that I’m saying these words. “If that’s what you want, then yes...”

I don’t have any experience of being penetrated by an actual human partner to compare this to, and I’m exceptionally grateful to that. This is an experience that Jackson and I get to have together. And it’s beautiful.

It’s not sex.

It’s not anything like it.

It’s the two of us joined together in the closest way we possibly can be. Two halves of a whole coming together in perfect unison.

I can feel his pulse throbbing inside me as his heart beats against my back.

Home. This is home. Jackson’s arms wrapped around me, his breath hot on my skin, his murmured words of love in my ear as he moves slowly inside me.

And I never want to leave.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Jackson

“WHAT THE FUCK...?” MY EYES SCAN THE LIVING ROOM OF OUR APARTMENT as my brain tries to compute what I’m seeing. I’ve just arrived home after a rare Saturday stint at the garage to find the place transformed into what appears to be the love child of Home Depot and Petco.

There are timber planks of varying lengths strewn across the carpet, with a bag of metal brackets tossed on top; nearby, a can of paint is sitting on what looks suspiciously like the auto-cleaning litter box Skyler’s been eyeing for several months; at least four or five plush velvet cat mats have been parked on the kitchen table, next to some kind of netting; several tall, leafy plants are sitting in large ceramic pots in front of the TV where the coffee table should be, with a cluster of smaller pots holding a less impressive grassy type thing scattered around them; the coffee table has been pushed right up against the breakfast bar, and the couch has been moved up against the opposite wall to make room for what appears to be Skyler’s disassembled bedframe, although I have no idea where the mattress is. And right next to the pile of slats that used to be the base of Skyler’s bed is a shopping bag bulging with cat toys.

“Skyler!”

A few seconds later, he emerges from his bedroom, a familiar expression of innocence painted on his face, which is half-shadowed under the yellow hard hat he’s wearing for god knows what reason.

“What....?” I break off, shaking my head. “Why are you wearing a hard hat?”

He reaches for the brim of his hat and raises it, swiping his forearm across his brow to wipe away non-existent sweat in a gesture I’m pretty sure he’s only ever seen in porn. “Safety first, Jackson. It’s important to protect yourself when you’re working with tools.”

I shake my head in exasperation. “What the hell do you need tools for?”

Before he can answer me, Rocket prances out of the bedroom, demonstrating his own apparent commitment to workplace safety.

I stare at the animal for a long moment. He’s not adorable; he’s the fucking devil. “Skyler, why the fuck is the cat wearing a hard hat?”

Skyler glances down at Rocket for a moment before returning his gaze to

me. “He’s also very safety conscious.”

I roll my eyes. “Sure.” Stepping carefully around the maze of DIY supplies and feline paraphernalia littering our living room, I approach my boyfriend and reach up to pluck the hard hat off his head. “Much better. Now I can see your face properly.”

He smiles and tilts his head forward to brush his lips against mine. “I missed you today.”

“Uh huh. I can see that—you mind telling me what’s going on and why you decided to turn our apartment into a home depot stock room? And why did you disassemble your bed?”

He flashes a bright grin and grabs my hand, tugging me into his bedroom. “I’m redecorating Rocket’s room.”

“Wh—the cat has his own *room* now?” Jesus Christ.

“Of course,” Skyler says brightly. “I mean, I’m not using it. This is the only thing that makes sense.”

I give a wry shake of my head, offering a fond smile. That’s a statement that could only be true in Skyler’s world.

Glancing around the room, I’m relieved to see the “tools” Skyler’s been using appear to be an Allen key and a hammer. For a moment I’d been worried he’d let his enthusiasm get the better of him and retrieved my power tools from our storage locker. But thankfully that doesn’t seem to be the case. His construction work looks to have been confined to assembling flat pack furniture. Although, judging by the mess of timber pieces, screws and bolts still scattered on the floor, he didn’t get very far.

“What do you think?” he asks, spreading his hands out proudly.

“Um...” As well as the half-finished flat pack, there’s also fresh mint green paint on three of the four walls; or, two and three quarters of the walls if we’re being more accurate. The only furniture in the room is a cabinet made of the same pale timber as whatever it is Skyler’s currently attempting to assemble; the door of the cabinet is open and Rocket’s litter box—the regular, non auto-cleaning one—is inside. Gross. “It’s...a start,” I tell him, unwilling to see the smile vanish from his face.

“Yeah. Charlie was here helping before because I wanted it all to be done by the time you got home, but then got called away for an “emergency”,” Skyler says, lifting his fingers to make air quotes and offering a knowing smirk. “Pretty sure that’s code for a booty call with my boss, but whatever.”

My brows creep up. “Why would you think that? I thought you said they

hated each other?”

He shrugs, offering an impish grin. “Let’s call it a hunch. All I can confirm at this stage is he was in a very good mood for someone on their way to deal with an “emergency”.” He does the air quotes again, this time adding a snort of amusement.

“Well, I think it was a little ambitious—even for you—to attempt to get this all done in one day. They don’t even do that on HGTV.”

“Yeah, but I’m more awesome than the people on HGTV.”

My lips twitch in wry amusement and I take a step toward the incomplete flat pack, bending down to pick up the Allen key from the floor and then holding it up. “Skyler, what’s this called?”

He gives a casual shrug, not letting the confidence slip for even a moment. “A turny thing.”

I let out a soft chuckle and toss the Allen key aside. “I think you should stick to your day job, babe.” I glance around the room again, assessing the mess. I’m not exactly sure what Skyler’s ultimate vision is here, but I’m assuming four painted walls and properly assembled furniture is a start. “Do you want me to help you finish all this?”

He grins. “Can you take your shirt off while you work? And bend down a lot, please? That would be a big help.”

I shake my head wryly but oblige him by shrugging out of my jacket, and then pulling my t-shirt over my head. “If I get splinters in my chest you’ll have to pull them out,” I warn him.

The corner of his lips curve up as he runs appreciative dark eyes over me. “Gladly.”

I let out a soft chuckle as I brush past him so I can toss my t-shirt and jacket onto the sofa, which is currently sitting right outside Skyler’s bedroom after he rearranged the living room to make space for his current project. My eyes briefly land on the pieces of timber that used to be his bed. It’s true he hasn’t slept in it for weeks, but this still seems a little drastic. I mean, this is Skyler we’re talking about here—the cynical, jaded guy who’s done nothing but scoff at the mere idea of “settling down” whenever any of our friends made the suggestion.

I turn back to him and hit him with a questioning look. “Okay, tell me what you want me to do and I’ll do it... But first...are you absolutely sure you want to give up your bedroom? I mean, I know you love Rocket, but he’s a cat, Sky. He doesn’t *actually* need his own room.”

Skyler stares at me in puzzlement for a moment before answering. “Jax, this isn’t my bedroom.”

“Huh?”

“This is just the room where I’ve been keeping all my clothes and shit. I already moved my dresser into our room. And there’s plenty of space in our closet for my suits because you have, like, two jackets and three pairs of jeans.”

