



*Friends,
Sexcapades, And
Love Affairs*

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By

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M/M Romance

Intended for Mature Audiences Only

This book contains graphic depictions of sexual intercourse and it is not meant for readers who are less than 18 years of age.

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Chapter One – Meet The Boys

Jared pressed his index fingers against his temples and stared dejectedly at the non-alcoholic drink in front of him.

“Are all your ships sinking right now or something?” A heavy hand landed on his back, making him wince and straighten up.

“How come you’re not already hooked up?” Jared questioned Adrian, his longtime friend.

Adrian shrugged and took a seat beside him on a high stool.

“I have yet to see someone I like,” he said as he grabbed a couple of peanuts from a bowl and threw them into his mouth with perfect skill.

At six point two, with the body of a Greek god, and the face of a sinner, Adrian never lacked bed partners. The guy knew his black hair and olive complexion were putting him in the same category as celebs on the dance floor and not only, and he took advantage of that, whenever and wherever he could. Also, as many times he could.

Jared eyed the way Adrian’s tank top stretched over his perfect pecs and sighed. He wasn’t exactly a twink, but there was no way he was in Adrian’s league. Also, he was still not over his rock phase, so he was still keeping his brown hair too long, which might not have drawn as many prospective partners as he wished. Everyone wanted a picture-perfect partner, with perfect abs, perfect pecs, a perfect haircut, perfect everything. Jared had a bit of a thing for flawed things, or so he wanted to flatter himself.

Not that Jared liked sleeping around. He wanted to go steady with some dude, at least for a while. Well, his problem was probably that he kept frequenting the same places as Adrian, who was the king of hookups. There was no way he would find the love of his life in a place like that.

He almost missed Mike, his other best friend, taking a seat by his right. At least the redhead was in as much a foul mood as he was. Mike, just like Jared, was searching for something. Not the same thing, but he was as unsuccessful as the more unfortunate of his two friends.

Mike was, unlike Jared, the perfect twink. Also, he was insecure about his looks, and that made him cute. Jared had pointed that out on more than one occasion. Adrian had been a bit blunt, touching Mike’s butt, and telling him he had a perfect ass and he would likely tap it.

Of course, right after that, Mike had pushed Adrian playfully aside and told him that he wasn’t into incest. That because the three of them were like brothers from different mothers, no matter how different they were, at first glance.

“So, no alpha top in the mood to get screwed by a cute twink?” Adrian asked Mike over Jared’s head, giving voice to what both of them were thinking.

Mike pouted and leaned over the bar to draw the bartender's attention. "What can I tell you, man?" he complained after, finally, the bartender took his order. "That's what I get from being into such a narrow fetish."

"Maybe you don't have the right approach." Adrian grinned. "Thought about Grindr?"

Mike made a face. "C'mon, man, do I look like I need some dating app to get laid?"

Adrian narrowed his eyes and examined his friend for a while. "Yeah." He nodded, and Mike stood up so that he could punch Adrian's shoulder without hitting Jared in the process.

"Can the two of you act more like your age, for fuck's sake?" Jared protested as the stool shook under his ass, due to what soon degenerated into an exchange of punches between his two best friends.

"Oh, sorry, grandpa, is past your bedtime or something?" Adrian joked. "Seriously, by your sour face, people would think you're ninety-three or something."

Jared pouted. "I'm younger than you."

"By three months," Adrian replied.

"You're already twenty-five, Adrian." Mike snickered. "Ancient. Ah, is that why you don't seem to score that easily lately?"

"Shut the fuck up." Adrian pretended to be upset over the friendly jab. "It's just that I'm picky is all."

"Sure, sure." Mike nodded like he didn't mean it. "At least Jared and I are owning up to our failures. C'mon, old man, admit it. You lost your shine to this young crowd."

"You and Jared want the impossible," Adrian said as he linked his fingers and placed his chin on them, elbows set on the shiny counter.

"Really?" Mike glared.

"Seriously?" Jared exclaimed, almost at the same time.

"Yeah," Adrian continued, sure of himself. "Jared, stop thinking about getting some house in the suburbs and settling down with a husband and two kids from two different surrogate moms. Gay guys still in their twenties don't do that. Seriously, you're making me wonder if you're not some crazy result of plastic surgery and you're actually eighty."

"We've been in kindergarten together, fucker," Jared said, amused by his friend's assumptions. "And I don't want a house and kids, what the fuck? I want a relationship."

“And?” Adrian shrugged. “You can have a relationship. Only that it might last between the time you say ‘hello’ to the guy and ‘bye’ after a crazy one night stand.”

“Ugh.” Jared rolled his eyes and pushed his hair back. “You’re clearly not the right guy to go to for relationship advice. I want at least a three-week relationship. Or three days! Is that really that much to ask?” He opened his arms and looked at the ceiling.

The ceiling didn’t reply.

“What can I tell you, man?” Adrian stretched and yawned. “Everything happens fast in this day and age. We have fast food, fast news, speed dating --”

“Speed dating?” Mike intervened. “Have you ever been to one of those?”

Adrian stared at his friend as if he had trouble understanding the question. “Of course I haven’t, what the hell? When you look like me, you don’t go to speed dating.” He pointed at his body as if it was unfathomable how anyone could ignore it and assume such unfathomable things.

“Well, not everyone’s lucky like you, Mr. I-Top-Everything-From-Top-To-Bottom,” Mike said with a grimace.

Adrian smiled at the compliment. Jared was sure that if he rolled his eyes each time Adrian was smug about himself, he would end up with a twitchy eye or two. But Adrian did have a reputation of being an uncompromising top, and that, of course, had triggered many conversations around the subject. Adrian even liked topping other guys pretending to be as incorrigible as him. And he had many notches on his belt to prove his prowess on the matter.

“Hey,” Mike exclaimed. “I know! You could lure one of those alphas, convince him to bottom, and then switch with me! Then I’ll manage the impossible!”

“Sorry, man, I don’t do charity work.” Adrian flashed his signature smile at his friend. “Ah, sorry, gentlemen, it looks like the perfect candidate for the position had just entered the door.”

“The position?” Mike questioned.

Jared needed to promise to himself that it was the last time he rolled his eyes at Adrian’s expense. “The ‘blowjob provider’ position,” he explained, and Mike, as expected, made a sour face.

“How that must feel,” Mike said regretfully while watching Adrian sauntering away. “Being able to nail anyone you want.”

Jared sighed, too. “I wish I were as uncomplicated as Adrian,” he said, mirroring Mike’s dejected tone. “Maybe I should start.” He pondered for a second and then reconsidered. “Nah, I’d better not.”

“So, what do you want to do?” Mike questioned.

“Probably not waste my Friday night like this,” Jared said with conviction. “I know I said that I’d be the designated driver, but do you think you and Adrian could catch a cab or something?”

Mike nodded and patted his shoulder. “No problem, man. I’ll tell Adrian you went home. But really, do you want to go home and sleep?”

Jared shrugged and pushed away the non-alcoholic drink he hadn’t touched. “Maybe I should consider some honorable dating app,” he said with a forced smile.

“Honorable?” Mike snorted. “If you find such a thing, let me know.”

Jared smiled. “Have you tried forums and stuff? You know, for your particular fetish?”

Mike shivered as if attacked by a cold. “I’d rather not end up on the next day’s six o’clock news. Me and dumpsters used for hiding corpses don’t get along that well.”

Jared laughed. Mike secretly wanted to go the old fashion way about his conquests. That might have explained his lack of success in the age of technology. One didn’t just meet the man of his dreams by walking down the street and buying bread, or doing something mundane like that.

He bid goodbye to Mike and headed for the door. He didn’t need to search for Adrian with his eyes. He was probably already with his ‘blowjob provider’, having the time of his life.

Adrian knew a confused guy when he saw one. And he was the best prescription and treatment for curing confusion. The newcomer looked like a jock and was throwing nervous looks around. All right, the prey had to be approached with care, but Adrian wasn’t one to waste an opportunity when he saw one.

The jock had sweet pouty lips, from what he could glean from his vantage point. A flight of stairs was the only thing between him and the current object of his interest.

For the love of all that was holy, he couldn’t get Jared and his obsession about relationships. All summer long, the city was a fuckfest, an all-you-can-eat-buffet. And with his looks, it was no problem for him to devour everyone in his path.

Adrian knew his friends were teasing him. There was no one to work as hard as him at the gym to look the way he looked.

The jock was at the foot of the stairs. He raised his head, and their eyes met for a second.

That was enough. Adrian smiled. The newcomer was skittish as a young colt, but he had gathered enough courage to walk into a gay club. From this point onward, it would be easy. And Adrian was happy to offer him a proper introduction to the delights of an alternative lifestyle.

His eyes trained on his target, he failed to notice someone climbing at the same time he wanted to descend, and his shoulder connected hard with the solid mass of another person.

“Watch it,” he growled, without looking at whoever crashed into him.

A firm hand was soon on his bicep, keeping him in place. Annoyed, Adrian stopped to look who the fuck dared to do that.

“Hey,” he tried to break his arm free, but the other steadied his grip even more.

His eyes clashed with a pair of eyes dark like a mountain forest, in the club’s lights. So the fucker was as tall as him if they could stare at one another like that. His curiosity piqued, Adrian examined the other.

Hmm, everything about this one spelled like he didn’t belong there. Starting with his clothes. Clearly, designer signed, but a suit, even if casual, was not exactly the type of getup ideal for a gay club populated night after night by guys in their twenties.

Adrian took in the wavy light brown hair, artistically arranged by a practiced stylist’s hand, the regular, yet a tad harsh features. Perfect cheekbones balanced the angular face, and the thin lips were arched in a snarl.

The fucker was attractive. But way too aristocratic for Adrian’s taste. Lean, yet strong, if he could tell by how firm the guy was keeping him in place with just one hand. He answered with a snarl of his own. For long seconds, they measured each other.

“I believe you owe me an apology,” the man said, and the way he enunciated every word confirmed Adrian’s suspicions once more.

He was a bit too far from home.

“An apology? Seriously?” Adrian snorted, still annoyed that he couldn’t shake off the grip, without getting forceful.

The long fingers continued to dig into his arm.

“Yes. Let me help you. You start by saying ‘I’m sorry’ and then you continue by admitting to what you just did.”

Adrian could not believe his eyes, nor his ears. Also, as the other spoke, he leaned into Adrian, making the words a whisper.

What the hell? He could smell expensive cologne. That meant they were way too close. Who did the fucker think he was? Royalty? He did look the part; Adrian had to give it to him. But otherwise, he was way out of line. Plus, why the hell was his pulse quickening?

Because he was pissed off. There was no other explanation.

“In your dreams.” He hissed, and this time, he pushed the other away, without caring that he might send the idiot flying on his ass.

The stranger stood his ground, but he loosened his grip on Adrian’s arm, and his hand eventually slid away. Adrian took a look around, but the jock was nowhere to be found now. He huffed in annoyance. “You,” he stuck one finger in the stranger’s face, “owe me a blowjob.”

The thin lips pursed in displeasure. “You certainly have the manners of an ape,” he commented, and this time, turned on his heels to walk away.

Adrian had a mind to go after him and find out what the hell he meant by that. He decided that the guy was not worth the trouble, and he began searching for the jock from earlier with his eyes. He went to the dance floor, scouting.

“Hey,” a shaky voice came from one side.

Adrian had every reason to smile with satisfaction, seeing the confused jock approaching him.

“I saw you looking at me earlier,” the guy said.

Ah, wasn’t he sweet? Adrian thought. “You look a little lost.” He threw one arm over the other’s shoulders and pulled him close.

The jock didn’t protest, nor did he make any sign that he didn’t like being treated with such familiarity by a stranger. Seldom was Adrian wrong about this type. He was looking for it, and that ‘it’ was precisely what Adrian would give to him.

“I believe you need someone to show you a good time,” Adrian continued, guiding his partner toward the bar, back up the stairs.

Jared walked over to his car, lost in thought. Going early to bed on a Saturday night sucked big time, but what sucked much more was to go alone to bed. Maybe Adrian was right, after all. He was trying too hard, and maybe that was why he couldn’t get a boyfriend. Perhaps he needed to let such things happen. After all, the more he tried, the more he seemed to fail.

“Hey,” someone from behind called.

Jared turned to see a man in a slim-fitting jacket and dress pants watching him intently. In the streetlight, he looked like someone in his late thirties, handsome and well dressed. His stature was not particularly impressive, but he had a presence, Jared could tell, by the way he was carrying himself. Probably, he worked some top management position. His friends often teased him over his Sherlock Holmes deductions but were also impressed with how right he was more often than not.

“Um, hi,” Jared replied, unsure what the stranger wanted.

There were people outside the club at that hour, laughing and talking loudly, but suddenly Jared felt like he and the stranger were the only ones there. The man moved and extended his arm. “I’m Chris. I thought I missed my chance.”

“Um, chance?”

It wasn’t like him to be a parakeet, Jared thought, but his throat became dry as Chris took his hand and shook it firmly. His hand was smooth and pleasant, and it was also warm and steady. Instantly, Jared felt a pull toward him. He shook his head.

“I saw you inside the club, and I was trying to gather some courage to come to talk to you, but then you disappeared.”

“Ah,” Jared replied, realizing, with some latency that he probably made the wrong impression by acting like he was dim-witted.

Chris laughed, and even the way he did that had something lazy in it, the quality of a feline, and Jared shook his head again. He had always known he liked men, but this instant attraction was strange.

“I’m sorry for calling after you like this. Are you leaving already? I was hoping I could dance with you, at least once.”

“Well, there wasn’t much for me to do there, I mean inside the club,” Jared said, finally finding his words and the ability to talk.

“May I offer you a drink? Not here, but somewhere else?” Chris asked.

“I’m driving...” Jared swallowed his words. A good-looking guy, not that he could see Chris clearly, but that was his impression, was asking him for a drink. “How about we have that drink at my place?”

He needed to stop talking. What was wrong with him? How could he propose that? But it was what guys did, right? Guys like Adrian, who didn’t wait for Mr. Right when they could have plenty of Mr. Right Nows.

Chris appeared a bit taken aback by that sudden offer.

“Sorry. Really,” Jared said. “I thought you wanted to hook up and --”

“Okay. I would love that,” Chris stopped the avalanche of stupid words threatening to pour out of his mouth.

Love what? Hook up? Have a drink at Jared’s place? Should he worry about acting out on an impulse?

“I would like to know your name first,” Chris said.

“Jared,” he said quietly.

“Jared, I’m pleased to meet you. And since I can sense apprehension from your part, I’m not known for dropping my partners’ corpses in dumpsters. It makes for a bad way to start mornings. Sorry, it was a lame joke. I heard you talking to your friend earlier.”

Jared started laughing. “For the record, that’s Mike who’s worried about that. This area is not known for high crime. But he wants a reason to justify not going for what he wants directly.”

Like you? A little voice whispered in his mind.

Chris came closer, invading his space, but Jared didn’t step back. From up close, Chris’s face came into focus better. Jared stared appreciatively at the strong jawline and took in the thick dark furrowed eyebrows. “I’m going to be honest with you here, Jared. I want that drink at your place. Also, to hook up, too.”

The last words were whispered and somewhere to the side, floating to his ear. Jared inhaled the smell of expensive cologne and decided he would do something stupid tonight, after all. Adrian wasn’t always wrong. If it was with this man, Jared wanted to hook up, too.

Mike stretched his arms on the bar and let his head drop. Jared had gone home. Adrian was somewhere, getting his dick sucked and doing other Adrian-like things. And he was sitting there, not even masturbating, he remembered that stupid meme. How did one go to a muscular alpha dude and suggest him to bend over and take it up the ass?

Jared would say he was too shy and lying to himself. Adrian would tell him to just do it. But Mike was afraid to admit that he thought himself too bad-looking to score with anyone, let alone the man of his fantasies. He was lanky, hairless, and the shock of curly red hair on his head probably put off most people.

Twinks had it tough, he admitted inwardly. There wasn't even enough porn to satisfy his curiosity and appetite for twink on alpha top fetish. Even as a twink, he wasn't much to look at, Mike was sure. It was enough for a guy to approach him, and he started shaking in his boots.

He was too strung. He had little experience. And he was hiding behind a stupid fetish just so he didn't admit that he had a hard time scoring, period, regardless of how prospective partners looked like and what position in bed they preferred.

"Hey, man," the bartender called.

Mike pushed himself up. "I know, I know, I'm scaring customers."

"Don't worry about that," the bartender said and flashed a cute smile at him.

Mike felt suddenly very invigorated. The bartender was as much a twink as he was, only prettier. He wore his black, probably dyed, hair over one eye, emo style.

"I'm finishing my shift, and someone will take over soon. Would you like to come to a party with me?"

"What kind of party?" Mike slapped himself mentally. He was thankful for a party. A party was a place where someone like him had better chances to score, at least compared to a club where dozens of attractive men in their twenties flexed their pecs and biceps on the dance floor.

"I think you will like it," the bartender said enigmatically. "I'm Jimmy, by the way."

"Mike," he offered.

"Here's a little something to keep you busy until I finish here." Jimmy pushed a red drink toward him. "It's sweet like you and on the house."

Sweet like him? Mike felt like melting. He sucked through the straw, as he mumbled some thanks that Jimmy could not have heard since he was already serving other customers.

Mike looked longingly at Jimmy. He seemed nice. And also, he seemed to like him, which was quite a big thing. Mike would never have admitted to Jared and Adrian to how afraid he was no one would like him. It was just easier to say he had a fetish, and no one cared to apply for satisfying his particular desire.

Both his friends were well-intended. It had been enough to complain a little, and Jared had showered him with compliments about how cute he was. Adrian had touched his ass and told him he was game if he was. Mike had had to decline not so politely; Adrian scared him a little, even if he couldn't admit it. He was the embodiment of sex appeal, and the ease with which he fucked and forgot was legendary. Mike didn't want to have a taste of that. His friends were off-limits because he couldn't even fathom what that would do to his fragile self-esteem. Also, they

were like brothers. Adrian had just shrugged like it was no big deal. Mike had been relieved; just the idea of having to fight off Adrian's advances was enough to make him shiver. Even to his friends, he couldn't admit he was so pathetic that he would accept a pity fuck as better than nothing.

The red drink was giving him a nice buzz.

"Are you ready?" Jimmy asked.

Mike nodded.

"Meet me in front in five. Ugh, I can barely wait to get out of here."

Jared could hardly hide his nervousness. His hands were sweaty against the wheel. It was true that he hadn't hooked up in a while, but that wasn't a reason to get like that. Chris's hand touching his knee startled him.

"Oh, sorry," Chris said and removed his hand. "The driver shouldn't be disturbed, right?"

Jared just nodded. What was wrong with him? He found Chris amazingly attractive, and they hadn't even looked at one another properly. Maybe Chris wasn't that amazing, and he just imagined things. And it was just a hookup, nothing more.

Chris was silent, and Jared didn't feel like striking a conversation. But wasn't it odd? As far as he remembered, guys hooking up tended to be chatty until they gathered their clothes and left in a hurry, inventing places to go and people to see.

This felt serious, for some reason. Jared had no idea why. Maybe Chris didn't look like the regular type to hook up. His clothes had a nice cut, and he had an austere look on his face, like a professor.

So he suddenly wasn't some hotshot CEO type? Jared chided himself internally. There was something about Chris that unnerved him and excited him at the same time. The last time Jared had felt that had been in eleventh grade when Andrew Thibault had changed next to him in the locker room and given him a first view of what a prime cut man meat looked like from up close.

Jared could still remember the smell of the body wash his classmate used. Well, otherwise, the guy was a douche, but Jared still cherished that memory. It was one thing to look at porn or at himself and another to have the real deal flaunted casually in front of him.

Was Chris some real deal? Jared risked a look from the corner of his eye, and an intense gaze met his stare. He cleared his throat and focused on driving. It was safer that way.

“So, how come you were alone tonight? No boyfriend?” Jimmy asked as they walked side by side.

The party, Jimmy had told him, wasn't far from there.

“No,” Mike admitted. “You?” he risked asking the question that has been on his mind since he had left the club.

“I have one,” Jimmy said and laughed.

“Oh. How is he like?” Mike tried to hide his disappointment.

“He's nice,” Jimmy replied. “I'll introduce you to him. I bet you'll like him.”

That was a bit of a strange thing to say, wasn't it? Mike wondered for a moment.

“We're here,” Jimmy said as they stopped in front of a house. There were guys outside the building, and music and laughter poured into the street from inside.

It was one of those old-style houses that probably cost a fortune. Mike didn't stop to ask Jimmy how come he had such affluent friends. The guy throwing the party had to come from old money. Or new. It didn't matter.

“I'll go search for Gino,” Jimmy said and scurried away, losing himself in the flurry of party attendants before Mike could ask him not to leave him alone.

With nothing else to do, Mike decided to look around, hoping he wouldn't stick out like a sore thumb. A couple of minutes later, he could feel his jaw dropping. Was his imagination playing tricks on him, or there were only hairy muscled men and twinkles at that party?

It was - sort of - his version of paradise, and now, he couldn't stop gawking.

“How are you, birdie?” A rough voice called from his left.

Mike startled but then reconsidered. Birdie? He wanted to laugh, but one look at the guy who said that was enough to make him bite his tongue. Everything he had ever described Jared and Adrian as his fantasy man was by his side. He wasn't very tall, but he had bulk, like really nice bulk. The low cut t-shirt showed off his chest, and Mike stared openly at the back curly hair.

“Just got here,” he said, without tearing his eyes away.

“Are you looking for something?”

Mike needed to stop staring at the guy's chest. The fact that some pretty nice nipples poked through the thin fabric of the t-shirt wasn't helping. He needed to look away, or he risked pissing

the guy off. Probably that was why women with generous cleavages got annoyed with men staring at their boobs. It was tacky, objectifying –

“My eyes are up here,” the guy said.

Mike looked up, feeling like a deer caught in the headlights. He was met by a friendly smile and one-day stubble that made the guy look rough and sexy. Mike was sure his knees were melted butter.

“Come with me.”

Mike just nodded as if he were in a trance. His hand was clammy in the other’s rougher one, but he didn’t even dare to breathe. Were his intentions that transparent? He was so fucked. Oh, he would get fucked, like all twink did, and seeing how he usually didn’t –

His mind was going places. He needed to make it stop. Soon, he was pushed through a door, and then plastered against the wall, as hungry lips took his. Mike’s eyes fluttered. This was so good, so, so good. It was happening incredibly fast, but it was so good that his head was spinning, and except for that sweet drink Jimmy had given him and a beer before, he had had nothing else to drink.

Mike could not repress a moan when he was deftly thrown on a bed and pressed into the mattress.

“Would you like to fuck me?”

Mike’s eyes snapped open. The question floated between them and landed on his neurons, making him wonder if he imagined things now. “What?” he mumbled under his breath.

“Your cock in my ass. Would you like that, birdie?”

That awful term of endearment was taking some of the magic of the moment. He would score, he would score, his mind stuck on repeat, he would score with a guy who looked like the perfect fantasy for him unless this wasn’t some bad joke. “Sure,” he barely managed to say.

The man stood up and took off his jeans, leaving everything else on. Mike blinked and pushed himself up. His hookup partner climbed the bed and put himself on his fours in the most nonchalant manner possible. Mike could feel his jeans getting tighter. Without a word, he got up and fumbled with the condom he always kept in his pocket, but the damned jeans were so tight that he couldn’t get it out.

“You okay there?” The guy threw over one shoulder.

“Yes, yes, please, just a second,” Mike said hurriedly, cursing and howling at himself on the inside.

The perfect muscled ass in front of him was only making him want to drop to his knees and thank heavens. Maybe later. Now, he needed to act and fast. Finally, he managed to rip the foil, and stood there for a second, as he watched his bed partner licking his fingers and pushing them wet into his tight behind.

“No lube,” he whispered.

“Just go ahead, birdie,” the other encouraged him. “I’ve taken bigger than you.”

Of course he had, Mike made a mental note and then pushed it away. The last thing he needed was to start worrying about his sexual prowess and natural endowment. Yeah, he was that bad, he concluded and grabbed the man’s gorgeous ass with both hands like he knew what he was doing.

At least, he could hold an erection. No, no, he wouldn’t think of that now. He knelt on the bed, behind his bed partner and managed to find the hole, which in itself, was a great achievement.

Mike groaned, under the sensory attack assaulting him, as his cock began to sink into incredible tight heat. It was like he couldn’t escape. He moved a little, adjusting his position, and leaned over the muscular body beneath him. His hands took in the taut muscles on his bed partner’s abdomen and followed the treasure trail down to wiry pubic hair. Mike sighed in pure satisfaction as his hands finally filled with the guy’s impressive erection, hard, and weeping.

This was paradise, Mike thought, as his hips moved and his cock found itself the way in that strong, yet pliant body underneath him. Oh, it was so good, so good...

His cock twitched and became harder to handle the pressure. If he only changed the angle, like this...

Fuck, the thought hit him a second too late. His hips jerked, and he couldn’t stop himself in time. “Fuck,” he groaned out loud.

Dreams did come true, but not to pathetic idiots like him. Mike slid away from the tight body that had milked him too good. He set his eyes on the ceiling, wondering what the hell he was supposed to say after coming so fast. If he were lucky, the guy would get up and leave, allowing him to wallow in his own shame.

“My turn now, birdie.”

“Um?” Mike managed to ask, but his mouth was taken into a hard kiss, and his pants were pushed down.

A grunt of frustration was breathed into his mouth as his jeans acted out and refused to give up. Eventually, the man pushed himself up, pulled his jeans together with his sneakers and Mike remained with his bottom half naked if he didn’t count the rubber still on his cock.

They were both half-naked now, and that equaled things. It was obvious what was on the other's mind to bring balance to their little encounter, as well. He watched with a bit of apprehension as the other rolled down a condom on his huge hard-on. Wait, could he even...

There was no time to debate over what was possible and what wasn't. His legs were pushed up, and he closed his eyes, decided not to make a fuss about getting skewered by what looked like an anaconda cock. His stupid mind began playing some silly song about giant snakes, and stopped, no, better said, screeched to a halt, when he felt something moist and firm touching his backdoor in the most pleasant way possible. Was the guy rimming him?

Dark eyes flickered at him over his balls and spent cock as he pushed himself on his elbows to look down. Mike made a small distressed sound, but then let himself drop on the bed. He had only been rimmed once before, and the memory was hazy, to say the least.

Now his ass was getting the royal treatment, and he couldn't stop moaning. Eventually, he decided to bite his hand to stop himself from making such weird sounds. Again, his tentative to get a bit of control over the situation was foiled, as the other stood up and covered him with his body.

The hand was pushed away from his mouth, and he was kissed again. The soft whimpers of pleasure turned into muffled protests as his ass was getting open by what had to be an alien cock or something close to that. Still, he was held down so well that there was little to do. For a second, Mike considered panicking, but his ass was slowly opening up, and the stretch was happening too slowly for genuine protests.

"Good, good, like this," words of encouragement were whispered into his ear, and Mike just bit his bottom lip, as his ass was busy welcoming the biggest ever cock he had ever had. With his luck, it would remain like that for a long time, too, so, despite the discomfort, he decided to suck it up.

The anaconda moved inside his ass, definitely with more skill than what he had manifested earlier. His prostate was hammered, literally hammered, that fast and hard the guy was fucking him, and Mike forgot about complaining.

He could run his mouth to his friends all he wanted about only wanting to top, but he had to admit that this was frigging amazeballs. Had he ever been fucked before? At the moment, he couldn't remember. All the cocks he had known previously were obliterated by that force of nature moving inside his ass, making his entire body quiver. His cock was going through all kinds of sensations, as it got hard again and began slapping against his abdomen, still neatly wrapped in the condom.

Oh, fuck, Mike thought. He would come again, and that was something worthy of a porno movie, the kind he had never thought he would come to live on his own.

Only a little was little, just a tiny little second... Mike grabbed his bed partner by his shoulders and closed his ass while the release shot through him.

“Fuck, you’re so hot,” the man praised him.

Mike mumbled words of thanks as his ass was pounded harder and harder. Tomorrow, he would spend the entire Sunday in bed, watching reruns of his favorite SF shows. It was all worth it, and he had it all planned out.

“Here it comes,” the other announced and pushed inside Mike so hard, that the bed creaked under them.

For a few seconds, Mike kept the other close as the hard cock pulsed inside his ass a couple of times.

“I’m going to take a quick shower,” the guy said as he pushed himself up and away from Mike. “You have a great ass, birdie. Don’t move, ‘cause I want another round.”

Another round? Mike’s eyes snapped open. He was pretty sure he was in no shape for such a thing. He searched for his jeans and began dressing up. It had all been nice and all, but a second round... there weren’t enough reruns he could watch to get over being impaled like that.

He would excuse himself, in the most polite possible, and then he would go mingle. He suddenly realized Jimmy must have been looking for him.

First things first, he needed to throw the full condom. The only way to do that was in the trashcan that had to be in the bathroom. Mike hated to do that, but there was no way he could sit there, with the condom in his hand, waiting for the other to finish his shower.

Damn, he didn’t even know the guy’s name. It had all happened so fast like Mike had it written all over him that he wanted to fuck a muscled top, and someone had just come to him and granted his wish. Like he had rubbed the magic lamp or something.

He put his sneakers on and then marched toward the bathroom. He opened the door just a little and snuck inside. “Just throwing this away,” he mumbled, looking down.

If he looked at the guy showering, he would stay. And then his ass would be in stitches.

“Gino, are you in there?” Someone began knocking on the door to the room.

Mike froze. Gino? Nah, that guy couldn’t be ...

“Birdie, could you go and open the door? I locked it so that we weren’t disturbed.”

Mike looked up in disbelief. Water was slushing down the man’s perfect body, and he just stood there for a second. “Gino? You’re... is that your name?”

The other flashed a gorgeous smile at him. “Yeah. Please unlock the door for me. That must be my boyfriend.”

Mike knew it had to be an animated gif best fitted for his situation, something with a guy throwing himself out the window. That was exactly what he needed to do.

Without a word, he withdrew and closed the door to the bathroom. Then he went directly to the window, pushed it up, and looked down. Sacrifices had to be made, and he had no time to think things over.

Mike took a deep breath, and off he went. He cursed as he touched the ground, but he was okay. As he sprinted away, there was only one thing on his mind: now he needed to skip town because soon there would be a bounty on his head and an angry boyfriend - someone else’s boyfriend - on his tail.

Jared pretended sudden preoccupation with a place on the wall where the wallpaper was starting to peel so that he wasn’t openly staring. Under the ceiling lights, he could see Chris was not amazing. He was gorgeous. Under the thick eyebrows, icy blue eyes were burning as they inspected him. The casual shirt was expensive, by what Jared could say, and a hint of chest hair could be seen through the two open buttons. Chris was caressing the neck of the beer bottle with slow moves while his gaze never left Jared.

The problem was they weren’t talking about anything. Jared could easily imagine how hard Adrian and Mike would laugh of his inability to speak. Typically, he was the most articulate of their trio.

But, right now, as he was sucking juice through a straw, he felt inadequate. Chris was out of his league. He had to be some hotshot manager or something, and his place wasn’t there in Jared’s apartment, watching wallpaper peeling itself under the inexorable force of gravity.

“I think I’ll take a quick shower,” he announced.

He didn’t need one, as he had had one before leaving for the club and he hadn’t exerted himself by dancing. Still, his jitters needed to calm the fuck down so that he could score with the man currently sitting on the sofa, drinking cheap beer.

Jared liked his small apartment and his beer. But Chris’s presence was enough to make everything appear drab and unappealing. As a general rule, Jared didn’t go for guys out of his league. Also, Chris seemed to be in his late thirties, or maybe he was even in his forties. Either way, Jared was sure he looked young for his age. Also, he never hooked up with older guys, not for his lack of interest, but mainly because they seemed to exist in a parallel universe.

Stiffly, he stood up, without waiting for a reply from his guest, which was definitely, horribly rude. He took a shower quickly, now berating himself for leaving Chris alone with nothing to do, except, of course, for staring at the peeling wallpaper.

Jared returned to the living room in nothing but a towel. He had carefully avoided wetting his hair too much, but he could feel the wet tips touching his shoulders.

What was he supposed to do next? Barely out of the shower, and he felt his palms sweating. When had it been the last time to hook up? At least several weeks ago, if he remembered properly. However, Jared had never hooked up with someone like Chris, and his lack of experience with the situation was screaming at him, asking for something, something he had no idea what it was.

Chris moved from the sofa. He had let his jacket on the back of the couch, and now Jared could openly stare at his lean build. Chris wasn't skinny, but he looked like one of those guys who never got fat because they always ate right and had the daily habits of an aristocrat who probably never had anything fried on the menu.

"I don't usually --" Jared started, unsure of how he wanted to continue that phrase.

Luckily for him, he didn't need to. Chris buried his hands into Jared's hair and kissed him. There was no hesitation in that kiss, no clumsiness, or the usual exploration that had to happen between two men who hadn't known each other before. In a few words, Jared had his breath taken away from him and the feeling of excitement from earlier when he had felt that pull toward Chris was back in full force.

He obeyed and kissed back, but strong hands held his head, guiding him and denying him the right to do that much. Jared felt a bit like a toy as Chris took the reins, and, along with them, the tiny towel protecting his modesty.

Jared grunted as the hands in his hair descended down his back, following the spine in what appeared to be a calculated gesture of seduction. If that was what it was, it was working. Chris reached for his ass and pulled at his buttocks. "You're so hot, Jared," he whispered, as he allowed them both to catch a breather. "I want to fuck you so badly. Will you let me?"

"Sure," Jared mumbled.

Chris pulled him toward the sofa and plopped on it, pulling Jared into his lap. "I'm sure you got ready for me while in the shower, right?"

Ready how? Like lubing himself? Jared froze. Cleanliness had been his only obsession.

Chris's hands left his ass for one second. A slap, not too hard, but surprising, followed. "Go get the lube. Also a condom. I wasn't expecting to get so far with you."

Jared felt a tad disconcerted with being commanded like that, but his cock was hard, and he had already inferred that Chris must be in a leading position. He probably talked like that all the time. He scrambled to his feet and went to search for lube and rubber.

Chris's gaze was intense and trained on him. He had also taken his cock out of his pants but had remained clothed otherwise. Jared checked the meaty organ and licked his lips. For such a lean man, Chris had the upper hand in any swimwear contest.

"Come on, hop on it," Chris said, a bit roughly, and Jared hurried to oblige.

He was quick to roll down the condom on Chris's cock and then pour lube on it, too. As he straddled the other, impatient hands grabbed his hips. "Wait," Jared whispered, "not too fast. It's been a while."

Chris brought one hand to bury it into Jared's hair again and pulled him close for a kiss. Jared gasped as he felt the stretch, but firm lips swallowed his protests. A skilled tongue silenced him as it began penetrating his mouth just as that gorgeous hard cock impaled his ass.

"Better now, sexy?" Chris asked, and his eyes smiled with his lips.

Jared nodded.

"Then let me see you move," Chris ordered and slapped his ass again.

Jared could feel his cock twitching with newfound desire at those playful slaps. That was one part of him he didn't know about. Chris steadied him, helping him go up and down, at a rhythm that was a tad too fast but was making the pleasure inside his ass grow exponentially.

Chris didn't move, except for his hands, but he did an excellent job at guiding Jared. It wasn't just the same to and fro. Chris was twisting his hips slightly, changing the angle little by little until Jared felt his breath quickening and the pressure in his balls soaring.

"Oh, yes, oh, yes," he murmured as his cock began erupting.

He gasped as he was lifted and then put back on the sofa but on his back and Chris began slamming into him hard. If he hadn't come, Jared was sure that little bit of rough action would have sent him over the edge.

Chris's icy blues were magnetic, and a few strands of dark hair, wet with sweat, were glued now to his forehead. Jared touched his cheek, but his hand was soon grabbed and together with the other, was held above his head.

The need for control had to be great in this guy. Chris grunted a few times and then leaned in to kiss him, while his hips bucked a few more times.

Jared was without words when Chris pulled away. He could still feel his ass pulsing, and the pleasure in his groin was still not fading away. His entire body felt deliciously spent.

Chris moved, and Jared could guess that he was removing the rubber to throw it away. He needed to keep his eyes shut for a moment and bask in the aftermath. His hookups weren't usually this intense.

"That was a very nice fuck, Jared," a silky voice whispered in his ear.

Jared's eyes snapped open. "Why does this sound like a closing statement?"

"I need to go."

Jared pursed his lips. "Of course," he said, without hiding the sarcasm in his voice.

"Is that supposed to mean something?" Chris sounded confused.

"You know, people call it a one night stand because usually, the two people involved spend the night together."

"Oh," Chris replied. "I thought we were hooking up."

Jared sighed. "Don't mind me. For some reason, I thought this would be different than a thirty-minute one night stand."

Chris remained silent.

Jared stared at him and realized, suddenly, how naked he was compared to the other who was fully dressed.

"I need to go."

"Sure. The door is over there." Jared looked around for his towel. If he only could get it around his waist, he would save a little bit of dignity.

"Are you usually this dramatic?"

Jared scowled. "Seriously now, get out."

"I'm not running away. It's just something I need to attend to."

"What could be so important?"

"Work," Chris said.

"On Saturday night?"

"Money never sleeps."

“Yeah, sure. I saw that movie, too.”

Chris didn't add anything. But, on his way to the door, he stopped for a few seconds. “Here is my card, Jared. Call me if you want more than to hook up.”

Now that was a slap in the face. Jared stood up, but Chris was already out the door. He didn't want to hook up. He wanted more.

He grabbed the card left on the small table and read out loud. “Christian Reeves, financial advisor.”

Hmm, that explained some things.

Half an hour and a few drinks later, Adrian had the jock where he wanted. So now they were stumbling toward the restroom, where all the action happened. The soonest they were inside, he grabbed him by his jacket and made their lips connect.

Adrian was not crazy about kissing. It was a waste of time, seeing that guys could get busy with their lips to do much more pleasurable things. But it was necessary to loosen up the jock whose name still he couldn't say he knew.

Not that the guy hadn't told him, but he hadn't paid attention. He wasn't usually this callous, but he was still pissed over the aristocratic scumbag from earlier. And somehow, he couldn't let go of that particular incident. It was like he could still smell the expensive cologne, and see those dark eyes. Were they green? Hard to tell in the club's lights.

He was way too rough as he pushed the jock to his knees. “Want to suck a big juicy cock now?” he asked.

The guy nodded enthusiastically, clumsily grabbing Adrian's hips. Adrian was quick to whip out his half-hard cock and then push it through a pair of delicious plump lips.

Oh yes, he leaned against the wall. He could not care less if anyone walked on them. That was the MO in that kind of club. Anyone with a voyeuristic streak could have a fill for his fantasy if he wanted.

Not that Adrian was particular about being watched. He could have done without the extra audience, but if it happened, it happened. A groan of delight escaped his lips as he closed his eyes. Yet, still, the memory from earlier resurfaced. Ah, damn. Well, the fucker could at least serve as fuel for fantasy.

The image of disdainful eyes staring at him from below, while firm lips wrapped around his shaft, made him fully and instantly hard. He grabbed the jock's head, forcing him to take the hard cock a little deeper.

An annoyed cough made his eyes snap open. The stuck-up from earlier was washing his hands at one of the sinks and was evaluating the scene happening three feet from him with evident disapproval.

“What the fuck, dude?” Adrian said, voicing his frustration.

Voyeurs knew a straightforward rule. *Don't intervene, or you're a douche.*

Green eyes – oh, they were green – inspected him once more. The nerve on him.

“Can't you see we're busy?” Adrian gestured toward the man knelt in front of him.

The jock removed his plump lips from Adrian's cock and made a gesture to get up, visibly embarrassed. Adrian kept him down with one hand, decided that he wouldn't lose this round.

“This is the restroom. Not a brothel,” the man commented, as he patted his hands dry using a few paper towels.

Adrian gestured around. “Is this your first visit here? This bathroom is for fucking, FYI. Does this look like the opera hall to you or something?”

Great, his cock was growing soft. To think that he was about to fuck a pair of perfect cocksucking lips while fantasizing about this asshole.

“I should go.” The jock shook off Adrian's hand and stood up.

Ah, damn, there was no way to stop him now. The jock scampered off and made himself scarce in less than two seconds. Adrian slammed the wall with one closed fist. Then, he looked at the scumbag who dared to ruin what could have been at least a half-decent blowjob, given the guy's enthusiasm and desire to learn. Now he needed to head back and try to find someone else. The problem was that he was no longer in the mood.

“So, are you going to make up for that or what?” he demanded, placing his hands on his hips, and making no move to put his cock back into his jeans.

If the other thought it awkward to stumble upon some dudes wanting to suck each other off, Adrian would show him that things could be much worse. Mr. Royal Ass would run away, tail between the legs, once Adrian finished with him.

“For what exactly?” the stranger asked airily like he could not imagine what he was accused.

“For letting my dick hanging.” Adrian pointed at his limp cock, dangling over his zipper.

“If I were you, I would put that away. It’s nothing to write home about, really.”

Adrian was sure his ears were playing tricks on him. This stuck-up asshole was mouthing off to him. But no one ever had the upper hand on him. Decided that the stranger had riled him up enough for one night, he squeezed his dick, gave it a quick rub, and pushed it back into his jeans.

“Good,” the other commented. Just like before, although his words seemed to cater to the ironic repertoire, his voice was anything but. “It’s good to know that you can take a suggestion.”

Adrian grinned. “Nah. I just asked my dick if it could get up from someone like you. I don’t have to translate the answer, right?”

The green eyes inspected him, now with a tinge of surprise in them. “Oh,” the stranger said and threw the used paper towels into the trashcan with pinpoint accuracy. “Everybody around here tells me you’re more charming than Prince Charming, and all I see is a dick.”

Adrian wanted to believe that he was not getting his jimmies rustled that quickly, but that simple remark was rubbing him the wrong way. “And what’s that supposed to mean?” he asked, crossing his arms over his chest, and eyeing the other menacingly.

The stranger didn’t seem one inch impressed. “I’ve been told you’re the best lover around here. All I see is a half-decent looking guy using cheap tactics to get men on their knees to service him sexually. I’m sorry, Adrian, but you seem a prick and a crook to me,” he concluded and made a move to walk out the door.

This time, Adrian was sure he couldn’t let this one go. Quickly, he blocked the exit and put one hand on the other’s chest to push him back. Without looking like he was intimidated, the stranger did take one step back and waited for Adrian to talk, with an expression of curiosity mixed with disdain on his aristocratic face.

“You know my name. It looks like I’m at a disadvantage here,” Adrian said. “How about you tell me yours?”

“Why? So that you have something to forget by morning? Or should I say by five minutes later? I believe that’s a more accurate description of the situation and your usual behavior.”

Ah, damn, was the guy annoying or what? Adrian pursed his lips. “Well, I only forget the names of the guys I fuck. And you don’t look like you’re worth the trouble. So, your name,” he demanded, hoping that the guy would lose a little of that cocksure attitude, seeing Adrian not impressed with his arrogant behavior.

“If you insist.” The reply came with a smile that could freeze the melting ice cap. “It’s Edward. Satisfied?”

“Barely,” Adrian said.

He moved one step forward. Edward didn't move. Adrian took in the handsome face again. Yeah, definitely, he was a looker. Too bad he was just a fucking asshole. Adrian leaned forward and inhaled. The other's breathing was quickening. Slightly. Not by much. But enough to tell Adrian what he needed to know. Ah, so that was the game they were playing.