I’m not sure why the words stun me. Or maybe it’s not the actual words, but the way Skyler is delivering them; as though it’s an indisputable fact that the bedroom I’d always considered “mine” is—and has always been—both of ours. And maybe he’s right. I’m sure, like me, it’s something that wouldn’t have occurred to him prior to our relationship taking this new turn, but the reality is that of the hundreds of nights we’ve spent cuddling together since moving to this apartment five years ago, I could count the ones spent in this room on one hand. All the other times were in my bed, though. *Our bed.*

With rare exception, it’s always been Skyler creeping into my bed during the night rather than the other way around. I’m sure part of that is because he tends to stay up later than I do, but I think it’s mostly due to the habit he formed when we were kids.

Our bed.

I finally snap out of my stupor, a slow smile spreading over my face. I take a step closer and reach out for Skyler, sliding one hand down his back and the other into his hair as I guide his face closer for a soft kiss.

He responds without hesitation, his arms coming up to wrap around my body, drawing me closer against him as he increases the pressure of our lip cuddle.

I love this. The feel of his hard body flush against mine, his strong arms around me, warm hands grazing my bare skin. We’re so close together it feels like we could merge into one person. And I still want to be closer.

I walk Skyler back a few steps and press him against the wall, molding my body to his as we continue to kiss and touch and meld together. His hands are like sunshine on my bare skin. Sunshine and blue skies and the softest of sea breezes. And I just want to bask in it forever.

It’s only when my hand slips over the wall that I’m brought back to the present moment and remember the wet paint.

“Oh shit. I’m getting paint on your t-shirt.” I move my hands to Skyler’s shoulders and draw him a couple inches away from the freshly-painted wall,

as though that's going to somehow reverse the damage that's already been done to the back of his shirt.

He lets out a soft breath of amusement, the corner of his lips curving up. "It's actually your t-shirt."

I glance down at the heather gray t-shirt he's wearing to see it is in fact one of mine. One of my better ones, actually. I'm not sure whether to be exasperated or amused at the fact that he opted to wear this shirt for his DIY day when there's a whole bunch of grease-stained ones he could have chosen from. But I don't really care. I told him weeks ago I'd give him everything, and that includes t-shirts.

I slide my hands back down his torso and around his waist, leaning in to nuzzle my temple against his hair as I press him back into the wet paint. "Our t-shirt." I slip my hands under the t-shirt and slide them over his heated skin, ducking my head to kiss the fluttering heartbeat at his neck and reveling in the soft groans and gasps I'm drawing out of him with these simple touches. "Our room," I murmur. "Our bed. Our *life*..." I lift one hand up to run through his hair as my lips move up to his jaw. "My *Skyler*."

I know the odds of us actually finishing off this freakin' cat bedroom today are growing slimmer and slimmer by the second now that I've started us down this path, but I don't care. If Skyler wants Rocket to have a bedroom, I'll make it happen. It'll be the best cat bedroom anyone's ever seen. But I can do it during the week. Or the month. Or the year.

I'm not giving up my Skyler cuddle time for the fucking cat.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Skylar

“CLOSE YOUR EYES!” JACKSON COMMANDS, THE SECOND I OPEN THE DOOR TO our apartment on Thursday night.

Confused, but not wanting to disappoint him, I slap a hand over my eyes. “Okay, they’re closed.” It takes about two seconds for my curiosity to get the better of me and I discreetly spread my fingers just enough so I can take a peek.

“Skylar, I can see you peeking,” Jackson says with obvious exasperation. “Keep your eyes *closed*.”

I let out a huff and close my fingers. “Okay, *fine*. They’re closed.”

“Good. Just stay there, I’ll just be a minute,” Jackson instructs.

“You’d better not be naked right now! I’m going to be really pissed if you’re naked and I’m missing it.”

“OH. MY. GOD!” I hear a familiar voice cry. “Ohmygod, ohmygod, *ohmygod!*”

Yeah, there’s no way I’m keeping my eyes covered after that. I drop my hand and grin wildly when I see Steph in the living room jumping around and squealing like she’s just won backstage Taylor Swift tickets.

“Oh my gooooodddddd! This is soooo awwweesssoommme!”

I let out a bark of laughter as I hastily cross the living room to wrap her in a fierce hug. “It’s so good to see you. What are you doing here?”

“Duh, what do you think I’m doing here? You get your results tomorrow!” She hits me with a beaming smile and wraps her arms tightly around me. “My baby’s going to be a lawyer!”

“I haven’t actually got the results yet, Steph,” I remind her.

She lets go of me and offers a dismissive flip of her hand. “As if you’re not going to pass. And if by some miniscule chance you don’t, we’ll go out drinking anyway and I’ll cheer you up by recounting all of *my* failures.”

I hug her again and drop a kiss to her dark brown pony tail. “I don’t think that’ll work, Steph—I can’t imagine you failing at anything. You’re the reason I’ll even be getting Bar results tomorrow. You’ve never let me down. Or Jax. Ever.”

She pulls away a little, smiling up at me as emotion plays over her

features. “I think you’re giving me a little too much credit, sweetie. All I ever did was encourage you.”

“That was enough.”

“Damn it, Skyler, I told you to cover your eyes,” Jackson groans as he emerges from Rocket’s room, shaking his head in exasperation.

“I was but then I heard Steph—what did you expect me to do?” I protest.

Jackson sends his mom an unimpressed look. “You couldn’t stay quiet for two minutes?”

Steph turns to Jackson with a dramatic huff. “You try staying quiet when you discover your two baby boys are finally an item.” She glances back at me for a moment, one eyebrow arched. “I mean, I’m assuming that’s why you said you wanted to see Jackson naked, right?” she probes. “Or have you suddenly turned into a perve? Do I need to be worried about you?”

I let out a soft chuckle, shaking my head. “No, you got it the first time. Jax and I are together.”

This sets her off in another round of crazy, jumping squeals.

“Jesus, Mom, you’re forty-four,” Jackson grumbles, unimpressed. “You want to tone it down a bit?”

“What, I can’t be excited that my life-long dream has finally come to fruition?”

Jackson holds his hands up. “I’m just suggesting maybe you could be excited in a more age-appropriate fashion...”

My brows shoot up. “This is your life-long dream?”

“Hell yeah,” Steph says with an eager nod. Then she sighs, her expression turning wistful. “Well, this or singing on stage with Whitney Houston, but I don’t think that will ever happen.”

“Yeah, it doesn’t seem likely,” I agree, doing my best to keep the amusement off my face.

Jackson rolls his eyes before side-stepping Steph so he can greet me properly with a soft kiss.

“Aww, you two are so *cute!*” Steph coos.

Jackson groans. “Fucking hell, Mom, are you going to be like that every time you see us together.”

“Jackson, don’t swear,” Steph chides. “And, yes, of course I am. My two baby boys are finally together and in love. It’s just so exciting—let me enjoy it!”

“You might want to clarify that we’re not *actually* related if you’re telling

other people about this,” I warn her. “Society tends to frown on that kind of thing as a general rule.”

“Can you please close your eyes again so I can show you the surprise?” Jackson asks, hitting me with an expectant look.

My brow furrows. “I thought Steph was the surprise.”

“No, apparently I’m *in the way*,” Steph says with a dramatic sigh.

“I didn’t say that, I just asked you to wait out here for a bit,” Jackson counters.

I let out a soft chuckle. “Um...okay. What’s the surprise?”

“Here—” Jackson reaches around from behind me to cover my eyes with his hand and then starts prodding me forward.

Whenever Jackson is this close to me it’s difficult to concentrate on anything else, even under normal circumstances, but without my vision everything is heightened; the feel of his beard scratching my neck, his hot breath on my skin, his strong arms wrapped around me as he guides me forward. “You know, I’ve never been into the blindfold thing before but I think it might be something we should keep in the back pocket,” I murmur.

He lets out a breath of amusement. “Really?”

“Would you like that?”

“I might,” he murmurs. “But no handcuffs. I need you touching me.”

“I know. I need that too.”

Just as I’m about to suggest we go try out a blindfold right now, Jackson draws us to a halt and shuffles back a step. “Ready?”

Oh, right. The surprise. And Steph is here—no blindfolds right now then. I sigh. “I don’t know. I know it’s not you naked, I can’t smell bacon, and I can’t hear any of the muffled pleas for help that I’d expect if you’d kidnapped Oscar Isaac and had him tied up and gagged in a corner. So unless he’s passed out...”

“Alas, my love for you doesn’t extend to felony kidnapping of a celebrity,” Jackson says wryly. “Although I’m curious to know what you plan to do with a bound and gagged Oscar Isaac.”

“Obviously I’d release him,” I explain. “Then I’d get him to put on his Moon knight costume and work as my personal butler for the rest of his life.”

“You’re going to make a great lawyer, Skyler,” Steph says dryly.

I flash a bright smile. “Thanks, Steph.”

“Well, I apologize for crushing your dream of becoming a twenty-first century celebrity slave-owner,” Jackson says. “I hope this makes up for it.”

He lowers his hand from my eyes and I find myself staring at the closed door of Rocket's bedroom. I kind of figured the surprise had something to do with this seeing as how I saw Jackson coming out of here not long ago, but when Jackson opens the door to reveal the interior, I feel my jaw practically hitting the floor.

I've been so busy at work this week I've been crawling into bed as soon as I got home and have barely given the cat room a thought. But Jackson's been hard at work. The room is incredible. Even better than the cat paradise I imagined in my whirlwind of enthusiasm last weekend.

The climbing tree I was struggling to assemble last week is in the center of the room, with a spiral staircase-style climber in the far corner and wooden planks fastened to the walls. They're of varying sizes and placed all around the room, connecting together in a kind of multi-leveled circuit so that Rocket can climb up and down and around the room from either of the climbers or various points on the walls. There's a comfy looking ottoman in another corner that I have no memory of buying, with one of the cat mats sitting on top of it. It's framed by two of the tall plants I bought, and the other one is in the third corner, next to the cabinet that houses Rocket's litter box. Two pots of the cat grass have been set on top of that cabinet, and the other one is conveniently placed in front of the cat TV—AKA the window.

The window was something I was fretting about last weekend, because it's just a little too high up for a sofa or ottoman to be any good. But Jackson's come up with the simple yet brilliant solution of a square bar table. The pot of cat grass and one of the cat mats are sitting on top; and so is Rocket. He's currently curled up on the velvet mat, staring curiously at the apartment building across from ours.

"Jesus Christ, Jax," I gush, still gaping around the room in awe. "This is incredible. How the hell did you do all this?"

A bashful smile crosses his face. It's adorable. "Drew helped a lot. And the actually doing it part wasn't all that hard—especially because it doesn't really matter if the shelves aren't exactly level," he explains. "But I needed to watch a *ton* of YouTube clips to work out exactly what needed to be done. That took a while."

"It's incredible," I gush, gazing around the room again before flashing my boyfriend a broad grin. I reach for him and pull him into my arms, nuzzling my temple against his and kissing his cheek. "I love it so much. It's perfect."

"Aww. You two are just so *cute*," Steph coos. "But can I ask, sweet child

of mine, is the reason you didn't want me to see this room before now because you were waiting for Skyler to explain why the cat gets a bedroom while I'm on the couch?"

Jackson holds his hands up in defense. "Hey, it's *his* cat."

"*Our* cat," I correct firmly. I turn my glance to Steph, offering a quirk of my lips. "Jackson pretends he doesn't like Rocket but I've seen them *cuddling*."

"Those cuddles were foisted on me," Jackson protests.

I arch a brow at him. "And I suppose Rocket stole your credit card and bought that ottoman over there all on his own? Naughty cat—looks expensive."

Jackson's cheeks flame. "It's to keep all his fucking toys out of the way. And it matches the decor."

"Oh, Jackson, you're a *cat* person," Steph teases.

"Am not," Jackson scowls.

As though wanting to weigh in on the debate, Rocket tears his attention from the window and stretches himself out before stepping off the table onto the climbing tree and racing down. He prances across the carpet, head held loftily until he reaches Jackson and starts rubbing his face against his leg.

"Oh my god, Jackson," Steph says. "Of course you love him—he's the cat version of Skyler."

"Well, we are awesome and adorable in equal parts," I agree.

Steph offers a wry smile. "I was thinking more...cocky and snuggly."

I nod. "Well, I do like to snuggle."

Jackson rolls his eyes and starts shuffling back into the living room, leaving Rocket meowing in displeasure.

I bend down and scoop the cat into my arms, giving his head a gentle scratch. He purrs in satisfaction and practically falls limp, making me snort with amusement as an unlikely resemblance flashes through my head. "Yeah, I don't know. I think he's more like Jackson."

"ARE YOU NERVOUS?" JACKSON MURMURS INTO THE DARKNESS, HIS BREATH brushing my face as he speaks.

We're curled up facing each other, with our heads barely an inch apart on

Jackson's pillow. Even in the darkness I can see the depth of love in his eyes. I can feel him reaching into my soul and brushing a reassuring hand over the name that's been etched there for as long as I can remember. I don't even hesitate to respond honestly. "Terrified."

In typical fashion, he doesn't brush me off with easy reassurances, instead lifting a hand to thread gently through my hair for a moment before quietly asking, "Why's that?"

I let out a soft sigh. "I don't know."

His pierced brow arches slightly in obvious skepticism. "I think you do."

I frown, shaking my head. "No, I really don't. Seriously, Jax—I don't fucking get it. I've been feeling good about this ever since the exams," I remind him. "I've been confident. I was sure I did well. But now..." I let out a heavy breath. "I just can't stop going over it and thinking maybe I just imagined all that. For all I know, I totally bombed—"

The corner of Jackson's mouth twitches up, and I see a glimmer of amusement flicker in his dark eyes. Not appreciated.

"Jax, it's not funny," I pout. "I'm really worried here."

This causes a full-blown smile to break across his face, and as gorgeous as Jackson's smile is, I'm really not sure now is the time.

Before I can call him out on it, he closes the little distance remaining between us to rest his forehead against mine, his breath making my lips tingle as he murmurs his next words, "Sky, you're not terrified of failing the Bar. You're terrified of being wrong."