"So, Edward," he said slowly, "if you asked about me, that could only mean one thing."

"Oh, really? And what is that?" Edward asked, looking straight into Adrian's eyes.

"You want to get fucked," Adrian stated.

Edward's lips arched again into a scowl. "By the likes of you? I sincerely believe I could do much better," he replied.

"Like better how?" Adrian questioned, now feeling on top of the game, unlike before.

"You know. Better than a low class like you." Edward's eyes fluttered, sending a spike of desire straight to Adrian's groin.

It was all clear. Tonight, he was discovering his sadomasochistic streak or something. Now he wanted nothing more but to teach this high-class asshole a lesson with his dick.

"Your Highness," he poured as much acid into his words as he could, "if you wanted high class, you'd be in a totally different place right now. Admit it. You want my cock."

"In your dreams," Edward replied, but his voice was low, filled with promise now.

His eyes were darting to Adrian's lips now and then. That was telling Adrian everything he wanted to know. The next second, his hands were in Edward's perfect wavy hair, messing it up, and their lips were clashing.

There was hunger in the kiss, and Adrian almost staggered. What the hell was he getting himself into? But a quick tongue sneaking into his mouth brought a halt to anything telling him this was a bad idea.

If they did this, it would be on his terms. Adrian grabbed Edward and almost slammed him face-first into the wall. Edward was quick to put his hands up to steady himself, and Adrian pulled him just enough to avoid turning their tryst into a visit to the ER and then the police station.

His hands were nervous as they fumbled with Edward's pants. Now he was no longer in the mood for just a blowjob. He would teach Edward a lesson, with a cock deep in his ass.

"Need help?" Edward's voice interrupted his plans of exacting vengeance.

"No," Adrian replied curtly and slapped one creamy buttock that quickly turned a shade of lovely pink.

With satisfaction, he slapped the other one.

“This is not exactly my idea of fun,” Edward said again.

“It’s mine,” Adrian replied, and, to make a case for his words, he slapped each butt cheek twice for good measure, making the other grunt. “Fine ass you have here, Your Highness. Is it open for business?” he joked.

“Oh, so gauche,” Edward replied.

Adrian wanted, really wanted, no, needed, to bring this guy down a peg or two. So he pulled him back into his arms and then started to feel his crotch. Hmm, Edward wasn’t even half-hard. He wasn’t joking, or he was the master of restraint.

“What the hell, dude?” he asked. “Do you want this or not? I’m all for a little roleplay, but not if you’re not on it, too.”

So he had wrongfully supposed that Mr. High Class wanted to get taken hard by a low class like him. Hmm, bummer. Because he was fucking hard.

“Don’t you think you should put a little more effort? What are you? A two-pump chump? I hope you didn’t half undress me just for this,” Edward said.

Okay, so Edward was annoying like hell, but Adrian still wanted to fuck him. Now it was a debt of honor, not just him wanting to get his rocks off. His reputation was at stake. Despite himself, he needed to slow down.

His usual trysts didn’t usually involve too much seduction. Most guys wanted to fall to their knees the moment Adrian flexed his guns. They were easy, but so was Adrian. So he didn’t mind going for it, without too much prelude and foreplay.

Yet, he had quite the situation on his hands right now. He took Edward by the waist and pulled his head to one side so that they could kiss. Edward seemed to appreciate the thought, arching his back and rubbing his naked ass against Adrian’s crotch.

Damn, he wanted to fuck Edward two minutes ago. Well, he had been told he was half decent at nipple play, so one of his hands moved to brush over pert nipples. The small shiver that seemed to shake Edward’s body encouraged him to proceed further. He pinched one nipple hard.

Edward pulled his mouth away from the kiss and frowned. What? Was it not good? Adrian could feel impatience growing. A bit too viciously, he twisted the other’s nipple.

“What are you trying to do now? Catch Radio Tijuana?” Edward protested.

“Are you going to let me guess everything? I don’t have all night to figure you out,” Adrian said, his mood deteriorating by the second.

Too bad that his dick was still rubbing against those perfect muscled buttocks. The man got back, for sure. And it was not like Adrian to let such a nice ass escape a dicking.

“It would be desirable.” Edward smiled, way too sure of himself.

Adrian didn’t like it one bit. He was being played here. Played hard. Nope, he didn’t like it at all. His dick had to understand that tonight it wouldn’t get wet.

“But I am more than willing to acquiesce to your desires,” Edward added, still smiling. “Come on, tiger, get your rocks off.” He touched Adrian’s cheek gently, bringing one arm back.

“Fuck this.” Adrian frowned. “I like my partners willing and engaged. Are you impotent? Is this some treatment you follow or something?”

Edward laughed and pushed his ass shamelessly into Adrian’s groin once more. “Let’s try it again. Play with these.” He grabbed Adrian’s hands and placed them over his chest, showing by slowly moving them, how to do it. “Then slap the rubber on your dick, and give it to me like you’re supposed to. I know there’s a reputation at stake here,” he said in a sultry voice, as Adrian’s fingers were getting the way he liked his nipples worked.

All right, the way Edward moaned softly was making Adrian bite his lips. Edward surely knew how to whet men’s appetite. He let go of his chest so that he could get the rubber cap on his best friend. But his fingers seemed to fail to listen to him this one time.

“Allow me.” Edward turned and crouched in front of Adrian.

Long fingers clasped over his, wrenching the condom off. Adrian watched in fascination as he put the tip of the rubber against his lips and went straight for the prize.

“Ah, damn,” he whispered, as Edward used his mouth to roll down the condom down on his dick.

Green eyes stared at him from below. Edward looked nice with a mouth full of cock. But his eyes were not filled with disdain, like in Adrian’s fantasy from earlier. He even had the nerve to wink at him. His eyes were laughing with genuine amusement. They were making Adrian wonder what the hell was funny and why.

It was hard to think about that when he was that hard, though. He was more than willing to let this one go. After all, it was just a fuck, and probably not even one that would be that unforgettable.

Edward was not exactly his type, although his sword swallowing technique was impeccable. Adrian was ready to pull his A-plus card and show it to him.

“Good to go?” Edward asked as he stood up and turned.

“Let me just get your ass ready.” Adrian pulled his lube out of his pocket and began spreading some between the perfect ass cheeks.

It was a good thing that this operation didn't require pinpoint accuracy. He did find the hole, and damn, what a fine, tight hole that was. His fingers were soon trapped in solid heat, and scissoring the entrance was a bit of a feat. This one didn't fuck often.

Or maybe he was usually on top. Nah, Adrian thought, as he moved his fingers slowly to get Edward a little used for the girth that was sure to stretch him later. Despite his annoying personality, he was just a bottom with a big mouth.

And Adrian loved to shut up guys who dared to mouth off to him like that. Usually, they ended up asking for his number. But Adrian didn't do repeat performances except on extreme occasions. At twenty-five, he still needed to collect his fair share of trophies.

Edward stared at him over one shoulder. “Are you conducting a prostate exam, or are we going to fuck?”

Adrian grinned. “You that sure you're ready for my gun?” he intentionally drawled the words.

“Told you,” Edward's eyes glinted with mischief, “nothing to write home about.”

Adrian could feel his lips twitching. Well, if Edward howled like split in half, it was no longer his problem. He was no saint.

But Edward didn't howl as Adrian sank his hard as a rock cock in his deliciously tight ass. His breathing did hitch, and he no longer seemed to be smiling, which meant mission accomplished.

“So, too much?” Adrian whispered into his ear.

“Oh, I'll tell you when to stop,” Edward replied, but his voice was a bit muffled, as he pressed his forehead against his crooked arms, set against the wall.

“All right then,” Adrian said with glee and grabbed his hips hard.

Edward had perfect Venus dimples, and Adrian sank his thumbs into them. Yeah, he was totally a bottom, sexy mouth running notwithstanding. He was made to be mounted and ridden by a capable farmhand.

He knew how to moan and thrash in the loveliest of ways, and Adrian loved that in a guy. It was nice to be let known he was doing a fine job. “Oh, fuck, you're so damn tight and nice,” he commented, as he moved in earnest.

“I hope you have staying power,” Edward threw over his shoulder once more.

Adrian ground his teeth. Fuck, all that contradictory chat from earlier, and the frustration Edward had made him go through, had not been helping. He was strung tight, and he wanted to come. Using one hand, he began searching for the other's crotch. If he made the guy go first, he was off the hook.

"Don't tell me you don't trust your abilities to have me come hands-free," Edward scolded him right away.

"That's a bit of a far stretch, don't you think?" Adrian hissed, and refused to let go of Edward's cock.

The damn thing was hard and weeping, and Adrian knew Edward wanted that hand there, no matter what BS he was spouting at the moment.

"It's fine." Edward sighed as if he was making a concession.

For the first time in a long time, Adrian felt he wasn't really the one on top. This bottom guy was getting on his nerves and was making him impossibly hard at the same time. He increased his rhythm, hoping that hitting Edward's prostate would trigger an earlier release.

By how nice Edward was whispering encouragements, he was not doing some half-assed job.

"Do you like it?" Adrian asked, feeling the sweat pouring on his forehead.

"Don't ask, it's tacky," Edward corrected him again. "And don't strain yourself. Come if that's what you want."

Fuck if he came before this asshole. It was quite the race. He continued to nail the fucker while his hand on Edward's dick became more frantic.

"Damn it, damn it, damn it," he whispered, feeling the hard squeeze on his cock.

Oh, no, he wouldn't make a fool of himself. He squeezed his eyes shut, trying hard to will down the wave of pleasure growing in his groin. His eyes snapped open as he felt a hand grabbing his hip. Apparently, Edward was steadying him, most probably wanting him to slow down.

With a small growl, he grabbed Edward's hand and smacked it against the wall, keeping it there. It was a bit awkward, not to use any of his hands to keep Edward's ass, but the other was helping him, meeting him thrust by thrust, and using his ass to milk Adrian of what he was worth.

"Oh, yeah," he whispered victoriously, as his fingers clenched around Edward's dick began to feel the moisture pouring in viscous drops over them.

Edward was now pushing his ass back even more, and he was moaning, unhinged. It felt almost like a blackout when Adrian finally came, deep inside. He almost wanted to laugh when he pulled out, a couple of minutes later.

He stared at the full condom. That was a big fucking load. Wrapped up in the pleasurable aftermath, he failed to notice Edward getting all straightened up. Except for the disheveled hair, and his slightly rumpled clothes, he still looked every inch like the stuck-up from earlier.

Adrian grinned. "That was frigging great."

The asshole frowned slightly. "Half decent, and let's leave it at that."

Adrian could feel his smile freezing. "You must be kidding me. You blew quite the load," he showed Edward's the hand he had wrapped around the asshole's cock just earlier.

"And would you like a prize?" Edward taunted him. "It's nothing I haven't experienced before. Also, remove that condom. It can cut circulation."

Adrian's jaw was getting so tense he was afraid he might chip a tooth. With brusque moves, he took out the condom and threw it in the trashcan. Talking about cold showers. This guy was an expert.

"What a fucking douche." Adrian shook his head, talking to himself.

"I beg your pardon." Edward had the guts to feel offended, it seemed.

"Sorry, Your Highness." Adrian stood his ground. "But I think you're a fucking douche."

Edward's lips curled in displeasure. "Such foul language. If you were mine, you wouldn't dare to talk like that."

"If I were yours?" Adrian snorted. "Did you come here for some shopping? It's the twenty-first century. You can't own a person."

Edward smirked. "Such a narrow mental outlook. I'm afraid I thought more highly of you than I should have."

Adrian bristled. "Stop talking in fucking riddles, man."

Edward came closer, and, although Adrian rarely backed down from a challenge, this time, under the dark scrutiny of those green eyes, he felt like it would be better to run away. He barely kept in a small wince of surprise, as Edward's fingers wrapped around his spent cock, gave it a little friendly tug and then took care of putting it back into his jeans.

All the while, Edward kept eye contact, and Adrian stood there, a bit dumbfounded, but unwilling to admit it. "You will need a lot of training, Adrian."

"Training? I'm not a dog!"

"We'll see about that," Edward said with a smile.

“Man, you’re into some weird stuff, aren’t you?” Adrian asked.

Edward smiled, and Adrian wanted to look away and shake that spell off. “If you want to know more, say so. I’ll make sure to find you.”

“How about I find you?” Adrian said right away.

“Find me? I asked about you, Adrian, don’t forget. You’re the local heartbreaker. You go around fucking men and forgetting about them. Do I look to you like someone who would allow being treated like that?”

“Let’s say that you managed to make quite an impression,” Adrian replied, decided to be honest.

Edward was so not his type. But Adrian was barely out of the guy’s ass, and he wanted seconds. Maybe it was because Edward was such an asshole, no pun intended. He challenged Adrian, and Adrian wanted to go to the bottom of it all.

“Here is my card then,” Edward said after pulling out his wallet.

“Edward Hastings. Are you really royalty?” Adrian questioned.

Edward just smiled. “Make sure you don’t lose my number.”

“How could I?” Adrian pulled his phone and introduced the number quickly. “You’re right here. Saved as High-Class Ass.”

Edward grimaced. “This frivolity can be worked out of you, I’m sure. I’m still debating whether I should keep you or not.”

Adrian laughed. “You can’t keep me,” he said, emphasizing each word. “But I would so tap that again.”

“Your enthusiasm scores you points. I could work with that. Of course, that if you call, which I very much doubt you will.”

“Only because you’re so damned annoying, I will call you,” Adrian said.

Edward quirked an elegant eyebrow. “I see. Well, if that’s all --”

“Wait. MD?” Adrian asked after looking at the card again.

“The human body has no mysteries for me,” Edward said with a small knowing smile. “I’ll leave you with that.”

Adrian caught Edward as he tried to walk away. “Shouldn’t we kiss goodbye or something?”

“Do you deserve it?” Edward teased.

“I liked what we did,” Adrian said, choosing the path of honesty.

Edward patted his head. Adrian grunted. But before he could protest, Edward leaned in and kissed him. Adrian felt a small jolt of pleasure, as Edward brushed his lips over and gave them a gentle lick. He was about to open his mouth and pull Edward close when the other moved away.

“Hey,” he complained. “How about more of that?”

“I need to make sure you’ll call,” Edward replied.

Eyes like a dark forest. Adrian could not recall the last time he had been lyrical about another man. But there was something in those eyes, calling him.

“I will first teach you how to kiss. In your language, you suck.”

Adrian frowned. Nice cold shower. “I’ll call you, and I’ll fuck you again,” he promised, wagging a finger at Edward.

The aristocratic lips stretched into a smile. “And?”

“And then you’ll stop talking smack about me.”

“I’m always honest, Adrian. Don’t worry. I’ll make a perfect lover out of you.”

Adrian stared after Edward, feeling stupid, standing like that, in a club’s bathroom, having no comeback at all. For a few seconds, he considered deleting Edward’s number from his phone and throwing away his card. But now, his curiosity was piqued and his ego bruised. Maybe Edward was right. He had had no challenges in his life, with so many hot guys falling at his feet. Yeah, he would teach Mr. High-Class Ass a lesson, or an entire course, if needed.

Chapter Two - Of All The Gyms In The World, You Had To Walk Into Mine

Jared was contemplating which CrossFit routine to start with when someone patted him on the shoulder. “Hey, man,” he said as he embraced Adrian shortly. “Wasn’t Sunday your rest day or something?”

“Wasn’t yours?” Adrian asked back as he took charge of one of the weight machines.

“I sort of have something to work out of my system,” Jared explained, looking in wonder at the kind of weights Adrian could lift from all sorts of positions.

After Chris had left, he had tossed and turned for about one hour before falling asleep. Was he really that stupid as to kick away a real chance or something serious with a guy? He needed to call Chris, but he also needed plenty of courage to do that. A couple of hours at the gym would help him clear his head.

“What about you?” Jared asked Adrian.

His friend was working up a sweat, and he looked sexy like that. Jared never considered anything of the kind involving Adrian, but he wasn’t blind.

Adrian grunted and didn’t reply until he finished his set of reps. “Kind of the same.”

Jared stopped his pretense at exercising and took a closer look at his friend. “Was the blowjob from that dude bad or something?”

“I didn’t get that blowjob,” Adrian explained.

“Really? So you went home without getting laid at all? I guess that explains it,” Jared said and leaned in to read the weights.

“I got laid,” Adrian said.

“Then what’s the issue?”

Adrian stopped and pressed his palms against his knees. “I met an asshole.”

“That’s redundant information. Since you got laid, it’s obvious you met an asshole,” Jared joked.

Adrian smirked. One thing friends were good for, Jared was sure, was to laugh at your bad jokes.

“So, what’s the deal? How was the asshole?”

“Tight and hot,” Adrian replied, and his smile grew broader.

“And yet, you’re here working out. So did you manage to fuck all the way or --” Jared made an attempt at guessing the situation.

“I fucked his brains out,” Adrian said with self-importance.

Jared didn't mind Adrian bragging about his conquests. Just like Adrian laughed at his jokes, he was always a listener when it came to his friend and his crazy sex adventures. “And?” he pressed.

“I don't know.” Adrian ran one hand through his dark hair. “He kind of pissed me off.”

Jared shrugged. “So what? You fucked him, and then he went on his merry way, right?”

Adrian pursed his lips. “He gave me his number.”

Now Jared gave up on his CrossFit routine completely. He sat down, next to Adrian, making him scoot over.

“You guys are using this machine, or what?” Some guy asked them.

Adrian threw one arm over Jared's shoulders. “Yeah. We're planning to shoot a porno here. The theme is gym assholes.”

The guy stared at them for a couple of seconds, clearly slow on the uptake. Jared couldn't bear it any longer. Trying hard not to laugh, he hurried to speak. “Sorry, man. My friend here is joking. We're just trying out a new routine. Double lifting.”

It looked like finally, the intruder understood he was being made fun of and walked away, muttering something under his breath.

“One day, we will be kicked out,” Jared warned Adrian, who was snickering like a schoolboy after a successful prank.

“Nah, we won't. The owner has a soft spot for me.”

“Really? Don't tell me you fucked Mr. Stevenson, too,” Jared said in disbelief.

Adrian scoffed. “Really, dude? He's like forty or something.”

“Forty is not old,” Jared protested, feeling a bit odd. Adrian always spoke like that, and it had never bothered him before.

“He likes that I bring him customers. I always tell people about his place.”

“Good thing we're safe then,” Jared said. “So, where were we? Ah, the asshole gave you his number. Wait, does he have a name? Do you remember it?”

Adrian sighed. “Edward.”

“Oh, the prince sighs. Could it be a sign that his heart of ice has melted just a smidge?” Jared said in a theatrical voice.

“Shut up, J. I’m trying to pour my heart out here.”

“Sorry, sorry, my bad. Let’s try again. Start pouring.”

“So,” Adrian started, “I go to the bathroom with this dude, and he has like, really fine lips, and I just can’t wait to feel them around my cock --”

“Adrian, man, slow down. Let’s whisper or something. I think there are at least a couple of dudes who are trying to eavesdrop. What if that guy really bought it that we want to shoot a porno here?”

“All right,” Adrian agreed. “Anyways, I’m about to get my dick sucked, and this sexy high-class asshole cockblocks me, completely out of the blue.”

“Sexy? High class? Who? This Eddie dude?”

“J, my friend, I don’t think he has ever been called Eddie in his life. He looks like he was born with a silver spoon in his mouth and all that.”

“Wow. And what was he doing in our club, then? It’s not like it’s the poshest thing in existence.”

They were all used to calling the club ‘theirs’, although they only went there to dance, drink, and eventually hook up. Jared sighed as he remembered the fiasco from the previous night.

“Hey, what’s with the sighing in your case?” Adrian asked.

“You first,” Jared replied. “So, Edward cockblocks you.”

“Yeah. And it wasn’t the first time. I ran into him while I was chasing that confused jock with heavenly lips. I’m telling you, man, those lips --”

“Adrian, stop trying to give me a boner. Keep it to the asshole.”

“Right. Anyways, he starts riling me up, talking smack about how I’m a dick --”

“You’re a dick, and he’s an asshole. A pair made in heaven,” Jared said.

“Yeah, I know, right? So I decide to shut him up since he obviously needs dick in his life.”

“Did you fuck him? Right there, in the bathroom? Not very high class of him, then.”

“The weird thing,” Adrian continued, seemingly absorbed with his own recounting of the story, “is that he’s not my type, but he makes me hard, you know, talking about how he would own me --”

“What? Own you? Wait, I hope this doesn’t get from a sexy movie to a horror one.”

“If you didn’t interrupt all the time, you would know,” Adrian said.

“My bad, my bad,” Jared hurried to say. “Please, continue.”

“I fuck him hard against the wall, he comes a boatload, and then he runs his mouth again about how I’m mediocre as a lover.”

“You? Mediocre? Haven’t you presented him with the long list of rejected calls on your phone?”

“Not sure if that would make the right impression, though,” Adrian replied. “You see, he asked about me around the club. He has this weird idea that I could be trained or something.”

“Trained?” Jared now thought it a perfect moment to be alarmed. “Like a dog?”

Adrian nodded. “He even patted my head like this,” he said and demonstrated his words, by petting Jared’s forehead.

“So weird.” Jared shook his head. “Good thing it was just a one-time hookup. It was, wasn’t it? I bet you already deleted his number, right? Or just pretended to get it --”

“I’ll call him,” Adrian said abruptly.

“The dog trainer? Why?”

“Because,” Adrian pursed his lips in dissatisfaction, “he gives me the hardest boner ever.”

“Adrian, you’re my friend, and I love you. How about no? This guy wants to make a prancing pony out of you, by what you’re telling me. What if he is in a sect or something?”

“J, you watch way too much bad TV. Edward is just kinky, that’s all. And I’m sort of bored with the same-old, same-old, anyway.”

“Oh, you like him.”

“I don’t like him,” Adrian protested. “I hate his guts.”

“Then you should forget all about him. He sounds like bad news.”

Adrian snorted. “Bad news, how?”

Jared took one moment to think, then drew a deep breath and let it all out. “You’re riled up. Not a good sign. You could fall for him.”

“Fall for him? J, I know you think yourself some sort of Sherlock Holmes --”

“You guys call me that, you and Mike. I just happen to be right sometimes about various stuff.”

“Well, this time, you’re wrong. But let me hear your deduction.”

“All right. You meet this guy. He insults you; you get a boner. Tell me when the last time that happened to you was?”

“Never.” Adrian didn’t hesitate.

“Thus, exhibit A. You like him too much to feel that insulted. You believe you can change his mind. Therefore, you proceed to make a demonstration of what qualifies you as the prince of the neighborhood.”

“Whatever. Yeah, pretty much. Except for that stuff about me liking him. I don’t. I just want to bring him down.”

“A peg or two?” Jared questioned.

“More like to his knees, with my cock in his mouth.”

“Ah, so his mouth was nowhere near your cock last night?”

“He put the condom on with his mouth. Ten out of ten, impeccable technique.”

“So you got what you wanted, but it’s not enough,” Jared continued his sleuthing. “That’s exhibit B. Even more, you fuck him, but you want to do it again, which you never, never do. And that’s exhibit C, and I rest my case. You like him.”

“Maybe a little,” Adrian agreed. “But it’s a long way from here to there, and I’m not going to fall for him. I don’t fall for anyone. I don’t work that way.”

Jared snickered. “Sure. Your dark heart is impervious to charms. Was it because of --”

“No,” Adrian said shortly.

Jared knew Adrian had a reason to pretend to be so tough all the time. He didn’t know the details, but he had a hunch that Adrian had fallen on the invisible poisoned dagger of unrequited love. Adrian had confided some in Jared, but not the whole story, and, to this day, that was one piece of his history that remained locked even to his best friends.

“I will just tell you this, Adrian. This guy will hurt you.”

“I think so, too.”

“Ah, so you agree with me.”

“No, I just mean that if he’s into kinky stuff, he might like BDSM and who knows what other things.”

“And you’re okay with it? You’re the most straightforward gay dude I know when it comes to sex. You like oral,” Jared counted on his fingers, “anal, and guys who don’t call you the next day. For five years, you’ve been unchanged.”

Adrian shrugged. “Then it’s only reasonable that I get bored, right? Don’t worry, J. I’m on top of the situation, like always. I just need to fuck him again, make him admit that I have the best cock he ever had, and that’s all.”

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you,” Jared said with a sigh. “But maybe the change of scenery will do you good, after all. Five years is way too long for a heartache.”

“What heartache?” Adrian said and looked away, annoyed.

“Don’t mind me. I have no idea why I said that.”

“What about your night? I thought you were going home to sleep, but I see dark circles,” Adrian said and grabbed Jared to stare into his eyes.

“I hooked up,” Jared said in one go.

Adrian grinned. “Good for you! Wait, don’t tell me the guy was so good that you moped about it until the wee hours of the morning because he didn’t go down on one knee and propose to you.”

Jared threw his friend a weird look. “Now who’s Sherlock Holmes?”

“What? Did I get it right?” Adrian was happy like a little kid.

“Well, not to the letter, but still. I met this guy, and he’s, I don’t know, way out of my league, I mean, you know, it’s like he’s clearly wealthy, really wealthy, and just decided to pick Cinderella, aka me, from the gutters.”

“Jared, you’re not Cinderella. You have better taste in clothes. Crystal slippers? I mean, come on. What, she never heard of kicks?”

“Thanks for the joke, but let me finish,” Jared said. “He’s some hotshot financial advisor. And I’m me.”

“So the high class asshole I fucked last night wasn’t the only rich dude searching for something in our humble neighborhood.”

“Technically, the club is not in our neighborhood --”

“J, stop dallying and spill the beans. What happened with this guy?”

“He catches me before I get in my car to go home, and practically says that he likes me. Not in these words, but anyhow. And, I don’t know, I felt like there was only he and I in the street, and there’s a magic moment, right there --”

“Wow, magic moment? Did he take out his dick and was a lightsaber or something?”

“Stop it, prankster,” Jared said and punched Adrian in the shoulder, which wasn’t very efficient, given their position, but still good enough to make a point. “I felt something different, and before I could think, I ask if he wants to come with me. And that’s how we ended up at my place.”

“And, let me guess, he fucked your brains out.”

“He was a bit rough, but I liked it, but that wasn’t where things went awry,” Jared continued. “It’s like this: he’s barely finished – by the way, he didn’t even undress at all, just pulled out his cock – and he tells me he has to go. And I cannot help it, and I get a bit sarcastic.”

A noncommittal grunt from Adrian followed. “A bit?”

“Don’t worry. I didn’t eat him alive or anything. The thing is he tells me, out of the blue, that he would want more than a one-time thing with me, and gives me his card, and vanishes. Now, should I call him? Would I look desperate? Did I mention he’s out of my league?”

“Call him,” Adrian replied.

“Just like that?” Jared questioned.

“Did you enjoy his cock or not? If you want more of that, go ahead. Also, two times will be an achievement, right?”

Jared sighed. “I don’t want just sex. I mean, of course, I want the sex part, but I want to go on a date or something. Do I really want the impossible?”

Adrian shrugged. “Maybe you found a kindred soul, Jared. Normally, dudes in their twenties don’t care that much about relationships and such.”

Jared coughed and cleared his throat. “He’s older,” he said quickly and so softly that Adrian leaned in to catch his words.

“How much older?” Adrian asked.

“I don’t know. He looks really good, you know, like someone in a commercial about some business TV show.”

“J, stop beating around the bush. You’ve never been with an older guy. How old?”

“Forty-ish or something?” Jared said, wincing a little.

Adrian shrugged. "Is this bothering you or something?"

Jared moved his head from one side to another, but with some hesitation. "I don't have anything against it, far from me. But it makes me feel like I'm even more out of my comfort zone. Besides the obvious wealth he has and all."

"Have you ever had fantasies involving your dad?" Adrian asked, but it was visible that the corners of his lips were twitching.

Jared punched him, this time hard enough to make Adrian try to getaway. "My dad is a great guy, but no, what the hell?"

"I was just checking if you have some latent manifestations of the Oedipus complex."

"For your information, Adrian, not that you would care, that's supposed to suggest that I'd have feelings for my mom, not my dad."

"We're gay dudes. We should be different," Adrian replied with a shrug.

"Still, more like his attitude makes me think he's in his forties. He looks like he's thirty-five, at best."

"All right. I don't care if my best friend is into daddies," Adrian joked. "Mike has his fantasies with muscled tops wanting to bottom; you go for silver foxes."

"He's not gray," Jared protested. "And what's your fantasy? To be pushed around by a guy with a silver spoon in his mouth?"

Adrian scoffed. "I'm not going to be pushed around. Stop worrying so much."

"I have to. In our little tightknit group, I'm the designated mother hen," Jared explained.

"Now tell me, mother hen, what keeps you from calling this guy?"

"I feel like I blew it," Jared said and squirmed in his place.

"Not worse than me," someone else intervened in their conversation, and they both looked up.

"Mike coming to the gym," Adrian said and pushed himself up to grab their friend and squeeze him into a tight embrace, lifting him off the ground until he protested to be put down. "It must be the apocalypse."

"Jared sent me a text he would be here if I wanted to hang out."

"You two come to the gym only to gossip," Adrian scolded them playfully. "Seriously, you're cramping my style."

“Like you wouldn’t get bored if we weren’t here,” Mike pointed out.

“Wait,” Jared realized what Mike had said the first thing, “what did you do last night?”

Mike sighed. Adrian pushed Jared away so that he could start lifting while carefully listening. Jared’s eyes were on Mike. “Well?” he asked, seeing that Mike was just moving from one foot to another without saying anything.

“I might not be able to come to the club with you, guys, from now on.”

“Why?” Jared asked.

“Because,” Mike said while twisting his fingers, “I might have fucked the wrong person.”

Adrian put the weight bar in its place and pushed himself up again. “Who? And let us get this one clear. Did you fuck someone, or did that someone fuck you?”

“Both,” Mike said with something akin to resignation in his eyes.

“Both?” Adrian and Jared exclaimed at the same time.

“Really?” Mike stared with his beautiful puppy eyes at them, making Jared feel a bit guilty. “Is that so hard to believe?”

“No,” Jared hurried to say.

“Yes,” Adrian said at the same time.

“Adrian!” Jared slapped his friend on the shoulder.

“You’re going to give me bruises,” Adrian warned.

“Good. How can you say that to Mike? Just look at him. Don’t you think he’s cute? Of course, he can fuck guys. And get fucked.”

“Thank you, Jared. But don’t worry. Adrian is right. I look like I’m the one with the least chances to get laid, and at a long distance from any of you.”

Jared wanted to protest again. It wasn’t fair that Mike thought so little of himself. But more pressing matters had priority. “What happened?”

“I got invited to a party,” Mike started. “This cute bartender, Jimmy, asked me.”

“It was the same bartender who served us last night?” Jared asked.

Mike nodded. “Anyway, I thought he might be interested in me, but, as it happens, he has a boyfriend. Well, I fucked his boyfriend.”

“What?” Jared expressed his disbelief now. “Mike, your parents raised you better than that.”

“Don’t I know it?” Mike said and cast his eyes down.

“Wait,” Adrian intervened, “just roll back the movie so we can understand what the hell happened. How did you fuck his boyfriend? Missionary? On all fours?”

Mike snickered, and Jared was thankful for Adrian’s sense of humor.

“I get to the party, and Jimmy says he’s going to find his boyfriend. Two minutes later, a guy comes on to me, and he looks, you know, just like my dream guy.”

“Interesting,” Adrian commented. “And that was the boyfriend?”

“Yeah. But I didn’t know,” Mike hurried to say. “I was so taken that a guy like that would talk to me that I went with him. And it was on all fours,” he added quickly.

Adrian whistled.

Jared shook his head. “And then what happened?”

“I fucked him and,” Mike struggled to find his words, “and then he fucked me, too.”

“Win all around, the way I see it,” Adrian said.

“I thought so, too, until someone comes knocking. And guess who that is?”

Jared exchanged one look with Adrian. “The bets are on the cute bartender.”

“Right,” Mike agreed with a sigh.

“You look good for someone who was into a fight over a hot boyfriend,” Adrian said.

Mike snickered again. “Do I look like someone who would be in a fight? Gino was in the shower --”

“Gino? Hmm, nice,” Adrian intervened.

“Let him talk,” Jared said.

“Anyway,” Mike continued, “he tells me to unlock the door because that’s his boyfriend.”

“Let me take a wild guess. You didn’t,” Adrian said.

“Of course not. The soonest I heard his name was Gino, I went and jumped out the window.”

Jared stared at Mike in shock. “And you didn’t break anything?”

“No. It was a low window. And we were at ground level. The party was at a house.”

“Are you sure you’re all right?”

“Yes, mom,” Mike replied, but he smiled.

Unlike Adrian, who didn’t appreciate being babied, Mike appeared to like it, and Jared liked that, too.

However, there was something that made Jared think Mike had been too quick to disappear from that party. He stared at Adrian and got the same all-knowing stare back. “Are you thinking what I’m thinking, Adrian?”

Adrian just nodded.

“What?” Mike asked. “I know I’m asking for too much, but until Jimmy decides to work someplace else, do you think we could hang out to some other club?”

“No need for that,” Jared replied. “Mike, I know you must have been scared out of your wits --”

“Just give it to him,” Adrian interrupted him. “Mike, my friend, you were about to get caught up in a threesome.”

“A threesome?” Mike asked in disbelief.

“Yeah. Without having Sherlock’s here power of deduction, this is what I see. Some guy takes you to a party although he doesn’t know you from Adam. He must have heard you talking to us about topping an alpha top who happens to be just like his boyfriend. So he calls his bf, tells him he found a cute twink and asks him if he’s game. You go to the party; the bf jumps you directly, gives you his nice ass – was it nice?”

“Yes, it was,” Mike admitted with a heartfelt sigh.

“Good. At least you got that,” Adrian said. “Then, as you feel great about banging the man of your dreams, Jimmy hopes to waltz in and get a piece of the pie, too. Only that you lose your marbles and jump out the window.”

Mike stared at Adrian like he couldn’t believe his ears. Then he turned toward Jared. “Is that what you think, too?”

Jared nodded and offered Mike a strained smile. “What were the chances for Jimmy’s bf to be the first guy to approach you at that party?”

“But why didn’t they just say so?”

“Hmm, maybe they expected you to freak out?” Jared offered. “If he had just said ‘hey, you’re cute, I think my bf would love to fuck you’, what would you have said?”

“I see, but still. I mean, there’s a chance I actually --”

“Gino wouldn’t have told you to open the door to let his bf in otherwise,” Adrian explained. “Oh, man, that guy really fucked you good if you didn’t see what was going on.” He began laughing, then leaned back and started lifting again.

Mike pouted, and Jared hurried to take him by the shoulders. “It’s all right, Mike. Threesomes are a bad idea, anyway.”

Mike hesitated, and Jared could tell that their shy friend actually didn’t mind the idea that much.

“Help me here, Adrian,” Jared said.

“Yeah. Threesomes, bad idea,” Adrian replied.

“Wait, really?” Jared asked, surprised that Adrian agreed with him on that one.

Adrian continued his set of reps but didn’t stop talking. “If there’s an orgy, that’s okay. You won’t be able to tell dick from asshole the next day. But in a threesome, there will always be someone who’s the third wheel.”

Mike blushed, and Jared noticed right away. “I don’t think Jimmy and Gino thought of you that way. They just thought you were cute.”

Adrian scoffed. “Jimmy and Gino might need a bit of flavor in their daily soup. Mike, don’t go there, man. These two guys either end up splitting up, or they discover they like each other more than ever. Don’t be the reason for either. Not your business. And that’s just a bit of friendly advice.”

“All right,” Mike said. “I suppose you’re right.”

“You don’t sound very convinced,” Jared noticed right away.

“The sex was hot,” Mike said in a low voice.

Adrian stood up and patted Mike on the back. “Then put that memory in the spank bank. That’s what I’d do. Hmm, guys, don’t turn right away, but fresh meat just walked in.”

Jared froze, and so did Mike. They both started laughing right away. Adrian hushed them, managing, without a doubt, to draw even more attention to their little group.

“So, what is he like?” Jared asked, without turning, but giggling with Mike.

“Hmm, expensive tracksuit, thousand-dollar haircut --”

“Really?” Mike expressed his disbelief. “Who would spend so much on having his hair done?”

“It’s just a way of saying,” Adrian explained. “Let me talk, will you? He must be in his thirties, but smoking hot --”

“Smoking hot like you?” Jared asked.

“Nah, more like a slim build, but you know, perfect shape, from what I can tell from here.”

From the corner of his eye, Jared noticed Adrian smiling. “Why the hell are you grinning?”

“He’s walking straight at us. I’m just civilized. I think his eyes are blue,” Adrian managed to squeeze that last piece of info in a hurried whisper.

Jared turned on his heels and froze in place again. “Oh,” was the only thing he uttered.

“Hey, Jared, what a nice surprise,” Chris said and walked toward him, took him by the waist and kissed him on the lips shortly in a somewhat friendly manner.

Jared was still in shock. Adrian slung one arm over his shoulders, waking him up. “Who’s this, darling?” he drawled. “Are you cheating on me again? I thought I told you two lovers on the side should be enough, even for someone with your appetite.”

Chris frowned, but only for a second. His eyes lit up with amusement, and Jared exhaled. Also, he realized he had been staring at his last-night hookup without saying a word. “Sorry, Chris. This joker here is my best friend, Adrian. And this is Mike, my other best friend,” he hurried to add.

Mike was hovering in the back, shy, as usual. Adrian shook Chris’s hand, and Mike followed his example, although he withdrew a bit too early and clumsily. Jared sighed internally. He needed to enlist Mike in some self-esteem boosting workshop or something. Nothing was wrong with him, except for his exaggerated shyness, which Jared had battled without too much success for years. He had an inkling that Mike needed to go over that by himself to make it matter. But still, as a friend, he felt for Mike.

Chris didn’t allow him time to daydream. He took his hand and looked into his eyes. “Jared, would you mind it if we talked a little?”

“No.” Jared shook his head a bit too energetically. “Guys, I’m just going to talk to Chris a little.”

“Sure.” Adrian offered him a broad smile.

Mike did the same, but more timidly, but gave him a quick thumbs up. Jared turned toward Chris. “We could go outside to talk if you want.”

“Actually, I have something better in mind.” Chris snuck one arm around his waist and began walking.

“Sure,” Jared replied, without knowing exactly what he agreed to.

Mike looked longingly after Jared and Chris.

“How about you do some lifting today?” Adrian took him by the shoulders and guided him toward one of the machines.

“Me? Lifting?” Mike asked, feeling a bit alarmed, but not quite able to get away since Adrian was holding him tightly.

“Yeah. Jared likes to cuddle you like you’re some fluffy pet, but in one friendly threesome, there’s some much need for some tough love. From me to you, in case you’re wondering.”

“Ah, damn,” Mike moaned. “Are you going to tell me again that I need more gluteus in my maximus? By the way, that movie sucked.”

Adrian snickered. “Yeah, it did. But you have a nice butt, Mike, and only need a bit of definition.”

“You know well that I want to top.” Mike pouted but followed Adrian’s directions as he was pushed toward one of the machines, whether he liked it or not. “I don’t want to be just a nice butt.”

Adrian smirked. “You should embrace your destiny as a bottom twink. It’s the only way you’ll be happy.”

“Why? Are you scared of the competition?” Mike teased. “Do you want to be the only top on a fifty-mile radius or something?”

“My ambitions are not that high,” Adrian replied. “But I can see your potential, and, unlike Jared, I want to spank you for not understanding your place in the gay reign.”

Mike rolled his eyes. “I do enjoy being on top, you know?”

“Of course,” Adrian said. “But, if you were true to yourself, you’d admit it, find a top to give you what you really need, and be happy. Stop being afraid. It’s all I’m saying.”

Mike knew there was more than a grain of truth in Adrian’s words, no matter how blunt. While he was indeed afraid to say it out loud, he began exercising, listening without protests to Adrian’s encouragements and guiding. To entertain him, Adrian started to tell him about meeting some high-class asshole who wanted to train him or something like that. Mike only half listened, his mind still filled with the events from the previous night.

Could it be that Adrian and Jared were right, and he had been on the point of almost ending up in a threesome? The thought should have scared him a little, but instead, Mike felt a bit better about himself. So there were two men wanting him, not one. He could imagine Jared shaking his head at that.

Not even to Adrian, the uncrowned king of hookups could he admit to that. His friends had been clear about what they thought about threesomes and whatnot. Well, they could afford to have principles like that. Mike wasn't so lucky.

At the end of it all, he was sore, sweaty, but there was a certain exhilarating sensation that made him feel better about himself.

"You know what, Adrian?" he said. "Thank you."

Adrian quirked an eyebrow, but then smiled and pulled Mike into one of his life squeezing hugs. And, of course, he didn't let go of him until Mike began to protest and beg. Finally, Adrian let him go and then ruffled his hair. "Are you going to be okay?"

"Really, dad?" Mike asked, biting his lips not to laugh too loudly. Already, the guys around them were throwing curious looks in their direction. They probably wondered what a gorgeous man like Adrian could see in someone like him. "If Jared plays the mommy role, you surely like being the father."

"Hey, someone has to play that role, too, right?" Adrian said with a small laugh. "But, seriously, are you going to be fine?"

"Yeah," Mike said solemnly. "But I think I'll head home and watch some reruns. I'm kind of beat, after last night, and now letting you put me through the wringer."

"Don't forget to eat something, too. But not sweets, okay?" Adrian wagged the finger at him.

"Hey, now you're stepping on Jared's territory," Mike warned.

"Actually, no. Get some protein, build some muscles. And you'll have to come with me to the gym three times a week. No excuses, okay?"

"Okay," Mike admitted, with some reluctance. But Adrian was right. It was good for him. "What are you going to do about the pet whisperer?"

Adrian scoffed. "You and Jared, really. You call Edward a pet whisperer, and Jared thinks he's a dog trainer in his spare time. Actually, he's some kind of doctor."

"A doctor? Wow. Someone's climbing up the ladder. The entire family would be happy to welcome a doctor in our midst."

Adrian snorted. “Dream on. I only want to hook up with him one more time. Okay, maybe twice.”

“Adrian, are you sure you’re not running a fever?” Mike joked. “If you reach three times with the same guy, it’s practically a relationship.”

“Let’s say it’s a risk I’m willing to take. He makes me hard.”

“All is simple with you, right?” Mike asked. “But it’s great, I think.”

He hesitated. It was just on the tip of his tongue to ask Adrian what he thought if he went for trying out that threesome. But Mike knew the answer and didn’t want to hear it right now. Maybe he wouldn’t even act on that desire. So there was no point in talking more about it.

Anyway, he had a promising afternoon of watching reruns, and that was the only certainty in his life at the moment.

Jared followed Chris without a word. “Why are we here? Are you in the mood for a shower?”

“With you, yes,” Chris replied and caught his cheeks in his hands and kissed him.

Little was needed for his knees to give in. All right, but the kiss was amazing, and Jared found himself grabbing at the front of Chris’s shirt and kissing back. Screw talking. For the moment. All that mattered was that the man who had entered his life just the night before wanted him as much as Jared wanted him.

“It’s kind of public,” Jared murmured, in-between kisses. “Aren’t you worried --”

“I don’t mind a bit of audience,” Chris replied. “Do you?”

Jared had a mind to argue a little, but Chris’s hands slid down his body, squeezing his chest in what could only be seen as want, and then traveled lower and snuck behind his back to grab his ass.

“I don’t think so,” he whispered.

“I dreamed about you last night,” Chris said into his ear while caressing it with his lips. “I hated how I left you. All I could think about was how to meet you again.”

“And then you walked into my gym,” Jared said, as his hands began to move tentatively down Chris’s shoulders, enjoying the feeling of firm muscles underneath the fabric of the tracksuit.

“Your gym?”

“Just a way of saying,” Jared hurried to explain. “I just come here.”

Chris was an expert in undressing men since Jared was soon left without his t-shirt and shorts. He would have a hard time explaining to anyone walking in why they were getting freaky in the locker room.

Chris let him be only so that he could undress, too. Jared was all eyes. Chris wasn't the obsessive shave-all-your-body type, and Jared marveled at the perfect body hair covering his chest and going down a perfect treasure trail down to his dark pubes.

Jared swallowed as he looked at Chris's amazing cock. The night before, it had all happened too fast. He sat on the bench and reached for the prize. Chris grunted in appreciation as he began to move his hand up and down.

"Let's go. I want you in the shower."

The stalls were separated, and that was a blessing, Jared thought as he left himself dragged away without a word. It wasn't like other people didn't sometimes use the facilities for exactly what he and Chris were about to do, but Jared tended to think that he was more of a private type of person.

It looked like all needed to make him reconsider that was a more adventurous man with a perfect body in the mood to test his limits.

Jared laughed when he was pushed under the spray of hot water. Chris's lips were back on his, shutting him up, and they were soon humping against each other, the water slushing between them and making their bodies sleek.

"Wait," he breathed out, "I don't have anything, you know, like condoms --"

"Don't worry," Chris replied. "I won't fuck you. I just need you."

Jared had a mind to ask 'what for then?', but his mouth was taken again, and with that, his thoughts came to a screeching halt. It was pleasant like that, but the stimulation wasn't enough. Chris's cock was pushing into his, and, as hard as they both were, they didn't appear to get what was needed from the contact.

"Do you want me to," Jared swallowed once, "suck you off?"

Chris nodded and kissed him again, with tongue, making him feel like mush on the inside. Jared fell to his knees, and Chris just guided him so that the water didn't bother him. Jared had, secretly, an oral obsession, but he was a tad afraid that his expertise wouldn't be on par with the kind of service someone like Chris must be used to.

He locked his lips around the hard cock, and a firm hand rested on his head and then moved and wrapped slowly around his hair, slightly pushing him, making him move to an imposed rhythm.

Jared understood. This was a man in charge, always in control, and the mere idea that he would be used sent a small shiver down his spine, despite the warm haze all around them. Chris's hand was firm, without being forceful, but Jared leaned into that guidance, whimpering around the hard cock in his mouth, now feeling hot again on the inside.

"Yes, beautiful, yes," Chris chanted, and Jared felt a small jolt of pleasure at being called that.

He gained courage and insisted, wrapping his tongue around the engorged head, over and over again, falling into a rhythm that worked, truly worked, and he could feel, really feel, each step Chris took in his arousal until he reached that plateau, that sensation that was close to bliss, but not quite so.

Chris withdrew, taking him by surprise. "Can I come on your sexy face?"

Jared nodded.

"Just close your eyes."

He did, and right that moment felt the warm droplets of cum falling on his cheeks, his lips, his closed eyelids. He liked the taste of cum, just like the next guy, so he dared to put his tongue out and have a bit.

"So beautiful," he heard Chris praising him.

He was helped to his feet and then made to turn so that he faced the wall, on which he rested his palms. The hot water ran down his back, making him shiver, more in expectation of what Chris wanted to do to him.

Jared let out a moan as Chris's hands traveled down his back and then parted his buttocks. Fingers began circling his back door, pushing only a little, returning wet after a while, going inside, deeper, more, and more, teasing him.

"Next time I'll lick your ass until you beg me to fuck you," Chris cooed the dirty promise in his ear.

Jared was sure no need for such extravagances was required. He would beg anyway. Chris began working his ass from the back but showed mercy in grabbing Jared's cock, too, and giving it the good-old, good-old.

"Lick my cum from your lips, beautiful," Chris said as he rested against him and pressed his cheek against Jared's.

Chris engaged in naughty play right away and began gathering the still warm cum from Jared's lips with the tip of his tongue and pushing it inside, feeding it to him.

Jared bucked his hips, unsure of whether the fingers in his ass were better or those tightly wrapped around his cock. Or the tongue teasing him, giving him, little by little, Chris's cum, was the best, and it was true what they said about the brain being the biggest sex organ, after all.

He cried out, probably loud enough for people outside the showers to hear, but he couldn't keep it in if he wanted. Chris kissed him softly, satiated, wiping the last remnants of the facial from earlier.

"Wow," he whispered.

"Wow indeed," Chris said and laughed.

Jared was terrible at making conversation after sex. There was a reason why he was pissed with all the guys he had ever hooked up with, not that they were that many. They hadn't allowed him to master that particular art, by being too busy to go out the door without saying much.

"Hey," he started, unsure of what he wanted to say, but a bit unnerved by the silence.

"How would you like to spend your Sunday? Do you have any plans?" Chris asked as he began to soap his back in slow, maddening circles.

Was it possible to go to sleep right there? Jared felt suddenly relaxed. "I don't," he managed to reply, eventually.

"Would you like to spend it with me, then?"

"Fucking?"

"I was thinking more like a fun date."

Jared winced. He was the one running his mouth about wanting to be in a relationship, and all he did was talk about having sex. Chris was good at it, so maybe it was safe to blame it all on him.

"I would like to know you," Chris added.

"Are you real?" Jared moaned.

The hands soaping his back so pleasantly stopped. "I apologize if I assumed --"

"No, please, stop. I would love to go on a date with you. I haven't been on one in a while so that you know."

Chris laughed wholeheartedly. "Me, either."

"Seriously? You don't go on dates, then?" Jared asked, a bit surprised.

"I do. I didn't have someone to do that with."

This sounded so good, actually too good to be true. Jared pondered over his next words. “Could it be that you’ve been in a relationship until recently? Something that didn’t work out?”

Chris appeared taken aback by his assumption. “What makes you say that?”

“Your comment about not going on dates,” Jared replied.

Chris pulled him from under the shower. “We could go on ours right from here if you don’t have pets to feed or --”

“No,” Jared said quickly. “Nothing like that. And my Sunday is completely free, so we could. Yeah, we could do that.”

“Great.” Chris kissed him on the forehead. “Maybe it would be a good idea to start drying ourselves, right?”

“Right,” Jared admitted, feeling all warm and fuzzy on the inside.

It was happening. It was really happening. He was going on a date with a fantastic guy, with whom he had had mind-blowing sex twice. Who said he couldn’t hook up and have a relationship with the same guy? It looked like everything was possible.

Chris’s magnetic eyes were watching him, and Jared smiled timidly. There was something in those eyes that made him feel a bit strange. They didn’t know each other, but Jared could only hope that today’s date would be the beginning of something amazing that would last for a long time.

Adrian was not, by far, as exhausted as he would have expected to be after working out at the gym for a few hours. Instead, he was way too filled with energy and had no idea what to do to get rid of it.

Usually, he would jerk off and indulge in browsing guys’ profiles on dating apps, but Sunday was a day of rest from more than just weight-lifting.

Well, he had crossed that line anyway today. Maybe he needed to go all out. The decision taken, he grabbed his phone.

His finger hovered over the newest addition to his contact list. Was it a good idea? Damn Jared and his cautious nature. Adrian just went for it, usually. Yet, somehow, as he stared at his phone, something was pulling him back.

For so long, he had been the adept of one-night-stands and short, intense hookups. Was he willing to change that? For what? Edward was a brand new shiny penny, but was that enough for Adrian to let his guard down?

“Damn you, Jared,” he murmured under his breath.

He didn’t think of the past much. Adrian thought he was good at doing that, but Jared, the big heart that he was, he had had to go there, and rustle some pretty muddy waters.

He shrugged. Why was he getting all worked up about this? Edward was a challenge. He was an asshole with a sexy, sarcastic mouth, and he needed a good old putting in place. Adrian hadn’t lied one iota earlier when talking to Jared. He had a boner just thinking of Edward. And yeah, the guy needed cock in his life, and Adrian much preferred that he was the one to administer the treatment.

The phone started ringing, so there was no turning back.

“Hello, Adrian,” the aristocratic voice Adrian found it now easy to recognize welcomed him. “I wasn’t expecting you to call so fast.”

“Hey. Listen, are you free this afternoon?” Adrian asked casually.

He put his feet up, on the coffee table, and knocked over a cup of tea. Adrian never drank coffee, as he didn’t believe in stimulants of almost any type. Hot guys were his drug and addiction.

“What was that? I think I heard something breaking.”

“It’s nothing,” Adrian replied and hurried to the kitchen for some paper towels. “Could you come by my place?”

“Is this a booty call?” Edward sounded amused.

It made Adrian smile, too. “Yeah, it is. I bet someone like you never gets propositioned like this.”

“That would be true,” Edward admitted.

“Then there’s a start for everything. How about you come over, and I can give you what you want?”

“What I want?” Edward questioned.

Adrian could swear Edward was arranging his hair to the last strand or brushing off his lapels of invisible lint that very moment. He was all ice, and the idea was driving Adrian a little bit crazy.

“Yes,” Adrian said, hoping he sounded confident enough. “My cock inside you.”

“Is this conversation supposed to make me hot?”

“Hmm, yeah. Why?”

“It doesn’t.”

Adrian grimaced. What was the game they were playing? Somehow, they seemed to be from different movies. “Then tell me what you want.”

“That’s more like it. Well, can I be blunt?”

“Yeah. I like guys who go straight to the point.”

“I want to fuck you.”

Adrian frowned and for a second, remained silent. “You asked around about me, at the club. You should know that I don’t bottom.”

“Well, you asked. What you do and what I want can be two different things, can’t they?” Edward’s voice had inflections that made Adrian’s hunter instincts wake to life. There was a promise there, and Adrian wanted that.

“Then it’s tough,” Adrian replied. “You can’t fuck me.”

“That remains to be seen. I assure you that I am perfectly capable of engaging in intercourse from the dominant position. So it is not a matter of capabilities.”

“Not one of semantics, either,” Adrian pointed out. “But it’s all right. Sorry to have bothered you --”

“Adrian.” His name was said in a firm tone.

He hated how he stopped from finishing the conversation, his ears prickling with apprehension. Was Edward a dog trainer in his spare time? For real? He needed to make money with Jared’s premonitions and guessing powers; maybe they could start a fortunetelling website together.

“Shoot,” he said, but his own voice was a tad lower, quieter.

“I never said that I wouldn’t come. It pleases me to give you what you want.”

Adrian stopped for a second before hurrying to reply to that. “Why?”

“Ah, finally. A sign that you’re actually considering it.”

“What is this ‘it’ you’re talking about?”

“Let’s talk about ‘it’ later. Please send me your location. I would hate to keep you waiting.”

“You’re coming right now?” Adrian threw a concerned look around the room. It looked reasonably clean.

“Yes. I thought you were impatient. I would be disappointed if you told me you weren’t.”

“Yeah, I want to see you,” Adrian admitted.

“Good. That’s a very good answer.”

Edward was something; Adrian could vouch for that. He could not remember meeting anyone so cool and distant, but with so much fire burning underneath. Adrian should know; he had fucked the guy, and it had been one of the best fucks in a long time.

Dog trainer, doctor, or whatever he was, Edward would moan and squirm under him while Adrian gave it to him hard. The thought alone was enough to make him smile.

“You can go now. Evaluate your sex toy collection. Have a cold drink ready for me. I am dying to visit your place,” Edward whispered into the phone, tickling his ear like he was there.

“What would you like to drink?” Adrian asked.

“Something refreshing. I don’t drink alcohol in the middle of the day.”

“Can’t you be specific?”

“Anything will do, as long as you make it.”

Adrian snorted. “Good luck with that. Is soda okay?”

“Hmm, and just when I thought you wouldn’t mind putting in a little effort.”

“Effort? I’m saving all of that for fucking you until you can’t walk anymore,” Adrian promised.

“Your big mouth might get you in trouble someday. Soda is fine. One last thing, though, Adrian.”

“Just say it. Don’t keep me hanging.”

“Oh, but that’s exactly what I intend to do,” Edward teased. “Don’t jerk off before I get to your place.”

“Hmm, is that a weird piece of advice or --”

“Consider it a little piece of friendly warning. I don’t like being denied what’s rightfully mine.”

Adrian chuckled. “You have a way with words, Your Majesty. I can’t wait to give it to you. As many times as you want.”

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep, Adrian.”

“Never. I only make promises I can keep,” Adrian emphasized each word. “Why aren’t you here already? I might start jerking off.”

“Don’t you dare, or we’ll have a problem. I usually opt for a reward system, but I don’t keep from punishment when it’s warranted.”

“Wow. That sounds sexy,” Adrian teased, in turn.

“You might find it less appealing once I turn you with your lovely ass up.”

“You really are into kinky stuff,” Adrian said.

“Told you. Present your sex toy collection when I get there, or there will be consequences.”

“All right. Such a slave driver,” Adrian muttered under his breath.

“I heard that. I will find it a delicious task to train your loose tongue, too.”

“Fuck, you’re such a tease.”

Now he was worked up pretty much.

“Then get off the phone. I’ll be there.”

“Okay,” Adrian replied, stopping from asking ‘when?’ like an impatient kid.

Sex toy collection? Damn, Adrian was sure Edward wouldn’t be that impressed. Well, it was worth a shot.

Chapter Three – Pretty Nerve-Racking

Maybe it was best if he told Edward that he had no sex toys whatsoever. Adrian had been amazed to realize that he had only one pair of handcuffs, fluffy and pink, ugh, and a Fleshjack, which had been a gift from Jared eons ago. He had enjoyed that particular piece a few times until he realized that it came with high maintenance, and the time invested in cleaning it was better used for hooking up with real guys with real assholes which he could pound.

But a promise was a promise, and Adrian was intrigued by Edward, so he wanted to see how he would get a scolding for having so few toys. If Edward wanted to educate him so much, Adrian didn't mind it, mainly because there was a hot ass in it for him and equally hot lips, which he hoped to feel wrapped around his dick pretty soon.

Yeah, he smiled to himself. Ah, he needed to welcome his visitor with a cold soda. That was something he could do, Adrian thought as he walked over to the fridge. He looked critically at the contents, and then an idea hit him. He could make a fresh drink. Usually, Adrian only had freshly squeezed juice for breakfast, but since his guest was close to royalty or something like that, it looked like he could put in the effort.

For one second, he hesitated. Was he playing to this guy's tune, getting trained, as Jared had warned him? No, he reasoned to himself; that was just him being a gracious host, and nothing else.

He got to work without any hesitation. Edward did deserve a glass of juice, after all. He would put his ass up for a pounding, and Adrian began to grin just thinking of it. A real Sunday treat; that was something to look forward to.

The knock on the door had him sprinting for it. Adrian opened the door wide. "You're quite fast, Your Majesty."

"It's not like I had to beat the rush hour," Edward replied. "My chauffeur also knows the city down to the latest shortcut between two points."

Adrian guffawed. "Your chauffeur?"

Edward quirked an eyebrow.

Adrian hurried to school his feature into something neutral. "Oh, it wasn't a joke."

"Are you going to let me in, or we will spend precious time talking in the hallway, like this?"

"Please, come in. Is your chauffeur waiting for you or --"

"I'll text him when I'm done," Edward replied, and he seemed taller than Adrian as he walked inside.

That wasn't the case. Edward was a bit shorter. His arrogant attitude added a few inches, though. Well, Adrian knew a lot about inches and about bringing guys to heel.

"I made you some juice," Adrian said proudly.

"Thank you," Edward said, as he sat on the sofa but didn't touch the glass.

Instead, he set his eyes on Adrian, measuring him up and down. Adrian smirked. "Do you want to take a picture? It will last longer."

"So cliché," Edward replied and leaned back, throwing one arm casually across the back of the sofa and crossing his legs.

Adrian felt hot under that stare. Guys were usually so taken with him that they either stared at him in adoration or looked away since they couldn't believe their luck. That wasn't what was happening here.

He could be flippant and get to the point, but his curiosity was getting the better of him this time around. "Would you like me to undress? Maybe it won't be that much of a cliché."

Edward gestured with one arm. "Please. I would like to see you, and I suspect that you're comfortable enough in your own skin to enjoy being admired."

Adrian shrugged. His cock was twitching, and the other guy was all dressed up, wasn't sucking him, and wasn't begging for a fuck, either.

This was new.

"Ah, ah. No. Please, do it slower," Edward ordered from Adrian's sofa that seemed to have been turned into a royal throne.

"Don't you want me to put on some music, too?" Adrian asked.

"No. I don't want you to display some boring routine which people frequenting striptease places find exciting only because they have never watched excessively tanned skin stretched over muscles created by steroids."

"What do you want, then?" Adrian questioned.

Edward smiled, and there was something a bit cruel in how his lips curled up as if their owner was making a deliberate and conscious effort to do so. "I'm glad you asked. I am more than happy to give you directions. Think of it like this." His voice dropped and began. "You're home after a long day at work, you have just kicked your shoes at the door, and now you can barely wait to get out of your clothes."

Adrian snorted, despite experiencing small eddies of pleasure coursing through his body as Edward's voice caressed his sense of hearing. "Do you want me just to throw my clothes around and then hit the shower?"

"Don't interrupt, Adrian."

Damn, even his name sounded different in that mouth. That mouth. The thought of Edward putting his lips on him was enough to make him pliable with any request.

"You would start undressing, but your lover is home, and you know how much he likes it when you're simply you. He's in the door to the bedroom you two share and stares at you. His eyes on you make you hot, and you want so much to make him want you the way you want him."

Adrian snuck one hand under his t-shirt and pushed it up only a couple of inches, showing a bit of skin, but not too much. He caressed his taut muscles and cocked his head, throwing Edward a look he hoped enough to convey how hot those words were making him.

He was rewarded with a smile, and this time, it was a genuine one. "You're good at taking directions. It's a fantastic start, Adrian."

"Tell me more," Adrian whispered.

It was barely mid-afternoon, and natural light was flooding the room, but Adrian felt like it was midnight, and he was putting on a show under soft dim lights the color of passion.

"Your lover licks his lips," Edward continued, his voice nothing but smooth silk. "He likes what he sees, but he also loves to play. It's enough for you to notice that naughty glint in his eyes. He wants you, but you need to show him more. It is a game of play-pretend, and yet, you must be your truest self to win him over, to make him want to kneel in front of you and take you in his mouth."

Adrian gulped. He pulled the t-shirt higher and used it to wipe his forehead. Now, his abs and pecs had to show pretty well. The temptation to flex them was strong, but he understood what Edward wanted. Something that seemed natural, genuine.

"Excellent, Adrian."

His name in that perverted mouth now sounded low and sexy. He pretended to look elsewhere and pulled his t-shirt over his head. He threw it on the floor and then ran his fingers over his face and through his hair like he was tired after a day spent outside the house.

"Yes," Edward encouraged him softly.

Adrian turned and fiddled with his belt. All this time, the thought of having Edward's eyes on him was making him so hard that pulling down the zipper on his jeans was a feat of strength and determination.

Eventually, he pushed down his jeans and stepped out of them. Pretending he was undressing like any other day, he took off his socks, too. Then he turned and gave his cock a short tug, but without looking at Edward.

"Look at me," Edward ordered.

Adrian did.

"You have a gorgeous body, Adrian."

"Thanks," Adrian replied, feeling good about himself, in charge even. "Is this the part where you come here, kneel, and take me in your mouth?"

Edward laughed. "I'm not your lover. And you hurried a bit there."

Adrian frowned, as he mulled things over. What was that all about?

"Do you want me to suck you off, Adrian?" Edward asked.

Adrian hesitated. The question appeared so straightforward after the game of seduction from earlier.

"I prefer honesty in all my dealings," Edward added.

"Yeah," Adrian replied, although he wasn't so sure anymore.

"You're not in charge, Adrian."

Maybe that was the problem.

"You're not in charge, and the thought alone makes you a bit uncomfortable. Here you are, in your apartment, your very own fuckpad, naked, while your guest sits across from you, completely dressed and not at all aroused."

"Seriously? You're not hard? Not even a tiny little bit?" Adrian asked.

"I am a doctor. I see naked bodies all day long. Of course, yours is very aesthetically pleasing, but seeing a nude body is not enough to arouse me."

"What does arouse you?" Adrian asked.

"Obedience," Edward replied. "Absolute obedience."

Adrian snorted. “You won’t get that from me.”

“I seem to have worked wonders so far, then,” Edward replied.

“Then how come you’re not aroused?”

“The game is just beginning.”

Adrian cocked his head to one side. “What game?”

“We’ll get to that. Now come here.” Edward patted the place next to him. “I do owe you a blowjob.”

“You make it sound so clinical; I don’t think I want it anymore,” Adrian replied.

“I believe I can make you change your mind,” Edward said.

The fucker wore a suit, something casual, but still a suit, and it wasn’t even a light color, but some deep metallic green that made his eyes appear even more magnetic. Adrian wanted to grab Edward, stick his tongue down his throat, undress him, and fuck him right there, on his throne, making him scream in pleasure until he couldn’t walk or talk anymore.

That didn’t even come from arousal. It felt like ambition, cold, and measured, and Adrian couldn’t recall one time he ever fucked someone because of ambition.

“Adrian,” Edward called for him. “Leave aside any thoughts you might have of fucking me in five minutes or less and throwing me out. This is not how we’re going to play this.”

“You’re hot and cold. It’s confusing,” Adrian replied, overly conscious of his nakedness.

“I know,” Edward said, and his voice was soothing and appeasing now. “It will all become clear as we progress, I promise. Now, come here. I do want to make you feel good.”

There were so many inflections in that voice. Adrian felt it like a physical caress, and then like a slap. His ego should have been bruised, but, instead, it was stimulated. With renewed confidence, he walked over to Edward and sat on the sofa, next to him, making sure to part his legs and offer a clear view of the snake between his legs.

That wasn’t lost on Edward. Adrian felt a firm hand resting on his thigh, then inching slower toward the groin area. Turning his head to the right, he met green eyes studying him. “Can I touch you, too, or --”

“Hush, Adrian, you’re ruining the moment.”

“Really? What moment?” Adrian protested. He was wrong. Being chastised like that all the time wasn’t fun.

As he chewed at the ugly thought, he missed how Edward moved his other hand to grab a handful of hair at the back of his head. Someone, in another life, had told him he looked handsome with his hair grown, not long or anything, but definitely enough to grab on. It seemed like Edward found that useful, too.

He was about to protest against it, but Edward caught his lips, making him gasp. Usually, he was the guy with the initiative, but it looked like that was taken from him, and, as unnerving as that was, it also made his body hum with desire, something new, enough to make him surrender.

Edward kissed him, and Adrian let him. He wasn't crazy about kissing, because it was something too honest in that, and it was just one of those things Adrian didn't want to act artfully or too casual about because it would feel wrong.

Yet, right now, as Edward bit his lips and chew on them for a second, making him gasp in pleasure and open his mouth, Adrian felt it was different. Edward made love to his mouth, and maybe it was a bit artful, but it didn't feel fake. He could taste Edward's desire, and that was enough to have him going.

The temptation to take over or at least brush the back of his hand against the other's crotch was high. But Adrian took great pleasure in allowing another man to be in charge for a change.

Edward caressed his jawline, and his hands were smooth, as smooth as his voice and his kisses. "You have excellent potential, Adrian." He touched Adrian's cock and caressed it slowly. "It looks like everything is in working order, right?"

"It always is," Adrian replied.

"I am surprised you don't push me at your feet so that I start sucking your cock."

"Um, I don't know," Adrian teased, "it feels good like this."

Edward's eyes were sultry now. "I want to make you come, Adrian. Time and time again."

"You don't have to convince me. Let's fuck."

Edward smiled. "I need to test your stamina. But first, where is the toy collection?"

"It's pretty lame," Adrian said and cursed on the inside. Edward's hand was moving lazily, up and down his cock. "It's almost non-existent."

"I still want to see it."

"It's just a pair of stupid handcuffs and a fake butthole."

Edward chuckled, and his hand continued to move. "I thought you got enough of the real thing to forgo artificial replacements."

“Just my friend Jared’s idea of a joke. I did use it a few times. It felt good.”

“Hmm, and did you abandon your toy for another?”

“No. I just found it too much hassle.”

“Good. You’ll have to throw that toy away.”

“It was a gift,” Adrian said and gasped as Edward changed the angle of rubbing his dick, making it even more pleasurable. He adjusted his position to buck a little into the other’s hand.

“I don’t condone cheating of any kind,” Edward warned. “And you could tell Jared the truth. I allow it.”

Adrian smirked. “Fuck, you’re into that master-slave thing?”

“It’s more than that. Trust me, Adrian, I have been looking for a perfect match for a long time, and quite painstakingly if I may say. You’re a promising candidate.”

“Wait, wait, wait, are you playing with others, just as you play with me now?”

The fingers in his hair began to rub his scalp, and Adrian shuddered at the small frisson of pleasure coursing through him.

“No. I have all my attention trained on you, and you alone.”

“Fuck, you’re torturing me,” Adrian complained.

“Maybe I am,” Edward teased, and his lips stretched in one of those winning smiles that made Adrian feel like his insides turned into a quivering mush.

When had it been the last time he had felt like this? Not in a while, that was for sure. Edward was seducing him, and Adrian had no intention to say ‘no’ to that.

“Please, hand me the handcuffs,” Edward said.

“What for?”

“I need a proof of surrender on your part.”

Adrian got up and brought the pink handcuffs. “Yeah, I know. Please, don’t start.”

Edward just quirked an eyebrow. “I didn’t say anything.”

“But you were about to.”

“I’m glad that you’re anticipating my reactions. That will also be part of your training.”

“Training.” Adrian snorted and threw the cuffs at Edward, who caught them swiftly. “Are you going to put me into a pony getup and have me trot around?”

Edward laughed. And he was laughing with his eyes, too, which Adrian liked. “No. My pleasures are a bit more refined than such travesties.”

“Color me interested,” Adrian said and walked over to Edward, stopping with his cock inches from him.

“Sit down, Adrian, and turn. Next time I’ll bring some rope to make sure that you’re properly restrained.”

“Fuck me sideways,” Adrian murmured but obeyed.

Jared was right. He had always been a vanilla sex type of guy if he thought about it. Yet, right now, the thought of being introduced to bondage seemed quite arousing. Or maybe he was anticipating getting his dick sucked by this high-class asshole that the touch of a feather or a word was enough to make him hard.

He put his hands at his back, allowing Edward to put the handcuffs on him. As much as he hated them, they were pretty comfortable, with enough padding so that they didn’t rub against his wrists.

“I will bring proper handcuffs, too. A strong man like you, Adrian, shouldn’t be played with, using such toys.”

“Are you going to play with me?”

Edward blew hot air over his ear. “That is what I intend. But with proper toys, next time.”

Next time. Adrian knew now that Edward was fooling himself. For now, he was hard and interested, but as soon as he fucked Edward again, he would have his fill and then forget all about him.

“There will be a next time,” Edward promised, guessing again what he was thinking.

“What if it’s not?” Adrian asked.

“I would be disappointed, but it won’t be the first or the last time that happens.”

Adrian let Edward turn him again and press him with his back against the sofa. This guy was good. As Edward stood up, Adrian watched him and realized quickly that he was in a subservient position, something new for him. For a moment, he considered leaning forward and pushing his head into Edward’s groin. Maybe he even did that a little.

“Do you want to smell me, pup?” Edward’s voice was amused.

Pup? The idiotic things he sometimes did to get laid, Adrian thought. “Ah, so it’s that weird fetish with puppy masks you’re into?”

Edward laughed. “No. I just wanted to see your reaction. You’re easy to read as you are now, and don’t get me wrong, I love it. It is easier for me to get in touch with you, with what you want. But under my guidance, you’ll become something more than you are now, Adrian. You’ll know when to show no emotion, and when to drive mad with desire any man you touch or merely look at.”

“Why are you so mysterious?” Adrian asked.

“I love playing with you. It’s more fun than I imagined. Here, a small reward for you,” Edward said and slowly unbuckled his belt and reached inside his dress pants, taking out his cock.

To Adrian’s satisfaction, it was half hard. He could call bullshit on Edward’s so-called restraint. Edward took him by the back of the head and brought him closer.

“You can have your little sniffing routine.”

Now he could tell Edward was playing, but the clean but manly smell of the other’s groin made him reach closer. He inhaled and rubbed his nose across the length of Edward’s cock. Although he preferred having others blow him, he put out his tongue and gave the head a small lick.

Edward pushed him back, not forcefully, but firmly. He put his cock back, much to Adrian’s disappointment. “Don’t worry. You’ll get acquainted with my cock in the most intimate ways.”

“You like playing around so much. I think I’m going to get some serious blue balls.”

“Never under my watch. I do believe in delayed gratification, but not denial. I also believe in excess, when served in the right dosage.”

“I’ve never had anyone fucking me with words only, but you’re one of a kind, Your Majesty. Usually, when my dick is this hard, it lasts little until I have a pair of sweet lips wrapped around it, or I can sink it into a tight, beautiful asshole.”

Edward grabbed him by the hair ahead and pulled his head back. “We’ll get there. Now let me take care of you.”

Adrian watched Edward as he took something out of the breast pocket of his jacket. It appeared to be a leathery thing, and something jingled, too. He squinted, trying to make sense of what he was seeing.

Edward put the leathery string around his neck, fixing it in place, and caressing Adrian’s skin in passing. Adrian gasped when he realized what the jingly hardware was. Cold metal against one nipple made him wince.

“I apologize for this,” Edward said and knelt in front of him.

Adrian let out a small moan as Edward put his mouth on his nipple, sucking it, licking it, and making it hard. The nipple clamp followed, and Adrian felt the little pressure as a signal sent straight to his cock. Why hadn't he ever tried this stuff? It was pretty freaking awesome.

Edward lavished his other nipple with the same attention, and put the clamp on, too. He flicked one finger over one, then the other, making Adrian grunt. “I think I'm going to come before you go down on me.”

“That would be unfortunate, but if it cannot be helped --”

“I was joking. Suck me off, Edward.”

“Say ‘please’.”

“Please suck me off, Edward,” Adrian said in an urgent voice.

“Say it like this. ‘Please, take my cock in your mouth and suck me dry’.”

“That doesn't sound very polite. Edward, please, suck my cock, please,” Adrian begged, as Edward teased him by kissing him slowly over his pecs and taut abdomen, inching down at a maddening pace.

“I will forgive you for now.”

When Edward delved and took him in his mouth, Adrian cursed loudly. Now he understood the handcuffs. He wanted nothing else but to grab the guy's head and pump his hard cock into his mouth until he came.

Edward knew his thing. His tongue was wrapping around the head, teasing the skin right under, while his lips were busy brushing over and over. Then he went for the jackpot, taking everything in, and then pulling out slowly, making sure to use everything to make Adrian's cock feel like it was in paradise.

Adrian tensed. It couldn't happen this fast, right? He knew his cock well enough to recognize the pressure building in his balls. He made a distressed sound, and Edward grabbed his cock at the base and moved his mouth away.

Adrian breathed out, hard. Fuck, that had been a close call. If it were only a blowjob he got this time, he wanted it to last. Funny, he was also thinking now that it would be a next time.

Edward reached for one of the nipple clamps and pulled. Adrian gasped. “Ouch. That kind of hurt.”

“That's the idea. I want you to last.”

Ah, so that was what the nipple clamps were for. Edward returned to his task and began using a different technique. This time, he focused on deepthroating, with practiced ease, if Adrian's knowledge on the subject served him right.

Adrian was never this forceful when fucking a beautiful mouth. As much as he liked to be firm, he could never live with the thought of making someone choke unless the guy was into that.

But Edward was a master of oral sex, and Adrian cursed each time his cock slid down and felt the squeeze of a talented throat. "Oh, fuck, you're killing me."

Edward withdrew, and this time played with Adrian's cock differently. He used it to make it hit the back of his throat, and this was even more intense.

"I'll come, please, not so hard."

Edward pulled the object of his lavish attentions out of his mouth and kept it from its root again. His eyes set on Adrian as his tongue darted out and began licking the hard cock on all sides, flicking his tongue around.

At this point, Adrian was sure he was drooling and on the point of crying. That kind of arousal was enough to make the hair of his head stand on end.

"I love it when you beg," Edward said. "Please, let me hear your voice more. It's a treat."

"What do you want me to say?" Adrian asked, through short gasps and moans. Even while talking, Edward didn't forget to tease him with his tongue.

"Tell me exactly what you feel."

Adrian could feel his Adam's apple bobbing up and down as he swallowed hard. What was about this man that was making him come undone like that?

"You're a sensual creature," Edward began in his stead. "When I do this," he leaned and flicked his tongue around the engorged head, "all your nerve endings in the head of your cock explode. And when I do this," he took him to the hilt in one go and pulled back, "you want nothing but to fuck. You want to pin me down and penetrate my mouth until you blow your load. Am I right?"

"Not completely," Adrian said as his breath became deeper, harsher.

"How so?" Edward continued his teasing.

"I want to pin you down and fuck your ass. I'm all for safe sex, but seriously, Your Majesty, as far as fantasies go, I would blow inside you like never in my life."

"Are you trying to tell me that you want to fuck me more than any of your conquests?"

“Yes. I’d totally do you. Any position you want. Any kinky stuff you come up with. I’d come all over you and in your holes until you stink so hard of me that you’re no longer someone else.”

“Enthralling,” Edward commented, and this time, as he moved down on Adrian’s cock, he didn’t stop.

Adrian could feel his toes curling against the floor, and his entire body was shaking, prey to a sort of trepidation that he had never known before. “Oh, fuck, yes,” he whispered and threw his head back.

The hot mouth moved from his cock. There was no longer a hand around it either. But his legs were pushed apart, and his ass was pulled toward the edge of the sofa, and suddenly, there was something hot and wet against his asshole. Adrian came, the thought of Edward rimming him hard, pushing his tongue in all to blame for his coming with his cock in free-falling from the heights it had been brought to.

He looked down, amazed at his own cock spurting long ropes of cum that landed all over his chest and abdomen. Edward stood up, and there was something strange in his eyes, triumph mixed with pleasure, as he observed the mess on Adrian’s body.

“More than satisfactory,” Edward said and touched Adrian’s cheek.

The kiss that followed was nothing like the storm of sensations from earlier. It was almost chaste, just a small brush of the lips and nothing more.

“That was,” Adrian whispered, “abso-fucking-lutely amazing.”

“I’m glad,” Edward replied. “Now, let’s get you out of those horrible cuffs. Where is the key?”

“Oh, shit,” Adrian said.

Edward appeared taken aback. “Adrian, please don’t tell me you lost it.”

“I had no idea we were going to use them. Damn, this is weird. I hope you’re not going to leave me like this, with cum all over and my hands tied.”

“I wouldn’t do such a thing. And it was an overlook on my part, too. I was too excited to think things through.”

“You just stood there, like a cold fish. That was you excited?” Adrian asked. “Damn.”

“You’ll get to know me well, don’t worry. Right now, we need a solution.” Edward pulled out his phone and called someone. “I will require a bolt cutter. Yes, the type that can cut through steel.”

Without another word, Edward cut the conversation.

“Have you done this before?” Adrian asked.

Edward laughed. “I usually have better planning.”

“Oh, fuck,” Adrian said and shook his head.

Edward sat next to him. “That was beautiful, Adrian.” He took out a handkerchief, some that looked like silk and expensive and began wiping Adrian’s chest slowly, with sensuous moves.

“Please, don’t make me hard again. You need to get handy with that bolt cutter. I don’t think that another blowjob is in the cards.”

“Unfortunately, you’re right. I cannot stay and play with you as long as I wish.”

“Why? It’s Sunday.”

“And I have numerous obligations.”

Adrian looked at Edward and noticed the Rolex half-hidden by the shirt cuff. “What’s that?” he asked.

Edward knew precisely what Adrian was talking about. He showed the watch to Adrian, bringing his wrist closer. It was a beautiful two-toned model that Adrian had seen only in catalogs. “Don’t tell me you have a yacht to go with that Yacht-Master,” he asked, only half-joking.

“It belongs to the family, but the answer is yes,” Edward replied.

“Fuck me. You really are royalty.”

“Just well off. And I do work for a living. Don’t pull some working-class card on me to deny me another visit to your den,” Edward said.

“If I live to tell the tale, you’re welcome back any time you want.”

“Then, let’s make sure you survive.” Edward took out his phone and then walked to the door. He only half-opened it, preventing the person at the door from seeing Adrian in his compromising position.

Edward returned with the bolt cutter. He snapped the chain first, and then took each of Adrian’s wrists and worked on releasing him from the inopportune bracelets. Good thing the handcuffs were made of inferior materials, and it took Edward little time to cut through them.

“Thanks,” Adrian replied and massaged his wrists.

“Did I hurt you?” Edward took one of his hands and examined a small bruise.

“I don’t think so.”

Edward placed his lips over the bruise, and then his eyes flicked with amusement at Adrian, who was staring at him in disbelief.

“You’re always screwing with people’s heads like this?” Adrian pulled his hand free and laughed. “Don’t tell me you’re a shrink.”

“Reconstructive surgery. I apologize for disappointing you.”

“No way you can disappoint me. So you do nip and tuck stuff?”

“I prefer the more difficult cases. People who were unfortunate to suffer terrible accidents, children with various birth defects, traumatic burns, and, of course, the list is long, but I will not bore you with it.”

“Wow.” Adrian stared at Edward, trying to do the math. “How old are you?”

“I’m glad you start taking an interest in me,” Edward replied with a smile. “I am thirty-four years old.”

“I couldn’t guess that we’re nine years apart. You look younger.”

“Thank you. You look younger than your age, too, Adrian.”

Adrian frowned. Edward caressed one of his eyebrows. “Serious doesn’t suit you right now.”

“What did you mean by that?” Adrian tried to pretend he didn’t like being touch so intimately. Such small gestures were more than sex. Sex was something he could deal with. Kindness of this type, especially from a stranger, was dangerous.

“I want the man, Adrian, not the boy,” Edward replied. His hand traveled lower, touching Adrian’s chest. “Let your body hair grow.”

“Seriously? I would have thought someone like you preferred smooth bodies.”

“I prefer everything as natural as it can be.”

“I hope you don’t want me to grow a beard, too.”

“No. I like your face. I wouldn’t like it obscured by a beard.” Edward traced slow lines, contouring Adrian’s cheekbones and descending along the jawline.

Adrian was sure he had never been seduced in his entire life. Was that happening to him? It seemed all of a sudden and random. “Edward, how come you picked me? Guys like me are everywhere.”

Edward appeared surprised. “Self-deprecation is not you, Adrian.”

“It’s not. Just that, you climbed out some golden carriage and picked me from the crowd. It’s unusual, is all I’m saying.”

“I went through ten other clubs until I found you. It didn’t just happen.”

“Now, can you forget about all the mystery crap and tell me what you want with me? First things first, why me and not any other good looking dude who goes dancing in one of those clubs you mentioned?”

Edward nodded. “Fair is fair. Dress up. Your handsome nude body can become a distraction.”

“Right. Wait, you didn’t come.”

Edward waved. “That is not important.”

Adrian shrugged. “Suit yourself.” He picked his t-shirt and jeans from the floor and dressed up. “Well?”

Edward smiled. “I am part of a select club of people who look for something more than just ordinary pleasures.”

“I’m listening,” Adrian replied.

“We all work hard, which is why we like to play hard, too.”

“Is it like a BDSM club?”

Edward shook his head. “Nothing of the kind. But it is a matter of pride to be present at parties accompanied by a worthy partner.”

“I’m a worthy partner?” Adrian asked, trying to hide how impressed he was.

“Not yet. But you will be. Now, what exactly do you want to know?”

“So, you all gather to brag about your boyfriends?”

Edward shook his head. “I’m glad you brought this up, Adrian. No. None of us has time for regular relationships, and, as I told you, we are not interested in ordinary experiences.”

“Okay.”

“I hope you didn’t think we would become engaged in such an arrangement. If that is so, please, let me know, and we’ll stop here.”

“Why?” Adrian asked.

“I chose you because you made yourself a reputation of being against relationships. Is it true or not?” Edward asked.

“Yes, it’s true,” Adrian admitted. “It’s okay. I don’t want to be your boyfriend, either. I want to fuck you.”

Edward quirked an eyebrow and chuckled. “I find your straightforwardness endearing. We’ll get rid of it.”

“It’s not exactly the type of thing you can nip with your surgeon’s knife,” Adrian pointed out.

“To make this work, I need to have you open to allowing me to mold you into the type of person I would enjoy most.”

“That’s kind of hard. I’m my own person. I don’t look forward to being owned and shit. Is that where that puppy thing comes into play? Will you put a leash on me and parade me around at these parties?”

“If I’m in the mood,” Edward replied. “I’m just teasing you; don’t worry. I am not interested in debasing you unless you discover public humiliation is something you’d like to sink your teeth into.”

“No, thanks,” Adrian replied.

Edward patted his knee. “I don’t expect things to go smoothly. I expect and value your reticence. It will be my pleasure to make you see, little by little, how exhilarating it can be to experience complete freedom.”

“My head hurts,” Adrian joked. “So, what else made you choose me?”

“Obviously, physical appearance is important, and you have a lot going for you. Do you exercise regularly?”

“Yeah.”

“It shows. Also, I don’t want just a beautiful body. I am interested in someone intelligent enough to appreciate what I’m offering.”

“I don’t know about that. So far, it sounds pretty shady.”

“I can assure you that it’s nothing like that. I will do my best to make you like my lifestyle, but you will be free to call it quits whenever you want. Of course, once that door shuts, there is no coming back.”

“You had others,” Adrian said matter-of-factly. “Before me.”

“Yes,” Edward confirmed.

“What happened to them?”

“They outlived their usefulness.”

“Seriously? I’d say that phrase sounded pretty ominous.”

Edward laughed again. “I apologize. For the sake of not sounding like a soulless prick, I only managed to make you confused. They wanted more of me, something that had never been in the cards. A relationship.”

“Wow. So you cut them off?”

“Gently. I am not heartless. Also, there is something, a bit of a game I like playing with any new partner I acquire.”

Adrian crossed his arms over his chest. “Shoot.”

“If you’re a perfect bottom, I want you to desire to top. If you’re an incorrigible top, I want you to surrender and bottom for me. And if you’re a vers, I want to find something that’s so much the extreme opposite of your desires that you would only do it to convince me that you truly want me.”

“To what end?” Adrian asked, feeling challenged. “I mean, if a guy does that, then what?”

“Then it’s game over, and I win,” Edward said simply.

“That’s when you get rid of the guy,” Adrian confirmed that he understood the situation. “So, the condition for me would be to put my ass up so that you can fuck it.”

“That’s correct. I will do my best to make you yield.”

“Good luck with that,” Adrian replied.

“Thank you. You’re an exciting challenge, Adrian. I can barely wait to put you to the test.”

“Well, I haven’t said ‘yes’ to anything, yet.”

“That’s right. I’ll let you think about it. But don’t take too long. It’s been a while, and I must find a partner. Please be respectful of my time. I would very much love to hear a ‘yes’ from you.” Edward folded his silk handkerchief, stained with Adrian’s cum, brushed it against his nose for a brief moment, and then placed it back in his pocket.

“You’re kinky,” Adrian said, watching Edward intently.