"It's the same thing."

"No, it's not." He draws back a little to gaze into my eyes as his hand slips from my hair, down to cup my cheek. "You're smart enough to know that tomorrow's not the be all and end all. You've done all the hard work already, and we both know no matter what happens, you're going to get your law license, even if it means taking the exam twice a year for the next five years."

"Jesus, that sounds like a nightmare," I grumble.

"But you'd do it." The conviction in his words is unwavering. "You're the most driven and determined person I've ever met, Sky. You're not going to let anything stop you from becoming a lawyer—definitely not a test result."

"But—"

He offers a soft smile and leans in to press a soft kiss to my lips. "You're

scared of being wrong. You're scared that if you don't pass when you felt so good about the exam it means you won't ever be able to trust your judgement again."

"Maybe..." I allow.

The amusement returns to Jackson's gaze. "And maybe you're a little worried people are going to think you're a pompous, self-aggrandizing dick if you can't back up all your claims of brilliance."

My lips form a sulky pout. "You're failing boyfriend duty right now, Jackson. You're not supposed to make fun of me."

He lets out a soft laugh and lowers his hand to brush his thumb over my lips. "As much as I love this pouty face, you can stop sulking. I'm not making fun. No one who actually knows you is going to think that for a second."

I don't think he actually meant to distract me by touching my lips, but it works all the same. I can't stop my tongue from poking out and swirling around the tip of his thumb.

He lets out a soft little noise that clearly indicates his surprise; I don't *think* it's a sound of displeasure or protest, but I pull my tongue back anyway and just let my lips rest against the pad of his thumb. We're still like that for a moment, and then Jackson slowly slides his thumb between my lips, pushing inside my mouth until I meet the resistance of the web of his hand.

I'll admit, finger and toe sucking isn't something I've ever found particularly appealing; but everything else with Jackson has been new and different—and better—so I guess it shouldn't be much of a surprise that this is too.

As I slide my tongue over the length of his thumb, he lets out a little rumble of pleasure and I feel his free hand slip into my hair, applying gentle pressure as he holds my head in place.

Instinct seems to take over me and I start going to town, swirling my tongue and sucking hard; I even use my teeth, which is obviously an absolute no-go with other types of appendage sucking. Jackson seems to really like it, though, so I start to alternate between some hard suction and scraping my teeth up the length of his thumb. Over and over.

Finally, he drags his thumb from my mouth, leaving me a little dazed, breathless, and horny as fuck.

Leaning over me, he murmurs in my ear, "My turn."

And then he's nudging me onto my back and moving above me, pressing

kisses over my skin as he makes a southward path.

“*Jax.*” His name falls from my lips in a soft groan as his hands, and then his lips find my cock. “Shit...*Jax.*”

I let my fingers roam over the thick muscles of his shoulders, up his nape, over his scalp as he takes my cock in his mouth with all the reverence and love and care he always shows me in every single aspect of our lives.

This isn't sex. And I don't need it to be.

Pleasure. Intimacy. Connection. That's what Jackson and I have; that's what makes it so much better than anything I've experienced before.

Sex was only ever for hook-ups.

Love has always been for us.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Skyler

“FUCK, WHY WON’T IT UPDATE,” I GROAN, FRANTICALLY CLICKING THE return key on my laptop over and over to refresh the page. “Shit—what if there’s a problem? What if enemy agents have hacked into the system and the whole network is shut down and they can’t post the results and I have to wait weeks for the postal ones and—”

“Babe, calm down.” My panicked ramble dies off as Jackson slides his arms around me from behind and gently nuzzles his head against my jaw. “It’s not midday yet. I think the most likely scenario is that they’re waiting for the scheduled time.”

I tilt my head back with another groan of frustration. “*How* is it not midday yet? God, this morning is taking for-fucking-ever.” Like the other first years at our firm, I’ve been given today off work. I guess everyone figured we’d be useless anyway—all distracted and stressed out in the morning while waiting for our Bar results, then wanting to either rush out and celebrate or crawl into a hole and die depending on what the outcome was. A day off seemed like a good idea when Leona suggested it, but now I’m wondering if maybe I shouldn’t have just gone into work this morning and let that take my mind off things.

“Here, baby,” Steph says brightly as she emerges from the kitchen with two champagne flutes in hand, both filled with what looks to be orange juice. She extends one of them out to me as she approaches the kitchen table where I’m hunched over my laptop. “This might make you feel better.”

Jackson straightens up, his tight hold of me easing as his hands move to rest on my shoulders instead. “Mom, is that a mimosa? We’ve already established it’s not even noon.”

Steph shrugs. “So?”

“Since when do you day-drink?” Jackson presses.

Steph lets out an indignant scoff. “I don’t *day-drink*, Jackson. But I’m a woman in my forties and I can damn well have a little champagne and orange juice in the morning if it makes me feel better about all the crazy shit my body’s doing right now.”

“Okay, okay, we don’t need details,” Jackson mumbles, prompting Steph

to roll her eyes.

“Here you go, baby,” she says to me as she offers the mimosa again, her familiar smile back in place.

I take it from her, managing a small smile in return despite the tangle of nerves and dread twisting around in my gut. “Thanks. I’m not sure I should be celebrating yet, though.”

“You’ve got plenty to celebrate,” Steph insists. “No matter what that test score says.”

I give a half-hearted nod and take a sip of the drink, unable to help a little cough escaping me as I swallow, because it is *strong*. “Wow. That’s—are you sure you used enough champagne?”

Obviously curious, Jackson plucks the glass from my hand and takes a sip. “*Jesus*, Mom!”

Steph narrows her eyes at us, clearly unimpressed by our feedback. “Would you boys like me to detail some of the wondrous joys of the perimenopausal experience?”

I give a quick shake of my head. “Nope. No thanks. I’m good.”

“Yeah, let’s keep some boundaries,” Jackson mumbles.

Steph lets out a wry chuckle, shaking her head. The apartment buzzer sounds and she sets down her glass and starts to move away. “I’ll get it.”

I fix my eyes back on the screen in front of me, once again tapping frantically at the return key. “*Why* isn’t anything happening?” I whine.

“Still sixteen minutes to go, babe,” Jackson reminds me, rubbing his hands over my shoulders.

“God, this is torture,” I grumble. Tilting my head back, I gaze up at Jackson, offering him the pouty, entreating look that’s been his kryptonite for decades. “Distract me?”

Amusement flits over his face and he lets out a wry chuckle. “How should I do that?”

“I’m sure you can think of something...”

He quirks a teasing brow at me. “I could put on a puppet show? Or dance the hula?”

I grin at him. “You’d look hot in a hula skirt.”

Jackson’s head falls back as he lets out a burst of laughter, and I instantly feel the mess of nerves inside me untangle and melt away. It really doesn’t matter what that score is. I already have everything I need right here.

“I love you.”

His response is written all over his face as he smiles down at me. He bends down and brushes a soft kiss to my jaw. “*My Skyler.*”

“Jax, you’ve got a package,” Steph announces, closing the apartment door with a thud.

Jackson straightens up and I turn around in confusion. I hadn’t even realized Steph had left.