“I strongly believe humans haven’t been blessed with intelligence to enjoy rutting like animals.”

“Do you always have one thousand words for something simple?”

Edward chuckled. “You should know better, Adrian. You work in advertising.”

“How do you know that?”

Edward waved his phone. He was ready to call his chauffeur. “Facebook. Don’t worry; I’m not stalking you. It’s just a small routine of observing social media that we all today are much used to. Any information I want to learn, I will ask you directly. What you are to the outside world and what you do for a living are of small importance to me, but if you volunteer this type of information, I will love to listen.”

“Are you trying to be perfect or something?”

Edward rewarded him with a broad smile. His patients had to love him. He was like taken from a commercial with handsome men in white, guaranteeing that you were in good hands should you decide to opt for their services. Of course, Adrian knew already Edward could be kind of a prick, and a bit of a sexual deviant (really, what guy was with Adrian and didn’t want to come?). If anything, he was more intrigued now than before.

“I am striving to be perfect, yes.”

“Well, since you can’t stay, I guess that’s it.”

Adrian had been so taken with his conversation with Edward that he forgot about the collar and the nipples clamps. Those were attached to the collar by leather straps. “I should give this back to you.”

He winced as he snuck one hand under the t-shirt and freed his nipples. The high of getting his dick sucked must have fooled him into thinking that those freakish things didn’t hurt.

“Please, feel free to keep it. Your sex toy collection needs it, seeing how abysmal it is. Oh, now I remember. Hand over that fleshlight.”

“Are you for real?”

“You don’t need it, and I told you that I am against cheating of any kind.”

“Will you be against dildos that go into my ass?” Adrian questioned.

Edward smirked. “You don’t bottom, but you want to play with dildos? I hope our little game won’t last so little. Dildos are a different thing. That fleshlight was, presumably, molded after a real person’s anatomy. I don’t want you fantasizing about fucking another man.”

“Demanding. Are you sure you don’t want to be my boyfriend? Because I swear, that’s how you behave.”

Edward laughed again. "I'd love to stay and chat, Adrian. But the clock is ticking, and I should go. The toy, please."

Adrian kept it to himself whatever he wanted to reply to that, but he went to the bedroom, grabbed the flashlight, and put it into Edward's hand. "Do you want a brown paper bag or something, or are you going to walk out of here with that thing in your hand?"

"Do I look like someone who doesn't have other people to take out the garbage?"

"Hmm, I see. When should I call you? Don't think I forgot I didn't get to fuck you."

"Call me whenever you have an answer."

"Can't we fool around a little more before I sell myself into slavery or something?" Adrian joked.

"There is no monetary compensation involved," Edward replied, still smiling. "Call me, Adrian. I haven't been so excited over a new partner in a long while."

Adrian stepped closer and pulled Edward into a kiss. He didn't forget to grab his ass, too, while at it. Edward's eyes glinted as they looked at each other.

"I think that you should move your hand away so I can walk."

"I like it where it is. You have a gorgeous butt, Your Majesty."

"Flattery won't take you anywhere. I still need to go."

"It was worth a shot."

"I admire your persistence. It's one of your many qualities."

"Look who's flattering who now," Adrian said.

"Don't worry. I will point out your flaws, too, and I will be ruthless."

"And I will fuck you," Adrian replied, determined not to let himself be dominated in that conversation.

"Any motivation is good for me. Don't forget to call, Adrian."

Adrian had to admit it. That had been one hell of a booty call. Even if his nipples hurt a little, he had minus one sex toy, but plus one bolt cutter he didn't have many uses for, as well as a collar with nipple clamps attached. He looked around while running his hands through his hair. There was still a giddy sensation he was experiencing after that awesome blowjob from earlier. His eyes fell on the table. Edward hadn't touched his drink. With a shrug, Adrian took it and gulped

it down. Yeah, he had every intention to fuck Edward. The guy was sex on a stick, regardless of his cold exterior.

In the end, they didn't go on their date directly from the gym. Jared insisted that he should go home and change, no matter how much Chris insisted that he looked great in his faded jeans and black Metallica t-shirt that also seemed from a different era. After changing from his gym getup, Chris looked every bit the part, that one about him that was a financial advisor and all that. One look at the casual dress pants, suede loafers that seemed expensive, and the polo shirt that was most probably signed by some big name, and Jared knew how he would look next to Chris.

So, he was home now, and frantically going through his wardrobe, on the point of panicking because all the clothes he had were jeans and t-shirts, with very few exceptions. Club clothes were a bit too tight for a daylight date, and otherwise, there was only one suit in his closet, the one he wore for formal occasions, which were too few and far between.

The suit was out of the question. He would look like he was ready to attend a funeral or something like that. With a frustrated growl, he dropped on the bed.

This phone pinged.

"Are you ready?"

Jared let his thumb hover over the screen. What could he reply? Not only he had nothing to wear on a date with someone as polished as Chris, but he was also making the other wait. He began writing something and then deleted everything. A couple more tries, and he had no idea what he could say to buy more time.

"You know, those three little dots are pretty nerve-racking."

Oh, right. All his hesitations were clear as day to Chris. Eventually, he settled for the truth. *"I have nothing to wear."*

"Why? Have all your clothes disintegrated?"

"All I have are jeans and t-shirts."

"Trust me, Jared, I don't care about what you wear. I know how you look naked, and I'm afraid I won't be able to stop thinking of that, completely ignoring your clothes."

"It's a date, though."

"Yes. But there's nothing formal about it, I hope. Wait. Are you going to introduce me to your parents? Now I'm the one with nothing to wear."

Jared laughed and began thumbing fast his reply. *“Are you sure you’re not a comedian in disguise? Oh, no. Are you pretending to be a financial advisor so that you can score with little old me, and gather material for your next show?”*

“All this texting is bothersome. I’m in front of your building, and I’m sitting here like a teenager, wasting time on my phone when we could already be on our date.”

Jared threw another sad look at his wardrobe and sighed.

“Pick anything, Jared. If you’re not here in five, I’m coming up, and you won’t get to wear any clothes at all. Just don’t complain later that we didn’t go on a date at all.”

The offer was pure temptation. But Jared wanted to go on a date. He picked quickly a light blue t-shirt and a pair of jeans that looked better than the rest and rushed down the stairs.

He was out in the street, his eyes searching for Chris.

“You look great.”

Jared turned on his heels, and his breath caught in his chest. Chris measured him up and down, and there was something in that stare that made Jared weak all over, not only to his knees. As much as Chris had told him clothes didn’t matter, he did go a little out of the way to change into a pair of dark chinos, laced up oxfords, and a buttoned-down shirt with its sleeves rolled up, showing his sexy forearms.

What was he thinking? If Chris showed him his pinky, Jared would still find it sexy.

Chris laughed and walked over to him. “You know,” he said, as he leaned forward, “that offer is still on the table. If you want us to go back to your apartment --”

“No. I mean that I don’t want you, but I want to go on a date more. Shit, that came out wrong, didn’t it?”

Chris placed a small kiss on Jared’s lips. “You’re the sweetest thing; do you know that?”

“You say the sweetest things,” Jared hurried to correct him. “Is this too good to be true or what?”

“What’s too good to be true?” Chris asked.

“This. Us. I mean. Oh, damn, did I say that out loud?”

“Yes, you did.”

“I wasn’t supposed to. Forget it. Let’s go already until I don’t manage to make an even bigger fool of myself.”

“Wait,” Chris said and stopped him by putting one hand on his shoulder. “If you think yourself lucky, that’s not how it is. I’m the lucky one.”

Jared snorted. “Yeah, right. Any guy would be happy and lucky to have you. Damn, I need to stop. It’s just a date. A first date. Not that you would feel obliged to ... Okay, I need to stop.”

“And breathe,” Chris suggested and laughed again. “Come on. There’s no need to feel so nervous. We already had sex twice, so it’s not like we’re not acquainted.”

“Hookups I had. Dates are trickier,” Jared admitted.

Chris brushed his hand by his and took it, linking their fingers. “Where would you like to go?”

Jared froze in place. “I haven’t planned anything.”

Chris smiled. “Don’t worry. What do you like to do? Normally?”

“Hmm, I don’t know. Watch movies, go for a bite ... But I don’t want to do these with you.”

“What would you like to do with me?”

Chris’s voice was smooth and pleasant, like fine wine.

“I would like to get to know you.”

“Then we go for a walk in the park. Since I’m not from around here, I count on you to take me where it’s most suitable. Do we need to call a cab?”

“No. I know just the place.”

There was a park nearby, and what Jared liked about it most was that it was never crowded. It wasn’t as landscaped as other places, and it was Jared’s choice when he wanted to take nature pictures.

“We could talk on the way there,” Chris said.

Jared shook his head. He looked down, as their linked hands. “I’m sorry. I feel a little like I must be dreaming. I’m gushing like a schoolgirl, right? I shouldn’t scare you.”

“Scare me? I don’t know how that would be possible. I’m not easy to scare.”

“I bet.”

“Hmm, and what’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’re some hotshot financial advisor. I bet you have ice in your veins while making your clients big bucks. Like in *The Wolf Of Wall Street* or something.”

Chris laughed his good-natured laugh and caressed the inside of Jared's palm with his thumb. "You're giving me too much credit. Yes, some situations can feel risky at times, but I must warn you that I can be a pretty dull person."

"You? Dull? After that number in the showers at the gym..." Jared trailed off. He wasn't going to discuss only sex, right? He was on a date, and he had to behave normally.

"That was good," Chris said.

"Only good?" Jared teased.

"All right, if you want me to spill it all. It was awesome. Nothing gets me harder than a beautiful young man at my mercy."

Now, Chris's smile was a bit naughty. Jared looked away. Good thing his t-shirt was long, or he would have a hard time hiding his boner. But it was all his fault since he had brought up that steamy encounter from earlier.

"Chris, how come you're single?" Jared asked, finally deciding that he needed to change the angle of the conversation. No matter how tranquil the park was, there was no way he would engage in public intercourse.

"Straight to the point. Well, having attachments would be inconvenient when moving to a new location, wouldn't it?"

"I guess," Jared replied. "But I do feel lucky to get to know you like this. I'm sorry for my paranoid mind, but you don't have a wife and three beautiful kids left in another state or something, do you?"

Chris shook his head with mirth. "Not that I know of."

He was joking. Jared breathed out. "But there must be something. Wait, for how long will you be here?"

"Six months, one year at best," Chris said. "How come you guessed such a thing?"

"I feel we're moving fast --"

"I can slow down," Chris offered.

"No. Actually, I'm such a damn hypocrite, right? We hooked up twice, and I didn't have anything against it, but now that we're on a date and I can get to know you, all I can think of is how to ruin it."

"You're cautious, and that's normal," Chris said and caressed the inside of Jared's palm a little more.

It was a small, reassuring gesture that Jared loved instantly. “You’re supposed to be on your side, not mine.”

Chris laughed. “I guess I must like you too much.”

“So, Chris, when you’re not advising people with too much money on their hands, what do you like to do? Don’t tell me you like to play golf.”

“I don’t.”

“You don’t play golf, or you don’t want to tell me?”

“The latter. Hey, you asked me not to. I can only say ‘yes’ to you.”

Jared laughed. “Then how about we play a round of mini-golf sometime?”

“Mini-golf? I might be out of my league.”

“Right. Let’s forget about it.”

“No way. We could play. Find a place, schedule our next date, and consider that I’m game.”

“Nah, you wouldn’t make a good opponent. You seem to have a habit of telling me ‘yes’ to everything.”

“Hey, if you tell me that you want me to wreck you at mini-golf, I’ll do it.”

“I’d love to see your competitive side,” Jared agreed. “But don’t wreck me too hard, okay? My ego is a delicate thing.”

“Okay. I will only wreck you a little.”

“Or you could save your energy for wrecking me in bed.”

Chris fell silent, and Jared looked away. Good thing the park was deserted. They had just taken a turn, a bit off the beaten path, and they were passing through a curtain of lush greenery. It felt like they were all alone.

Jared was about to say something when Chris grabbed him hard and pushed him behind a large granite statue. Hard lips were crushing his, and a hand was between his legs, crushing his semi. There was no point resisting. Sex in a public place, checked. Jared was sure he would be game for anything Chris wanted, no matter how risky.

“It must be nice to be so young and always ready to go,” Chris whispered into his ear while fumbling with his fly.

“Young? It’s not like you’re that old, right?”

“I’m forty-four,” Chris replied.

Jared almost choked. His father was forty-six. Somehow, Adrian’s words from before irked him.

“Is that a problem?” Chris asked while licking his ear and making him want nothing but to have his cock, fully hard now, released from his jeans, preferably with a hand on it, ready to jerk it off.

“No,” Jared replied quickly. “I think you’re hot. And what are you saying? You’re always hard.”

“When I’m with you,” Chris replied.

Jared had no comeback to that. It was a compliment; that had to be. Shaking off the daze of arousal engulfing him, he struggled to touch Chris, too.

“Here,” Chris said and put his hand inside his chinos. “Work it here. Your hand is so good on me, Jared.”

They were like a pair of teenagers, struggling to get off before someone walked in on them. Chris’s hand was firm on his cock, rubbing fast, and Jared imitated him, feeling the same rush and excitement.

At the same time, their lips were busy, just as their tongues and Jared feared that the sounds they were making might attract passersby anyway. He pushed it away. Maybe Adrian was right, and he acted too much like an older person.

Chris flicked his thumb over the head of Jared’s cock, making him gasp and thrash. It was almost too intense, but Jared knew that he needed to live with that because there was no way out but through.

In his hand, Chris’s cock was a living, pulsing thing. Jared wanted to kneel and take it into his mouth, but he was kept plastered with his back against the granite statue. He wondered if he would have the bruises to prove his little adventure. But the small pain of having his flesh pressed against the stone was soon conquered by the hand stroking his cock with steady force.

“Chris,” he whispered, “Chris!”

He was incoherent at this point. Bucking his hips, he reached the point of no return, and after several moments of pure bliss, spent with his cock being pushed past his limit, and with a hard tongue silencing his cries, he collapsed.

Jared had no time to get to his senses because he was pushed down. In the throes of orgasm, his hand had slipped out of Chris’s pants. Now, the cock he had cared for until moment ago was shoved into his face. He opened his mouth without one sound of protest. It was easy to imagine what Chris wanted.

“Don’t miss a drop,” Chris whispered, as he held Jared by the back of his head. “You don’t want to stain your t-shirt like a naughty boy, right?”

Jared nodded, his mouth full of cock.

Chris smiled. “Good boy.”

Jared placed his hands on Chris’s thighs, allowing him to do his thing. He was still trembling a little in the aftermath of his climax, but the way Chris was fucking his mouth was adding something more to that pleasure from earlier.

Not in a million years, he could have guessed he liked being used like that.

“Here it comes, baby,” Chris cooed and held him tightly, emptying inside his mouth.

Jared felt a different type of pleasure, as Chris unloaded with small grunts and whispered words of praise addressed to him.

Chris carefully closed his mouth as he withdrew. With his thumb, he wiped Jared’s lips. “Beautiful,” he said and kissed him shortly.

Then, he helped him to his feet and used a few moments to fix his clothes.

Jared felt a bit unsure on his legs as they moved. Chris took his hand. “All fine?”

Jared just nodded. The taste of Chris’s cum was at the back of his throat still. Only that thought made him tremble a little.

“You’re irresistible,” Chris added. “I apologize if I took you by surprise.”

“I was the one who wouldn’t shut up about sex,” Jared said.

Chris laughed. “I like you very much, Jared. Also, I get tested regularly, so you don’t have to worry about the fact that I came in your mouth. I like it best when my partner swallows.”

Jared just nodded. Shit, he hadn’t even thought about that. His brain was a total mess if he hadn’t thought at all about safe sex practices.

Chris caressed his arm and took his hand again. “You’re safe with me, Jared.”

“Thank you.”

They were out of the park, and Jared could not remember anything from walking back the way they came.

“I’m dying to kiss you again, but I don’t want to have an audience,” Chris said.

Jared laughed. "So earlier, while we did those things, the thought of having an audience didn't occur to you, or you just ignored it?"

"I tend to have tunnel vision when I'm aroused the way I am when we're together. It sort of slipped my mind. It's good to see you laugh. Earlier, you looked so serious, I got scared. I thought that maybe I did something wrong."

Jared shook his head. "You did nothing wrong. That was, um, pretty hot. I mean, like the hottest thing I've ever done with someone."

"I'm flattered. So, where to next, Jared?" Chris's phone went off at that moment. There was a small frown on his face. "I'm terribly sorry, but I will have to take this."

"Go ahead," Jared said.

Chris replied to whatever questions the caller addressed him, in short phrases. There was a small tick in his cheek that Jared noticed. Whatever it was, it wasn't good.

"I'm so sorry," Chris apologized, the moment he ended his conversation. "I will have to go home and work on something from my computer."

Jared deflated but chose not to show it. "Sure. I understand."

"I'll call you," Chris promised. "Let's meet again sometime."

"Sure," Jared replied. "Sometime."

Chris kissed him quickly on the cheek. "I'll call a cab. I'd give you a lift but since you live close by --"

"It's fine. Don't worry. Can I wait with you?" Jared asked, and wanted to swallow back the way the words came out like he was begging for something.

"Sure." Chris pulled him into a hug. "I can barely wait to see you again."

Jared looked into Chris's eyes. There was no need for him to fret so much. Chris was just a busy guy; that was all.

"So, you guys are just having the usual?" Mike asked as they sat at their favorite table at the same diner they had been frequenting for years.

"I'm starving," Adrian commented. "I had no idea a blowjob can drain you like this."

"What blowjob?" Mike asked, at the same time with Jared.

“A blowjob I received. An A-plus blowjob,” Adrian said with a broad smile. “I’ll have the roast turkey salad tonight. A double portion because I feel like I haven’t eaten since yesterday.”

“Wait,” Jared said. “When the hell did you pick someone for a blowjob so quickly? Stop using Grindr, Adrian. It’s beneath you.”

Adrian just shrugged. “Don’t knock it until you try it, J. No, it wasn’t some random Grindr hookup. I got a house call from a doctor.”

“Seriously? That Eddie dude?” Mike asked.

“Edward, please. Guys, the next time I see this guy --”

“Next time?” Jared and Mike said together.

“Yeah. Hey, he’s kinky like hell, and he has a mouth on him... I’m telling you, he’s not getting rid of me that easily.”

Jared just sighed. “That’s good for you, Adrian. But keep it like that, and you’ll find yourself in a relationship. And we all know how much you would hate that.”

“Nah. All’s clear with Edward. He told me he doesn’t want a relationship either.”

“Just where do you find these uncomplicated men, Adrian?” Jared asked.

“Uncomplicated? No, he’s anything but. Can you believe that he didn’t want to get off? While being in the same room with me?”

Mike snickered. “Maybe you lost it, Adrian. Your mojo.”

“Shut up, bear lover.” Adrian swatted Mike’s head playfully, and then winced and touched his chest.

Jared eyed him carefully. “Why do you keep rubbing your pecs? It’s distracting. We’re supposed to come here to eat.”

Adrian grimaced. “My tits hurt.”

“Why?” Mike asked.

“It’s not something little kids like you two need to know.”

“What did you do with that guy?” Jared questioned.

“Kinky stuff, obviously,” Adrian replied.

“Didn’t you get a blowjob?” Mike asked again.

“Let’s say that it was a variation of the traditional stuff,” Adrian said. “By the way, Jared, sorry, man, but I had to part with that silicone asshole you gave me.”

Jared seemed disoriented as he looked at Adrian.

“Did you forget? You gave it to me as a present like five years ago or so.”

“What silicone asshole?” Mike asked. “Like a sex doll or something?”

Jared smiled at Mike. “Ah, it was that fleshlight thing, right?”

“Yeah,” Adrian confirmed.

“Ah,” Mike said, realizing what his friends actually talked about. “And why did you get rid of it?”

“Edward says ‘no cheating’,” Adrian explained.

Both Mike and Jared stared at their common friend, mouths agape.

“What?” Adrian asked. “Did I grow a third tit or something?”

“No,” Jared said. “But you’re basically telling us you got yourself a boyfriend.”

“I told you. We’re not anything like that. But enough about me. What did you do all Sunday, J?”

“I was on a date until I wasn’t. And I had public sex.”

Adrian grinned. “Sex in the showers at the gym is not that public. Semi-public, maybe.”

Jared rolled his eyes. “Does everyone know or something? Wait, don’t tell me you looked.”

“No,” Adrian replied with a shrug. “But it was clear what Chris wanted the moment he dragged you away.”

“I’m not talking about that,” Jared explained. “We went on a date, and one thing led to another, and we ended up in the park close to my building, where he jerked me off and then came in my mouth.” With that short confession, he looked away quickly.

“Wow,” Mike said slowly. “You guys have, like, the most exciting sex lives ever.”

“Um, I don’t know,” Jared said. “He cut the date short because he was busy. You know, he’s a financial advisor. And it appears that he needs to work on Sundays, too. So except for this hot half a date, I don’t know if I’ll get anything else.”

“He came in your mouth?” Adrian asked.

“He said he gets tested all the time,” Jared replied.

A small grunt from Adrian was the immediate answer. “Don’t play fast and loose with strangers, J. Even if guys say that, don’t just take it as the truth.”

“Fast and loose?” Jared revolted a little. “You’re the king of hookups.”

Adrian didn’t seem bothered. He shrugged. “I don’t do that with anyone. And I know I’m not putting anyone at risk, either, since I’m also the king of checkups. If anyone asks, I have the results on my latest test saved on my phone.”

“That’s responsible of you, Adrian,” Mike said.

“That’s how we all got educated, right?”

Jared looked down. “Yeah. You’re right, Adrian.”

“I didn’t mean to rain on your parade,” Adrian began apologizing. “It looks like you like this guy.”

“Don’t worry,” Jared said with a wave of his hand. “You’re right, and I do need to be cautious. I was going to get tested soon, anyway.”

“Let me give you my doctor’s number,” Adrian offered. “He’s efficient and won’t put you on hold for weeks. Hey, Mike, how’s your ass?”

Mike shot Adrian a dirty look. “Do you have to ask? I made love last night to a freight train.”

Adrian laughed. “Made love, huh? Just be careful about angry boyfriends, okay, Casanova?”

Mike was relieved to see Jared smiling, too, at that joke. “Just my luck to hook up with a guy who was already taken.”

“Don’t take it too hard,” Adrian said. “I have a hunch you are yet to see the last of Jimmy and Gino.”

“I’m not coming next Saturday to party with you, guys,” Mike replied.

“Yes, you will,” Adrian said. “He needs to, right, J?”

“Sure thing he does,” Jared said. “It wouldn’t be the same without him.”

Mike felt a little warmth spreading from the middle of his chest. His friends were the best in the world, and he loved them.

Chapter Four – Secret Crush

Mike examined the fern guarding the door to the elevator like an extra from an alien-themed movie. It looked like overgrown biota taking over some distant planet. He could take the stairs, but it was just something about elevators he liked. The idea that he was, for several seconds, in the hands of a machine, pleased him and tickled his inner nerd. He felt the same thing about high-speed trains, but he wasn't that much of a traveler to enjoy such joyrides. So, for the moment, the elevator trips he took to the basement of the building where the servers were, aka his workplace, had to do.

A few co-workers joined him. Well, maybe that wasn't the right term to use. Mike didn't mingle, and he was a loner by definition. No one cared about the guy in washed-out jeans and dark t-shirts operating the machines that practically kept the whole place from falling apart.

It was okay. Mike liked to be in charge of so much power and responsibility, even if he got no gratitude for his day by day work. Whenever there were troubles with the hardware, he was the man. No bit of information was lost, due to his careful backup strategy, and the company living and breathing above cared naught about the small disasters averted every day by the faithful employee operating in its bowels.

“Have you seen our new boss?” one of the female co-workers waiting for the other elevator chirped happily.

“He is absolutely dreamy. Finally, we have someone younger to run the company. Mr. Armstrong was supposed to retire eons ago.”

“Well, at least they don't have to change the name on the door,” another said. “Our new boss is Mr. Armstrong's nephew and has the same name. So we practically have a prince inheriting the royal throne.”

“It must be nice not to have to climb the ladder. You know, have everything handed to you on a silver platter.”

“How old is he, anyway?”

“Thirty-two, I heard.”

“That's nice. Not too young, but not too old. Just as I like them.” The woman laughed.

“With our luck, he's married.”

“Lena from HR told me she didn't see a ring.”

“Then we really have a chance, girlfriends. May the best of us win.”

“It's not only us; you realize that, don't you?”

“I haven’t seen him yet.” A third intervened in the conversation. “How does he look like?”

“Oh, he’s tall and dark,” the first said dreamily. “Ivy League crew cut hair, all buttoned up... you know, that kind of guy.”

“Oh, nice.”

“And he dresses like he’s out of a fashion catalog. Business professional, not casual.”

“You girls are missing the point. Does he have a girlfriend?”

“Unknown at this point.”

“Maybe he’s gay,” the third one said.

“Shut up!” The other two turned toward her.

Mike pretended to focus on the numbers blinking slowly as his elevator was finally coming down.

“Hey, you’re Mack, right?” One of the women talked to him.

“Mike,” he corrected her.

She offered him a forced smile. “Have you seen our new boss? Could you tell whether, you know, he’s batting for your team?”

Some people at work knew of his orientation, not that he was waving the rainbow flag or anything. Apparently, turning down a couple of female co-workers and being honest about the reason had been at the root of that. He didn’t mind, so he replied as direct as possible. “I haven’t seen him, and I couldn’t tell, anyway,” he offered in the most apologetic tone he could muster.

A collective disappointed sigh from all three women was the immediate reaction.

“Is your gaydar broken?” One ventured to ask.

“I don’t think I have one of those,” Mike replied, shifting from one foot to another.

Good, his elevator was there. Mumbling an excuse, he hurried inside. That had been enough awkward conversation for the entire week. He doubted he could be some woman’s best gay friend for now or something. Just like guys, women intimidated him, too.

Jared and Adrian were both too tired to go out for a drink on Monday evening, so Mike was heading for one on his own in a pub close to his workplace, where he had never set foot before. It had been all Jared’s idea, encouraging him to go out a little and try to mingle with other people.

For starters, he had decided on something neutral, not a gay bar or club, as usual when hanging out with his best friends.

He intended to go there, stay for a drink, and then head back home. That had to count as mingling, and even Jared had to admit that it was enough for a first attempt.

Mike pushed open the glass door, and the flurry of conversation was the first thing to meet him. It was the type of place where young corporate employees chose to hang out, mainly because it was close to the cluster of buildings where most of them worked.

Maybe it was too brightly lit and too open, Mike thought and was about to turn on his heels when newcomers pushed him inside from behind. Now he had no choice but to head over to the bar, climb on a stool, and order something simple.

Everything looked squeaky clean, and that gave the place a bit of an artificial air. Not that Mike liked uncleanness or anything, but it felt like the smallest human imprint had been wiped with sanitizing alcohol.

Mike grabbed a stool and sat upright, placing his elbows on the shiny bar, but then reconsidering. As usual, he appeared to be invisible to the bartender who was busy serving a band of slightly tipsy young interns.

“Do you come here often?” From his right, he heard a voice with a slight pleasant lilt.

Maybe the guy wasn’t talking to him, but it would have been impolite not to look. Mike turned on his stool and came face to face with a pair of amused black eyes. His breath caught in his chest.

“I’m terribly sorry about my accent. It’s both a blessing and a curse. People often don’t understand me, although they say they like it. Should I repeat the question? It’s not just an ice breaker. I would really like to know the answer.”

Mike stared at the stranger for a couple of seconds. He was pretty sure people had trouble understanding the man simply because he was too gorgeous. The plaid shirt was open two buttons, and the stranger seemed relaxed and at ease. The rolled-up sleeves showed muscular forearms, and Mike lost a couple of more seconds admiring the bony wrists and large hands that, although not particularly callous, seemed to belong to someone working construction or something that involved a lot of physical activity. Unlike him, the stranger had had better luck with the bartender, and there was a snifter half-filled with whiskey in front of him. Neat, Mike thought and remembered something about what Adrian had once told him about the right way to have whiskey. The stranger knew his stuff; no whiskey on the rocks for him.

“I’m Ryan,” the man interrupted the awkward silence and offered Mike his hand.

“Hi,” Mike replied and shook Ryan’s hand. “Mack, I mean Mark, fuck, I mean Mike.”

What the hell was wrong with him? Great, now his t-shirt was glued to his back with sweat.

Ryan laughed softly. That simple sound tickled Mike's ear. Did everything about this man have to be sexy? "Which one is it? Or all three? Your parents must have had a strong sense of humor."

"Mike, sorry. Just nervous about new places," Mike explained and looked down.

"Ah. It's all right. I was looking for company. I'm just as new to this place, as well."

Mike exhaled. That could explain some curious looks thrown in their direction. Or maybe he was just too awkward not to draw attention. Who was he kidding? He was invisible. Everyone must have been staring at the sexy stranger at the bar who, for some unfathomable reason, was chatting up a nobody.

"I don't come here often," Mike said, finally answering Ryan's initial question. "Actually, it's my first time."

"Ah, so you don't hang out with the rest?" Ryan made a small gesture, pointing around them.

Mark looked, too. There were some vaguely familiar faces around, but it was not his style to strike up a conversation with people he barely knew. Some worked in the same building as him, and he even knew a few names.

But it had to be weird as fuck to admit to Ryan that he was such a loner at work. "I don't know any of these people," he said.

"Are you from the city?" Ryan asked.

Mike nodded.

"So, do you know places that are more fun than this?"

For a moment, Mike hesitated. But what the hell? He would tell Jared he mingled with at least one person. "Sure."

"Then let's go. Any minute now, and there will be holes drilled into my back. And I seriously like this shirt."

Mike liked Ryan's red and black plaid shirt, too. It looked great on him. As Ryan stood up, Mike stared at the classic jeans and tan boots that completed the man's outfit.

Ryan joked. "Do you happen to work at a fashion magazine or something? There's something judgmental in your eyes that scares me."

Mike shook his head. "Sorry about staring. I don't work at a fashion magazine." He was about to say where he worked but stopped in time. Admitting that he was practically working with most

people hanging out in the bar would make him appear awkward now after saying that he knew no one.

“Let’s go then,” Ryan said and threw a bill on the bar.

Who did that? Everyone there appeared to be the type to pay for drinks with their phones, Mike thought. It didn’t matter. Maybe Ryan was a bit old-fashioned, but Mike liked old-fashioned things, too.

Ryan touched the small of his back as they went out, and Mike felt a bit queasy. Could it be that this guy was interested in him? No, they weren’t in a gay bar, so that couldn’t be. Ryan was looking for a buddy to drink with.

But what if? Mike needed to get a hold of himself. That wasn’t okay. He couldn’t just mistake people’s politeness for sexual interest. Maybe his gaydar was broken, and maybe there was a workshop somewhere for getting it fixed. But what if he could find out?

The words flew his mouth. “Would you have anything against going to a, um, gay bar?”

Ryan hooked one arm over his shoulders as they began walking down the street. “Hmm, I was about to propose the same thing. You know, to make sure.”

Mike wasn’t queasy anymore. The butterflies in his stomach were doing somersaults. “Make sure what?”

“You know. That we’re batting for the same team. I just had a hunch in there. But, you know, I would’ve hung out with you, either way.”

Mike made a small weird sound. Great, now he was about to lose his voice, too. Wait, he was getting ahead of himself. Ryan needed someone to take him to a gay bar because probably he wanted to hook up. With someone else. Not with him.

“Have you been in town long?” He eventually found his voice.

“No, not long.”

“What kind of place do you prefer?” Mike asked. “We have all kinds. I go with my friends everywhere they take me --”

“Well, I would like a place that’s dark, comfy, and lets me kiss you until we can’t feel our lips anymore without people staring,” Ryan replied promptly.

Mike stopped, frozen in the spot.

“Ah, sorry,” Ryan said, and stopped, too. “Do you have a boyfriend? If that’s it, I’ll back off, don’t worry. I’d still like to have a drink with you, but only if that’s okay.”

“I don’t have a boyfriend.” Mike stumbled over each word like it was a boulder. “Are you interested in me?”

Ryan burst into laughter, and Mike could feel the tip of his ears getting as red as the hair on his head. “You’re adorable, but I bet you know that. Yeah, I’m interested. I couldn’t believe my luck when you sat next to me at the bar.”

“Really? I mean, okay. I mean, I’m flattered. Sorry, I have no idea what to say. Men usually hit on my friends, not me. They’re much cooler and more handsome.” He was babbling, and it was bad.

“Maybe that’s not the type I go for,” Ryan replied. “Although I should ask. Are your friends movie stars or something?”

Mike laughed, but then tried to stifle the sounds he was making. “Adrian could be, I think. He has a, um, sculptural body --”

Ryan laughed again. “Sorry, Mike, but you should know that advertising other men shouldn’t be a topic of conversation on a first date.”

First what? Was he in a dream? Was he being tricked, like on those stupid shows?

“Are we on a date?”

“We are if you want,” Ryan replied, and this time, after squeezing Mike’s shoulder, he let his hand travel lower until it reached the back pocket of Mike’s jeans and pushed it inside.

That was practically code for an underhanded method to touch someone’s butt. Mike’s belly butterflies were in a mating frenzy now.

“Wow.” That was the single thing he could say.

“I know. I’m a forward type of guy. What do you say?”

“Yes,” Mike said in a somewhat mechanical voice.

It was awkward to walk like that, so he snuck one arm around Ryan’s waist, too. He hooked one thumb through one of the belt hoops and let his hand roll around Ryan’s hip. He was touching the guy, and he was touched, too. Jared would be so proud of him.

“I know just the place where we can hang out,” he said after Ryan asked him whether he had a special place in mind.

It was pretty much a hole in the wall type of thing, but it was cozy, and nobody cared about the clientele getting busy in dark corners. The last time he had been there with Jared and Adrian, Mike had felt like paralyzed in paradise. It seemed like everyone there was going at it, not sex

per se or at least that was what he thought, but as close to that as possible, and only the sounds of people kissing and touching around him had sent him home with a huge boner. Adrian had gone through at least three or four guys, while Jared had hooked up with a man he left home with afterward. Mike had been the only loner, which had made Jared feel bad the next day, and Adrian tell him for the umpteenth time that he needed to loosen up.

“Loosen up,” he mumbled to himself.

“What?” Ryan asked, and he leaned toward him, blowing hot air over his ear.

Mike shivered. “Nothing. Just my friends tell me I’m too stiff.”

“Hmm. I have a pretty good recipe for stiffness. It involves rubbing the stiff area, maybe with a bit of lotion,” Ryan continued to whisper in his ear. “Spit works, too.”

This was bad. If Ryan kept it up, Mike would just come in his pants like a total teenager.

Good thing they were inside. Mike chose a table that was as remote as possible from the central area, which wasn’t much, either, but where a few couples still struggled to use it as a dance floor, no matter how cramped.

They sat on the comfy sofa that had just enough room for two people. The place was designed for getting busy with a date. A waiter came to their table and placed some drinks on their table in tall champagne glasses.

“Remind me if we ordered because I can’t recall,” Ryan said.

Mike laughed. “I forgot to tell you. The personnel here kind of watch the door, and send the first drinks as what they think would be fitted for the patrons. Then you can have whatever you want.”

Ryan took the flute and stared at it. “And what’s this?”

Mike could tell he didn’t know, but he wanted to impress his date. “Secret Crush,” he said. “It’s just some sparkling wine, Campari, sugar, and I don’t know how many types of bitter.”

“Secret Crush. Hmm, sounds fitting,” Ryan commented. “Let’s drink to it. Or just drink it.”

Mike raised his glass, too, and clinked it to Ryan’s flute. He had to be in a dream because there was no way he was drinking erotic cocktails with a drop-dead gorgeous guy. Maybe Ryan didn’t fit his fantasy man to a tee since he didn’t appear to be excessively muscled and didn’t have the overbearing attitude of an alpha male, but he was charming, handsome, and, what counted more, much interested in him. Also, he was pretty tall, and Mike liked that, too. He was sure that if they stood face to face, he would have to crank his neck to stare at Ryan.

At least, for tonight. That only meant that he needed to make the most of it, Mike thought and drank from his flute. Ryan rested his arm casually around his shoulders, but then his hand moved, and his thumb brushed by Mike's cheek, making him turn his head through sheer force of attraction. It was dark, and it was comfy, just as Ryan had said he wanted, and Mike was thankful for it. He leaned in, hoping, willing himself not to be awkward, not to be that guy he usually was, the kind that left home on his own because he never dared to make a move.

"I feel really lucky tonight," Ryan said.

Mike was about to snort and say the first self-deprecating thing that came to mind, but his lips were caught in a soft kiss. The immediate result was his bones turning all jelly, and his eyes fluttered shut. Ryan's lips were firm but gentle, and Mike opened his mouth, allowing a tentative tongue, tasting of the cocktail they just had, to reach inside.

There was also a soft grip on his neck, Ryan moving his hand again, this time resting his fingers against Mike's throat. Mike felt like he needed to hold on to something because it was like he suddenly jumped off a plane and floating down, inexorably, toward the earth.

But it wasn't gravity pulling him closer, but a strong body, and soon he and Ryan were clashing, their hands a bit frantic, as their kiss deepened. Mike had only a slight feeling of eyes rolling in his head, toes curling inside his sneakers, and the entire mid part of his body getting all hard, from just one kiss.

"Wow, I knew you would be sweet, but wow," Ryan said as he slowly moved away.

Mike had no idea what to say to that. It wasn't often that he was told that, and his so-called success from the previous weekend when he had almost gotten caught in a threesome couldn't count as a success. This wasn't about being the third wheel. Ryan really liked him, and there were no hidden boyfriends around waiting to jump for joy as if at a surprise birthday party.

"Wait," he suddenly realized he hadn't asked, "do you have a boyfriend?"

Ryan laughed. "Is it some jet lag that makes our conversation feel so fractured?"

"Sorry. I think I'm slow," Mike said. "I just realized that I didn't ask you."

Ryan caressed his cheek with his lips. "I'm the one guy's man type, sugar."

"Oh," Mike managed. "So, no boyfriend."

"No boyfriend," Ryan said.

Now Ryan's hand was on his knee, and Mike could feel needles and pins rising under the touch, and spreading everywhere. He shivered lightly, as Ryan kissed him again as his hand on Mike's knee grew bolder.

Mike caught it as it rested against his unmistakable erection. "Wait, I--"

"It's okay. I usually don't get so much carried away on the first date." Ryan moved his hand away.

That wasn't what he meant to say. Mike's primary worry right now was how not to come in his jeans from being touched like that. "It's okay," he whispered. "I like being touched."

"All right," Ryan said, and this time he snuck one hand under Mike's t-shirt.

There had to be something he could do, too. Mimicking Ryan's move, he tried to reach under his partner's shirt. There was also an undershirt in his way, and while trying to remove it by pulling it up, Mike managed somehow to let his hand slide directly on top of Ryan's crotch.

"You little devil." Ryan laughed. "I'm trying to be nice here."

Ryan was nice; he was very nice that very moment to Mike's nipples, which he lavished with attention, first one, then the other, rolling them between the thumb and the forefinger. Mike counted on that as Ryan being nice. What could be more was on his mind, with that as the starting point.

"I could," Mike whispered, unsure whether what he was saying was even normal.

That other time when he had been to that bar with Jared and Adrian, his friends had only resumed to some heavy petting. Adrian had said that after a few Power of Will cocktails, he had eventually pulled some guy out and fucked his brains out, but that was Adrian, and he never played by the rules.

Mike was Mike, and at least he could be decent enough not to act on impulse and refrain from having sex inside the bar. The atmosphere was as lewd as it could get, but he doubted the personnel would tolerate people having an orgy while supposedly seated at their tables.

But tonight, Mike didn't want to be someone he had always been. Ryan could be just in passing, and that meant that tonight was the night. Without saying a word, he slid down and under the table. From there, he struggled with Ryan's fly. Gentle fingers caught his and helped him.

Mike groaned as he felt the smooth skin under his fingers. It was not easy to tell from that position how big Ryan was, but his cock was pretty thick, and Mike's mouth watered instantly.

It was better to drool over the object of his fascination than sit there. Mike moved his lips over the length of the hard cock in front of him under he reached the head and began lapping gently at it. It tasted so nice Mike couldn't remember ever having something as good as that.

Fingers pushed through his hair, caressing it, and Mike delved in. It felt incredible to have a mouth so full while his own erection was struggling against his jeans. But tonight was all about

being bold, so Mike managed to pull out his own cock and began rubbing it in tandem with what he was doing to Ryan's tool of pleasure.

One thing was sure; he needed to be as fast and inconspicuous as he could, to avoid turning the sexy time he was having right now into a nightmare. So he used all the suction power he could muster while treating his cock the same, moving his hand up and down steadily.

Ryan moved and pulled out his balls from his jeans, too, so Mike didn't hesitate to rush at licking them and taking them into his mouth. Everything about Ryan was delicious. His tongue swirled over the taut skin, moving back to the engorged head, and then he swallowed as deep as he could.

The fingers in his hair grabbed gently and pulled him back. Mike bit his lips as hot droplets landed on his cheeks. He squeezed his cock but didn't splash, careful to make his climax as quiet as possible.

He moved back up, and Ryan began patting his cheeks with a tissue. The gesture itself felt like a reward for a job well done. Ryan kissed his lips and then laughed. "I had no idea this bar was that kind of place."

"I don't think it is, normally," Mike said, this time embarrassed by his earlier audacity. "I just hope nobody noticed."

"It's true that I could only observe some kissing and touching, and nothing overtly sexual, or at least not as sexual as this, as we got seated to your table," Ryan replied. "So, it was a bit risky what you did?"

Mike tried to be nonchalant about it. "I guess."

"I wish I could clearly see your face like that, all covered in my cum," Ryan whispered into his ear.

Mike wiped his hand nervously on a tissue, too. Was that really him? Did he have it in him to be like that? Now, after the fact, no matter how awesome it had been, Mike felt like getting cold feet.

"You smell of me. That's nice," Ryan continued. "Hey, are you shivering? Are you cold?"

"No." Mike shook his head, vigorously. "I just... I mean... I don't usually do such things."

Ryan pulled him close, lending him some of his body heat. "Then I'm all the more honored. Hey, what would you like to drink next?"

Mike just mumbled something and let himself comforted. Their kisses turned satiated now, and the waiter came and went a few times. After a couple of hours, he was wasted in all sorts of ways, but he wasn't shivering anymore, and any fear over what he had done was gone, too.

"I don't want to be a spoilsport, but during the workweek, I go to sleep at the same time," Ryan said.

"It's all right," Mike said right away. "I should head home, too."

He had a mind to ask Ryan if he wanted to come over, but he didn't want to assume. After all, Ryan had just made it quite clear that he needed his sleep.

"I have one regret about tonight," Ryan said.

Mike could feel the familiar squeeze on his heart. And there came the other shoe, dropping like a rock. It was usually like that. Even his very few hookups often told him that he was nice, but no one cared about seeing him again. Sort of like what usually happened to Jared, but in his case, the guys Jared was hooking up with were as gorgeous as him, only that they were social butterflies.

"Do you want to know about it?" Ryan asked.

"Sure." Mike tried to be cool about it. "Shoot."

"We didn't get to talk," Ryan said and pulled him in for another kiss. "I think I was just too taken with this."

Mike snickered and then tried to rein in his emotions. "I guess I was, too."