“Here you go.” She crosses the living room and hands Jackson the small padded satchel, prompting his eyes to light up when he sees the label.

“*Finally!*”

“What is it?” I ask curiously.

He just offers a secretive smirk and starts walking backward toward our bedroom. “Come with me. I’ve got a distraction for you.”

Intrigued, I push myself out of my chair and follow after him. “Is it the blindfold we talked about? Should I get naked?”

“What was that about boundaries?” Steph asks dryly.

I let out a breath of laughter but can only manage a half-hearted shrug by way of apology.

When I enter the room, I find Jackson sitting casually on the unmade bed, spinning the package around in his hands. “I ordered this ages ago,” he explains. “It was supposed to be a present for starting your new job, but it’s taken forever to get here.”

“So it’s *not* a sex thing?” I tease, one eyebrow quirked.

He lets out a soft laugh. “Afraid not. Sorry to disappoint.”

“You could never disappoint me.”

Even though the present is supposedly something innocent, I can tell that Jackson’s a little nervous about it, so I decide to close the bedroom door to give us some privacy.

“So it’s a present for me?” I ask, joining him on the bed. “I like presents.”

He offers an affectionate smile. “I know you do. This one...” He hesitates for a moment, tracing the seal of the satchel with one finger. “I wanted to get you something special, but it’s taken so long...now I’m not sure...”

“Well, *I’m* sure,” I tell him. “If you picked it, it’ll be perfect.”

Love and affection are written all over his face as he reaches out and cups the back of my head, drawing me forward for a soft kiss. “I love you.”

I can’t help myself from responding in the exact same way he did earlier. Smiling, I nuzzle my temple against his and brush a kiss to his cheek, just above his beard. “*My Jackson.*”

We stay like that for a moment, breathing each other in, before Jackson draws away and hands me the satchel. “Open it.”

Really curious now, I don’t hesitate to rip into the packaging, a little surprised when I pull out a book. Jackson is definitely *not* a book person, but he’s clearly put a lot of thought into this. I turn it over so I can see the cover and my whole body freezes as I’m overcome with a sense of rapt amazement.

“It’s a first edition,” Jackson says. “From the sixties. It said on the site I bought it from it was in really good condition, so I hope that’s true.”

Slowly coming out of my stupor, I move my hand over the cover, reverently tracing the foil stamping of the title, and the stenciled image of the familiar little girl. Over and over, I trace the delicate foil, my gaze fixated on the path of my forefinger as emotion causes my throat to tighten and the back of my eyes to prick.

“Sky?” There’s wariness in Jackson’s tone, but I still can’t bring myself to tear my gaze away as my forefinger once again traces the letters *R-A-M-O-N-A*. “Are you okay? You’re not saying anything...”

“It’s perfect,” I murmur. “The most perfect present I’ve ever been given.”

“Really? Even more perfect than the Poe Dameron boxer briefs from last Christmas?”

The corner of my mouth tilts up in response to his teasing, but I can’t bring myself to quip something back. I’m just too overwhelmed right now. “Did I ever tell you why this is my favorite book?” I ask him.

Jackson’s quiet for a moment, then he says, “I remember my mom gave you a copy she found at a junk sale and that was the first book you ever owned.”

I nod in acknowledgement of the memory. I’ve been obsessed with books and reading and learning for as long as I can remember, but it wasn’t until I was seven that I actually got a book of my very own. One that I could write my name on the inside cover, and read as many times as I wanted, and keep for as long as I wanted to—not like the library books that always seemed to be due back before I was done with them. It was the most precious thing I owned, and I cared for it as though it was a priceless heirloom. It wasn’t until years later that I found out it had only cost Steph about twenty cents at one of her weekend treasure hunts, but that didn’t change its value in my eyes.

I smile and shake my head slightly. “That made it more special. But it was already my favorite book before that.”

“Okay...why, then?” Jackson asks curiously. “Of all the thousands of

books you've read in your life—why this one?"

I trace my finger over the little girls again. "Because she led me to you. I would never have been bold enough to escape my place, let alone climb through your window if I hadn't been so fucking curious about this Ramona girl I heard Steph talking about. It just sounded like such an unusual name, and I was dying to know what made her a pest." I finally tear my eyes from the book and glance at Jackson, finding him gazing at me in that familiar way that makes me feel so cherished and loved. "I'm sure we still would have been friends, even if we were just neighbor kids chasing lizards and riding the bus to school together. But we wouldn't have been *us*. Not without her," I add, brushing my hand over the stenciled illustration of Ramona Quimby again. "This was the Big Bang."

A soft smile touches Jackson's lips as he takes a moment to gaze at me. I catch glimpses of wonder and gratitude in his expression, and I'm sure the same thing is written on my own face. "I guess it's my favorite book now, too."

I let out a soft laugh and carefully set the book down beside me before reaching for Jackson and pulling him in for some much-needed lip cuddles.

I feel as though the past twenty years have just replayed themselves in a matter of minutes, and all I saw was Jackson. *My Jackson*. My person. My heart. My home. My universe. My history. My future. My always.

"Marry me," I blurt out. It's a complete impulse, but as soon as I say the words, I know there's nothing that makes more sense than this. We were always going to spend forever together, even before our relationship changed. This would just be sealing the deal.

Jackson just stares at me, wide-eyed. "Huh?"

I slide my hand up to the back of his head, grazing my fingers over his scalp as I start laying kisses on his lips and cheeks and nose. "Marry me," I repeat. "Marry me, Jackson."

He lets out a soft hum of pleasure and butts his head back into my hand. "What was the question?"

I grin and move my kisses across to his ear. "It was more of a demand," I murmur. "But I can be nice and polite if it'll help. Please, marry me, Jax. Tomorrow."

He lets out a sputtering laugh, jerking a little and causing my hand to fall away. "*Tomorrow*? Today's not good for you?"

I draw back and let out a sigh. "Today's not good for the state of New

York,” I explain. “We need to wait twenty-four hours after getting the license or the marriage won’t be legal. Unless...” I perk up, hitting Jackson with a quirked brow. “You don’t happen to already have a marriage license lying around, do you?”

He shakes his head, eyes glimmering in wry amusement. “Sorry, babe. I guess it’ll have to be tomorrow.”

I grin at him. “So that’s a yes?”

“That’s a *fuck* yes.”

I throw my arms around him in a fierce hug that propels him back against the mattress. He takes me with him and I end up sprawled on top of him, staring down into the beautiful face that’s more familiar to me than my own reflection. “Celebration lip cuddles?” I suggest.

Jackson quirks his pierced brow suggestively. “How about *naked* celebration lip cuddles?”

A wide grin spreads over my face as I duck my head to brush a brief kiss to his lips. “I knew there was a reason I wanted to marry you.”

We roll around on the bed, stripping out of our t-shirts and sweats, and letting our hands and lips roam. Jackson flips us over and starts lavishing attention on my neck—tasting my heartbeat, as he calls it.

I let out a soft groan as the sensations start to mingle together—the light scratching of his beard, his heated breath, his wet tongue, the sense of pressure as he sucks on my pulse point.