"So let's meet again this week. I can't promise anything for tomorrow or on Wednesday, but on Thursday, I'm free."

"Great," Mike said in a heartbeat. Was it okay to appear so enthusiastic?

"Let me give you my number."

Mike pulled out his phone like it was a lifeboat, and he was the last man standing on the Titanic. "Ryan," he whispered as he entered the phone number.

"I really had a great time, Mike. I hope that we'll get to know each other properly."

"I hope so, too."

"Now come here. I know I need to go, but I want to kiss you one more time."

Mike couldn't recall other kisses or other men in his life. Ryan was a master of all things involving kissing.

“Why did you say that you felt lucky tonight?” Mike asked when Ryan let him breathe.

“Didn’t I get lucky?” Ryan laughed. “Well, it’s simple. Here I was, walking among strangers, and I saw the cutest boy ever. And that was you, just in case you’re wondering.”

“I’m not exactly the kind to make an impression.” Mike tried to protest.

“That’s what you think. I like the shy and nervous type.”

“Ah,” Mike said. “Really?”

Ryan nodded. “They tend to be honest people. And I value honesty above everything. I don’t like people that are too polished, fake. I like genuine people, like you.”

“Wow,” Mike said in a low voice. “I had no idea anyone liked that.”

“What? Honesty?”

“No, I didn’t mean that. I meant the shy and nervous type.”

Ryan laughed. “Well, I don’t know about other people, but I do. Quite a lot.”

“So I’m your type?” Mike ventured to ask.

“I don’t feel my lips anymore, so that’s mission accomplished. I’d say you are, and more than that. It’s refreshing. Usually, people want something from me.”

“I want something from you, too,” Mike replied.

“Maybe,” Ryan admitted, “but first you gave me something. And I didn’t hear you asking for anything in return.”

“I guess I can’t feel my lips anymore, either. Maybe that’s enough for a reward.”

“Let’s meet again, Mike. I want to get to know you.”

“Ryan, can I ask you something? Do you really think I’m cute?” Mike blasted out the question like an artillery round.

Ryan laughed. “Yeah, the cutest.”

“In that bar full of preppies?”

“In the known universe right now,” Ryan replied.

Damn, Ryan had a way with words, Mike thought. He hated that he had work tomorrow, and that Ryan had work tomorrow, and that they had to part ways. He wanted to do the getting to know

part, and the going to sleep together part, and the waking up together part, and all the parts that made a whole.

The waiter left the bill on the table and withdrew without making a sound. Ryan took it before Mike had a chance to reach for it.

“I invited you here,” Mike insisted.

He knew it had to be expensive, but it wasn’t like he spent money on many things, anyway. It was worth it.

“And I’m new around here, so I need to get on your good side so that you would invite me again,” Ryan argued.

Mike stared a little, as Ryan paid in cash. That was a bit weird, but maybe not everyone liked to use credit cards and their phones to pay.

“Is there something wrong? Look, you could pay next time,” Ryan said.

“Nothing, it’s just that you pay cash. Not that it’s wrong,” Mike hurried to say.

“I like to have money on me when I go around having fun. Sometimes a name is like a tin can strapped to your tail if you know what I mean. I use credit cards like everyone else in day by day activities. That’s all.”

“Oh, okay,” Mike said.

It wasn’t until later that night, as he recalled the events that he realized he didn’t know Ryan’s last name.

A tall man in a business suit was followed by a cohort of men and women dressed sharply and talking animatedly. From where he stood, Mike could only see the man’s back, and he had to admit, just like anyone else, that the new boss had a striking presence.

It was funny, he thought, how the short dark hair stopping right above the collar of his shirt looked precisely like Ryan’s hair. But maybe he had a bit of a crush, so Mike saw Ryan in every man he met carrying a smidge of resemblance. There was still a long time till Thursday, and Mike tried not to think about it, or the passing of time alone would drive him nuts.

Down in the basement, surrounded by the comforting blinking of server lights, Mike got to work. That was enough to distract his attention from the awesome guy he met on Monday evening.

After a couple of hours, his phone rang. Mike smiled as he saw Jared's pretty face popping on the screen. "Hey," he said, and he was pretty sure the way he smiled was palpable even through the phone.

"You're in a good mood," Jared commented. "And here I was, worried that you haven't called to tell me about your night. Did you go out, as we talked?"

"Yes, I did," Mike confirmed, and his lips stretched into a broader grin. "And I met a gorgeous guy!"

"Wow, do you have time to tell me everything? I'm on a break."

Jared was a professional photographer and doing mostly freelancing work, so he wasn't constrained by the same rules as nine to five employees.

"I can give you the abridged version."

"Please, do," Jared encouraged him.

"Well, I went to a bar close to work, and I met him," Mike started.

"Is he a co-worker then?" Jared asked.

"No. I mean, he didn't say, but he didn't know anyone there and was all by himself, although a lot of people were ogling him. And he said he's new in town, so he must have landed in that bar by accident. Then he asked me if I knew other places that were more fun, and that's how I ended up making out with him for more than two hours."

"Wow," Jared said. "Nice work, Mike. Listen, did you take his number?"

"I sure did," Mike said, proud of himself.

"That's great. So are you two going to see each other again?"

"On Thursday. He's pretty busy with work."

"What does he do for a living?" Jared asked.

"It didn't come up. Nothing came up really since we were just too busy kissing like crazy."

"I'm glad to hear the attraction is mutual, and, Mike, I'm proud of you for getting out of your shell a little."

"You should've seen me," Mike said, no longer able to hold it in. "I blew him in the bar."

"You did what?" Jared exclaimed.

“Yeah,” Mike said, and now felt getting red just thinking of it. “I just wanted to, and I went for it. He was surprised but pleased.”

“What kind of bar was that?” Jared asked.

Mike told him quickly.

“Then you’re lucky you didn’t get caught, although, frankly, I think a lot of people do more than just kissing when they go there. Still, it’s nice for more of a romantic fantasy,” Jared said. “So, you’re free tonight?”

“How’s Chris?” Mike asked, realizing he had been too busy gushing out about his crush that he hadn’t asked his friend anything about him or the guy he was seeing.

“We haven’t talked yet,” Jared replied, and his voice was strained.

“I’m sure he’ll call,” Mike said.

“I’m not holding my breath. Seriously, I need to check some matrimonial websites or something.”

“Chris seemed a lot into you. He’s just busy,” Mike said.

“I suppose. But I’m on a new diet now,” Jared joked, “one that’s not based on disappointments as the main course. So I’m trying to take things lightly.”

A company memo blinked on Mike’s screen, and he opened it. “J, I’d love to talk, but it looks like I need to go introduce myself to the new boss or something.”

“Okay. Let’s meet tonight. And good luck.”

“I hope he doesn’t fire me or something,” Mike said in a nervous voice.

“Fire you? Mike, have a little confidence. You’re indispensable.”

“What if he’s downsizing the company?” Mike felt his anxiety rising as the reality of the memo opened in front of him caught up with him.

“You can’t know that. Look, go, and say hello. I think it’s a good sign that the boss wants to see you.”

“He wants to see everyone; it seems,” Mike said, as he looked through the memo again. “I’m scheduled in ten minutes, so I better run.”

“I’ll keep my fingers crossed. But I’m sure you’ll be fine. Hey, call me after you see your boss. You know, just so that I know you’re fine.”

“Okay,” Mike said.

He wished he could share Jared’s confidence in him. Human interaction was a discipline he had never been good at.

He knocked shortly, even if the secretary told him to go right in, and entered only after he heard the encouragement to come in from the inside.

Mike kept his eyes down as he walked in. He closed the door behind him carefully, and only after that, he looked up.

“What the hell?”

That was his boss speaking. He didn’t say a word. There was too much ice in his veins for him to do that. Behind the old boss’s desk sat no one else but Ryan. His Ryan. What his? What Ryan? What was he thinking?

Mike just stood there, completely frozen, and gaping like a fish. It was Ryan, all right. Gone were the plaid shirt and relaxed attitude. Instead, Ryan had been swallowed by a dark blue smart business suit, and he looked nothing like the guy Mike had made out with for hours on Monday evening. But he was the same guy, and Mike felt his lungs draining of air.

“Do you work here?” Ryan asked and stood up abruptly.

Mike would have taken a step back, but he was already glued to the door.

“Yes,” he said in a faint voice. “Do you?”

It was stupid to ask that, but his mind was empty. Not for long.

“Are you going to fire me?”

“Are you going to sue me?” Ryan asked at the same time.

“What?! No!” Both exclaimed.

Ryan sat back at his desk and pushed his fingers through his hair. “Why the hell didn’t you say anything about working here when we met?”

“You didn’t ask,” Mike pointed out.

“I’m sure I did,” Ryan said, and his eyes were darting sideways like he didn’t want to look at Mike at all.

“You just asked if I went there often and if I knew anyone,” Mike said, regaining his voice. He could not just stand there and allowed to be judged unfairly.

“And? Why did you lie?”

“I didn’t! I never go to that bar, and I don’t get along with anyone!” Mike pursed his lips and then looked down stubbornly.

Ryan groaned and leaned back into his chair. “What the fuck, Mike? Wait, is that even your name?”

“I don’t lie,” Mike said, and the ice in his veins turned to steel. He was like a cornered animal. His forgotten strength was coming to the rescue.

Ryan looked at the screen on his desk. “Micah Cavanaugh.”

“All my friends call me Mike.” Great, now he was defensive.

Ryan groaned again. “What fucking luck. I should’ve known not to try to pick up someone in a place so close to work. But you looked so out of place that I just...” He trailed off and ran a hand over his face.

“Do I get to keep my job or not?” Mike felt cold sweat pouring down his back. Ryan looked angry. Angry bosses were just one of the many things that made him feel anxious.

“Of course you do,” Ryan said. “So, are you trying to tell me that it was just a mistake? That you really didn’t know anyone at that bar?”

“Shy and nervous,” Mike found himself talking.

“What?” Ryan asked, and his dark eyes thinned in displeasure.

“Nothing,” Mike replied. “That’s me.”

And your type, he felt tempted to say, but it wouldn’t be fair. If he tried to put himself in Ryan’s shoes, he would realize the situation was bad. No one had to know. But, hell, some people must have seen them leaving together. Shit, shit, shit.

“This is a fucked-up situation,” Ryan said.

“It’s all right. I won’t tell a soul a thing. It’s buried. It never happened,” Mike said quickly.

“Some people must have seen us going out of the bar together,” Ryan pointed out.

“And I could just say that you asked me something about directions to... places. It’s not like anyone followed us into the street or anything. I think.” He was babbling, and his nervousness was growing.

Ryan sighed. "I take a gamble here, trusting you."

Please, please, I don't want to start searching for a job, Mike prayed silently. "You don't have to worry. Also, people might have stared at you at the bar that night, but I'm pretty much invisible. No one will remember I was there, too."

"You're not invisible," Ryan said, and his voice was calm now, composed. "And I remember."

Mike swallowed and continued to look down at his snickers. "Mr. Armstrong, you wanted to see me?" he asked in as a neutral voice as could muster.

Ryan picked the cue. "You're an exemplary employee, Mr. Cavanaugh. You are due a raise." His voice was neutral, too, professional.

"You don't have to bribe me," Mike mumbled, staring at his feet.

"Stop assuming that you know me," Ryan said in a frosty voice. "My decision to offer you a raise had been taken before you entered my office."

"How come you were drinking alone that night?" Mike asked, feeling like he had the right to ask some questions, too.

"I rejected anyone approaching me on the grounds that I was during my off-hours. I believe I was quite convincing."

Mike could bet. The cold man in a suit sitting at his desk was nothing like the Ryan he thought he knew. But he didn't know anything.

"And didn't you worry what people might say about seeing you leave with someone?"

"My private life is none of anyone's business," Ryan said, and this time, his eyes were burning with something.

Mike nodded. "I understand. Thank you for the raise, sir."

"Dismissed," Ryan said.

Mike walked out of Ryan's office, stiff and cold everywhere. There was a sound, something like a thump, from behind the closed door, and he cringed, pushing his head into his shoulders. Such things could only happen to him.

Jared caressed his hair gently as he lay with his head on the table, feeling miserable. "Hey, it was just a mistake on both parts. And he wouldn't dare to fire you now. It's no one's fault, but if he wants to spread the guilt around, he's equally guilty. Actually, even more than you."

“How’s that?” Mike asked, and his words came out slurred, as his cheek pressed hard against the wood, making it difficult to talk.

“He should’ve known not to hunt so close to home,” Jared said promptly. “You had no idea who he was, but he could assume you were an employee. Plus, he didn’t ask you directly if you worked with the others.”

“That’s pretty much what he said, and what we talked about. How come these things only happen to me?” Mike complained.

Wallowing in his misery, he missed Adrian taking a seat beside him.

“What’s with our pretty boy?” Adrian asked, cheerful as usual.

“He got involved in a difficult situation,” Jared said in a diplomatic tone.

“I gave my boss a blowjob,” Mike said directly.

Adrian appeared surprised for a moment. Mike couldn’t tell since he didn’t dare to look at his friend. “Wow, kinky.” So like Adrian to say such a thing. “Did it happen in the Oval Office? Did you keep the dress or does the Secret Service have it already?”

Jared moved his hand from Mike’s hair, most probably to punch Adrian. “None of them had any idea they worked together when that happened. It was just a coincidence,” he explained.

“Damn. What are you going to do, Mike? I could ask around if you want to work someplace else.”

Mike could tell Jared was making desperate gestures for Adrian to stop talking.

“Guys, I know you’re great, but at this point, I’m more afraid of finding a new job than of confronting my boss. The man I blew in a dim-lit bar,” Mike said, slurring the words. “It’s not like I’ll stumble upon him by the water cooler.”

“You only drink bottled water,” Jared pointed out.

“Exactly.” Mike straightened up. “That’s it. I don’t have to see him ever again. There’s no need for me to go work somewhere else.”

Adrian scratched his head. “Still. He’s your boss. Are you sure you’re not going to have wet dreams just because you saw his car parked on the premises or something? That’s so going to haunt you, Mike. Wait, did he threaten you or something?”

“He gave me a raise,” Mike replied.

“Then it must have been a really good blowjob,” Adrian joked again.

Jared intervened. “That’s not the reason why Mike got a raise. It was for doing his job well.”

“I know. I’m just trying to cheer you up, guys. It’s like there’s a funeral or something.”

“You sure are in a good mood,” Jared said, talking to Adrian.

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Did Edward call?” Jared asked.

“Yes. We talk every night. On a schedule, but still.”

“On a schedule?” Mike asked. “How’s that? And wait, is this a fixture?”

“We talked on Monday evening, and we talked again tonight. Yeah, it’s pretty much a fixture.”

“And what are you talking about?” Mike asked.

Adrian smiled. “Things. Kinky things.” He winked at Mike.

Mike groaned and put his head back on the table. “It must be so nice to be Adrian.”

“Yeah,” Adrian admitted. “Don’t worry, Mike. If the guy knows what’s best for him, he will keep his mouth shut. And it looks to me like he does.”

“Mike still likes him,” Jared said.

“I don’t!” Mike protested.

Jared threw him a knowing look. He made himself small.

“All was great until today. I’ve never met anyone like him.”

“Your boss is off-limits, Mike,” Adrian said and placed one hand on his back in sympathy. “I’m sorry, but you don’t fuck at the same place that pays your rent and stuff. It’s bound to get messy.”

“I know,” Mike replied. “Why do I always have to get in such situations?”

“It’s not your fault.” Jared hurried to comfort him.

“Or maybe it is.” Adrian smirked as he grabbed Mike by the scruff of his neck. “Listen here, Mike. Stop overthinking everything. Just go with the flow. So you gave your boss a bj as a welcome gift. Big deal. No one got hurt. Go to work, do your thing, bring home the dough. But next time, have some fun when we go out. Real fun. Loosen up.”

“Isn’t it funny that Adrian is the one with a boyfriend of all of us?” Jared said with a small laugh.

“Mike, you’re a responsible guy, and I love you for that. Don’t listen to Adrian and his live-the-

moment life strategy. But he is right, in a way. No one got hurt. And you need to get over it. We'll go clubbing this weekend, and we'll have fun."

"On Friday, because I'm booked on Saturday," Adrian said.

"What did I say?" Jared shook his head. "Adrian, of all people, got himself a boyfriend."

"He's not my boyfriend," Adrian protested.

"Right. He's like your master, and you're the pet," Jared joked.

"We're not that, either. But it's too complicated to explain it to mere mortals like you," Adrian counter-attacked.

Jared rolled his eyes. "Sure. As a friend, I must tell you again. Be careful. And have nine-one-one on speed-dial."

"Now you talk like Mike, who's afraid of yogurt," Adrian said.

"Hey, you never know what goes into that thing. A thousand types of bacteria could kill you," Mike said, only half-joking.

"All right, dad. I'll only have organic stuff," Adrian replied. "Now, let me hear your strategy for going to work tomorrow."

Mike pursed his lips. His friends knew him a little too well. "I wanted to call in sick."

"No." It was Jared's turn to scold him. "You go there as usual and see about your job. Your boss has no business visiting the servers, so there's no point in so much avoidance, okay?"

"Okay," Mike admitted.

"I'll check on you every hour if I have to," Jared warned him. "There is no way you give up on a job you like --"

"For a blowjob," Adrian finished the sentence.

Mike snickered. He could always count on his friends to make him feel better, no matter how screwed up he was. "All right, guys. I'll do it."

He continued to smile as Jared and Adrian patted his back. But, on the inside, his heart was still small, small, small.

Chapter Five – Shadows Of The Past

Adrian smiled as he picked up. “Your Majesty, always on time.”

He stretched on the bed, lazily, touching his chest. Edward’s voice was sex, even when they talked about mundane stuff. What was he thinking? They never talked about mundane stuff.

“Why shouldn’t I be? I’ve sent something to your address. It is a suit, and I hope it fits you to a tee. It should arrive by tomorrow.”

“Something wrong with my fashion sense?” Adrian asked right away.

“Not at all, and you look good in anything. It’s just that I want you to make an entrance when I take you to our private club this Saturday.”

“I can barely wait to see how rich perverts party,” Adrian said and laughed.

“What a naughty boy,” Edward said in a low, measured voice that was giving Adrian goosebumps. “I adore these little bouts of rebellion; they really add to the anticipation of me breaking you.”

Adrian turned on his belly, his half-hard cock rubbing against the coverlet. He didn’t care for being dominated, but Edward’s voice and promises were doing wonders to his cock and arousal ever since he had met the man. “What if you never break me?”

“That would be a premiere. I would admit defeat, of course.”

“Hmm, sounds good. What’s the prize, though?”

“Besides my admittance that I failed?”

“Yeah. That sounds sweet, too, though.”

“What would you like?”

Adrian pondered for a bit. “I’ll think about it. It has to be something that goes against your grain.”

“Absolutely. I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

There was a small break in the conversation. Adrian waited. Edward had a way of messing with him that only made him excited about what would follow.

“You’re silent,” Edward pointed out.

“As you are,” Adrian said in reply.

“So why aren’t we saying our goodbyes so that we can see about our evening?”

“Why, indeed.” Adrian chuckled. “Are you sure about this? About me?”

“Are you getting cold feet, Adrian?”

“Not at all. I’m just teasing you. You’ll lose, you know? Wait, is there a time constraint? How long do I have to resist to your futile attempts to fuck me?”

“Ah, I like this. You’re practical. Well, I suppose we should put all the terms down. How about six months?”

“Wow. That would be the longest relationship I’ve ever been in,” Adrian commented. “You’re making me sign my freedom over to you.”

“I’ll make it worth your while,” Edward replied politely. “So, I guess we’re at that point where we should play along with a cliché, right?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Adrian said, still pushing his cock lazily against the bed, giving it just a little bit of rub.

“What are you wearing?” Edward’s voice was half seductive silk and half spicy irony.

Adrian loved how he was learning to read the man. “Absolutely nothing. And I’m rubbing my dick against my sheets, imagining how it would be to have you under me.”

“I hope those sheets are nothing close to a resemblance to my person.”

“They’re not. It’s frustrating, really. I wish you could skip whatever it is you need to do tonight and come around.”

“You still think I’m your booty call.”

“Call it whatever you like. I need you here.”

“Will you go back on your word and abandon me on Saturday if I don’t relent?”

“No. A word’s a word. I gave it, so I won’t take it back. But it would be so nice to feel you.”

Adrian waited, pretending he wasn’t keeping his breath, not quite so, for Edward to reply.

“It might turn into a lesson. You might not appreciate it as much.”

Adrian made a silent sign of victory, his fist closed. “Oh, if it’s your ass, I think I will appreciate it very much.”

“Are you looking forward to your training, then?”

“Have it your way. As long as I’m satisfied, you can run your mouth all you want. Your sexy mouth,” Adrian added shortly.

“I don’t usually comply with such requests. You’re barely trying, Adrian.”

“It must be my charm.” Adrian grinned, knowing well the other couldn’t see that. “Admit it, Edward. I’m intriguing you. I challenge you, and you let me get away with stuff because no one ever did that to you.”

“You flatter yourself and reduce my experience and expertise to nothing. I have been challenged before.”

“Maybe you didn’t like the guy. Maybe you like me,” Adrian explained right away.

“That must be.” The amusement in Edward’s voice was easy to guess.

“Then let’s cut this convo short. I’m not one for phone sex when I can have the real deal.”

“All right then. I will be with you shortly.”

“And then I’ll be in you,” Adrian joked and snickered.

“So crude,” Edward remarked, but he laughed, too.

His Majesty could pretend all he wanted. Adrian was sure no one ever told this guy ‘no’, whatever his pretensions were. Now, that he was challenged, he must have drawn some kinky excitement from saying ‘yes’ to whatever Adrian was asking.

Adrian had no qualms with answering the door completely naked. Edward watched him, giving him a short look and then entered. “What if there was someone else at the door?”

“I would have just told them that I was expecting my booty call.”

“You have an answer to everything,” Edward commented. “So, do I gather that you want us to go straight to business?”

Adrian leaned against the door, which he had closed quickly after Edward was inside. Despite his bravado, he wasn’t that in the mood to shock his neighbors. “Actually, since you caved in and you’re here, I’ll let you lead in exchange.”

Edward smiled. He was standing, not two feet away, detached, hair perfectly combed, hands in his pockets. “Then that’s something to look forward to. Let’s move on to the sofa, shall we?”

Adrian plopped himself down on the couch beside Edward, who elegantly sat down, crossing his legs. His hands were linked together, resting on top of one knee, and appeared to lose himself in thought for a second. Then he suddenly turned toward Adrian. “Why are you a bad kisser?”

Adrian snorted. “I’m not a bad kisser. What are you saying? It’s just that I don’t see why some people consider it so important. I’d rather have sex.”

“I enjoy kissing. I believe it is a simulation of penetration that allows those involved to set up some ground rules. If someone insists on being the dominant --”

Adrian grabbed Edward by the back of his head and kissed him hard. “You had me at ‘I enjoy’.”

“And I thought you said you’d let me be in charge,” Edward replied. He touched his hair for a brief second, somewhat seemingly self-conscious.

“Did I?” Adrian grinned and leaned into Edward’s shoulder, batting his eyelashes.

Edward laughed, his eyes crinkling at the corners. “All right, then. On your knees, Adrian.”

“Ah, damn,” Adrian mock-complained, but obeyed, and placed himself on his knees, right in front of his guest.

Edward touched his cheeks gently and used his thumbs to tease the corners of his mouth. “Let’s see it, then.”

Adrian closed his eyes as Edward’s lips touched his, feather-like. Everyone who knew him would laugh his ass off. He was a straightforward kind of guy. He liked having his dick sucked and fucking nice asses. Not ever was he for indulging in such a dull thing as foreplay. Yet, right now, he was making an exception to the rule, and it was more than half pleasant.

Edward used more than just his lips to kiss him. From time to time, he moved away just very little, and let one thumb brush against Adrian’s bottom lip, over and over, the firmer touch making small eddies of pleasure course through his body.

“Open, just a smidge,” Edward demanded, and Adrian allowed one naked thumb to squeeze through and caress his tongue.

Then, a hungry tongue followed, and Adrian let one tiny moan escape. Edward broke the kiss and watched him through half-hooded eyes. Adrian blinked a few times. “You really want to seduce me?”

“It’s part of the play,” Edward replied.

“Then you should up the ante. Your kisses are good, but it’s your ass I’m yearning for.”

Edward allowed a small, thin smile to curl his lips. "Are you trying to tell me you don't like it? I heard you quite distinctively."

"That was just something in my throat," Adrian lied. "And it's good; I'm not saying it's not good."

Edward touched the tip of his nose. "You're not a very good liar. How you managed to fool so many men, it's beyond me."

"It's simple. I always tell the truth. I tell them that I want them to suck my dick, and when I tell them not to call, it's the truth, too."

"Yet, you give them your number."

"How do you know that?"

"A lucky guess."

"They ask for it. I tell them I won't bother to answer. But you know, it would be too cruel to refuse such a simple request."

"Too cruel," Edward echoed his words. "What you do is even crueler."

Adrian sighed. "Did you perch yourself up on the sofa and got me on my knees so that you can have the moral high ground?"

"Far from me to do such a thing. Your cruelty in such affairs of the heart satisfies me. It's also what I look in a partner since I do not chase fleeting emotions and attachments."

"Really? I thought you wanted to bring me down, to make me fall for you so that you can be the winner."

"You have it all backward, Adrian. That is the goal of the game, the finality of it, but not what I want. What I want is to find another person that can function outside the conventions of so-called relationships with the ultimate purpose of enjoying nothing but pure pleasure."

"Sometimes, you're making my head hurt. But I'm all for pleasure and zero attachments."

"We'll see," Edward said with a small, enigmatic smile. "After all, I will spare nothing. But enough about such tedious matters. We are both here to have fun, aren't we?"

"Yeah," Adrian admitted. "Are you done with your kissing lesson, then?"

"For the moment. Right now, I need you to suck my cock."

"Wow, really?"

“It’s the least you can do to help me get a bit of arousal before heading to the main course,” Edward justified his request right away. “Are you going to deny me this pleasure?”

“I suppose not,” Adrian said, feeling a tad disoriented by Edward’s shift in behavior. He appeared entirely compliant, but it was surely a smokescreen seeing how a blunt request like that could leave his lips without one drop of hesitation.

He focused on freeing Edward’s cock from his suit pants and then gave the head a little lick. Edward was only half-hard, and Adrian felt a bit annoyed at that. Even with all the talking, he could sense his cock, hard as a rock.

Damn, that was, again, something he didn’t do. Any second now, he would be scolded for not doing a good job. But it was all for a reasonable purpose, seeing how, after that, Edward would finally put his ass up.

He caught the hardening cock in his fist and gave it a long rub. Usually, he didn’t enjoy going down on guys, but, right now, the novelty of the situation was doing something to him. Adrian licked and licked the head and sucked it into his mouth.

A hand in his hair began caressing him. “You don’t like to suck off your sex partners. I do not blame you. Someone with your reticence against being dominated in any way --”

“Are we talking or having sex?” Adrian pulled the cock out of his mouth with a smack and threw Edward a rightfully annoyed look.

Edward laughed softly. “I stand corrected. I will shut up now.”

“Good. ‘Cause it’s hard work down here, you know?”

“Don’t I? But I’m not by far as endowed as you.”

“Big enough, though,” Adrian replied, trying to quench the little swell of pride in his chest upon hearing his manhood praised like that, especially by comparison.

Edward exhaled, and he appeared content, as Adrian returned to his business. Why didn’t he like sucking cock? He wondered as he moved both his mouth and hand up and down Edward’s cock. It was more like he didn’t want being taken for a fool than actually disliking it.

In Edward’s case, not only he enjoyed it, he actually found a new sort of delight. The hand in his hair was a reward, and he also discovered Edward’s scent to be just as he liked it best, a bit of the light side, obviously because of the man’s impeccable hygiene, but also pleasant and subtle, with a hint of growing desire.

Now he was going faster and faster at it. The long elegant fingers in his hair flexed and squeezed. “That is most exquisite, Adrian,” Edward’s raspy voice said, “but being so determined about it would deprive me of experiencing other pleasures at their fullest.”

Of course. And Adrian didn’t want Edward to come from a blowjob, either. He just moved away, and Edward caught him and kissed him deeply. It was, indeed, exquisite, to find his hunger being matched by the other’s if the way Edward’s tongue swirled inside his mouth was any indication.

“Just let me get the rubber and the lube,” Adrian said as he reluctantly let go of the kiss.

“Do that,” Edward said, and his voice was soft and his eyes a bit moist.

Adrian hurried, almost stubbing one toe into the furniture on his way. “Fuck,” he whispered under his breath.

“Should I kiss it to make it all better?”

Even when mocking, Edward’s voice was dipped in sex. Adrian just threw him a pointed look. “Joke more. I won’t forgive your ass. Just look at this thing.” He half-turned and slapped his cock in passing.

Edward licked his lips. “I am looking.”

Adrian just shook his head. “Then get ready for a pounding. Ass up when I come back, or I might just ruin that pretty suit.”

Edward laughed instead of a reply, but he began pulling at his tie. Adrian would have loved to stay and watch, but he needed to get the condoms.

When he got back from the bedroom, Edward was completely naked and kneeling on the sofa, with his ass jutting out. “Was this what you had in mind when you gave that order?”

“You’re pretty close.”

Adrian moved to stand behind Edward. He moved his fingers through the tight buttocks, enjoying the little playful squeeze Edward gave.

“Just one thing,” Edward said.

Adrian looked a bit surprised at the tie Edward handed to him. “Are we getting into all that *Fifty Shades* cliché kind of thing? Do you want me to blindfold you?”

“Not really. I need you to put it over your eyes. Missing one sense does heighten the others. At least there was one thing that movie got right.”

“But I want to look at you.”

“You’ll see me with your mind. That’s my only request.”

“Actually, you also asked me to suck you off. This is your second request.”

“Touché,” Edward admitted. “Will you indulge me? Later, I’ll ask you what you saw.”

Adrian grumbled as he took the tie and put it over his eyes, tying it at the back. “Great. Now how am I going to put lube on you?”

“Don’t worry about that. I’ll do it. I will guide you, Adrian.”

Was Edward talking that way all the time? Because if he were, all his patients must have boners at the most absurd times.

“What do you mean, tell you what I saw?” Adrian asked, enjoying the small touches on his cock, the condom being rolled down, the tiny squeeze of his balls, the two kisses planted one on each. Edward must have turned to do all that.

“I want us to have a connection. No, not a relationship, but a real connection as two people enjoying pleasure, as real as it can be.”

“I could lie.”

“Of course you could. The question is: will you?”

Adrian said nothing. His cock was guided slowly toward a tight entrance. He didn’t move, unsure of whether he could truly gauge his partner’s discomfort if he pushed literally blindly inside.

Edward clearly knew his thing. He knew when to stop and when to go, and Adrian groaned in pleasure as his cock was finally entirely sheathed inside.

“I didn’t say you couldn’t touch me,” Edward said. “I want you to learn me with your hands.”

Adrian grabbed one hip and used his free hand to draw a line across Edward’s spine. His fingers curled around one shoulder, massaging it for a brief moment, only to move along and follow the line of the back of Edward’s neck.

Small gasps and moans encouraged him. Lost in his exploration, he remained still.

“Now I believe it’s my turn to protest. Are we fucking or doing something else?”

Again, that small ironic dip of the tongue which Adrian had come to enjoy, for some kinky masochistic reason. One move of the hips, and he got in deeper. A loud hitched breath from Edward was enough to tell him he was on the right way.

“For pleasure,” he found himself saying as he leaned over and searched with his lips for a patch of skin to land on.

Edward’s nape was tasty as he sank his teeth into it, like a wild animal holding down its prey. There would be no one else Adrian would think of while doing this.

He bucked his hips, and Edward pulled him in, squeezed him, and then rejected him, but only for a second. They were fighting a bit, smashing and crashing into one another, but one had to be on top, and Adrian relished the sensation, the knowledge of being the one.

Nothing was dull, despite not seeing anything through the silky fabric. His hearing caught on Edward’s cock slapping rhythmically against his lower belly. That poor thing had to be in either hell or heaven. Frustrating, that was for sure.

Funny thing, not being able to supply the visuals to heighten his pleasure. It wasn’t like he had never closed his eyes when fucking or getting sucked by some random dude. Still, this didn’t feel random at all.

His arousal was soaring, his cock, trapped in that high heat, getting closer and closer. The pleasure, so high, and Adrian’s mind wondered, if only for a fraction of a second, to a time long before, something that came round and round to haunt him, not wanting to let go of him.

The same thing he thought of when fucking other guys. No, he wouldn’t think of that. He wouldn’t think of getting back, of getting even, at least not this time.

Didn’t you know that it wouldn’t last?

“Ah, fuck,” Adrian groaned. He grabbed Edward’s hips hard and squeezed his eyes shut, regardless of the futility of the gesture. But for one second there, the texture of the skin beneath his fingers, the smell in the room, what he couldn’t see, took him back and he was done for.

He withdrew, breathing hard, pulling the tie away from his eyes, and the condom from his cock, in a run for the bathroom, not wanting Edward to look at him and guess.

He threw some water in his face and then went back into the room. Edward was already getting dressed. Adrian glanced guiltily as Edward’s still hard cock was pushed back into the pants.

“You thought of someone else,” Edward said, and there were no inflections in his voice, nothing there, not hurt, not mockery, nothing.

Adrian said nothing. He just stood there, staring down, like a kid caught doing something wrong.

“It’s all right. I’d rather have everything out in the open,” Edward said.

Adrian continued to remain silent. Edward passed by him, maybe with the intention to touch him, but Adrian moved out of the way.

“Goodbye, Adrian.”

Edward didn't ask for an explanation. Adrian felt relieved, but for a second. “Wait,” he called after Edward, but the door was already closed.

“Fuck this shit,” Adrian said and dropped on the sofa.

His body was still coming down from the earlier release. But he felt like crap. And why the hell was that? It wasn't like he was in love with Edward and cheating on him or something.

Then why did he feel so guilty?

Jared stared at the caller ID, a bit surprised. He wasn't sure if he should get it or not. It had been four days and seven hours since he had last talked to Chris. Well, if he didn't answer, he would never know what Chris had to say.

“Hi,” he said, and then cleared his throat, self-conscious of how unsure he sounded.

“How am I doing with the three-day rule?” Chris asked directly, and his voice appeared a bit impatient.

A bit disoriented, Jared sat down on his bed. For some reason, it had seemed important to stand up while taking the call. “Three-day rule?”

“So that I don't appear desperate.”

Jared wanted to smack himself silly. Or maybe smack Chris silly. “It's been four days and --”

“Seven hours,” Chris completed his sentence.

Good thing he was sitting, or he would have started to melt on his feet. “Did you count?”

“I know how youth today cares about independence and rules of their own, and I didn't want to be in the red zone.”

“I have no idea what youth you're talking about. I'm not part of it.”

“That's good,” Chris replied, and Jared could easily imagine him smiling. “Would you like to meet me this weekend?”

“Sure,” Jared replied with a bit of too much enthusiasm. “I mean, it's okay.”

“I must admit that I panicked a little, seeing how you haven't called.”

Jared closed his eyes and cursed inwardly. Maybe he was a moron for not thinking about how Chris might be waiting for a sign for him. It just seemed like he could have been seen as the desperate one if he had made that move.

He had thought he was giving Chris space, when, in fact, Chris didn't want that much space. He was nothing but a fool. "I thought that might make you feel, you know, uncomfortable."

"Why?" Chris seemed genuinely puzzled.

"Just some stupidity of mine," Jared said quickly. "So, when would it be good for you? I'm free all weekend."

Eager. Desperate. Jared closed his eyes and tried hard not to bite his tongue. It deserved the treatment.

"How about Saturday evening? I would also like to invite you to see my place."

Jared stood up from the bed so that he could do a little victory dance. "I would love that."

"Now, I should ask you if dinner first is okay."

"Yeah, it's perfect."

Chris laughed. "I'm glad you agree with everything I say."

"I guess I'm not a particularly pretentious person. And dinner sounds awesome, actually. Wait, do I have to dress up? Where are we going? What level of fancy are we talking about?"

"The level you want, beautiful," Chris replied. "Anything that works for you. I wouldn't want to trigger another wardrobe crisis."

For a moment, Jared frowned, and then he remembered. "Ah. Well, you might be right. But would you really be okay with eating junk food? Because I think that's the highest level of fancy my wardrobe can deal with right now."

"I would, of course. All I want is to see you again."

"Then I will put in the effort, and go shopping for some decent clothes," Jared concluded.

"Anything is fine, Jared, really."

"But I want to," Jared said and realized too late how he sounded like a petulant child.

"Okay. But don't go too fancy. We'll find a not-so-fancy restaurant where we can dine without making any of us feel out of place. What do you say? I'll make a selection and send it to you. You pick, and we'll go from there."

“Great,” Jared agreed gleefully.

There was a short moment of silence. “I really like you,” Chris said softly. “Will you be so kind as to tell me if I’m blowing it?”

Jared just shook his head. “I don’t see how you could do that.”

“I’ll count the hours until I see you.”

That was an incredibly romantic thing to say, wasn’t it? But who said that anymore? Jared felt a bit small and inadequate as he sat back on the bed. Maybe Chris was out of his league, in ways he couldn’t even start to imagine.

“I am so lucky,” Chris added, being the first to interrupt the awkward silence.

“If you say so,” Jared mumbled.

“I do say so.” A small laugh followed. “See you on Saturday, then, Jared. And I promise that there will be no more annoying interruptions.”

Jared was staring at his phone long after the conversation was over, unsure of whether it was true or not that a man of Chris’s status was interested in someone like him. Usually, Jared considered himself somewhere in the middle, not rich, not poor, not a genius, but not a dumbass, either, and even in the looks department he tended to believe he was nothing special, although, if he took Adrian’s and Mike’s word for it, he was on the pretty side. Plenty of guys were also willing to hook up with him, so that counted, too.

But to be called ‘beautiful’ and be treated like some kind of winning lottery ticket by a guy like that seemed a bit unbelievable.

“Too good to be true?” He asked out loud.

Maybe he was selling himself short. That had to be it. Maybe Chris had a type, and Jared happened to be it. That would have been an easy explanation.

Jared needed to turn off the worrier inside. So far, things were going well. Despite his obviously exaggerated disappointment from earlier, Chris had called, and all was good.

The least he could do was enjoy it.

For all the right reasons, Mike felt like a stalker. Ryan seemed to be on everyone’s lips, and, given the novelty factor, the buzz wouldn’t fade away for some time. While he should have kept away from anything involving his boss, his handsome, drool-worthy boss, he found himself,

more often than not, leaning in to hear fragments of conversation that featured the man as the main food for gossip.

So far, he had learned nothing new or worthy of attention. No one seemed to know of Ryan's preferences in bedroom affairs, so all the female population, minus those happily married, was in a frenzy of possibilities to win the new boss's interest.

Damn, he had gotten to that point that he was now hanging by the water cooler, waiting for gossip to fly by.

"So, can we assume he's single?"

"Told you, no ring."

Mike nodded to himself. Ryan had said as much. Even as a gay guy, he was single, so the gossip was right in that respect.

"But what can you do to earn the attention of such a man?" One female employee complained.

"I heard he has a soft spot for hard workers. During those meet-ups with employees he just held, you know what I'm talking about, I heard he rained raises all over the most hardworking butts in the place."

"Ah, damn, and I'm totally lazy by definition. It looks like I have to step up. Wait, did you get a raise?"

"Of course," the first employee said with self-importance. Then, maybe because she didn't want to put down her friend, she added. "But it was really small. I heard those nerds in IT got the highest raises."

"Ah, damn. I'm not good at computers, either."

"Rumor has it he's a bit paranoid about cybersecurity or something. That's what I heard from the secretarial team. Those guys in IT, don't envy them too much. I heard they got a thousand pages long book of instructions on how to do their job now."

Mike stood there, thinking. He wasn't part of the IT team, per se, since he was the server-side, but how come he didn't get further instructions? Maybe Ryan had been so disturbed by the reveal of whose mouth he had practically fucked the previous night that he might have forgotten to tell him some vital information.

For a couple of seconds, he held his breath. Could it be that he could head over to the boss's office to ask for clarification regarding his work? No, he shook his head. That would be wrong. So far, he had watched Ryan from afar and had seen him only by accident, but he longed to see him again with an intensity he couldn't understand.

No, it was insane even to consider that. After all, Ryan, most probably, wanted to see as little of him as possible, given the unfortunate circumstances of their little affair.

He would just go back to his servers and watch them blink in understanding. After all, it wasn't like guys like Mike usually hung out in the same universe as guys like Ryan. No, not Ryan, Mr. Armstrong.

And you better remember that, he chided himself. There had to be a way to cure himself of this newfound obsession. But how on Earth was he supposed to do that? After all, Ryan and that magical evening had been almost the only things on his mind ever since they happened to him.

He needed to get a hold of himself and pronto. Briefly, he wondered what his female colleagues would say if they knew he had practically feasted on the big boss's equally big cock already? Maybe he could consider purchasing some defense armor, just in case.

His fingers tapped against the keyboard rhythmically, as he operated the usual backup of the data that was supplied by the building above him and the little ants working hard for the system. His new headphones were the most awesome thing ever, truly noise-canceling, so not a smidge of the outside world could sneak inside and ruin his flow.

Since he was completely alone, he could sing along and out of tune as much as he wanted. A tap on his shoulder surprised him just as he was attacking a much challenging bridge of a popular song.

Mike jumped out of his chair so quickly that he got it flying backward. His eyes grew wide when he saw his visitor. Rapidly, he took his headphones off and almost smashed them against the keyboard.

"Damn, fuck." He managed to stop the damage by hitting the right keys and then carefully closed the windows on his screen. "I'm so sorry, sir," he said eventually, as he turned to look guiltily at Ryan.

No, not Ryan. His boss, Mr. Armstrong. How many times did he have to repeat that to himself? It was a bit tedious. And also, a part of him, small and crippled, wanted to protest against that.

Ryan didn't appear amused, as that would have been required to diffuse the situation. Instead, he was wearing a deep frown etched on his face, and Mike had to admit to himself that Ryan could rock that look any day. His knees were weak for all the wrong reasons, too.

"I appreciate that you are pulling long hours, Mr. Cavanaugh, but less your work ethics. I'm not sure I understand what is going on here."

Mike knew he was beet red at this point. “I’m sorry, sir.” He tended to apologize a lot. Well, apologies couldn’t cut it. “It’s just that no one ever comes down here. Ever.”

Ryan quirked an eyebrow. “Do I gather, from what you’re telling me, that you’re the one dusting around here, too?”

“Ah. I mean. Yeah. No. The janitorial services take care of most of it. But no one touches the hardware,” Mike said, as he gestured around. “That’s all on me, with a little... dusting thingy, brush,” he tried to explain, gesticulating way too much.

Ryan threw a look around at the long rows of servers. “That’s quite a lot of dusting to do.”

“I wouldn’t let anyone touch them, sir,” Mike said quickly.

“Why? Are you afraid someone might feel tempted to steal your job?”

Mike looked straight at his boss and felt relieved when he saw the shadow of a smile on those perfect lips. “Not really. My position is not that coveted.”

Ryan began moving about, observing Mike’s desk and the shiny new headphones which he took into his hands, studied them for a while, and then placed them on his head.

Great way of feeling out of place. Something told Mike that Ryan couldn’t be the type to listen to commercial pop tunes. By the slight frown on Ryan’s face, Mike had to be right.

“You’re doing a great job, Mike.” Ryan put down the headphones.

Not Mr. Cavanaugh. Mike. He inhaled and kept the breath in. What was next? A ‘but’? Was he getting fired, after all?

“I wanted to see where you work,” Ryan continued. “It must get a bit lonely here, right?”

Mike just shrugged. He didn’t see it that way. It would have been worse to work in a crowded office, with colleagues talking, taking calls, and doing who knew how many other annoying things.

“It’s all right. I don’t feel lonely.”

Ryan leaned against Mike’s desk, crossing his arms over his chest. It was wrong, so damned wrong, but he couldn’t help staring at him. Mike bit his bottom lip hard, hoping that he would heed the hidden warning in that. He was not supposed, in capital letters, to dream of his boss, consider him sexy, and want to drop to his knees and declare his adoration.

He was completely, utterly stupid.

“I suppose that it takes a unique type of individual to handle this type of work,” Ryan said, while his dark eyes scrutinized Mike.

At his point, Mike would have much wanted that his boss had business somewhere else. He was getting a tad jittery, and the worst part was that he felt the need to move his arms and legs randomly to escape the sensation of being trapped.

The situation was far from ideal. Talking about getting what he wanted. All week, he had been engrossed in the fabrication of scenarios that would land him face to face with Ryan. The thing was the respective scenarios were carefully built under a blanket of impossibility, so it had been okay to have wide-eyed dreams.

Now, the so-called dream-like scenario was unfolding in front of his eyes, and Mike wanted to be completely somewhere else. Or for Ryan to be somewhere else. That space belonged to him, not to him, him, like in the sense of property, but in the sense that no one, ever, well, except for the janitors who had no choice in the matter, came down there.

“Why are you so nervous?” Ryan asked, and his voice was now, at least a little bit, amused. “Don’t tell me you were about to watch porn on a company’s computer.”

Mike gestured wildly. “I would never do that!”

Ryan laughed wholeheartedly. “You are so easy to tease.”

“I admit that I was listening to music. But the headphones are mine. And the music lets me focus. Helps me, I mean.”

“Ah. Don’t worry. I was actually teasing you about that, too. Although your taste in music leaves a lot to be desired.”

Those dark, intense eyes were trained on him, but Mike was no longer fidgeting. Instead, he was in a tiny bit of shock. So Ryan had been teasing him ever since putting one foot in there? Go figure. “I guess,” he said with some difficulty.

Ryan’s eyes thinned. “You guess that your taste in music sucks?”

Sucks. Sometimes, Mike could focus on the stupidest things. Not only his taste in music sucked. He... all right, his brain needed to take a chill pill.

“To each their own. Or something,” Mike said quickly and looked away.

Great, he was blushing again, and probably Ryan thought he was a complete lunatic.

“You might have to get educated.”

“I don’t have time for that,” Mike said promptly.

“Hmm. I suppose not. These servers are your life, right?”

Suddenly, his life resumed in that sentence appeared to be terribly depressing. “I do have a life outside work, sir.”

“I had a glimpse of it, so yes, I am well aware.” Ryan’s voice was no longer teasing. Right now, it was melting something inside Mike. Could it be that Ryan was thinking of that, as much as he was? But he couldn’t bring it up. It would have been like breaching a code or something. After all, they had both established that nothing had happened between them.

“I won’t listen to music anymore if that’s a problem.”

“It’s not.” Ryan shifted in his place, and Mike couldn’t repress in time the need to do the same. “I actually wanted to talk to you about some security issues.”

Mike exhaled. As soon as Ryan entered his business mode, he could manage. To all questions, he replied to the best of his abilities, making sure not to leave anything out. As a boss, Ryan was great. He knew all sorts of things, and he was not like one of those people who only cared about numbers and couldn’t be troubled with technical matters.

At the end of their conversation, Mike had every reason to believe that the company was in good hands. He moved to his desk and explained to Ryan his system. For a few seconds here and there, he reined in with some difficulty the temptation to inhale Ryan’s expensive cologne. But, as long as he was on the job, he could deal with everything.

There was a bit of pride, but also something else inside his heart when Ryan patted his shoulder and commanded him on how he handled his job.

“I am glad I have such a great employee under me. Working under me, I meant to say,” Ryan said quickly.

Mike was glad he was sitting. It would have been troubling to try to assume a vertical position while hearing those words. At least, he wasn’t the only one awfully aware of the innuendo, as accidental as it was. “Thank you, sir,” he mumbled and looked down.

“I am also here because of another reason,” Ryan started.

Mike could feel his ears pricking, trying to catch the faintest of sounds.

“I feel that I must apologize for my outburst at realizing you were my employee. It was not your fault in the slightest, and I shouldn’t have accused you the way I did.”

“You did nothing wrong, sir,” Mike said and shook his head. “Anyone in your position... Hell, I’m lucky that I still have a job.”

Ryan exhaled. It was a good thing they weren't facing each other, as awkward as it was to have a conversation like that. "You are an outstanding employee, Mike. I strongly believe you're an asset to this company. If only you weren't." The last words were spoken quietly, so Mike wasn't sure he heard correctly.

"Sir?" he asked, turning his chair.

Ryan looked down at him, and there was something in there, a small fire burning, and Mike found himself in the impossibility to speak. "Easy on this 'sir' thing."

Mike gulped. "Sorry."

Ryan reached for him and caressed his head, but only lightly. He withdrew his hand so quickly, Mike almost thought he had imagined it.

"You have no idea what you're sorry for, isn't it?" Ryan asked, and now his voice was deep and charged.

Mike just shook his head slowly.

"I'm not going to tell you. But you should be. You should be very, very sorry," Ryan said with a smile Mike could only interpret as self-deprecating. "Don't worry, though. This is just me, rambling. Great job, Mike. Your raise was well earned."

Mike pondered over the meaning of those words long after Ryan was gone, leaving him all along, among his servers.

"Adrian," Jared called, "you've been stabbing that piece of meat for the last five minutes like it killed your entire family."

Adrian exhaled. "Yeah. Sorry. You went through so much trouble to cook for all of us. And I was much in need of some comfort food."

Jared stared at his friend, a bit puzzled. "You're never in need of comfort food." For good measure, though, he unloaded another big chunk of creamy potato salad onto Adrian's plate.

Mike sighed as well. Jared turned toward him. "At least I know what's bothering you."

"The same thing," Mike said and looked depressed enough for Jared to consider that he should have brought only the dessert to the table.

But Mike took a mouthful of food and seemed enthusiastic enough about it.

“You really have it bad for your boss, don’t you?” Jared said and shook his head. “Maybe going out on Friday could help you cleanse your palate a little.”

Mike threw him a pointed look. Adrian snickered.

“Oh, sorry, such a wrong choice of words,” Jared apologized right away. “I thought I was just using a clever metaphor.”

“Clever it was,” Adrian said and raised his glass.

Like on cue, Adrian’s phone went off. Jared quirked an eyebrow when he saw that Adrian didn’t even bother to check the caller’s ID. “How are things with His Majesty?”

Adrian just made a thumbs-down gesture and grimaced.

“Very talkative tonight, aren’t you?”

Adrian just shrugged.

“C’mon, Mike and I both unload everything. I’m having trouble trying to come to terms with the idea that some big shot financial advisor really wants to date me. Mike here has a crush on his boss. What’s wrong with you?”

Adrian frowned and stared into his plate. For a moment, Jared pondered whether he had gone too far in pressuring his friend to speak. But Adrian took both him and Mike by surprise when he started talking. “I thought of Alexander while fucking Edward.”

Jared gulped. He who was never to be mentioned had just been, well, mentioned. “Why? Sorry, I suppose it’s a stupid question.”

“No, it’s not. Why?” Mike asked, as well.

Adrian took another bite and chewed like he had to hunt it and kill it at the same time. “It’s just some stupid, really stupid thing that happens to me once in a blue moon.”

“Let me understand this,” Mike intervened. “Alexander is the one who got away?”

Jared made a small gesture, trying to silence Mike. It wasn’t Mike’s fault, though. Adrian had spoken very little of his first and only love, and the guy who, as far as Jared knew, had been the only one to top Adrian, ever.

“The one who didn’t get away fast enough,” Adrian commented, with a dark look on his face.

“How so?” Mike asked. He was out of the loop much more than Jared on the matter, but since their friendship was a three-way, and Adrian was in the mood to share, Jared couldn’t intervene to stop Mike from asking questions.

“He was a fucking asshole.” Adrian stopped for a moment, apparently reminiscing events that had happened a long time ago but never forgotten. “I should have known better.”

Mike looked at Jared, in need of an explanation. Jared just shook his head.

“And what if you thought of him while being with Edward?” Jared asked. “After all, people think of celebrities and whatnot while having sex. It’s not ideal, but it’s not a capital crime, either.” On the inside, he was plenty mortified about learning that his friend was still pining over that man from his past, but he was trying to stay positive.

“Edward didn’t appreciate it. Let’s leave it at that.”

“How did he know? Did you tell him?” Mike asked, as astonished as Jared was.

Adrian shook his head. “He guessed. Don’t imagine that I told him. He just knew. It was frigging weird. I’m better off.”

“Wait, don’t downplay this,” Jared said. “You two aren’t exactly in a relationship if what you told me is still true. Is it?”

Adrian nodded. “That’s hardly the point, J. The problem is I’m not some public library. Nobody reads me like that. It’s freakish.”

Jared sighed. “Was he upset? Did he tell you some nasty words or something?”

“No. He was completely cool. Like a fish cool.”

“Cold like a fish,” Mike said. “Sorry. I was just thinking out loud about the order of words or something.”

“So he doesn’t care you thought of someone else. Isn’t this ideal? You dislike jealous boyfriends, and you don’t even do boyfriends.”

Adrian stared down into his plate for a while. “Well, he wasn’t jealous, that’s for sure. But he couldn’t have liked it, either. He walked away, hard cock between his legs.”

Mike guffawed at that choice of words, but then quickly covered his mouth. “Sorry. I’m weirder than usual.”

“You’re not,” Jared hurried to tell him. “I mean, you’re not weird at all. Adrian, let me understand this. Isn’t this guy the perfect match for you? He doesn’t care about feels and all that, you don’t care --”

“It’s weird and complicated. Not like Mike here. He’s weird and complicated but in a cute way. Whatever is up with Edward, it’s, I don’t know. Look, I felt guilty. I felt like I was cheating on him. And I was! I mean, I was pounding his ass, and damn, how much I wanted that, and bang,

it's like that frigging douchebag is in my head. All right, I know what you're going to say. I'm the one who thought of him; it's not like some mumbo-jumbo happened to me."

"I wasn't going to say anything," Jared replied. "Look, Adrian, don't get too worked up over this. Maybe it's a sign that you should let go of that hurt from long ago."

"What hurt?" Adrian puffed out his chest as if an army of Alexanders couldn't bring him down. "It was nothing like that."

"It was like that, and since you're among friends, you could just go ahead and admit it."

"Right," Adrian said, somewhat aggressively. "You're right, J." This time, he exhaled. "Whatever. Things with Edward couldn't have worked out anyway. He's a rich pervert, and I'm just a small-time playboy."

"Small-time playboy?" Mike stared at Adrian, then at Jared, in utter disbelief. "You didn't just say this about yourself, Adrian."

"I did, and it feels good to tell the truth. Edward wants someone kinky and sophisticated, and I'm all for fucking in the purest sense of the word. I don't need whatever this guy has on his plate for me."

"You're just saying," Jared protested. "Actually, maybe not getting too involved with someone with so much lack of human empathy is a good thing."

"I don't think Edward suffers from that. He's a doctor."

"And doctors need to detach themselves of their emotions, as they need a cool head when working with a patient. I guess that might explain his behavior. Be thankful that he's not just a plain weirdo," Jared pointed out. "Anyway, whatever I think is not important. How do you feel about it all?"

"Like crap. He left, and that was all."

"I think he's still calling," Jared said. Adrian's phone was happily chirping, announcing a new incoming call.

"That means he's still interested," Mike intervened in the conversation.

Jared agreed. "Maybe he just wanted to brag how well he read people. Maybe it was just a lucky guess on his part!"

Adrian groaned and attacked his food again. "I don't see how that could be. He's a sharp dude. And well, I guess I'm out of my league anyway."

“Nobody’s out of your league!” Jared protested right away. “There’s no one more handsome than you. Hey, guys all over the city want to be with you.”

“Yeah, that’s right,” Mike chimed in. “Edward knows it, and that’s why he wants you.”

Adrian smiled as he looked at his friends. “Guys, if I ever marry, I think I want to marry the two of you.”

Jared broke into a sweet ‘aww’ while Mike made a surprised face.

“What? Don’t stare at me like this. You two are the best husbands I could ever think of.”

Chapter Six – Sometimes, You Just Want To Eat At Home

“What’s the expiration date on a crush?” Mike asked with a long sigh.

On the other end of the phone call, Jared matched his with one that spelled compassion. It was only natural for Mike to go complaining to him since Jared always had some kind words for him.

“Go have fun, Mike. I feel guilty that I can’t come with you so that we could party as usual. Actually, I could call Chris --”

“No, listen, Jared. It’s okay. We went last night for drinks, and it was all fine. I’m not going to take over your Saturday, especially since you have a date with a super guy.”

Jared made a small sound like he was melting. “I know how you hate being on your own. But you’re cute and young, and there are many guys out there. I know that the last time I told you to go out on your own, you practically ended up --”

“Sucking off my boss,” Mike completed Jared’s words, but his voice was dreamy, not self-deprecating as he aimed for.

“Right. But I think the best remedy is to go dance with some hot guys, take a few phone numbers, and see where the night takes you.”

“You are so optimistic about my chances to get some hot guys’ phone numbers. But thanks for your trust in me, J. You’re the best friend I could ever hope for.”

“I haven’t asked you. Have you seen Ryan after he came down to your server haven?”

“Just from afar. I promise I wasn’t stalking him or anything!”

“I wasn’t accusing you,” Jared replied, obviously surprised.

“Ah,” Mike groaned, “I’m in so deep. Why do I have to fall for impossible guys?”

“When have you ever fallen for such guys before?”

“In my dreams,” Mike said promptly.

Jared laughed. “It’s okay to fantasize. But don’t lose yourself in such a habit. It could be quite dangerous.”

“So, are you trying to tell me that it’s fine if I dream of my boss?”

“If you can’t help it... But please go clubbing. And yes, I know what you’ll say, even without Adrian and me. Even if you go to the club, stay for one hour and then go back home, it will still be a win. At least, you won’t be by yourself, moping around.”

“I guess that’s true. But I should think of going to another club. Jimmy might still want to kick my ass over that Gino thing from last week.”

“I told you, Mike. There’s nothing to worry about. You can go to our usual spot. The only thing you should worry about is them proposing you to get into a threesome.”

“Would a threesome heal my broken heart?”

“No,” Jared said promptly. “Please don’t tell me you’re even considering it.”

“I wasn’t. Well, if Jimmy won’t kick my ass, then I’ll go for one drink. He might not even be there. If I’m lucky.”

“Hey, have a little faith.”

“Wait, how do you turn down an invitation to a threesome?”

Jared laughed. “Just say that you believe in monogamy.”

“What if they get into a debate and come strong at me?”

“Hmm.” Jared seemed to ponder. “You can lie, then. Tell them your boyfriend is jealous.”

“Ah, so I managed to get a boyfriend between last Saturday and this one. They won’t buy it.”

“I should point out some things. One, the chances that some strong debate over the delicate subject of threesomes would occur are slim. Two, you almost did get yourself a boyfriend. It just wasn’t meant to be.”

Meant to be. Somehow, those words felt cruel to Mike. Jared wasn’t at fault, of course. But that evening with Ryan had been perfect. It had felt like something meant to be. And Mike was a bit afraid that such things were unlikely to happen too often to someone like him.

Mike took place at the bar, trying to appear relaxed and in the mood for fun. He knew it quite well that his tries wouldn’t fool anyone, but the lights were dim, and people were too busy seeing about their night that they couldn’t be bothered to observe one awkward guy.

“Just the man I was hoping to see.”

Mike looked up and forced a smile. If anything went wrong, he could always blame Jared. No, he would never do that. Going to a different club seemed way too intimidating, so he had settled for their usual spot, as Jared had said.

“Hi, Jimmy.” His voice was so low that Jimmy had to lean over the bar to catch his words.

He waited. If Jimmy wanted to curse at him, he was welcome to do it. Despite what Jared and Adrian had said, Mike still had his doubts that the cute bartender would be okay with his boyfriend sleeping around, and especially with someone Jimmy had practically invited because he had taken pity in.

Jimmy offered him a smile from up close. Then, he suddenly closed the distance between them and kissed Mike quickly.

“Wow, what was that for?” Mike asked, his voice even meeker than before.

“You looked like you needed it. So, you just ditched me and Gino that time, huh?”

Mike fidgeted in his bar stool. “I had no idea he was your boyfriend.” That excuse was lame, but also true. “I’m sorry.” He looked down and linked his fingers, to stop his nervousness.

“I’m the one who’s sorry. I should have come clean and tell you my boyfriend and I both wanted to get to know you better.”

Mike’s head snapped up. “For real?”

Jared and Adrian had told him this much.

Some client shouted something unflattering, so Jimmy flashed an apologetic smile at Mike. “Be right back. Here, something to keep you busy.” He placed a drink in front of Mike.

“I’m paying for it this time,” Mike said, but Jimmy was already gone.

It wasn’t such a bad idea to have a drink. At least, he could work a little on calming his jitters while Jimmy was busy with the other patrons and their parched throats. Was Jimmy going to propose that kind of arrangement? Nah, probably that ship had already sailed, and the previous Saturday had been the only chance for Mike to do something so wild.

He hoped Jimmy wouldn’t say anything. Things were completely different from the previous Saturday. Now, there was Ryan on his mind and, as helpless as it was, the idea of cheating on him with an adventurous couple made up of a cute twink and a handsome alpha top was torturing him already.

Wasn’t he getting ahead of himself? Jimmy had a handsome man like Gino in his bed, and Gino already had a cute twink as a boyfriend. He didn’t need a lesser cute one.

He was still debating over his shortcomings when someone took the seat next to him. “How are you, birdie?” The husky voice made Mike sit straight in his bar stool.

“Oh, Gino, hi.” He threw some desperate looks toward Jimmy, but the bartender was still busy and quite far away from them to be easy for Mike to call for him, without appearing hysterical.

Mike let out a small gasp as a firm hand rested on his back and began to massage his tense muscles.

“You know, I wondered why you took off like that.”

“Ah, well, I just remembered that I was busy... preparing... um, something for work,” Mike blurted out the last words.

“On a Saturday night?” Gino appeared genuinely disoriented over Mike’s lie. “Hey, listen, we wanted to have some more fun with you.”

“Jimmy is your boyfriend, right?” Mike asked, trying to sit in such a manner so that Gino would take his hand off his back. Gino didn’t appear to take the hint.

“Yeah. We’ve been together for six months or so.”

“And is he really okay with, you know?”

“Yeah, sure.” At least Gino understood what Mike was talking about and didn’t make him say the words out loud.

“But he’s cute.”

“Yeah.”

“Cuter than me.”

Gino laughed, and this time, he moved his hand only to sling one arm over Mike’s shoulders and pull him close. “Two cuties are better than one.”

Oh, fuck. Here came that debate about threesomes. What was he supposed to say? His mind was blank. Automatically, he reached for his glass and downed it all down.

“Wow. Thirsty?” Gino laughed.

Jimmy finally made it back to them. He kissed Gino on the lips, not quickly, as he had done with Mike, but long, sweetly, and lingering. Then he noticed Mike’s empty glass, and, without even asking, he brought a bottle and filled it.

“Thanks,” Mike said politely.

“So, Mike, do you have any plans for tonight?” Jimmy asked, after bringing Gino a drink, too.

“Not really,” Mike mumbled, realizing too late that he would have better come up with a lie.

“Then let’s have some fun. You guys sit here and get to know each other a little more while I’m slaving for the man. Just make sure that you keep something for me, too.”

Before going away, Jimmy kissed Gino again, and then Mike, too, this time, sweetly and lingering, just the same as he had done with his boyfriend.

He was in deep, deep trouble. Mike reached for his glass and drank some more. As soon as he let his glass down, Gino turned toward him and grabbed him, pulling him into a kiss. The tongue in his mouth was firm and persistent, and Mike should have felt like his entire world was tilting on its axis, but it was nothing like that. Instead, the kiss just triggered other memories, such as soft, gentle lips searching his and giving him an internal orgasm without even being touched anywhere else.

No, he couldn't think of Ryan. Ryan was off-limits. Ryan was his boss, his gorgeous, awesome boss, a handsome sexy man that had arrested his soul and his mind.

So that very moment, Mike decided that maybe Jared was wrong. Maybe having a threesome was a good idea.

Jared stole a quick look at Chris across the table and then back at his plate. He had put on the effort for tonight, getting a casual suit and tying his hair into a discreet ponytail, trying to minimize his usual looks in exchange for something that should work better for dinner in the company of a man such as Chris.

Chris caught his eyes. "You seem a bit stressed out. Is there something bothering you?"

Jared just shook his head. He was not usually this nervous. He had been on dates, but right now, he was, indeed, stressed out. If someone were to ask him, he couldn't have said what was wrong. Maybe he felt out of his league. The restaurant was lovely, and Jared was glad he had dressed up or else he would have looked out of place. There was even subdued classical music filling the air, spread through invisible speakers.

"This place is really nice." He studied his fork, trying to avoid Chris's eyes.

"I have a feeling I've overdone it. If you want us to go someplace else, please, just tell me. I want you to feel at ease."

"Oh, no, this is really nice." Jared knew that he had just said that.

Chris sighed. "Is the age difference bothering you? Is this place making it obvious?"

"No, it's --" If he said once more that it was nice, he was officially stupid.

"You clearly were more at ease while we walked in the park or at the gym. I didn't mean to take you out of your comfort zone."

“It’s not like that. It’s, um,” Jared struggled to find the right words, “I guess I’m a little overwhelmed.”

Chris sat back into his chair. “I knew it. Let me call the waiter with the check, and we’ll be out of here in a minute.”

“No. I wouldn’t want that. It would be like ruining the date, right?”

“The only thing ruining the date is my poor choice of a restaurant.”

“I could have said something when you sent me the list of alternatives. Maybe it’s time I grew up a little.”

Jared pushed the food on his plate mindlessly as he talked. There was also the other issue he needed to bring up, and he didn’t know how to do it without sounding like he was accusing Chris of something. He had visited Adrian’s doctor, and, although he told himself there was nothing to worry about, he still felt a little bad over being reckless.

“Look, Jared,” Chris said and put one hand over his, the one that just lay on the table, doing nothing.

“Reeves? I can’t believe it!” Someone called from their right.

Chris withdrew his hand quickly and welcomed the man addressing him. “Porter, what’s bringing you here?”

“I asked first,” the newcomer said in a playful voice.

Jared took in the guy. He was showing his age, unlike Chris, and seemed in his late forties. The business suit couldn’t conceal his considerable girth, but he appeared to be laid back about his weight and not at all bothered by it. He had the look of someone who enjoyed the fruits of successful endeavors in more ways than one.

“I’ve been relocated for a while,” Chris finally replied. “Business is going crazy.”

“You’re telling me? I’m just in passing and saw that this place had glowing recommendations. What are you guys having?”

Jared felt strange as Chris’s acquaintance studied him briefly. He wondered whether Chris would invite the man to join them, turning that Saturday evening dinner – which was supposed to be romantic – into a business meeting.

“Actually, we were just leaving,” Chris replied.

Jared observed his date carefully. Chris appeared detached, but his right hand that had held his only moment earlier appeared rigid like its owner didn’t know what to do with it.

“That’s too bad. What would you recommend? I hope you two aren’t leaving because of the food,” Porter joked.

Chris offered a few suggestions affably, but something in his countenance told Jared that he was almost ready to bolt.

“Hey, how’s Andrew?” For some reason, Porter stole a glance at Jared while asking that.

“He’s fine,” Chris replied. “Oh, so sorry, I haven’t introduced you two. Porter, this is Jared, a young and very talented photographer. This old goat here is an old friend of mine.”

Jared shook Porter’s hand, and the sensation that something was wrong came washing over him. What sort of introduction was that? Could it be that Chris was in the closet, at least, to some of his friends?

That was a reasonable explanation. He replied politely to a few questions regarding the city that Porter addressed him while Chris hurried the waiter with an impatient gesture.

Just for how long was this guy going to insist? Adrian stared in annoyance at the list of unanswered phone calls from Edward. No texts, though. It seemed like Edward was bent on having him answer his phone, and there was no other way he would accept as a means of communication.

He also had the habit of calling at the same time every day. Was he secretly a robot? Adrian was tempted to think of him in all the unflattering colors possible since Edward was, after all, guilty of seeing through him and quite fast.

Adrian liked to think he was an uncomplicated guy. But he was entitled to his secrets, and he didn’t want to have them exposed. For days, he had thought about that fucked up way their fucking had ended, with Edward guessing right away that Adrian had been thinking of another dude during sex. At first, he had blamed himself. Then his anger had turned against Edward for meddling where he wasn’t supposed to.

Whatever. The chance was lost. Edward would eventually take the hint and stop calling. And, in the meantime, Adrian had no time to waste with stupid things, like reminiscing the past and wondering if Alexander hadn’t fucked him up good for all eternity. He was in no mood to visit some shrink and listen about how his inability to commit was rooted in a broken heart. He wasn’t made for that kind of stuff.

He knocked on the door to the posh townhouse and waited. Maybe he didn’t attend parties as sophisticated as whatever Edward was used to, in the company of other rich perverts like him, but he could score some more bizarre experiences for himself without pretending to be the hottest stuff that ever walked the earth.

“Wow.” The slim brunet standing in the doorway and wearing nothing but a vaporous see-through threw him an appreciative look. “You look better than in your profile pictures.”

“Thanks.”

The brunet made a small sign with his chin and stood out of the way, allowing Adrian to come in.

It was like walking into a fantasy, Adrian thought as he didn't hesitate to stare shamelessly at the naked bodies populating the gorgeous living room. There were probably a few places in the world, let alone in the city where there could be such an impressive concentration of hotties per square foot.

The beautiful brunet snuck one hand around his waist. “Hey, everyone. Can I have your attention, please?”

Those who weren't already looking at Adrian with hungry eyes turned toward him.

“We have Adrian here, and guess what? He's our guest of honor.”

The audience started clapping right away, and there were small murmurs of appreciation, and a few little delighted laughs.

“Can I offer you a drink, handsome?” The host offered, but Adrian shook his head.

“I'm ready if you guys are.”

“Nice,” the brunet replied and dragged Adrian to a lavish armchair, after helping him out of his jacket.

Adrian plopped down on the armchair and smiled at his host, who got on his knees fast and began pulling down his jeans after a short struggle with the fly. He winked at him as the young man gave a long seductive lick to the entire length of his cock.

“Remember, boys, play nice,” the brunet said as he turned toward the room. “Each one with his condoms and don't try for seconds until everyone got some, okay?” After that, he addressed Adrian again. “So, are you up to the challenge? There's only one of you, and ten of us.”

Adrian nodded with a smug grin. “Come and hop on my dick, and you'll see how up to the challenge I am. Are you going to be the first?”

The brunet threw him a flirty look. “I wish. But I have the reputation of a perfect host, and that means that my guests have priority. Just make sure you can still keep it up by the time I'm coming for you.”

Adrian grabbed a handful of the host's ass. “I will.”

“Excellent. Then I should let you prey to these fiends now.”

A tall blond with languid eyes came to rest on Adrian’s knees, straddling him. He had a throaty, sexy voice. “You’re new. I haven’t seen you before.”

“Ah, I just thought I should try this.”

The blond got busy with Adrian’s cock, wrapping it quickly in a condom. “Viagra? So nice and hard.”

“Please don’t insult me. I’m all-natural. You’re enough to make me hard.”

The blond flashed a perfect smile at him. Adrian caught him by the waist and bit on his chest playfully, making him gasp. He could hear squelching sounds as the blond was preparing himself. Adrian didn’t allow him much leeway and pushed him down on his cock. The pretty young man seemed used to such treatment and began bouncing up and down happily.

Adrian tried to grab the also bouncing cock, but the blond slapped his hand away. “I’m all hands-free, honey.”

The squeeze on his cock was delicious, but Adrian found his mind doing tricky things. His cock twitched the soonest he let his mind wander. Only that right now, he wasn’t thinking of Alexander and his betrayal, but of Edward, and that thought unnerved him nonetheless.

There was no need for him to think of His Royal Highness now. He was in a room filled with beautiful bottoms, and all wanted a piece of his cock. What need did he have for a sophisticated man who played games with his mind and with his body?

Being the main course at a reverse gangbang party was all Adrian needed to get himself cured. All he had to do was to focus on giving and receiving pleasure while playing with beautiful men who weren’t Edward.

The blond gasped and played with his tits while he fucked himself into Adrian’s cock. He had no trouble keeping it up in a place like this. With a last long moan, the blond began shooting from his cock, spreading juice all over Adrian’s t-shirt.

He should have taken it out. But it was okay either way. The blond stood up and kissed Adrian on the cheek. “Thank you, sexy. If there’s still something left in your balls by the end of the night, I’ll come to suck you dry.”

Adrian just patted the young man on his behind. Two other beautiful boys materialized next to him and playfully pushed the blond away. Their Asian features made them look like China dolls.

“Are you going to tag team me?” Adrian joked.

The new guys didn't offer an answer, but one gracefully hopped on the arms of the armchair and pushed his cock into Adrian's face while the other was busy replacing the condom on his cock. So tag team it was. It was pleasant to fill his mouth with a small pretty cock while his own was given the royal treatment.

His cock hardened as his mind flew back to Edward. Just remembering the way Edward had laughed while letting Adrian have a small whiff of his manhood made him shudder in unexpected pleasure. The guy feeding him his cock moaned prettily, probably thinking he was the reason why Adrian reacted like that.

He reached between the young man's buttocks and began fingering him. At the other end, the second guy was happily milking Adrian's cock with his ass.

"This guy is so good. Such a hard cock." Adrian heard the two exchanging impressions while using him as a sex doll.

Well, it was what he had signed for, right? He let go of the cock in his mouth and watched, amused as the guy just slid himself into his friend's cock.

"You guys seem to be enough for each other," Adrian commented, as now two guys were bouncing up and down in his cock, but he was just fucking one.

They laughed. The one getting fucked replied. "My friend here is afraid of a big gun like yours. So I'm here to encourage him to try it."

Adrian had a feeling the two beautiful boys just wanted a bit of spice. But he was okay either way. He wasn't there to judge.

When they both got up, they were satisfied, and Adrian's t-shirt had gotten some fresh new marks of victory.

The next contender looked down at Adrian. Even naked, he looked like he had style. Also, he had an attitude to go with that. He crossed his arms over his chest. "Do you expect me to hop up and down your dick like these silly rabbits?"

The haughty attitude made Adrian's cock perk up again. He hadn't come once, so maybe it was time, by number four, to allow himself that. Although he was there to provide entertainment to these hungry bottoms, there was no rule against seeing about himself and his needs, too.

"What position would you like, princess?"

A small huff was the initial reply. "Guess."

Adrian stood up and got rid of his jeans and footwear. He walked around the young man and then grabbed him by the nicely styled hair. "I'd say you'd like to be taken on all fours," he whispered into his ear.

This time the reply was an appreciative moan. Oh, so that was the little masochist in that soup. Adrian pushed him down and slapped his ass, making him push it up lasciviously.

"Is that all you got? I must warn you. I won't let you be until my ass is all red."

So the little masochist didn't mince words when it came to what he wanted. Adrian obliged and smacked his behind a few more times.

The host hurried by his side and helped him change the condom. "Lube?" he asked.

So far, the others had dealt with that on their own. The current one didn't appear to care. Obviously, even the host was at his beck and call. Masochist or not, he was pretty dominant in attitude.

The host offered him a half-smile. "He lubed himself." His voice dropped a little lower. "Make sure to give him a few slaps from me, too. He's just such a diva."

Adrian just nodded. "Damn, why the hell are you this tight?" he shouted as he sank into the perky ass, now a lovely shade of pink from all the slapping.

"Because I like to feel something, not like the other loose holes around."

Now Adrian knew why the host wanted this one to get spanked hard. He totally deserved it. Therefore, he got to work, sparing nothing. His cock was hurting a little, and it was clear that the guy had used only maybe half the lube needed, but Adrian's reputation was at stake. He pounded that ass hard, making sure to slap it, too, with all his might.

They even had an audience, as the others had gathered closely, curious about what was going on. Some even cheered Adrian on, and a few also came to touch him and caress him.

The problem was that all that, while he could appreciate it for what it was, didn't allow his mind to wander. Or maybe, it was a blessing, because he didn't need to come while fucking a guy and thinking of Edward. It would have been too much of history repeating.

Also, the other problem was that the stubborn masochist seemed no closer to getting off, either. That left Adrian no choice. He grabbed him by the hair hard, and then he used his other hand to sneak it under and pinch the guy's nipples, hard.

"Hey, did I tell you to touch my tits?"

Adrian grinned. "No, and I don't care."

“You don’t care?” The haughty attitude seemed to melt a little.

Adrian could only congratulate himself for guessing right.

“Yeah. I don’t give a damn. So go ahead and shout at me while I’m getting my fill from you.”

“Spank me more, please.”

“No way I’m going to do what you want.” Adrian let go of the guy’s nipples and just made his head turn for a kiss.

Everybody cheered, and Adrian could feel the lithe body under him surrendering to the spasms of orgasm. He continued to kiss him as the young man turned limp into his arms.

That didn’t last long. His partner pushed him and then walked away, with his head high. “Seriously, I think this guy is nothing special.”

Everyone laughed. Obviously, Adrian had played his hand right. Mr. Haughty Ass had gotten his just desserts.

The host hurried by his side. “That was super cool.” He was extra careful when removing Adrian’s condom. “Hey, you haven’t come yet. Are we not pretty enough for you or something?”

“I’m here to give you satisfaction, right? Then that’s what I’m going to do,” Adrian replied. “And you’re all pretty. It’s not that.”

Four more drinks down the road, Mike was still struggling with the idea that he wanted to get into that threesome with Jimmy and Gino. They weren’t talking, he and Gino, busy only to down drink after drink, and kiss. From time to time, Jimmy floated to them with a friendly jab and a bit of kissing of his own, reminding them not to go too far, in a flirty, joking voice.

“I think I need the bathroom.” Mike got to his feet.

“Want me to join you?” Gino asked, getting close and nuzzling his neck.

“No. I mean, Jimmy would be upset,” Mike added quickly.

“I have a great rebound.”

There was a promise in Gino’s voice, but Mike pretended he didn’t get it. “I’ll be back quickly.”

He cursed to himself as he almost stumbled and fell face forward as he took the first step. Gino caught him and laughed.

“I’m fine. I’m fine.”

He was anything but fine. Right now, he needed to get away from Gino and the looming threat of that threesome. Before Ryan, he would have thought that a fantasy come true. Not that he would have taken up on such an offer. Now, he needed to. Now, he needed to forget about Ryan.

Right. It was all Ryan's fault. Mike felt pissed all of a sudden. He went directly into a stall and locked himself inside. He didn't need the bathroom so badly. It was just that he needed to get away a little.

He put down the lid and sat on it. It was all Ryan's fault. Yeah, that was such a relieving thought. He wasn't at fault. Why should he be? Ryan should have known better. The nerve on him, to come down to the servers and mess Mike's head like that!

And Mike had had to apologize. For nothing! Sometimes, things needed to be set straight. Mike pulled his phone. Although he had promised himself that he would delete Ryan's phone number, he hadn't gathered the courage to do it.

With one deep breath, he started typing.

"I'm not the one who should be sorry. You should be sorry."

Sent. Mike stared at the screen. Was he really doing this? Maybe Ryan didn't understand, or, right now, he was pretending not to, since there was no reply.

"You should be sorry for being so handsome. Really, who talks like that? It's like you're from a hotline ad or something."

There was still no reply, so Mike felt courageous. He began typing again.

"You should be sorry for messing me up. FYI, two hot men are waiting for me right now so that we could have a threesome. A threesome, do you get it? I shouldn't be thinking of you!"

Damn. Gino and Jimmy were really waiting for him. He would have a threesome, a nice little threesome, and then go home and still think of Ryan. Mike felt miserable.

"So you're not saying anything? I guess for you it was just another blowjob. But for me, it wasn't. For you, it was just another Monday night, going around seducing the shy and nervous type. What did you even mean by that? Shy and nervous is nobody's type! I will go and have that threesome now."

Mike made one hand into a fist and pushed away the few tears threatening to fall. His phone ringing made him jump to his feet. Without even thinking, he answered.

"Mike?" Ryan's voice came through, authoritative, and impatient.

"Yeah." Mike froze, all his courage from before gone. He would have expected a battle of wills via angry texts, but not a phone call. He should have never taken that call. Too late now.

“Are you drunk?”

“Probably,” Mike mumbled.

Oh, shit. He had just drunk texted his boss, the same guy he had a huge crush on. Not even Jared would forgive him now. The realization hit him like a ton of bricks. He sat back on the toilet. Now, he needed to start apologizing. His hands were cold, and there was sweat on his back.

“Where are you?”

“Some club.”

“Name, address, your exact location.”

Mike didn’t even stop to consider why Ryan wanted to know that. “I’m in the bathroom.”

“Stay there. Don’t you dare get out of there and go with those people. Understood?”

“Yes.” Mike swallowed hard.

He would get fired while sitting on the toilet, in a club, on Saturday night.

Jared waited patiently for Chris to say goodbye to his friend since Porter seemed to have more questions. Under the pretext that he wanted a bit of fresh air, he had gone into the street and now was studying Chris through the glass doors. There was wariness in how he held himself, and Jared felt a bit guilty. Could it be that something in how he looked or talked made Porter suspicious? But it was not like he and Chris had done anything to draw attention to themselves.

Chris seemed relieved as he walked into the street. “That was an old friend,” he said apologetically. “I certainly wasn’t expecting to meet him here, of all places.”

Jared said nothing as they walked side by side. There was a distance between them and not just a physical one. Jared hated it, especially since he was under the impression that Chris was trying to make things work, and he was the one blowing things out of proportion, even if only on the inside.

“May I ask you something, Chris?”

“Sure.”

“Does your friend know you’re gay?”

Chris felt silent.

Jared hurried to talk. “I know that my friends and I are all out and proud as they say, but it’s okay if you’re not. It would be nice to know, is all I’m saying.”

Chris drew a long sigh. “You’re quite sharp. I guess I assumed that the chances to run into someone I know would be slim. I guess I was wrong. Wait, is this blowing off my chances with you?”

Jared shook his head. “No. I just noticed how tense you were when your friend came by our table. I wanted to know why. And don’t worry. I’m not going to annoy you with advice on how you should tell everyone and blah-blah-blah. You must have your reasons.”

Chris chuckled and put one arm around Jared’s shoulders. “For someone as young as you, you’re quite wise, Jared.”

Jared felt warm and snuggled closer to Chris. “Then it’s okay if we engage in such public displays of affections? You’re hugging me.”

Chris looked at him, and his eyes were smiling, too. “I suppose it’s okay to take risks, sometime.”

“Okay, but please don’t let me be your downfall.”

“You couldn’t be.” Chris leaned in for a kiss.

Jared enjoyed it, despite its brevity. “Can I ask another thing?”

Chris was still close, and they were looking into each other’s eyes. “Anything you want, sexy.”

“Who’s Andrew?”

It was just for a split second, so Jared thought he must have imagined it. Chris’s smile faded only a fraction. “A close business partner. Porter knows him well.”

“Ah, it’s all business with you people.” Jared shook off any awkward sensations as Chris’s smile returned in full force.

“Quite boring. Which is why I want to drag you to my lair so that I can finally have my fill and some fun.”

He just needed to put his mind at rest, Jared thought. The only one messing the date was he, with his suspicions. From that moment on, he planned on switching off the part of his brain, always looking for problems. He was in the arms of a handsome man, and he would have fun, no matter what.

After number five, the pretty bottoms became a blur for Adrian. He had a recollection of having taken a cute Latino on his back directly on the floor, and of another in nothing but a cowboy hat and boots who had jumped up and down his dick like he wanted to win the race, as well as of the group of three sweet friends who used both his mouth and his cock switching between them and giggling all the time.

And by the end of all that, his cock was still hard, and Adrian was pretty sure that he could hammer nails with it and wouldn't feel a thing. On the other hand, the others seemed quite satisfied as they lay on the lavish sofas, fanning themselves, laughing, and drinking pink cocktails. So at least there was that.

The host came to take it by the hand. "Saving yourself for me?"

Adrian smiled at him. "You bet."

A short musical laugh was the only reply. The host dragged him out of the living room and into a small alcove with a love settee by the window. With another giggle, he pushed Adrian down and began licking his cock up and down.

"What's your name?" Adrian asked.

The host shook his head. "No names. You know the rules."

"You know mine."

"That's because we need to know who we fuck. But every one of us likes the illusion of sharing a beautiful sexy stranger for a night of hot, anonymous sex."

"You make it sound like you have more to gain than the lucky fuckers like me who get the chance to stick it into some of the sexiest asses in the city."

"We do," the host replied. "We are all friends, and having this particular experience to share only makes our bond stronger. There are no jealousies."

"Whatever floats your boat," Adrian said with a small shrug. "So don't you want me to fuck you, too? Like I fucked your friends?"

"Am I not good at sucking your cock?" The brunet cocked his head and stared at him.

"You're great. But I feel like fucking."

"Should I hope to succeed where all my friends failed?" The host stood up gracefully and removed his see-through.

Adrian didn't reply. Instead, he reached for the other and pulled him into his arms. The rich ringlets of hair were soft under his fingers, and he took pleasure from kissing him. The young

man was eager, pliant in his arms, and Adrian felt that he needed to make that beautiful face transfigure with pleasure.

The brunet pushed himself down fast on Adrian's cock. It was clear that he had waited for that moment, kindled by watching his friends getting fucked, growing impatient with each orgasmic cry filling the room.

That should have been enough. Each one of the other nine young men Adrian had fucked tonight should have been enough. Yet, still, his cock was hard, and it was relentlessly doing its job, stuck at a threshold, with no possibility to soar higher.

His grunts and moans were now dipped in frustration, and his partner slowed down. "Am I being too impatient? Do you want me to do something different? No matter what you want, I will try to make it happen."

Adrian didn't reply and, instead, dragged them both on the soft carpet. He moved his hips, pounding hard into the other. The brunet's faint cries turned delirious. Blunt fingers were digging into Adrian's back, leaving marks, without a doubt.

His partner turned rigid into his arms for a few moments, and Adrian was sure fresh stains on his t-shirt would be there as soon as he unglued himself from the other.

He stood back, looking down. With precise moves, he tore the condom from his cock. "Where should I throw this?"

His host sighed and took it from his hand. "You're an amazing lover, Adrian. But do you mind me asking? Why are you here?"

"Isn't it obvious?"

There was a small reproach in the kind eyes inspecting him. "The only obvious thing is that whatever you want is not here. Or whoever you want."

"Everyone's a psychic these days." Adrian got up.

"I will bring the rest of your clothes." The brunet slid out of the room almost without a sound.

He came back quickly, though, carrying Adrian's jeans, jacket, and footwear.