I glide my hands over Jackson’s back, savoring the familiar feel of his hard muscles straining and flexing under my touch. I’m just about to move farther south to give his hole some attention—something he’s become very fond of since our first sponge bath last week—when there’s a rap on the bedroom door, reminding me that it’s the middle of the day and Jackson and I aren’t alone in the apartment.

“I hope I’m not...um...interrupting anything,” Steph says awkwardly from the other side of the door. “But it’s quarter past noon, so I just thought —”

“*Fuck!*” I stare up at Jackson with wide eyes. “You’re way too good at the distraction thing.”

He offers a wry grin as he starts to climb off me. “Hey, you’re the one who upped the ante with a proposal.”

I offer a goofy smile as I think about the proposal, and his response, and the fact that by tomorrow night Jackson will be my husband. My hand starts

to reach out with the instinct to pull him back down against me so we can finish where we left off, but then I remember why we were interrupted and I bounce off the bed and rush for the door.

“Skyler, wait—you’re practically naked!” Jackson calls after me.

I halt in my tracks halfway between the bedroom and the kitchen table, where I left my laptop—and my results. I’m not *naked*, but my *Power Rangers* boxer briefs don’t leave a whole lot to the imagination. And they definitely can’t disguise the boner I’m currently sporting.

“Oh, god.” At Steph’s awkward squeak, I glance up to see her covering her face, which is flushed bright red. “I’m sorry for...”

“It’s fine.” I shrug and continue toward the kitchen table, taking a seat at my laptop.

“If you say so,” Steph says, the doubt clear in her tone.

I draw in a deep, fortifying breath and log into my account again. “Jackson, come on—I’m about to open the results page,” I call.

“What the hell’s happened to all your sweatpants?” he calls back. “Do you know the ones you were wearing have pasta sauce on them?”

“I don’t need pants for this, Jackson,” I declare. “Just you—now get the fuck out here.”

“I can’t wait to tell this story when you’re a Supreme Court justice one day,” Steph says wryly.

Jackson finally ambles out of the bedroom, smiling with exasperated affection as he makes his way toward me. I’m a little disappointed to see he’s fully clothed, but I guess I shouldn’t have expected anything else—the downside of Steph visiting. From the corner of my eye, I see a streak of orange dart out from Rocket’s room and when I turn my gaze, I see him prancing over to me as well, as though he’s sensing this is a moment he doesn’t want to miss out on.

When Rocket reaches me, he springs off his feet, landing in my lap and curling up, just like he does every morning when I’m eating breakfast.

“Okay, I don’t know whether to be relieved that I can look at you again, or weirded out about the lack of boundaries between you and that cat,” Steph says, her face twisted up in a mix of amusement and dismay.

“Weirded out,” Jackson grumbles, but I know he’s joking. He loves Rocket, and after the epic cat room reveal last night, there’s absolutely no hiding it now.

I return my attention back to the screen, moving the pointer to hover over

the link to my results page. “Okay, this is it.”

Jackson gives my shoulders a reassuring squeeze and leans in behind me to brush his lips over my ear. “Just remember, no matter what this score says, you’re going to be an incredible lawyer—it’s what you were meant to do.”

I nod, feeling my heart swell with gratitude and love. After another steadying breath, I finally click on the link and read through my results.

For the second time in less than an hour, I’m stunned into speechlessness. Are these actually the right results? Maybe there was a mistake and they’ve been mixed up with someone else’s?

I mean, I left both of the exams feeling relatively confident, but holy fuck.

I was aiming for around the mid-sixties with the essays; the point was to demonstrate my knowledge of the law and answer the theoretical questions in a comprehensive, yet concise manner, and with eight essays to write in a single day, I wasn’t about to pen down any Alito-esque dissertations. And when I left the exam room that first day, nursing my cramping hand, I felt relatively confident I’d achieved that goal. I’d at least managed to complete each of the essays and thought my responses had made sense. It wasn’t until yesterday that I started to doubt. I’d been kind of out of it after that grueling day, and my attention had shifted pretty rapidly to the second part of the exam the next day. Could I even really trust my memory of that day?

I have no idea why it took me until yesterday to hit me that there was a possibility I could have been completely misremembering that slight spring in my step as I left day one of the exam, but it turns out I was worrying for nothing. I didn’t hit my goal of mid-sixties; I did better. I have six essay scores—including both of the higher-weighted ones—in the seventies, as well as two sixty-eights. The total score for the written section is 160.7.

When I glance further down and see my score for the MBE—the Multistate Bar Exam—I almost fall off my chair. 169.2.

Jesus Christ. I knew this section would be stronger than the written one, but fuck. Combined, it’s a scaled total of 330 out of a possible 360. I’ll have to check, but I’m pretty sure that scrapes me into the ninety-ninth percentile. What the hell is happening right now?

“Oh my god, he’s so quiet,” Steph says in a soft hush, her voice tinged with concern. “Is this good or bad? I don’t know what these numbers mean.”

“I have no idea either,” Jackson says. He rubs his hands soothingly over my shoulders. “Sky? What’s going on? You okay?”

I should really respond and reassure them both, but I'm just too captivated by the information on the screen as my eyes scan farther down the page to the percentiles for each of my MBE subjects. *Civil Procedure: 97.8. Constitutional Law: 96.2. Contracts: 95.7. Criminal Law: 98.1...*

"Are these supposed to be out of a hundred?" Steph asks, sounding completely lost.

"I don't know," Jax says. "These ones look good, but I don't know about these." He reaches past me to point at my essay scores. "Last time he got a score in the sixties he didn't get out of his pajamas for a week."

"I just don't understand how they get that score from those numbers," Steph whines. "Oh, I should have finished high school! I blame you for this, you know."

"Gee, thanks, love you too, Mom," Jackson says dryly. He squeezes my shoulders again and then lifts a hand to thread through my hair, prompting me to let out a soft sigh. "Babe, talk to me. I can never tell if something's really fucking good or really fucking bad because you always have the same reaction for both. It's very frustrating."

This finally brings me out of my stupor and I let out a rumbling laugh, tossing my head back to grin at Jackson. "It's really, really, *really* fucking good."

He beams in return. "You're a lawyer?"

"Hell, yeah! Top one percent in the country."

"*Oh my god! You little overachiever!*" Steph squeals, nudging Jackson aside so she can wrap me in a tight hug. "I'm so proud of you, baby."

I grin and hug her back. "I'm so glad you're here for this."

"Me too. And now I'm going to let go because I've just remembered you're not wearing pants and it's getting weird."

I let out a wry laugh as she releases her hold on me and steps back, allowing me to shoo Rocket off my lap and stand up, throwing my arms around Jackson.

He presses a kiss to my forehead and draws back, eyes shining with adoration. "You're incredible. You know that, right?"

"Because of you. If everyone who took the Bar had a Jackson there wouldn't be any fails." I think for a moment and then correct myself, "Well, actually, it's a curve so I guess there still would be, but it'd be ridiculously tight."

He lets out a soft laugh and ducks his head to nuzzle against my temple.

“Love you.”