"Was I bad, after all?" Adrian asked. "I see that you want me out the door."

His host just shook his head gently. "You were the best in a long time. Everyone agrees. But I don't want you on my conscience. Who knows what may happen to your beautiful cock if you don't come at all?"

Adrian laughed. Under any other circumstances, he would have had the time of his life. He took the jeans and began dressing up.

“I will ask for your t-shirt, though.”

“It’s night. Are you worried someone might see me wearing a t-shirt all covered in spunk like this?”

The brunet laughed. “Let’s call it a little souvenir. We are entitled to one, aren’t we?”

Adrian laughed, too. “Here.” He took out his t-shirt and threw it to his host, who caught it deftly.

He was busy putting on his socks and his shoes when he felt a gentle touch on his back. His host was busy wiping him with a towel. He allowed it, as the other moved to wipe his chest, too.

“Normally, you would shower here, but only after we got to come on you a few times. However, I can’t allow that kind of treatment toward a man who’s already taken.”

Adrian snorted.

“Whoever that man is, just tell him he’s lucky to have you,” the brunet whispered in his ear.

“Lucky? I’m at some crazy reverse gangbang party.”

“And yet, you didn’t come once. I’d say that’s a pretty huge commitment.”

“Commitment, right.”

Adrian knew not to overextend his welcome. His host gave him a sweet, lips only kiss, before sending him on his way.

“Wow, your apartment is amazing. O.M.G., the views!” Jared hurried to the floor to ceiling windows and looked down. Everyone appeared so small from there.

Chris pulled him close from behind. “Tonight, I am going to fuck you against this window while you look down at the entire world.”

Jared shivered slightly and leaned into the embrace. “Promise?” he asked teasingly.

Chris was about to reply when his phone went off from the coffee table where it had been abandoned. Jared hoped Chris would ignore it, but instead, he released him from his arms and went to get it. Even with his back at Jared, he appeared tense.

Jared could bet he was frowning. Chris turned to him with a strained smile. “Make yourself at home. I’ll be with you in a minute.”

With that, Chris marched out of the large living room, taking his frown and phone with him. Jared began looking around the place, taking in the post-modernist paintings on the walls, the minimalist, but expensive furniture, and the few business books on the coffee table.

Chris emerged back into the room. "I am so sorry, Jared. It's an emergency, and I need to take care of it."

"It's all right," Jared said. "We could meet at another time."

To say he was disappointed was an understatement.

"No." Chris seemed categorical. "Let me take you to the bedroom."

What for, was the question on Jared's lips, but he followed nonetheless. Chris proceeded to take his jacket, taking him by surprise. And then he pushed Jared toward the bed. "But your emergency --"

"I'll take care of it." Chris arranged a pillow at Jared's back and then planted in his hand a remote control. "The TV is there. I have all the streaming services, browse, binge watch, do all you want. I'll also take your shoes."

Jared said nothing, lost for words, as Chris took care of taking off his shoes, one by one.

"Feel free to undress if you feel like it. I would love to come back and find you naked in my bed."

"Is your emergency going to take long?" Jared asked, finally regaining his voice.

"I will make it as short as possible." Chris kissed him quickly. "And since I suppose you're considering it, you're not allowed to leave. That's why I'm hiding your shoes," he added playfully.

"All right," Jared said and smiled, too. "I guess that's what I get for dating a hotshot financial advisor, right?"

Chris offered him an apologetic smile. "I can barely wait, Jared," he said and kissed him quickly again, before disappearing through the door with Jared's shoes in his hand, as promised.

It was way past two AM when Adrian got in front of his building. Preferring walking to riding in a cab home, he hadn't even felt that he only wore his jacket over his naked skin. A bit of fresh air was supposed to clear his head, but his head was anything but clear by the time he reached his neighborhood.

Was he now – what? – in love with Edward? That couldn't be. The idea was simply ridiculous. They barely knew each other, and it wasn't the same thing as what had happened with Alexander. Not that he was still in love with Alexander. He was in hate with him if that was a thing.

He was lost in thought, but even like that, he could sense a foreign presence close by. The streets were supposed to be deserted at that hour, at least in that neighborhood. Otherwise, it was Saturday night, and everyone was out, partying downtown.

Adrian raised his eyes from the sidewalk. Leaning against the door of a dark vehicle that looked elegant and expensive in the street lights, was no other than the man responsible for his inability to come, not even once, tonight, while in the company of the sexiest bunch of bottoms around.

“You're not taking any of my calls,” Edward said, instead of an introduction or a greeting.

“I'd say you should take a hint.” Adrian tried to ignore the unwanted visitor and headed toward the entrance.

Edward was quick to cut his way. “I could, but I won't.”

“Look, I've just got back from some crazy reverse gangbang party where I was the top, all the bottoms were top-notch, the most delicious things you've ever seen, but I didn't come, and now I have a bad case of blue balls. So, if you'll excuse me, Your Majesty, I need to go and put my balls on ice. Unless you want to hold them for me, please don't let me keep you.”

What on earth had urged him to be that honest, Adrian couldn't say. But it felt good to dump all that surely unwanted info on Edward so that everyone could let him fucking be.

“I would hold them, but I have a better idea.”

The reply took him by surprise. He was only inches from the door now. “Are you going to keep your chauffeur sitting here while you come up to nurse my balls?”

Edward offered him a thin smile. “I understand that your balls are in a not so great condition, but I was unaware you needed prescription glasses. I came by myself.”

Adrian only then looked at the car and noticed that there was no one in the driver's seat. “At least that means that you're a bit human,” he said, mostly to himself. “You know, not getting the poor man out of his bed on Saturday night, while you're on some wild goose chase.”

Edward caught up with him and grabbed his arm somewhat hard. “Let's see what damage you've done to yourself tonight.”

“I was kidding,” Adrian said, realizing too late that maybe honesty wasn't that good, given the circumstances.

“You need a bath,” Edward said airily. “You don’t have a t-shirt on, and you stink of other people.”

“No shit, Sherlock,” Adrian replied.

Nonetheless, he allowed Edward to push him inside and then inside the elevator. On their way up, Adrian stood at a distance from his visitor and tried to ignore the eyes scanning him without one trace of guilt.

“Haven’t you seen people before?” he asked in an irritated voice.

“We’ll have a good long talk, Adrian. But after you take a bath and of course, after you come.”

Adrian grimaced. He had had plenty of reasons to come tonight. It wasn’t like he wanted to give Edward satisfaction by coming at his hand. Was that what Edward was thinking? A handjob? It seemed like a lousy appetizer, compared to the five-course meal he had been presented earlier that night.

“I think that boat has sailed. I got my dick to calm down, and I don’t want to start all over again,” Adrian said.

The elevator stopped.

“We’ll see about that. I told you, Adrian. No blue balls while you’re in my care.”

Adrian shrugged and took out his key. Edward waited patiently for him to get inside. He didn’t even follow and just stood in the door.

“Are you coming or what?”

“I was waiting for an invitation,” Edward said.

“You already invited yourself over minutes ago. Come in and stop playing. I don’t think I’m in the mood tonight.”

Edward walked in without another word. Adrian would have taken a bath anyway, but it annoyed him to no end that Edward thought he was in charge. Abruptly, he began shedding the few clothes he had on, throwing them all over the place.

As he turned, he was shocked to see Edward out of his suit jacket, and now carefully unbuttoning his shirt.

“What are you doing?”

“I would not want to wet my clothes while I’m tending to you.”

“I’m not a baby. I don’t need tending.”

So what now? Did Edward want to baby him, wash his back, and all that? As much as Adrian tried to convince himself that he was displeased with the idea, his cock had a different opinion. With a sigh, he looked down at what used to be his best friend.

“Your cock seems pleased with the prospect.”

Edward continued to undress, placing his clothes in a neat heap on the sofa. Adrian watched him as off went the pants and the underwear, too.

What was about this man? Tonight, Adrian had had the chance to fuck a bunch of gorgeous bottoms, with perfect bodies, perky butts and lips to die for. But, as he stared at the shiny chestnut waves of Edward’s hair, his angular features, his thin lips curled into an all-knowing smile, Adrian knew there was no one he would have kissed.

Edward had a slim waist and beautiful lean muscles, but he couldn’t have held a candle to the youthful beauties Adrian had had tonight in his arms. Edward was nice looking. Those guys were gorgeous. They were exuberant and willing, and they wanted sex just because. There was nothing of Edward’s complicated games in them. Or maybe, Adrian just wanted to believe that there was a more significant contrast.

No matter how and why, it was still Edward he wanted to bend from the waist, and penetrate until his cock was deep inside, pound and crush under him. The small calculated gestures, the perfectly brushed hair, the inherent restraint that seemed to be that man’s true nature, he wanted to destroy all that.

Without thinking, he walked toward Edward, but he was stopped by a hand on his chest. Edward moved his head away when Adrian leaned in for a kiss. “I believe you should brush your teeth.”

Maybe he was a masochist deep inside, Adrian thought without one trace of humor. He wanted, truly wanted, this guy who loved to put him down like he was some rabid dog. The funny thing was that he couldn’t find it in him to be mad.

“It’s not like anyone came in my mouth,” he argued, just for the sake of pretending that he didn’t go down without a fight.

“But you did have their cocks in your mouth,” Edward pointed out right away.

So like Edward to say that. Predictable. All right, predictable was fine. But there were other issues that Adrian wanted to say that he could predict how they would find a resolution. “My cock hurts now,” he complained.

“Let’s go.” Edward pushed him gently, placing one hand on the small of his back. “I told you you’re in my care. This little slip-up of yours doesn’t mean much. We’ll talk.”

Adrian didn't oppose any resistance as he was guided around as if that wasn't his home. He leaned against the door as Edward fixed his bath, his eyes wandering down the curve of that shapely ass, between the thighs, where he could catch a glimpse of a pair of heavy balls, maybe not as big as his own, but still close.

Tonight, Adrian had fucked guys barely past their adolescence, seeking a thrill. They had been soft and pleasant, but Adrian didn't want that. He wanted something hard and harsh, muscles that could fight him, a man who could stand up to him and challenge him.

With a small grunt, he brushed one hand over his cock. Yeah, what his cock wanted was right there. That reminded him that he needed to brush his teeth. He went to the sink and began, without throwing another look at Edward. If he watched any longer, he would need to rub his cock and finally make it spit.

"Get in," Edward said shortly.

"Are you getting in with me?"

"Do you want me to?"

"Can we make it less of a game and more of a real thing?"

"You're right."

Now that wasn't expected. Adrian looked at Edward, searching his eyes. His guest was frowning a bit, and then he reached for Adrian and wiped the corner of his mouth.

"A bit of toothpaste."

Adrian climbed into the bathtub, thankful for having a large one that could accommodate two grown-up men without a problem. Edward climbed in, across from him, but he took the soap and began to wash Adrian's chest.

"Tell me about your night."

Edward's hands were efficient. They didn't stop to caress or make that erotic. Adrian knew, somehow, that Edward must have been upset with him. Yet, even that, the fact that Edward was pissed, was good.

Adrian exhaled and allowed Edward to knock himself out. He grunted shortly when a hand reached between his legs. His silence should have been enough of a reply.

"Get up and let me wash everything."

Adrian obeyed, acutely aware of how Edward was facing his cock, and then when he turned, his ass. This time, the hands lingered, soaping his cock from behind, pulling at it and stroking it.

“Are you going somewhere with this?” Adrian couldn’t believe how low his voice was as he spoke.

“I’m upset with your little running around,” Edward said matter-of-factly.

“Are you sure? Could’ve fooled me,” Adrian murmured.

“So, if you want me to make you come, you need to offer something, too.”

“Sure,” Adrian agreed, his eyes on the wall in front of him. “I could jerk you off, too. Or I could suck your cock.”

“No. You’ll accept my fingers in your ass.”

Adrian chuckled. “Some might say that you have an anal obsession.”

“In your case, I do. What is it going to be, Adrian?”

Edward’s hand was moving slowly on his cock, knowing what it needed and stopping only a little short of giving everything.

“Sure, why not?”

He expected Edward to gloat, but nothing like that followed. Instead, soapy fingers began pushing against the tight ring of his hole, threading lightly, but insistently.

Adrian rested his arms against the wall and put his feet apart to allow Edward to do his thing. The hand on his cock was heaven, moving now at a steady rhythm, one that was no longer just teasing.

At the same time, the fingers in his ass weren’t progressing too far, just probing around. But Adrian knew what Edward wanted. It wasn’t a waste of time, either. Adrian enjoyed having his prostate stimulated, just like the next guy. The trouble appeared when someone wanted to put his cock inside him. That was where he drew a line. That he couldn’t allow.

Edward flexed his fingers for the right angle and began moving, making Adrian gasp in pleasure.

“Faster, please,” Adrian begged.

Edward obliged, and now the hand on Adrian’s cock was squeezing a bit more, but getting faster and faster. Adrian could hear his voice, ragged and gone, and he began moving his hips to meet the rubbing of his cock and then the fingers pressing against his prostate at the other end.

When he shot, it was one of the best orgasms in his life. A bit limp, he let himself down into the water. Edward took him into his arms and kissed him on the forehead.

Adrian wouldn't have it, though. He turned his head and forced Edward to accept his kiss. Knowing well he was superior, in terms of physical strength, he didn't have to work much. Or Edward was in the mood to let him win tonight.

Yet, the aristocratic lips pursed, without letting him in easily.

"What?" Adrian growled impatiently. "I brushed my teeth, I cleaned my mouth, the only thing I didn't do is floss, so what's the deal?"

"I'm still upset."

"Tough luck. Me too."

"You? Why would you be upset?"

Adrian pondered for a second. Edward was close to him, clearly not wanting to push him or himself away. "That time. It wasn't your fucking business."

Edward chuckled, and Adrian felt his annoyance growing. "It wasn't – let me phrase this as you did – my fucking business that you were pounding into me while imagining you were having sex with someone else?"

"It's nothing like that. You didn't stay so that I could explain."

"I don't think you wanted to explain anything, Adrian."

"True. But I don't want to fuck that guy. It's just that I can't help it, and I do think of him once in a while."

"When you fuck."

"When I fuck."

"And did you think of him tonight? At your little party?"

Adrian wasn't sure if he could read Edward right. The last word had been thrown with a bit of hostility. Could it be Edward was jealous? The thought made him laugh.

"Well?" Edward insisted.

It was funny how they stood in hot water, Edward half wrapped around him, and they somehow managed to fight.

"No, I didn't think of him."

"Hmm. Lying doesn't suit you, Adrian. I'd rather know who my rival is."

“You arrogant asshole.” Adrian laughed and kissed Edward hard on the lips. “I thought of you. I didn’t want to think of you. The problem was as soon as you came to my mind, uninvited, by the way, I was about to cream. And, since I didn’t want to do that, I tried to push you away, hence my blue balls situation.”

Edward sighed. “So, you had the decency to treat those partners of yours at that party and not come while thinking of another man, but you didn’t care to offer me the same respect?”

There was still some lingering upset in Edward’s voice, but it was thawing slowly. “What can I say? Your ass that time was much better than all the asses I had tonight. So I couldn’t help myself.”

“Liar.” Edward chuckled. “Now, let’s get out of the bath. I wouldn’t want you to catch a cold. Plus, we need to have that talk.”

“Later.” Adrian pulled Edward to him and bit his lips. “First, I want you.”

“Aren’t you a presumptuous little shit?” Dirty words sounded dirtier in that aristocratic mouth.

“Wow, Your Majesty. Make sure you don’t bite your tongue. Who knows what might happen? You’re the one saying that you want to tend to me. One handjob is not tending. It’s a pat on the back.”

Edward threw one look over his shoulders and appeared to observe something. “Your drying cum on that wall says it was more than a pat on the back.”

Adrian laughed. “Let’s say you just popped the cork. Now I want the whole enchilada.”

“And if I say ‘no’?”

“Are you going to say ‘no’?” Adrian liked the slippery feel of his hands on Edward’s skin. The position was not ideal, but he could still make his intentions known.

“No.”

“Then why waste time with what-ifs?”

“You always have an answer ready,” Edward said, a bit reproachful.

“I told you, Your Majesty. You might have met your master in me.”

“Might.”

Adrian knew Edward was flattering him with some obscure purpose in mind. But he loved the game, so he stood up and pulled Edward to his feet, too. “Here.” He took Edward’s hand and

placed it on his cock. “I’m not mincing words and wasting time. I want you like I haven’t wanted someone in a long time.”

“So, are you trying to tell me I’m better than those perfect bottoms you met tonight?”

“Your Majesty, do I smell a whiff of insecurity? I thought you were above that.”

“It’s just an assessment and nothing else.”

“Have it your way. Now let’s take this to the bedroom. And it’s a good thing no chauffeur is waiting for you. I would have felt like a prick for holding him up all night.”

“Do you expect me to spend the night?”

“Yes. I’m going to chew your shoes if you don’t plan on staying.”

“Just like a dog possessive of his master,” Edward teased him. “All right. But we will still have that talk.”

“Yes, the talk. Whatever that is. We’ll have it. Sure. Now give me a real kiss.”

Edward grabbed him by the hair hard. Well, at least now, his annoyance was manifested not through resistance but aggressiveness. And that, Adrian could appreciate.

Chapter Seven – Out Of The Frying Pan And Into The Fire

Edward's lips on his were something fierce. Usually, Adrian would have had no problem getting any bottom boy to behave and curb his aggressiveness, but Edward was having none of it. As Adrian had thought and desired, only earlier that night, Edward was a man, a strong man who had no qualms about fighting him, which was exactly what he hoped for.

His body slammed down on the sofa, and Edward straddled his chest, resting his knees against the hollow of Adrian's elbows.

"That hurts, you know," Adrian said with a wince.

"I thought you were wild and a bit misunderstood, but in the light of recent events, I tend to think that you're mischievous, too. And that is something I must drive out of you."

"Mischievous? Like how? I just like sex." Adrian moaned and struggled to move his arms.

Edward pushed his knees down a little harder.

"Is maiming me part of the plan? I don't think I can feel the fingers in my right hand."

"I just want to make sure you're listening. I'm terribly upset with you."

"So you said. But I thought we agreed I'd fuck you first. Then, I'm all yours for lecturing me or whatever."

"While you snore and dream of pretty bottom boys? I won't have it."

Adrian stared at Edward's face. The guy seemed pretty serious. Also, there was something else, just as serious, going on for him. "You're hard," he pointed out and laughed.

Edward's eyes thinned. "You are being a total brat, Adrian. How am I supposed to go about disciplining you?"

"It's simple. You're not."

"That remains to be seen."

Edward pushed himself up and went straight for the chair on which he had his clothes, neatly folded. Adrian jumped to his feet and caught him by one arm. "Are you jealous? For real?"

"Oh, please."

There was a small flicker in the dark green eyes when Edward glanced at him that wasn't lost on Adrian. Apparently, Edward was more thin-skinned than he pretended to be. Or it was all a game, but Adrian wasn't sure anyone could be that great an actor.

Adrian hugged Edward tightly from behind. His lips traveled along the other's neck, teasing gently with small kisses. "Since everything must be a negotiation with you, here is a deal I'm offering. Let's fuck, and then you can do with me whatever."

"Careful, Adrian," Edward said quietly. "It's not the first time you propose something outrageous."

"It's what you want, right? Put a leash on me, ride me like a pony, I don't care. All I know is that I want to be deep inside your amazing ass, and fuck you until I lose my mind."

"Are you trying to seduce me?" Edward's small laugh seemed a bit harsh. But Adrian was getting used to the façade. Behind it, there was still a man, and that was something he could work with.

"Is it working?"

Edward turned toward him. "Remember that you offered me complete control. Now let me exact a little punishment for tonight's shenanigans."

"Aren't we going to fuck?"

"You have a one-track mind. Don't worry." Edward took Adrian's cock in his hand and rubbed it to full hardness before continuing. "I will allow you to fuck me."

"I'm honored, Your Majesty. Let's get it over with that punishment you're talking about. Just make sure you don't incapacitate me for the fucking I'm going to give you."

"Rest assured that it won't come to that," Edward replied. With that, he plopped down on the sofa, his legs parted, and his erection in full display.

Just for the record, Adrian sucked off guys sometimes as a means to an end. But, right now, as he looked at Edward's cock, hard and stern, just as its owner, he licked his lips. "I so want to suck your cock," he said in a heartbeat.

"If I let you, you won't understand what punishment is. Come and sit across my lap."

For a second, Adrian stared at Edward, unsure if he had heard correctly. "Wait," he laughed, "do you want to spank me?"

"You're getting off the hook easier than you think," Edward warned him. "Don't keep me waiting. Also, I should say. I won't hold back."

Adrian pulled at the lobe of one ear, a bit puzzled over Edward's request. Could it be something as childish and cliché as that? Edward seemed above the usual kinkiness Adrian had the chance to experience or see. So a little spanking appeared a bit off. With a shrug, he moved and placed himself over Edward's lap.

It took him a few seconds to adjust his position as his cock was still hard. Edward's hand rested on his buttocks and, for a couple of moments, just remained there, doing nothing. Adrian was about to ask what was holding Edward back when the hand moved, and a hard slap broke the silence.

"Jesus fucking Christ," Adrian shouted.

"You appear no longer in the mood for laughing," Edward said.

"You took me by surprise, that's all." Adrian squirmed a little, and the same hand touched the area it had just slapped earlier.

This time, he steeled himself. Edward was good at playing mind games, and Adrian realized he was holding his breath. Just as he exhaled, the second slap followed. And in the same place. Now that called for a little protest. "How about a small change? I'm completely willing to turn the other cheek," he joked, to hide his embarrassment over feeling that slap quite hard.

"Feeling generous?" Edward teased.

The third slap landed on the same spot. Go figure, Adrian thought dryly, and much to his shame, he could feel his erection waning a little. Edward was putting his all into those slaps. The next moment, Edward grabbed his ass cheek and squeezed it. Playfully, he snuck one finger in Adrian's crack and teased the tight entrance.

"If you thought this some prelude to your fucking me in the ass, you're wrong. After this, I'm going to fuck you until you aren't able to walk straight."

"I've never been known for that. You know, walking straight," Edward said, and his voice made him sound content.

"Gay from head to toes? That what you're saying?" Adrian asked casually, keeping hard from pushing his ass up for a little more teasing.

Edward moved his hand again, but only to land another slap, although, finally, he chose the other cheek. All right, he only needed to brace himself for a few more, and that would be all, Adrian thought.

He ground his teeth as Edward suddenly increased his rhythm, and this time he didn't stop, not even to allow Adrian the freedom to protest. In the end, Adrian started squirming. "The fuck! This fucking hurts!"

"Do you want me to stop?"

"Hell yeah, I want you to stop! My ass is on fucking fire!"

"Do you have honest regrets about what you did tonight?"

For a second, Adrian thought about defying Edward. Then, he reconsidered. As irking as the thought of obeying the sexy, arrogant asshole was, he needed to be considerate of his behind.

“I do! Fuck, I do! I swear I don’t need any sex parties in my life forever!”

Edward stopped abruptly. “That’s too bad, Adrian. I plan on taking you to many sex parties.”

Adrian looked over his shoulder. Edward was watching him closely. “Fine. You win. I won’t fuck around. Is that enough to convince you? By the way, that’s quite a heavy hand. What do you do in your spare time?”

“I am much interested in making you part of my spare time, so you will learn all about it. Do you think you had enough, Adrian?”

Adrian rubbed his ass and winced. “My dick is done for. I think you made a point.”

“So we’re not going to fuck, after all?”

Adrian loved the way Edward talked. It was like each word was chosen and spoken carefully. When Edward said ‘fuck’, it came out just as strong a word as it was. Many people used it casually, Adrian included. But if Edward said it, the guy meant it.

“Just give me a second, and I’ll be up for it,” he promised while getting to his feet.

Edward stood up, too, and went for his clothes again.

“Oh, come on, you’re not going to leave now, are you?” Adrian complained.

“I only wanted to take this,” Edward said and pointed at a rectangular box he held in his hand. “You’ll do me the pleasure of wearing this, right?”

Adrian watched Edward as he took out what looked pretty much like a dog collar. “You are into that pup play, after all,” he said out loud.

“I hate all that masquerading with masks and tails, and everything,” Edward said promptly. “But I very much enjoy the idea of having a pet that adores me and hangs on my every word and gesture.”

Adrian bit his lips, trying hard not to laugh. “Man, you should just get yourself a dog.”

Edward scoffed. “As much as I enjoy teasing your animal instincts, Adrian, I much appreciate your beautiful human shape.” To make a point, he closed the distance between them and began putting the collar around Adrian’s neck. “You truly look beautiful like this.” He caressed the collar, touching Adrian’s skin in passing.

“Whatever floats your boat,” Adrian said with a small shrug.

There was a small flutter in his stomach as he felt the leather rubbing against his skin and the coldness of the metal buckle. Edward was a big pervert, after all, and Adrian was just curious about how deep his perversions went. He had a feeling he was embarking on a true trip of discovery.

Jared jolted when he felt someone touching him gently on the cheek. He blinked a few times, chasing away the sleep still hanging from his eyelashes, as he realized where he was. The bedside lamp threw enough light for him to see Chris standing by the bed and caressing him.

“Oh, sorry. I have no idea how I managed to fall asleep so fast. What time is it?”

“I should be the one to apologize. It’s three in the morning.”

Jared remained silent for a moment. “I should go home then,” he murmured.

“You look good in my bed,” Chris said.

He began undressing slowly, making a show out of it. Jared pushed himself up on his elbows and turned to have a good look at Chris. “You have an amazing body for your age. Ah, damn, sorry, I shouldn’t have said that.”

His words caught in his throat as his eyes landed on Chris’s manhood, stiff as a log. Again, Chris came closer and began caressing Jared’s cheek, his fingers touching his mouth and the thumb finding its way inside. Without thinking, Jared took it between his lips and began sucking on it.

“Oh, yes,” Chris said quietly, “you are so good at this, kiddo.”

Jared stopped. “Kiddo?”

Chris smiled fondly at him and leaned in to steal a kiss. “You’re the one who sees me as old.”

Jared pouted theatrically and then laughed. “I guess I could be convinced to wake up.”

“Good,” Chris said shortly and straightened up.

Jared’s laughed died out as Chris began nudging his cheek with his cock again. He looked up, and his eyelids fluttered as he took in Chris’s intense eyes, then his strong chest, and last his taut abdomen.

He used his hands to caress the tough planes of the body in front of him, pliant under his fingers, but only this much. Jared risked another look up and noticed the smile curling Chris’s lips. He had never met anyone like that. Chris knew what he wanted, and he was firm without being forceful. Anyone Jared had ever had sex in his life with paled in comparison, they appeared like

nothing but clumsy teenagers, too reckless to stop and notice anything, too eager, and too hurried, only until the moment they reached their climax.

In front of him stood a man, a real man, and Jared felt he was getting into something he knew nothing about. But he was willing to discover it all. Unlike Adrian, he had never had a serious relationship, not for lack of trying, but for lack of suitable partners. So he had never truly felt, and he had never truly hurt.

He took Chris's cock into his mouth and looked up from time to time, awaiting confirmation that he did well. Chris curled his fingers around the back of his head, moving only to play a little with the small leather tie keeping Jared's hair in that proper ponytail to let it loose.

"Like this, kiddo, like this," Chris encouraged him.

Jared loved being praised. He wrapped one hand around Chris's cock and began moving his tongue and lips over the length. Feeling that strong cock in his mouth was more than what he had bargained for, though. It put a little strain on his jaw, as Chris was holding him in place, without allowing him too much freedom of movement.

But it was all good since he was willing to work for it.

"Yes, beautiful," Chris encouraged him, his hand still firm on Jared's neck.

Jared was discovering things about himself. He had liked sex, enjoyed it, before, but this was different. It was funny to think of it that way, but he put his soul into it this time. So he increased his rhythm, determined to show Chris his entire appreciation.

As a difference from other times, now he knew well, Chris was hard because of him and for him. With others, too often, he had experienced the feeling that he and his partner for the night were nothing but people found in a typical situation, horny and only with the present possibilities to solve that.

This wasn't it, Jared thought. He could feel his erection straining inside his pants. As much as he adjusted his position to suck off Chris better, nothing was helping with that. So he just placed one hand over his erection, pressing down on it hard, while strange sounds made his throat vibrate as he couldn't be convinced for anything to let go of the juicy bit in his mouth.

Bit wasn't the right word. Jared found himself more and more enthralled with everything that was Chris, his smell, his cock, the wiry hair above it, the muscular body, the way he held Jared in place, stern and demanding. Never before he had ever thought of feeling so good about being used. But there was pleasure to be taken from pleasuring another, and that was all Jared's mind was filled with, to the brim.

"I'm close, kiddo," Chris whispered.

Through the haze of his arousal, Jared remembered Adrian's warning, and he pulled the glorious cock out of his mouth, only to make it shoot all over his face. Chris grunted, and there was a sign of surprise in how he appeared to ground his teeth hard as he came.

Fuck. He should have talked about it before this, Jared scolded himself inwardly. And the worst part was that he hadn't thought about how he could say it, without making it sound like an insult or an accusation.

Chris ruffled his hair, a bit too hard. "I thought you would swallow it all. All that, wasted." He laughed, apparently not as upset as Jared would have believed him to be.

He touched his cheeks gingerly. "Um, can I have a tissue or something?"

Jared didn't dare to look up, but he sensed Chris moving away. He kept his eyes down, so he was a bit surprised with the gentle touch on his cheek. Chris batted his hand away as he tried to grab the tissue, and he allowed his face to be wiped clean.

"It's okay if you don't like to swallow. I was under the impression that you enjoyed it the last time."

Jared just nodded and looked away. "Ah, it's a bit weird, and I don't know how to put it."

Chris took him by the shoulders and then grabbed his chin, making him look up. "What is it?"

Jared could feel his cheeks getting red. Normally, with anyone else, he would have had no issues with bringing that up. But Chris was a different breed than people of Jared's age, and he might take it personally. "You see, um, I don't know you, and – Ah, this is harder than I thought!"

Chris kissed him gently. "Just say it. I won't be upset if that's what you worry about."

Jared closed his eyes and then opened it. "If we're to swallow each other's cum, we should exchange medical information and stuff." He had said it so fast that he had barely had time to breathe. Therefore, he inhaled deeply when he finished.

Chris's silence was not a good sign. But Adrian was right, and Jared knew it. At least, it was out in the open.

"It's not like I suspect you are..., ah, damn, I'm burying myself deeper, right?" Jared said and tried to move away from Chris.

"Wait." Chris took him by the hand and pulled him close. "Actually, I think that's a great idea. I didn't know we're getting committed here, but you have a point, and, as I promised, I didn't get upset."

Jared opened his mouth and then closed it, unsure if he could force his luck. In the end, the curious part of him won. "Are we getting committed?"

Chris laughed. "I think so. It's the third time we see each other, and what do you know, the sex is as hot as in the beginning."

Jared rolled his eyes and laughed, too. Chris took advantage and pushed him down on the bed to climb on top of him. "I thought young people today are more into fleeting hookups than into relationships."

"Well, we're not. We're totally responsible. We don't even say 'hello' to one another, and we ask each other when it was the last time we got checked."

"That's very responsible, indeed. But I wasn't talking about that. I was thinking about you wanting us to become something more."

"I do want it. I think. I do," Jared replied, feeling more and more panicked now. Was Chris just teasing him?

"You better do because I am all for not using condoms at all."

"Oh." Jared relaxed a little. "I wasn't thinking very far, I guess."

Chris laughed again. "Well, you can't take it back. Exchanging medical information is a pretty big step. And," he said, as he moved one hand and caressed Jared's lips slowly, focusing on them intently, "I really enjoy coming in your mouth, so any sacrifice would be too little for me to get to do that."

"Do you like my mouth that much?" Jared asked.

"Mm, I think it's delicious and that it looks absolutely amazing wrapped around my cock and pulling all the juice out of my balls."

"You sure don't mince words," Jared replied.

"Am I coming too hard at you?"

"I was lucky I closed my eyes in time," Jared joked.

Chris chuckled and kissed Jared deeply. "You know, I think your mouth is good in many ways. I can barely wait to enjoy your ass completely bareback."

"Is there such a thing as a partial bareback?" Jared asked, grinning.

"As I said. Your mouth is something else. Now, until I get everything straightened out, how about I go search for some pesky condoms, put one on and fuck you?"

Jared nodded enthusiastically.

“Undress,” Chris ordered as he got up. Jared obeyed and began right away. From the door, Chris looked at him. “Just wait for me, sexy.”

Jared looked back. “I wouldn’t be anywhere else.”

Chris rewarded him with another fond smile.

Mike was biting his nails and didn’t have the guts to leave the stall. Now he fucked up big time. He couldn’t call Jared and ask for advice, as it was too late, and most probably he was now with Chris, sleeping even, like normal people. Adrian, he didn’t dare to call. Also, he doubted Adrian even had his phone on. As Mike knew his other best friend, he was probably swimming in hot bodies by now.

That left him with nothing but his anxiety and utter panic as companions.

“Mike?” Someone called from outside.

It wasn’t Ryan’s voice, so Mike let out a breath of relief. Then, he re-became rightfully alarmed.

“I’m all right,” he replied loudly.

Jimmy came and knocked softly on the door. “Is it because of the booze?”

“No! I mean, yes! I think I got a bit fucked up,” Mike replied.

“Can I come in? I am pretty good at this kind of stuff. You know, because of my job.” Jimmy laughed good-naturedly.

“I’d rather sit here by myself and drown in my misery,” Mike said.

“Nonsense. There’s too little water in the toilet bowl to drown,” Jimmy joked and pushed open the door.

Mike stared at the cute bartender, hoping his guilt wasn’t transparent. Jimmy touched his forehead. “Have you managed to throw up?”

Mike just shook his head.

“I think you might feel a little better if you got some of what you drank out of your system.”

“No way. I can’t do that. It scares me to throw up because I feel like I can’t breathe.”

Jimmy looked at him, visibly concerned, and then his face changed a little. “Are you getting cold feet because of our little arrangement?”

Mike looked down and said nothing.

“Hey,” Jimmy called softly, “it’s okay. You can tell me. I thought that you would be okay with it, but, in all truth, I didn’t ask you. So you can just say if you don’t want to, you know.”

“Oh, fuck.” Mike covered his eyes. “Now, you must hate me. I practically had sex with your boyfriend, and now I don’t want to have sex with you!”

Jimmy began laughing. “I’m not the jealous type if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“What are you two birdies doing in there?” Gino’s voice startled both of them.

Other people were coming and going, but their corner of the bathroom was claimed, so their little drama could unfold without that many witnesses, Mike thought without one trace of humor.

“We’ll just have to have fun by ourselves tonight,” Jimmy explained.

“What’s wrong with him?” Gino asked, pointing with his chin toward Mike.

“He’s not feeling that well.”

Mike remained mute. Was there a reason why Jimmy was lying to Gino? He could just say that Mike wasn’t feeling like being the third wheel in a threesome. It couldn’t be that much of a problem, right?

“Did he throw up?” Gino asked.

“Gino, let’s just call Mike a cab so that he can go home.”

“It’s all right. You two don’t have to worry about me so much,” Mike intervened.

Gino grimaced, and Mike wondered, all of a sudden, what Jimmy could see in him. He had no idea why his addled brain had come up with that, but that was what he believed, for a moment. Gino was handsome, but there was something arrogant in how he was carrying himself like he expected all the twinks in the universe to fall at his feet.

And it wasn’t anything like Adrian’s arrogance if that made any sense. Adrian was a bit playful, and it was like from the start, people knew they couldn’t take him seriously. Also, Mike had never known Adrian to take rejection badly, although he seemed pretty pissed about that Edward dude.

“Then I might just go home and hit the hay,” Gino said.

What? Mike’s ears perked up. If there was no threesome, the guy didn’t want to go home with his boyfriend?

“I’m sorry I ruined your night, guys,” Mike offered. “Do you have long until you finish your shift, Jimmy? You two should go home together.”

“It’s all right,” Jimmy replied and waved.

“I’m going home to my place,” Gino intervened, somewhat aggressively.

“You two don’t live together?” Mike asked, the question flying out of his mouth without being able to stop it.

Jimmy stole a quick, embarrassed look at him. “Let’s say we’re not at that stage in our relationship.”

But they were at that stage where they planned threesomes, Mike thought and felt unease washing over him. It appeared that, by accident, he had walked into a bit of a complicated situation.

“Raincheck, then?” Gino asked Mike, without paying attention to Jimmy, which Mike thought pretty rude.

“I don’t think so,” Mike said. “I’m not cut for this type of stuff.”

“Really?” Gino asked and frowned. “So you were planning to ditch me, just like that? He’s not sick, is he?” He turned toward his boyfriend.

Mike bit his lips hard. He had a knack for saying – and texting! – the wrong things tonight. “I wasn’t planning anything! And actually, you two came on to me, not the other way around.”

Jimmy threw him a distressed look but immediately began talking. “I’m sorry, Mike. I really am. I shouldn’t have assumed you would be into something like this.”

“I thought you said this guy was a sure thing,” Gino said to Jimmy.

Mike wanted to be somewhere else altogether. If only he could wish for that and disappear, it would be great.

“Mike isn’t prepared,” Jimmy explained, and Mike could read defensiveness in his voice. “We will just find someone else.”

“You’re always like this.” Gino snorted. “I guess it’s up to me to find a guy that won’t stand us up.”

Ah, now Gino cared about including Jimmy in the situation, but obviously, only so that he could put him down for being incapable of finding the right person for a threesome.

“I can do that,” Jimmy said quickly. “Stop jumping to conclusions.”

“I’m not jumping to anything,” Gino replied. “I’ll just bring someone.”

“I’d rather you didn’t,” Jimmy said and appeared a little cross as he said that.

“Mike!” Someone called for him.

Mike got to his feet. “Guys, stop fighting because of me. Also, I should go.”

“We’re not fighting because of you,” Gino said, in an irritated voice.

Now Mike had no idea what he had seen in Gino no longer than a week ago. In the harsh light of the bathroom, he appeared cold and uncaring. No matter how handsome he was, his features seemed twisted and unappealing.

“Mike!” Ryan called again, and Mike made himself squeeze through Gino and Jimmy, who were facing each other in the cramped place like they were about to get into a fight.

“There you are.” Ryan had a deep frown etched between his eyebrows, and he seemed quite upset.

Mike stopped, dead in his tracks. Out of the frying pan and into the fire. Busy with the quarrel erupting between Jimmy and Gino, he had forgotten all about how he was about to lose his job, and in the most humiliating manner possible.

Ryan looked good, wearing the same plaid shirt as that Monday when they had hooked up shortly. Mike’s heart ached instantly.

“And who’s this guy?” Gino asked as he got out of the stall, followed by Jimmy, who tried to catch his arm.

What a fucking night. Mike turned toward Gino. “He’s my --”

Ryan placed a heavy hand on his shoulder. “I’m Mike’s boyfriend. Do you have a problem with that?”

Mike gaped like a fish. Jimmy’s eyes grew wide. “Do you have a boyfriend? This man is your boyfriend?”

Mike didn’t have it in him even to nod, that scared he was about Ryan’s statement.

“I can’t believe it!” Jimmy looked at him and frowned. “Let’s go, Gino,” he called for his boyfriend and pushed against Mike’s shoulder on his way out.

Mike just got out of the way. He totally deserved it. Gino threw him a disdainful look, but he didn’t push against him, like Jimmy. Instead, he gave Ryan a quick once-over. The smirk on his

face disappeared quickly, though. Mike was pretty sure Ryan was giving Gino a stare to be remembered. He didn't dare to turn and look.

"Let's go home," Ryan said and squeezed his shoulder to the point of making it painful.

Mike just nodded. All right, so he wouldn't be fired in that bathroom, and Ryan was at least merciful enough to conduct such business somewhere away from other people. That was something he could live with.

"So, do I get upgraded to the bedroom?" Edward made a small gesture with his chin.

"Upgraded?" Adrian snorted. "Your Majesty, my humble abode is all yours. I could do you on the balcony if you just said the word."

Edward's lips twitched. Adrian leaned in and bit them softly, and Edward chased his mouth, biting back, a bit too hard. "I'd rather not do something so outrageously scandalous. And I'm known to appreciate comfort, so please bear that in mind. What are you doing?"

Adrian laughed as he hiked Edward in his arms.

"Put me down this instant!"

He could, but he had something to prove, Adrian thought, and managed, not without struggle, to put Edward over one shoulder and walk with him into the bedroom where he slammed him down on the bed, without any preamble.

Without allowing Edward one moment more to protest, Adrian covered him with his body and kissed him deeply. "Are you saying that I'm bad at kissing? How about this?"

He covered Edward's mouth again and pressed their mouths together while his tongue got busy. Edward's resistance was slowly melting, and that meant that he was doing the right thing. If he could put his mind to it, Adrian could be an awesome kisser, he decided. So Edward would get his kisses if it meant that neither of them felt his lips at the end of the night.

Edward grabbed his head hard and kissed him back. It was like a battle, but one in which the competitors faced each other in a game of seduction. Adrian didn't like losing, so he grabbed Edward by the shoulders after he slid his arms under him to keep him in place.

"Tell me, Your Majesty," Adrian said breathily as he continued to bite and kiss and provoke, "tell me that I'm good."

"Are you longing for my approval?" To his satisfaction, Edward's voice was as strained as his.

“Yes.” Adrian could play that game. He wasn’t stupid. If he gave Edward what he wanted, heaven awaited.

“You do well enough.”

Adrian moved his lips across Edward’s perfectly shaved jawline and sank his teeth in an earlobe once he reached it. “This is not what I expect.”

“Would you like me to lie to you?”

“I would like you to be honest, and I think you had no one like me, Your Majesty.”

“I have had many men in my bed and my life.”

“But no one like me,” Adrian insisted.

“Is this what matters?” Edward hissed as Adrian snuck one hand between them to grab his erection.

“What matters is to let yourself feel this,” Adrian said.

Without any other unnecessary words, Adrian slid down on Edward’s body and caught his erect cock between his lips.

Edward inhaled sharply and grabbed a handful of Adrian’s hair. It didn’t hurt, but Adrian could appreciate it. After all, the way the slim fingers flexed and pulled gave him excellent indications of whether what he was doing was good or bad.

As things looked, he was doing pretty damn good. Adrian took hold of Edward’s cock and held it so that he could savor it properly.

“Damn it,” Edward said with a grunt. “I thought you wanted to fuck me, not this.”

“And? Since when do I do what you say?”

Edward’s only reply was another moan of unbridled pleasure. Adrian would have grinned in satisfaction, but his mouth was pretty busy. So, instead, he continued to suck with gusto, making sure to release Edward’s cock with a small pop now and then, only so that he could look at the engorged head and the way the thing pulsed in his hand, obviously much in agreement with its treatment.

“Adrian,” Edward warned in a breathless whisper.

Adrian stopped and got to his feet. Edward looked at him, seemingly a tad disoriented, his face flushed, his flawless skin covered by a thin layer of perspiration, and a single curl of hair rebelling from the perfect hairdo and gluing to his forehead.

“I’m getting a condom.” Adrian winked at the gorgeous man on his bed and got quickly busy with the rubber.

He grabbed the lube on his way to the bed. Edward tried to move with his back to him, but Adrian stopped him. “No. Like this.”

“Really? Missionary?”

Adrian just shrugged. “I want to look at your face.” Edward looked away. Adrian caught his chin and made him look back at him. “Just to make it clear, I want something real.”