“Okay, I’m going to head this off before you forget that I’m here,” Steph says wryly. “How about Skyler gets dressed and then we go out and celebrate?”

I shrug and shift around to face her. “Sure. Let’s do lunch—I’m starving. And then Jackson and I have some... errands we need to do this afternoon.” I slide a conspiratorial glance toward him, which Steph clearly misinterprets based on her response.

“And I’m assuming you want me out of the apartment so you two can do these “errands”?” She raises her hands to make air quotes, a suspicious eyebrow raised.

“Um...no. We won’t be here,” I inform her. “We’ll be Downtown.”

Her forehead creases as she scrutinizes the pair of us. “So...you’re *actually* running errands?”

I shrug. “That’s what I said.”

“Then what was with this shifty look?”

“There was no shifty look.”

She places her hands on her hips and fixes me with one of her “mom” expressions. “There was so a shifty look. Spill it.”

I chuckle with wry amusement and exchange a glance with Jackson. Then I turn back to Steph to break the news. “Jax and I are getting married. So we’re going to get the license this afternoon.”

“The wedding’s tomorrow,” Jackson adds.

Steph places a hand to her chest as her jaw drops practically to the carpet. Her expression seems to be caught between overjoyed and horrified. “But I can’t be in wedding pictures looking like this!” she cries, running a hand over her brown ponytail. “I have gray roots coming through!”

Epilogue

Jackson

It turns out it's actually pretty easy to plan an awesome wedding in only twenty-four hours when some of your best friends happen to be rolling in cash and hold a ton of influence and prestige throughout the city—or dating guys who happen to fit that description.

Skyler and I haven't had to lift a finger—everything's been taken care of for us. Charlie sweet-talked the clerk at the City Hall into squeezing us in with a decent time slot this evening; Paxton's recruited one of his camera guys to take video—a job that I'm positive is well below the paygrade of someone working at a cable news station like BCN; Deacon's arranged for us to have the reception at Tanner's son's bar—and I can only assume Tanner has foot the bill; even Mom's been taken care of, with Emme squeezing her in for a complimentary hair appointment on what would be one of her busiest work days.

Spencer and Sullivan were particularly quick to spring into action when Skyler and I broke our news yesterday. I'd almost go as far as to call it *suspiciously* quick. As much as I appreciate their help, and I'm sure it's *mostly* coming from a place of friendship and love, I have a feeling they're both over the moon that we're not lingering over our nuptials, so the risk of thunder being stolen for their own upcoming weddings has been dramatically reduced. Personally, I don't really get the whole concern there—I wouldn't give a shit if someone decided to make some big, exciting announcement today, or show up with a new partner and steal everyone's attention. As long as I can still marry Skyler, that's all I need.

But considering the generosity they've shown us, I'm not going to call them out. Spencer has organized for us to stay in a deluxe penthouse suite at one of his hotels tonight and tomorrow—a mini honeymoon considering Skyler won't be able to take any real time off work for a while. He's also offered the services of his private driver and one of his *gorgeous* cars—a gun metal gray Aston Martin that I unashamedly drool over every time I lock eyes on it.

Sully took care of last night's bachelor party—because apparently even a one-day engagement needs a bachelor party—and he's had his private tailor

measure us up for new suits.

“He won’t have time to make them to order,” he told us last night, looking far more disappointed that the situation warranted if you ask me. “So you’ll have to make do with ones that are adjusted off the rack.”

“*Off the rack? On our wedding day?*” Skyler gasped, clutching his chest. “Are you hearing this Jackson? We may as well walk down the aisle in rags.”

Sully groaned, covering his face with his hand. “I know. It’s terrible...”

“For fuck’s sake, Sullivan.” Drew let out an exasperated huff, shaking his head. “He’s messing with you. No one but you even knows the difference.”

Yep. That’s true. I have no idea what the difference is. A designer suit is a designer suit, right? I feel just as weird wearing this as I do in any other suit I’ve ever worn.

But Skyler’s going to like it. That makes me smile softly as I give my reflection one last glance in the bathroom mirror.

“You ready?” Drew asks me.

My smile widens. “Hell, yeah.”

We exit the bathroom into a corridor that’s not quite bustling, but not empty either. It’s a little strange to see people going about their business while I walk toward the what is bound to be the best moment of my life.

Okay, maybe second best. The best will always be the moment Skyler knocked on my window when we were seven years old.

“Nervous?” Drew asks.

I shake my head, my smile still in place. “Nope.”

He lets out a wry laugh. “You’re not even a little worried about giving Sky control over the song selection for your first dance?”

“Why should I be worried about that?”

“Because it’s *Skyler*. You could end up dancing the first dance of your married life to “Pump It” or something like that.”

I let out a little huff of amusement and give a one-shouldered shrug. “Then we’ll dance our first dance to “Pump It”.”

I don’t think it’ll come to that, though. Skyler can be fanciful and inappropriate and irreverent at times, but that’s with other people; not us. He’s never trivialized our relationship and I can’t imagine he’d start now.

We finally get to the clerk’s office, and I push the door open, causing the soft hubbub floating around the room to quiet. Everyone’s here. The guys from the team, their partners, some of Skyler’s friends from work, my

mom...even Deacon's parents have made the drive over from Long Island; and Paxton's daughter, Kaley, is here all the way from North Carolina. I'm touched by the unexpected gestures of support, and I know it's going to mean a lot to Skyler as well.

But as thrilled as I am to have all these people here, there's only one face I want to see right now. And fortunately, I don't need to wait long, because Skyler and Deacon stroll into the clerk's office only a minute or so behind Drew and me.

Flickers of amazement and gratitude cross Skyler's face as he notes all the people in the room, and then it melts into a familiar expression of love and appreciation as his eyes land on me. He steps toward me, not saying anything but not needing to. I can see it all there in his face.

We take a long moment to just gaze at each other, soaking in the moment. And then Skyler breaks the silence, his lips curved up in a wry smirk. "You see, Drew? This is how you do an engagement—no muss, no fuss."

"So after twenty years together, you finally decide to get married and that's *fast* to you?" Drew shoots back, his pierced eyebrow raised in challenge.

"I'm not sure you can count the twenty years when they only started dating a month or so ago," Skyler's friend Cait says thoughtfully.

"Yeah, I keep expecting one of them to announce they're pregnant," Charlie snorts.

"The past totally counts—they've been in love with each other since they were kids," Deacon declares.

My mom nods in agreement, clutching a hand to her chest. "It's true. I was there. It was so sweet."

"Can you all please stop stealing our vows," I grumble.

Fortunately, the clerk bustles in at that moment, prompting everyone to fall silent. It's time.

The actual ceremony is kind of a blur. The clerk says some things that I barely hear because I'm so fixated on my Skyler, and then we say some things that have emotion catching in my throat.

"...best thing in my life..."

"...one soul in two bodies..."

"...always..."

The words are like little pinpricks of light that are impossible to catch all at once. Even as I'm saying and hearing them, I know I'm too overwhelmed

in this moment to be able to remember this word for word. And I don't need to. It's all stuff I already know. It's engraved on my heart, entwined with my DNA.

I don't even notice it happening, but as we exchange our vows, we move closer and closer together until our foreheads are touching and our words are no louder than soft murmurs. I doubt anyone can hear us now, but we're not asked to speak up, which I'm glad for.

Once we're done with the vows, we exchange the rings Mom found for us during her thrift hunting expedition yesterday afternoon. And then we're pronounced married.

I wrap my arms around Skyler and pull him in for our first lip cuddle as husbands. He responds by linking his arms around my neck and pulling me even closer as he increases the pressure of the kiss.

We finally break apart and I duck my head a little so I can nuzzle at his temple, murmuring, "Congratulations, Mr. Downey."

He sighs happily and sinks further into my arms. "I love that we share a name. That name."

I brush a kiss to his hair and squeeze him tighter. There really wasn't much to the discussion about names last night. Skyler's always felt much more a part of my family than the one he was born into, so this seemed like the obvious choice.

"This is really sweet and everything," Charlie says, reminding me that there are a whole heap of other people gathered in this room right now and it's not just me and Skyler, "but the clock's ticking on our timeslot here. Maybe we should take this outside? Get some photos on the steps while it's still light?"

"Oh, the sun will be setting soon," Mom gushes, beaming with enthusiasm. "It'll be beautiful."

I throw my hands up in a helpless gesture and we let our guests lead the way out of the clerk's office.

We have to pose for about a million photos on the steps of City Hall, and only get a reprieve when the light gets too bad. Thank god it's April or we'd be here for several more hours.

"Do you think it'd be rude if we skipped the reception and just went straight to the suite Spencer got us?" I ask Skyler as we roll through Manhattan in the beautiful Aston Martin.

"I've been instructed to take you straight to the bar, sir," Isaac, Spencer's

driver says. “No detours.”

I slump back against the buttery-soft leather. “Damn it. He knows us too damn well.”

Skyler lets out a soft chuckle. “Well, we don’t have to stay *long*.”

Like the ceremony, the reception is relatively small—Skyler and I just don’t have that many people in our lives who are important enough to invite to an event like this—but the staff at the bar have done a nice job of making the space suit the crowd. They’ve taken out most of the tables and brought in sofas and lounge chairs, and they’ve designated a generous space in front of the stage as a dancefloor. They’ve also used curtains to block off a whole section at the opposite end to the stage, giving an impression of a more intimate venue.

“It looks great,” I say to Skyler, nodding in approval.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” I hear a familiar voice say through a microphone. I turn my gaze to the stage and see Deacon beaming at us. “It seems the newlyweds have arrived, so if everyone could raise their glass to celebrate our friends—Misters Jackson and Skyler Downey.”

“To the happy couple!” Someone—Paxton, I think—calls out, which results in an echo as the words are repeated by the crowd as they drink a toast.

“Wow,” Skyler exclaims, brows shooting up in surprise. “If I knew getting married was going to get me this much adoration, I’d have done it years ago.”

I offer him a wry smile. “You should have asked me years ago.”

He offers me one of those beautiful smiles and I’m about to lean in for a lip cuddle when we’re interrupted by another voice coming over the microphone. When I glance up, I’m surprised to see an upright piano has been moved out onto the stage. Although I’m not all that surprised to see Jazz sitting at it—Deacon mentioned he’d be able to play music for us tonight.

“Hey, I’m Jazz—I guess I’m the entertainment for the evening. I also own this bar, so don’t fucking wreck anything.”

I let out a breath of amusement. I’ve only met him a couple times, but how this guy is Tanner’s son, I have no idea.

“Oh, we’re up!” Skyler exclaims, his face radiant with anticipation. “Come on.”

“Huh?”

I don’t receive an explanation as Skyler grabs my hand and tugs me

toward the space that's been designated as a dancefloor.

"I don't really play this thing that often anymore so I'm a bit rusty," Jazz continues. "Skyler asked for my help with the first dance, though, and this song fucking sucks on guitar..."

Suddenly, the lights around us go down and then we're hit with a blaring spotlight that causes me to screw my face up at the intensity.

"Jackson, stop making that weird face," Skyler hisses anxiously. "This is being videoed."

"What's going on? Why are my corneas being burned off?"

"Jackson, it's just a spotlight." His voice is a mix of amusement and exasperation. "Here, this might help." He puts his arms around me and draws me toward him, then he turns us around so that my back is to the spotlight. He winces a little when he gets a full face of the blaring light, but that's as far as his expression changes. "Better?"

I nod. "Better."

Skyler holds up a thumb and I hear Jazz grunt into the microphone, "Fucking, finally."

And then I hear music. The soft tinkling of keys and a familiar tune played with absolute perfection as far as I can tell. There's nothing rusty about Jazz's ability, and while his voice is different to the one I'm used to, he's still able to do the beautiful lyrics justice.

Skyler and I are supposed to be dancing, but we're not. We have our arms around each other and are swaying slowly as our temples brush together.

I've always loved this song. The moment I first heard it, it felt as though the lyrics had been specifically written for Skyler and me. And recently it's taken on a whole new depth. Especially after the story he told me yesterday with the book.

"How did you know?" I murmur.

"Know what?"

"This song. I don't remember telling you about it—how much it reminds me of us. That's why it's one of my favorites."

He's quiet for a moment, before admitting, "I didn't know about that. I knew you liked it. But there are a ton of songs you like. I chose this one because it's true." He tilts his head to press a soft kiss to my ear before whispering, "I am the luckiest."

There are three other books in the [Suits & Sevens](#) series! They're available now on multiple retail platforms.

Want more ideas for your next read? Check out the "What to Read Next" page for some suggestions!

LOVE FREE BOOKS? Check out [these shorts](#) when you subscribe to Isla's newsletter

What to read next

Want more [Suits & Sevens](#)? *Mr Big Shot* (Spencer's book), *Mr Right Now* (Sullivan's book), and *Mr Nice Guy* (Deacon's book) are available now.

Want more best friends by Isla? Check out [Fake it 'til You Make Out](#), [Hopeless Bromantics](#), [Rule of Law](#), and *The Ghosts of Crushes Past*

Want more ace spectrum characters by Isla? Check out [Web of Lies](#)

Want to read more about Tanner's son Jazz? Check out Isla's Patreon serial [Whiskey Tango Foxtrot](#) - it's a super-spicy cross-over between the Suits & Sevens and Love & Luck series with several chapters released each month. The first eight chapters can be read for free.

LOVE FREE BOOKS? Check out [these shorts](#) when you subscribe to Isla's newsletter

Visit Isla's [website](#) for more book info!

Isla & Her Books

Isla is a cocktail-loving, history-obsessed Aussie who writes low-angst queer romantic comedy full of spice, shenanigans and swoon-worthy men. She's best known for the *Love & Luck* series, and *P.S. I Loathe You*

Her favorite tropes include:

Queer-awakening

Friends to Lovers

Enemies to Lovers

Secret Fling

Age Gap

Sibling's/Best Friend's Ex

and many more...

Check out her [website](#) for everything you need to know, including how to get in touch via social media and where you can get her books on ebook, paperback, and audio.