Edward smirked. “Serving me my lessons back?”

“No. I want something real.”

Edward remained silent. Adrian was quick to use the lube on both of them, and if there was any discomfort experienced by his bed partner, nothing showed on that aristocratic face. He had spoken the truth. Edward excited him, he made him want more, so he didn’t want to miss one second of staring into that handsome face and gauge each moment of arousal, of realization that Adrian was truly good, good for him, and different from whomever Edward had ever had.

When he pushed inside, he wasn’t uncaring, but he didn’t allow Edward too much time to adjust. It was amazing to realize how well their bodies fit, as Adrian draped himself all over Edward’s sweaty body and bucked his hips to push all the way inside. There were no weirdness, no elbows, and no knees in the way, which meant that Edward was more of an experienced bottom than he wanted to admit. He was pliant as he received Adrian into his body.

“Do you feel me, Your Majesty?” Adrian continued to move his hips and nothing else so that he could allow Edward to experience his cock alone.

“You’re big. Is that what you want to hear, Adrian?”

Adrian smiled. “I want to wreck you this night, and wreck you good.”

“I am not inexperienced. It would be hard to achieve such a purpose, especially since I have been in this position countless times. Unless you want to become unnecessary forceful.”

Adrian took one of Edward’s hands and placed it on his collar. “You’re the one with the power here. Pull me hard, and I’ll know I’m hurting you. Deal?”

Edward pulled at the leather collar. “I might pull at it hard when it’s too good. Will you stop?”

“Tell me what you want.” Adrian moved slowly, enjoying each small gasp from Edward, and the way his eyelids fluttered. “I’ll do everything you want.”

“Another time. I’ll use this blank check you’re giving me. Now, just fuck me like you mean it.”

Adrian grinned. “Sure thing, Your Majesty.”

Edward’s next aroused groan didn’t take him by surprise. Adrian cradled his partner’s head on his palms as he moved in and out, slowly at first, taking in every sign of pleasure from Edward. They were moving as one, and that was fucking amazing. Only tonight, Adrian had fucked so many others, but it was nothing compared to this. Perfect sexual compatibility, that had to be. For it, he could live with Edward’s sharp tongue and pretensions. And since it wasn’t a relationship, any other complications were out of the question.

As he began moving faster and faster, Edward’s gasps increased in frequency, too. Now, he was pulling at Adrian’s collar hard, while his eyes were rolling in his head. Adrian didn’t have to look to know Edward was coming.

That was the real satisfaction of all that had happened that night, Adrian realized. “Exquisite, Your Majesty,” he whispered, and then finally focused on his own pleasure.

It didn’t take him long. He had the sensation that he had been there for the entire time, and loud shouts of victory accompanied his release. “Yes, yes, yes!”

For a few moments after, he almost blacked out. Edward kept him close as his body trembled. Why was it so good? Adrian was a simple man.

One minute later, he moved away and placed a small kiss on Edward’s shoulder. “When’s the next time we can do this?”

Edward laughed. “And here I was, believing you when you told me that you would keep me up all night long.”

“I will get it up again. Just say the word, and I’ll obey.”

Edward turned toward him. “You really are special, Adrian.”

Adrian grinned. “I hope you’re not saying like I’m slow in the head or something like that.”

The dark green eyes were shining. “Nothing like that.”

“So,” Adrian teased, “did you enjoy it or what?”

Edward made a small gesture at his body. Adrian took in with satisfaction the cum spread all over Edward’s abdomen and chest. “Nice load. I wish I could clean it up.”

“We’ll get to that. Like anyone in this day and age, before committing fully, we will prove our seriousness by presenting medical records.”

“I don’t go bareback,” Adrian said apologetically.

“Even if we’re both tested?” Edward asked, and appeared disappointed.

Adrian hesitated. “I don’t do attachment well.”

“Yet, it’s what I ask of you. And you know that I don’t mean it as a relationship in the romantic sense of the term. Is that what you worry about? I want us to enjoy each other’s cum.”

Adrian exhaled. “You make my mouth water, Your Majesty,” he said, as he threw one forearm over his eyes.

“Come on, Adrian. Not only in the beginning, but we will both get tested regularly, just to make sure. I’m a doctor. I know how important such things are.”

Adrian put his arm covering his face away. “You’re serious about this.”

Edward nodded.

“You like me.”

Edward rolled his eyes. “Would I have let you do this to me otherwise?” He pointed out at his body.

Adrian smirked. “Then let’s do this.”

“But no more parties with bottom boys sharing you,” Edward warned.

“When I have you?” Adrian threw Edward a look full of meaning.

Edward smiled contently. “You do have something of a seducer in you, after all, Adrian.”

“I’m doing my best for you.”

“Then I should take a quick shower and go back --”

“What? No way. Sleep here.”

“Why? We’re done, are we not?”

Adrian leaned in and suddenly pushed his nose into the hollow of Edward’s neck. “But I need to smell you more.”

Edward laughed. “To create affinity? Is this what you’re trying to say?”

“Call it whatever. I want my sheets to smell of you. Until I see you again.”

“So, you don’t wash your sheets regularly?” Edward joked.

Adrian snickered but stood there without moving. “I was just trying to be romantic.”

“But we’re not in a romantic relationship,” Edward pointed out.

“I know. But anything like this seems to be to your liking, and I’m all for satisfying you.”

“True,” Edward admitted.

“Stay. Take your shower. But sleep here, in this bed, with me around you.”

Edward pushed himself up. “I should take that, too.” He gestured for the full condom, still on Adrian’s cock.

“Sure,” Adrian said.

He put his arms under his head and watched Edward pulling off the condom with care. Well, he wasn’t for relationships and all that, but he could get used to that. And since there weren’t any emotional entanglements, he had nothing to worry about.

Mike was small as he walked behind Ryan, but he stopped when they were in the parking lot. “Mr. Armstrong, I think it’s okay if you fire me here. I wouldn’t want to take much of your time.”

Ryan appeared not to hear him. He stopped in front of a car, sleek, but featuring a low profile in the vicinity of much gaudier vehicles. “Get inside.”

Mike stared a little, wondering what Ryan could mean by that. He watched his boss as he got behind the wheel and then opened the other door. “Are you coming today?”

He hurried and climbed in. Without another sound, he fixed his safety belt. Funny, how sober he felt, despite having drunken quite a lot. With his small body frame, he was usually a lousy candidate for drinking too much.

Ryan kicked the engine into gear and pulled out of the parking lot, without sparing Mike a glance. “Where do you live?”

Oh, home. That what Ryan meant. But when would he talk about firing Mike? In a quiet voice, Mike told him the address and gave some directions on how to get there. On their way there, they remained silent, Ryan focused on the road, and Mike too scared even to breathe.

He did breathe. The problem was that he could feel Ryan’s expensive cologne each time he inhaled, and that made him dizzy. Not because the scent was overpowering or anything like that, but because Mike couldn’t help feeling a tiny bit aroused, which was terribly fucked up since he would get fired soon, and no one in the whole universe could have a boner while waiting for something as terrible as that.

“Thank you for the ride, Mr. Armstrong,” he said when Ryan pulled in front of his building. “Have a good... night?”

The question mark remained unanswered. He had no idea what would happen next. Most probably, Ryan would wait until Monday to fire him properly. After all, it was pretty stupid to think that Ryan would just fire someone while giving him a ride home. The thought alone was so ridiculous that Mike couldn't keep in a small snort.

Ryan had already stepped out of the car and was looking at him like he was a lunatic. Of course, that wasn't off the mark seeing how Mike had drunk-texted, tried and failed to get some threesome action, and now had been given a ride home by his boss who would fire him as soon as the circumstances allowed.

“Anything funny?” Ryan's voice was irritated.

Mike gulped. “No, sir. Good night.”

He began walking toward his building, trying hard not to stare back. The problem was, he realized only one second later, Ryan was following him in. “Do you know someone in this building?” he asked stupidly.

Ryan put one hand on his shoulder and pushed him inside the elevator. “What floor?”

Great, Mike thought. He had made such a fool of himself, that Ryan didn't trust him now that he knew his address. So that meant that Ryan would see him to the door.

They were out on his floor, and after a few tries, Mike managed to put the key in and open the door. “I guess I am home,” he said and looked at Ryan over his shoulder.

Ryan stood close to him. Too close.

“So you don't have to worry that I might --” Mike swallowed his words. He might, what? Drunk-text again?

“We have to talk.” Ryan followed him in.

Mike stopped in the middle of the small room, which served as a resemblance of a living room. His bedroom was even tinier, so that was as good as it got. And it wasn't like Ryan wanted to see his bedroom, right?

“Sorry about all the mess,” he said as he gestured around.

“What mess?” Ryan asked as he threw a cursory look at the sofa, the TV, and the coffee table that made pretty much all the furniture Mike had there.

“I don’t know. It’s a way of saying,” Mike replied as he shifted his weight from one foot to another. “Do you want to sit down? Can I get you anything?”

Ryan let out an exasperated sigh. “This is not a social call, Mike.”

“Right,” Mike admitted. “You’re about to fire me.”

Ryan shook his head and then ran one hand over his face. He appeared a bit amused as he looked at Mike. “All I want from you is to explain yourself.”

Mike let his shoulders drop. “It would be much easier if you just fired me.”

“You’re one hell of a server technician, so I’m not about to let you go because you decided to torture me via phone texts.”

“Torture you?” Mike’s eyes grew wide.

“Maybe we should sit down for a bit.”

Mike followed Ryan as if his boss was the host, and he the guest. It was pretty stupid, but what of what he had done the entire night wasn’t?

“Are you playing with me?” Ryan asked directly.

Mike was sitting at the other end of the sofa, so, as small as that was, they were at a relatively safe distance from one another. Ryan seemed relaxed, sitting there and watching Mike with a strange look in his eyes.

“No, sir,” he said in a small whisper.

“I see. You don’t appear very drunk.”

“I guess,” Mike replied. “I don’t know how much I had.”

“Which means that you were pretty sober when you sent me those texts,” Ryan concluded.

“No!” Mike protested.

“I was expecting to find you wasted, but you seem fine,” Ryan pointed out.

“I was drunk when I texted,” Mike explained. “But then you called, and I realized what a big mistake I did, and then, poof, I was sober. Also, the cold air helped. I think.”

He made little to no sense. Ryan was toying with him, and any moment now, the other shoe would drop. A tense silence followed, and Mike didn’t dare to look up and at Ryan.

Then, he heard a small laugh.

“You’re one hell of a guy, aren’t you, Micah?” Ryan said.

“I thought I was just one hell of a server technician,” Mike replied. “And nobody calls me Micah.”

“Hmm. Then maybe I should. Seeing how I was so special.”

“I don’t remember saying that,” Mike mumbled.

“Right. Good thing I have all your texts so that we can talk about them at large.”

“No.” Mike moaned and buried his face into his hands.

“Oh, yes,” Ryan said, and he appeared to be enjoying himself quite a lot. “Let’s see ... The first one. *You should be sorry for being so handsome. Really, who talks like that? It’s like you’re from a hotline ad or something.*”

In Ryan’s mouth, those words seemed even more disastrous. Mike kept his hands firmly on his face.

“How do I talk exactly? I wasn’t aware that I could have a fruitful career recording ASMR videos.”

Mike pulled his knees up and embraced them with his arms while keeping his face hidden.

“Well? Are you going to tell me or not?”

What could he tell? “Please, just fire me,” he begged.

“No. I have no intention of doing that. Leaving aside my ability to talk like a hotline performer, let’s see the next. You should be sorry for messing me up. FYI, two hot men are waiting for me right now so that we could have a threesome. A threesome, do you get it? I shouldn’t be thinking of you! Exclamation mark. Hmm. So I should be sorry. Will it help if I apologize?” Ryan offered.

Mike pulled his head out. It was a bit hard to breathe. “You don’t have to apologize. That was just me, being stupid.”

“I don’t know. Via text, you sound pretty intense. And I thought you were nothing but shy and nervous. Ah, which brings us to the last text, through which you challenged me to offer a reply. So you’re not saying anything? I guess for you it was just another blowjob. But for me, it wasn’t. For you, it was just another Monday night, going around seducing the shy and nervous type. What did you even mean by that? Shy and nervous is nobody’s type! I will go and have that threesome now. Well, I must admit that your challenging me was quite compelling.”

Mike risked a small look at Ryan. It appeared as if the distance between them was no longer so significant. “Compelling how?”

Ryan's eyes shone with something dark and dangerous. "No way in hell I would let you get involved in a threesome if I could help it."

Mike was afraid to breathe. He just kept looking at Ryan, and, for a few long seconds, they both remained silent.

"It wasn't just another blowjob," Ryan said in a quiet, low voice. "Do you understand what I'm saying, Mike?"

He didn't reply. He could still not breathe normally.

Ryan sighed and straightened up in his seat, looking away from Mike. "We can't, Mike. Do you understand?"

"I do," Mike said meekly.

"I don't think you do." Ryan sounded irritated again.

"I won't do it again. I was just drunk. Look, I'm going to do what I should have done the moment I learned you were my boss. I'm going to delete your number."

Mike pulled out his phone and, with trembling hands, began browsing through his list of contacts, wanting to delay the moment, no matter how wrong it was to do that.

A steady hand covered the screen of his phone and then pulled the device away from him. "Don't." Ryan's voice was tense.

Mike turned toward his guest and didn't protest at all as hot lips took his, and he was kissed as he had dreamed for days and nights.

Like all good things, it had to come to an end, and Mike kept his eyes closed shut even as Ryan moved away.

"I'll be on my way," Ryan said and stood up.

Mike opened his eyes and stood up, too. "What does this mean?" he asked, as he started pulling at the hem of his t-shirt.

"That I'll have to go home and try to catch some sleep for what remained of this night," Ryan replied.

For a moment, Mike snickered. He would have offered the same answer if asked. "But... the kiss?" he whispered.

Ryan looked at him, and his eyes were filled with unhidden pain. "I can't afford anything else."

Mike nodded as if he understood. If anything, he was the most confused he had ever been. He remained standing, even long after the door closed.

Chapter Eight – Good News And Bad News

Adrian woke up with a yawn and stretched, blinking hard to chase away the sand from his eyes. For a moment or two, he felt the place next to him with one hand. He sighed. Somehow he doubted Edward was in the kitchen, making waffles. But there was no point in being disappointed since such domestic pleasures weren't his speed, anyway. He didn't eat waffles.

He stood up and moved his arms, to remove the stiffness in his limbs, and realized that something was chafing his neck. Oh, great, he must have slept with the collar on. With a laugh, mostly addressed to himself, he proceeded to remove the leather strap when his eyes fell on the nightstand. There was a small note left, written on a square piece of paper with a pearly sheen to it.

The note, in itself, shouldn't have been that much of a surprise. It appeared to be something fitting for Edward's habits and personality. What made that simple gesture stand out was the expensive champagne gold pen placed carefully on top of the note, as a statement.

Adrian pushed the pen aside.

"I had a great time last night. Don't forget to call. P.S. I hope this note is cliché enough to earn at least a small snort from you."

Adrian stopped right in time. Yeah, he would have done that. He took the beautiful pen and examined its exquisite craftsmanship. Then, as an idea came to mind, he grabbed his phone.

"Adrian, are you already up? After last night's exertions, I would have expected you to sleep well into the afternoon." Edward answered only after two rings.

"Don't downplay my ability to rest and recover within a short time," Adrian replied. "Hey, listen, I think you forgot a thousand-dollar pen on my nightstand."

"Is that the reason you called?" Edward questioned, his voice smooth and pleasant.

Adrian moved his phone from one ear to the other and plopped down on the bed. This call had the potential to become good. "Well, your note said that I shouldn't forget to call," he pointed out.

The instant reward for his little joke was the sound of laughter on the other end. "I'm glad to see you so eager to do my bidding. It wasn't an order, though, but hope from my part that I would not be part of your usual fuck-and-forget lot of lovers."

"You have too little faith in yourself, Your Majesty. Don't worry; we can work on that. I can be so glued to you that you will have to push me away with a stick so that I leave you alone."

“Oh, so is my ass that amazing?” Edward asked, but Adrian could read the amusement in his voice.

“You’re a rich, handsome man with confidence issues. I tend to think that I just found my kryptonite.”

Edward laughed unrestrained. “Would that make you Superman?”

“Put me to the test. I am willing to prove myself to you.”

Edward sighed. “Too bad my Sunday is filled with obligations.”

“Screw those,” Adrian demanded.

“I wish I could. But a rich, handsome man with confidence issues such as myself has to cultivate good relationships within the family and beyond. That is what Sundays are for.”

“Boring,” Adrian said and yawned. “At least, I know that you will come back for your Mont Blanc.”

“Oh. That is yours,” Edward said matter-of-factly.

“Really? Was I that good?” Adrian joked.

Edward laughed again. “Of course you were. But that’s not the point. When I choose someone as my partner in certain delights, I enjoy being generous.”

Adrian studied the pen in his hand. It was a beautiful piece. “Don’t tell me you received this on your graduation day, and it has some immense sentimental value.”

“Nothing of the kind. I purchased it yesterday to offer it to you.”

“Just like that? You couldn’t know I would be home.”

“You would have come home, eventually. I’m also a patient man, in case you haven’t noticed. And I can be insistent.”

“You don’t have to buy me stuff,” Adrian replied. “That’s not how I work.”

Edward sighed. “I am not one of your other lovers, am I, Adrian? I know for a fact that you don’t do relationships and that someone hurt you in the past.”

Adrian tried to protest.

“Please, allow me to finish. I do not want your heart on a silver platter, or for you to fall madly in love with me. I know that you don’t work that way, and as far as our little games of seduction go, it is my right to play my part, just as well as you play yours.”

“I’m not sure I follow,” Adrian replied.

“Come on, Adrian. I know you’re trying your hand at seducing me. Last night is proof enough, as is my inability to sit comfortably, which may be a challenge, seeing how I am supposed to attend a long lunch and an even longer dinner today.”

Adrian had a mind to contradict Edward. But then, he reconsidered. “So, you intend to shower me in gifts, in response to my trying to seduce you?”

“Yes. I suppose you may think that. But I am usually generous with my partners. That’s how I function.”

“To erase the guilt for being incapable of falling in love?” Adrian aimed low.

A short silence followed. “Where has that come from? I wonder.”

“You’ve never loved someone, right, Edward?” Adrian asked.

“I guess that is correct.”

“It’s all right. Maybe it’s time someone came along and corrected that.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“You’re all cold and pretending not to care, but I think you don’t know yourself that well,” Adrian said. “So, here is my part of the challenge. You said that complications such as my wanting a relationship with you, a real relationship, would bring this arrangement we have to its end. But this is what I say. I will make you fall in love with me. And then, the arrangement will be over. Of course, you will have to be honest with me.”

“Let me understand this,” Edward said, and he appeared puzzled as he spoke, “you want me to fall in love with you so that you can dump me? You know that’s highly improbable --”

“I’m not saying that.” Adrian took great pleasure in drawling the words as he continued. “If you fall in love with me for real, if I manage to do that, then we’ll have a real relationship.”

“You are puzzling, Adrian. Why would you do that?”

“Well, maybe I’m ready to retire if I manage to get someone like you to have real feelings for me.”

“Retire?”

“I will give up on my bachelor status if that happens.” Adrian waited for a few seconds, and then he laughed. “Gotcha! Didn’t I?”

Edward exhaled. "You are mischievous, Adrian. I can't believe that I almost thought you were telling the truth."

"Hey, it's a good dare, don't you think? I'll do my best."

"And I'll do my best to resist you," Edward said in a somewhat perplexed voice.

"Good. Do that. Plus, I thought you said that you were planning to make a total charmer out of me. How about offering yourself as my precious guinea pig?"

"Adrian, tell me you haven't just compared me to a furry creature."

Adrian burst into laughter. "Bad choice, I guess. Seeing how you are perfectly groomed, but you're asking me to let my body hair grow."

"I believe you would look better that way," Edward replied, a bit clipped.

"I will do it for you. Then I will rub my entire furry body against your smooth skin."

"I look forward to it. I have to go now; duty calls. And I hope you will forgive my roundabout manner of offering you a small gift."

Adrian chuckled. "Small? I guess it does fit in one's pocket. Well, at least it's not a collar. You have a thing for those."

"I certainly do. Have a nice Sunday, Adrian. And please, honor our understanding."

"I won't sleep around," Adrian said with a small huff. "I promised."

"I was talking about having medical test results forwarded to one another."

"Ah, that. Sure. I'll take care of that."

"That sounds great."

"Wait, when will I see you again?"

"My workweek tends to be extremely busy. But I hope that you will keep your weekend open for me."

"Of course. And, until then, I won't see you again?"

"I would hate to make a promise I can't keep."

"Call me then?"

"Of course. Enjoy your Sunday, Adrian."

Adrian said his goodbyes and then stared at the pen for a while. He could not wait to tell Jared and Mike about it. They will surely like to see it and play with it for a little. Although they were no longer kids, it was still fun to show their toys to one another.

Jared shifted as he felt strong hands around him and firm lips on his neck. He laughed but refused to open his eyes for a while longer. "Wait," he mumbled, "did I fall asleep before you came back with the rubber last night?"

"Yes," Chris replied promptly. "That means that you will have to make up for that now."

"Morning sex," Jared said and snickered.

"What's so funny?"

"Sunday morning sex," Jared said as an additional explanation. "You know, like married couples."

"Hmm, I'm pretty sure it is Saturday morning sex what you're hinting at, and I have a mind to ask you how you know about such things, being so young and all."

"I'm watching too much television or something," Jared replied.

"As much as I'd love to stay and chat, Jared, I believe you have a small promise to honor from last night."

Jared could feel something poking at his behind. How come he was naked? Ah, last night, at least he had had the energy to undress while waiting for Chris to come back. Funny thing, he had had a feeling that it had been some time he had spent waiting. Maybe that was just his imagination playing tricks on him.

"I think you had been the one to promise something," he said with a small giggle.

Chris nuzzled his neck playfully. "My memories are all hazy. It was just after I got a pretty amazing blowjob, so I can't recall everything to the letter."

"Was an amazing blowjob? I recall how I let you down by not, you know, swallowing," Jared said the last word as a whisper.

"You'll swallow plenty, don't worry," Chris replied, and he began getting busy behind Jared. "Is it good, like this? Sideways?"

Jared snickered. "I think I always wanted to say this. Fuck me sideways!"

“Ah, you’re really in the mood to play this early in the morning,” Chris scolded him, but he laughed, too. “You know, Jared, you have a pretty amazing ass. So, please, forgive me.”

Jared wanted to ask what for, but Chris pushing inside him made him forget about all that. As it happened to any other healthy male in his twenties, his morning wood was out and proud. Chris covered it quickly with one rough hand while he continued to play with his exposed ear and neck.

Chris’s voice was soft and deep as he whispered sweet nothings in Jared’s ear. Jared felt a bit overwhelmed. It was like he had asked for this kind of thing for a long time, and now that he had it, he couldn’t quite believe it was happening.

They didn’t fuck sideways for long, as Chris seemed to have other plans. He moved Jared on all fours, and then he started fucking. Jared could swear his eyes were rolling in his head. That was surely the type of fuck he would come to feel for at least a couple of days, as it looked that Chris didn’t want to spare any effort.

The bed was creaking under them, and, usually, Jared would have found that funny. Fortunately, there was not one neuron left in his brain that could be bothered with such details. Right now, his pleasure was focused on how his ass was pounded. Chris was a big guy in the downstairs department, and he knew how to make great use of that awesome tool, as well.

A hand wrapped around his hair and pulled back hard.

“Fuck,” Jared protested, taken by surprise.

“You’re a young colt that needs a little bit of putting in place, aren’t you?” Chris teased him, but his voice was now a bit harsh.

Jared felt turned on. He wouldn’t have ever imagined himself enjoying a bit of rough sex, but this was okay. Chris was holding his hair in such a way that it didn’t hurt much. It was just enough to make him feel the other’s power, and that was exciting, in a strange way. Jared curved his back inward, letting his head back, to prove his obedience.

“That’s good,” Chris praised him and slapped his ass, one time, hard.

Jared could feel his ass squeezing tightly in response to that. Now that was a bit of a shameful secret. He did like a bit of pain. Chris caressed the abused flesh he had slapped earlier. “Your skin is lovely, boy,” he whispered. “You’re such a beautiful boy. I love to fuck you hard.”

There was no reply he could give to that, Jared thought. Dirty talk in bed was just another turn on which he was discovering now. Chris let go of his hair and wrapped both hands around Jared’s neck, without squeezing. At this point, Jared wasn’t sure if his erection could get harder than it was. His skin was pricking with sensation all over, and his brain was a total mess. The hard cock in his ass was moving faster and faster, hitting his prostate over and over again, without end.

Jared could not recall coming like this ever in his life. His cock was just spurting, releasing itself, and he didn't control it at all. Chris slowed down, allowing him to breathe. "Just a little more, sweetie," he said, and Jared didn't offer a reply, as his coming down had the magnitude of an earthquake.

Chris pushed his head down and held him, as his rhythm increased again. Jared shivered, unable to go beyond that point. His body now perceived the abuse, but it was helpless, and the sensations grew back, almost to the point of becoming unbearable.

"This is it, baby, this is it," Chris said, and then, he moved a few more times, slamming hard into Jared, before he reached the finish line, too.

Chris dropped by his side and pulled him close. Jared was thankful for the hard kiss that followed. Chris was a kisser for sure; his tongue was in Jared's mouth for a few moments, and then he was let go. "You have an awesome body, Jared."

"Thanks." Jared giggled, feeling too spent to say anything else.

"I mean it." The look in Chris's eyes was intense.

Jared resisted the temptation to look away. "I guess I know that. You did a number on my ass." He snickered again.

"I've had my fair share of bed partners. You're amazing, and I mean it."

Jared smiled. "You're in a league of your own, yourself. I've kind of had only so and so... hookups, if you want to know."

Chris was sweaty and tired, but he turned to one side to look at Jared better. "I do want to know."

Jared licked his lips before continuing. "I mean, being young and free is not all that's cracked up to be. Everyone just wants to hook up for several minutes and then move on."

"Several minutes?" Chris's lips curled into a smile.

"I'm exaggerating, maybe. But I want a relationship, not just one night stands," Jared explained. "Ah, damn, I might ask too much of you. I mean --"

"It's all right. I'm glad you feel that way. You're beautiful and sexy. You're just what I want in bed. And you're a lovely companion all around."

"So, will it be okay if I ask you this? Will you be my boyfriend?"

Chris's eyes sparked with amusement. "I feel a bit too old for that term."

Jared rolled his eyes. “You just want to tease me over that comment I made about your age, right?”

“Right,” Chris confirmed. “I want to be more for you.”

Jared’s eyes grew wide. What the hell was more than being boyfriends? If Chris suddenly mentioned marriage, he would need to pinch himself hard. He wanted a relationship, but, at this point, they knew each other for way too little time to consider such a possibility.

“I want to be your protector,” Chris said.

Ah, good, it wasn’t marriage. “Protector? Like how?” Jared asked.

“A young man like you must have plenty of hopes and dreams. You’re a photographer, right?”

“You already know that,” Jared pointed out.

“And? Wouldn’t you like to have an exhibition?”

Jared paused. “Of course. I mean, that’s one goal. Right now, I think I’m searching for the right style that would suit me. I don’t consider myself an artist just yet.”

“Maybe you should,” Chris said promptly. “What do you like to take pictures of?”

“I work as a freelancer. I usually deliver what my clients want.”

“I understand that. But what do you like to do?”

“I guess I like to photograph people. It’s my favorite subject if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Do you have a portfolio?”

“I have some pictures I like very much.”

“Then you should consider organizing an exhibition.”

“That’s not exactly within my budget for now,” Jared explained.

“Money’s not an issue.”

Jared stopped for a second and then decided to take it lightly. “Hey, I know you’re some big shot financial advisor, but I’m not sleeping with you so that I could mooch off of you.”

“Too bad.” Chris smiled and leaned in to kiss Jared again. “I wouldn’t mind pampering you a little.”

“Paying for an exhibition couldn’t be considered pampering. It would be a little too much, especially after only three dates.”

“Ah, I see. How many dates are necessary to convince you to let me do this for you?”

Chris was more persistent than what Jared would have expected. “I don’t know, but it would feel wrong.” Was it because of the differences between them that Chris considered normal to offer his boyfriend – or whatever Jared was for him – such an expensive gift without even blinking? Jared felt like he needed to tread lightly so that he didn’t insult Chris but didn’t give in to such offers, either. “I mean, you could always settle for a watch,” he said in a light tone, to make it clear that he was joking.

“All right. But gifts, expensive as they may be, won’t help you in the future or advance your career,” Chris said, and he appeared serious.

Jared sighed. “I was joking about the watch, too. I don’t need anything. What? Are you afraid a young colt like myself,” he chose to joke again, “wouldn’t like for real a silver fox like you without any gifts and the like?”

Finally, Chris laughed. “Silver fox? Come on, cut me some slack, sweetie. I’m still in my forties. I believe I’m safe for at least another decade from being called that.”

“I’m just teasing you,” Jared said. “I like you very much, Chris.”

Chris’s eyes lit with fondness. “That’s great. I like you very much, too. But you will have to forgive me if I’m starting to buy you gifts. They will be small, I promise.”

Jared laughed. “Don’t you think I didn’t notice you said ‘small’ and not ‘inexpensive’. I believe I know what you’re trying to do here.”

“Oh, really, what?” Chris’s grin wasn’t at all a sign of anything good. “Trying to shower my young lover in gifts?”

“Speaking of showers, I believe I need one, and badly,” Jared said and pushed himself up.

Chris stood up. “Let me join you. I need to make sure you’re in one piece after I fucked you so hard.”

Jared squared his shoulders and threw Chris a challenging look. “I don’t break that easily.”

A small shadow passed over Chris’s eyes. “Be careful, boy. I might have a bit more stamina in this old body than you think. And then you’ll have something to complain about. Consider my buying gifts for you a way of offering proper reparation for what’s going to happen to that perky butt of yours.”

Jared snickered. “You sure talk big.”

“Maybe. Or maybe I’m just telling the truth. Let’s get you under that shower,” Chris said and took Jared by the shoulders. “I promise I won’t do anything. But I will have my hands all over you so that you know it.”

“Guys, does everyone look a bit worse for wear, or is it just my imagination?” Jared asked first, as soon as they were all around the table, at his place.

Adrian grinned broadly. “I’m tired but happy. Guess whose ass I tapped all night long.”

“Weren’t you going to some reverse gangbang orgy or something?” Mike asked while throwing a look filled with envy to the most handsome guy in their little group.

“Well, I was there, I fucked some pretty bottoms, and then I went home, and guess who was waiting?”

Jared huffed. “Adrian, I swear, someday lightning is going to strike you dead in the middle of a sunny afternoon, and I won’t even be surprised. Just tell us already, you lucky ass.”

Adrian sighed theatrically, and then he pulled a golden pen out of his jacket. He played with it, putting on a little show.

“Is that a Mont Blanc?” Jared asked and reached for the pen.

Adrian held it high, making Jared lean over the table and fight him for it.

“Am I missing something here?” Mike complained.

Jared sat back into his chair, holding Adrian’s pen triumphantly. “This thing right here retails for about a thousand or more.”

Mike’s eyes grew wide. “Shit. I knew those pens were expensive, but I never really cared to learn how much they cost.”

Jared studied it carefully. “Adrian, did you get a raise at work or something? I mean, I know you earn the most of us all, but still, you wouldn’t spend so much on a pen.”

Adrian puffed out his chest. “It was a gift.”

Jared stared at Adrian. “A gift?”

“Yeah. From Edward.”

“Did he just give you a one-thousand-dollar pen? Just like that?” Mike asked.

Jared handed Mike the pen so that he could look at it, too. “So, Adrian, you fucked Edward last night.” Adrian nodded as his smile grew brighter. “And he gave you a pen. And earlier last night, you fucked a bunch of bottoms. Forgive me if I’m lost, but how the fuck did that happen? And did you cheat on Edward? You’re not a cheater!”

Adrian picked his pen from Mike’s hands and placed it back carefully into his jacket. “I didn’t! I mean, when I fucked all those guys, I fought so hard not to think of him.”

Mike snickered. “Adrian’s in love, Adrian’s in love,” he began like a child on the playground.

“I’m not in love,” Adrian protested. “It’s just that, right now, I like him better than anyone else.”

Jared patted Adrian’s arm in sympathy. “It’s all right if you’re falling for this guy, Adrian. We’re like a family here, and we won’t tell a soul. Your playboy reputation is not in any danger.”

“Stop joking, fool,” Adrian protested. “I’m not falling for him.”

“But how did you get from an orgy to fucking Edward?” Mike questioned his eyes as big as saucers. “And how doesn’t that count as two-timing?”

“If you midwives stopped pestering me, I would tell you.”

“All right. We’re all eyes and ears,” Jared said, curious to learn about Adrian’s adventures. Mike nodded in acquiescence.

“So I was at this orgy, and all the boys were fine, and I mean, top-notch, you haven’t seen in your life a bunch of frigging sexy bottoms like these guys. And I fuck, and I fuck, and I can’t come, you know?”

Jared just shook his head and exchanged a few meaningful glances with Mike. “We don’t know because we haven’t been invited to such parties so far. Our invitations must have been lost or something. The postal services today are unbelievable.” He snorted to make a point.

“Anyways, I’m like totally priapic if you know what I mean,” Adrian continued.

“Do you know how it’s that?” Jared asked Mike who appeared confused for a moment.

Mike just shook his head. “Priapic is that thing when your dick won’t go down, right?”

Adrian slammed one hand on the table playfully. “Will you two jokers listen already? I have a juicy story, right out of the oven, and you’re busy making fun of me.”

“Go ahead. You better not be a two-timing prick, though,” Jared warned his friend.

Adrian waved. "Once I'm telling you the entire story, you'll understand why I'm not. The thing was I was still pissed at Edward. While at that party, I thought I was completely through with him."

"Although he kept calling you, probably to apologize," Jared offered himself an explanation.

"Stop interrupting," Adrian said. "The problem was that I wasn't really there. I mean, they were fine and sexy, and --"

"Just get over those bottoms, or we'll never hear the end of this story," Jared advised. "If they were so damned special, how come you didn't finish?"

"That's the issue," Adrian said and crossed his fingers. "Under any other circumstances, I would have come like a frigging fountain. But no fucking dice, I'm telling you. None did it for me. None," he emphasized the word.

"Wow," Mike whispered. "Do you have like one of those conditions then? Because you fucked too much?"

"I don't have any conditions," Adrian replied in an irritated but still playful voice. "My mind wasn't there; this is what I'm trying to tell you. My mind was at Edward, and each time he popped into my mind, I felt like my balls were ready to make my dick shoot. But I didn't want that. I didn't want to come while thinking of that guy."

"So, what did you do?" Mike asked, leaning over the table, as he could hear more like that.

"I didn't come," Adrian said promptly. "I left with a pair of fucking blue balls and pissed off at myself for still thinking of Edward."

"Hmm, it must be love. Don't you think so, Mike?" Jared turned towards his other friend.

Mike nodded enthusiastically. "Adrian really is in love."

"I hate you, guys," Adrian said matter-of-factly. "Just because a guy has a thing, a pretty strong thing, for a sweet piece of ass, that doesn't mean he's in love."

"We're in our twenties, and we're horny. If we think a guy is sexy, and if we fuck, and he doesn't leave the next day, barely waiting to hook up with others, we're sold," Jared explained.

"That might be your case. I don't judge," Adrian said with a small shrug. "Well, I got home, and Edward was waiting for me."

"So?" Mike asked impatiently, seeing how Adrian wasn't continuing, busy to drink some fresh juice from his glass.

“We had a little chat. And one thing led to another. And I won’t tell you anything more because it gets too X-rated for your young ears.”

“The story about how you went to an orgy and put your cock in who knows how many sexy asses wasn’t X-rated, but your having fun with Edward is. So puzzling are the ways of the dick,” Jared said in an exaggerated tone he wanted to sound wise.

Mike laughed out loud at his joke. Adrian threw them both murderous looks.

“I see you enjoy making fun of me. So I guess I won’t tell you anything more.”

“No, please,” Jared begged, putting his hands together in a pleading gesture. “Your adventurous life keeps us all alive.”

Adrian sighed like it was too much to bear his friends’ shenanigans. “Fine, then. The thing is Edward solved my blue balls situation and swiftly. And, just like that, I realized. My dick wants this guy. And my dick is my best friend.”

“Did you hear that, Mike? We’re beneath a dick, in Adrian’s book.”

“It must be a pretty big dick,” Mike replied. “I guess we can live with that.”

“You fuckers.” Adrian grinned. “You’re just jealous of my success.”

“Us? Jealous? Why should we?” Jared said and laughed. “I’m glad to see you settling down, Adrian. It’s a start, you know? I’m not saying you’re in love, okay, that’s a joke, but it’s good to try your hand at a relationship. They’re not all bad.”

“Hmm, and how come you’ve become such an expert in relationships?” Adrian asked, watching Jared through his eyelashes as if he was suspecting something.

Jared looked down and smiled. “I might have just made it a bit official with Chris.”

“Official? Are you two getting married?” Mike asked right away.

Okay, so now he would be the butt joke of his friends, Jared thought. It was his turn, though, so he couldn’t be upset. “No, of course not, but we talked about becoming committed to one another, just like in a relationship.”

“That sounds nice,” Mike said. “To have someone who likes you like you back.”

“So, he’s like your boyfriend or something now?” Adrian asked.

For a moment, Jared hesitated. “Yeah,” he replied and searched for his glass. After all, Chris had said something else. Whatever, those were only semantics. They were committed now. “Hey, Adrian, how come you didn’t mind that Edward gave you such an expensive gift?”

Adrian shrugged. “Why should I mind? The guy is loaded, and this gift is just a token of his appreciation.”

“And it doesn’t feel like, I don’t know, some kind of a way for him to buy you?”

Adrian looked at him, pensively. “I don’t see why. I do what I want. He does what I want. So I can let him give me a few gifts if he feels like it.”

“I’m thrilled we had this talk,” Jared said with a small sigh. So it wasn’t so bad to receive gifts, after all. Of course, nothing like an exhibition. That would have been way too much. But maybe he didn’t have to be so hung up about it and stop worrying so much.

“I guess that leaves me as the only loser in this group,” Mike said with a long sigh.

“What did you do yesterday?” Jared asked.

“I went through quite a lot,” Mike replied and looked down.

Jared placed one hand on Mike’s shoulder. “You’re still thinking of Ryan, right? I guess it would take more than a couple of days without seeing him at all to --”

“I saw him last night,” Mike blurted out.

Adrian was the first to express his surprise. “Does this guy have a knack for appearing in the same places as you? You went to the club, as usual, right?”

“Yeah. It’s a complicated story,” Mike said. “I was about to have a threesome --”

“Mike!” Jared was fairly alarmed. “After everything we both told you?”

Adrian just shook his head in mirth. “I guess Mike is hornier than we think. The shyest ones are the kinkiest. It’s just how it is.”

“Oh, really? You just went from being used by a bunch of bottoms to falling in love with the best ass ever or something.” Jared shook his head. “You don’t have a shy bone in your body, Adrian.”

“Just let Mike tell us everything.” Adrian waved as if his shenanigans couldn’t count. “So, was Ryan part of that threesome?”

Mike appeared quite horrified at Adrian’s guess. “No! I just went to the club, I saw Jimmy, and then Gino, you know, his boyfriend, came and it all kind of spiraled from there.”

Jared sighed. “You didn’t do it, right?”

Mike shook his head. “No. But I got drunk and texted my boss. While drunk.”

Jared exchanged a small look with Adrian. Even Adrian, as playful as he was, frowned at that. “Fuck. That’s bad.”

“Yeah, I know.” Mike sighed again. “But the good news is I didn’t get fired.”

“That’s good news indeed,” Jared agreed.

“Then what’s the bad news?” Adrian asked.

“I’m not over Ryan, and I don’t think I’ll be soon,” Mike said in one go. “He,” one moment of hesitation followed, “kissed me.”

Adrian quirked an eyebrow. “Then, he must want you, too.”

“I’m not up to date with such policies at the workplace since I’m a freelancer, but would it be so bad to date your boss?”

“Ryan thinks so. I mean, I think he thinks so. I... don’t know what to think. It’s just like my mind is set on him, and I can’t do anything to change that. And we barely know each other.”

“You had the guy’s cock in your mouth,” Adrian said in a philosophical tone, “so you might know him well enough.”

“Adrian,” Jared said shortly and threw his friend a pointed look.

“What? I’m just trying to make a bit light of the situation,” Adrian explained. “Mike, on a scale of one to ten, how much do you want to suck this guy’s dick again?”

“Really, is that what --” Jared tried to protest.

“Ten,” Mike replied, and this time without one ounce of hesitation.

“Then quit your job,” Adrian said promptly.

“Oh, great,” Jared intervened. “Is that a real solution?”

Mike seemed to listen intently.

Adrian leaned over the table. “Just think about it, J. The only issue that stands between Ryan and Mike is that they share a workplace. And, of course, that Ryan is the boss. Mike could just say he wants to quit, Ryan offers him a glowing recommendation, Mike finds another awesome workplace, and then they can date.”

“I wish I could say something about this plan,” Jared said with a small smile. “Adrian, you’re still too brutal in your approach. And Mike barely knows this guy, and he tends to,” he tried to find his words, “get attached to places. He cannot just quit without knowing that it’s for a good reason.”

“You keep talking for Mike. Just let him speak,” Adrian said.

Mike blushed a little, and Jared placed one protective hand on his arm. “It’s okay, J. Adrian is right. You always take my side, and I like it because I’m, well, Ryan said it well, shy and nervous, but I need to find a way to do things without relying so much on you.”

Jared remained silent and waited for Mike to continue.

Mike took one deep breath and then said, “I can’t quit.”

“Why not?” Adrian fired the question at him right away.

Jared knew, this time, that he needed to keep silent.

“Because it’s like J said. I’m too comfortable where I am. And I can’t quit.”

Adrian groaned in exasperation. “Mike, you might need to choose. If your boss doesn’t want to cross the line and risk some sexual harassment lawsuit --”

“What sexual harassment?” Mike asked, visibly puzzled.

“He’s the boss; you’re the employee,” Adrian explained. “To outsiders, that may look like he’s abusing his position of power to make you, well, suck his cock, or whatever stuff you two might do together.”

“He’s not abusing anything!” Mike was rightfully revolted, Jared noticed. “I mean, we didn’t even know we worked for the same company when we met. And Ryan didn’t force me to do... that thing. It was all on me.”

Adrian grimaced and continued. “I know all that. J knows all that. You and Ryan know it, too. But, as I told you, if someone looked at this from the outside, they might jump to conclusions.”

“Who would do that?”

“Someone who might want to hurt Ryan and his position as the head of your company.”

“Even so, it wouldn’t be true.”

“It wouldn’t. But what if the news that your boss takes advantage of his employees, demanding sexual favors, were to break out, what could you do?”

“Deny it, of course!” Mike said.

“This is also highly hypothetical and improbable,” Jared intervened.

“I work in advertising,” Adrian explained. “I have seen plenty of nasty things. Competition is not only about whose product is better. And, given how much credit people give today to whatever

they read on the Internet, without verifying the facts, it wouldn't be that hard to taint someone's reputation. As for what you say, Mike, you can deny it for all you want, but if your name isn't mentioned, you would just make things worse if you said anything."

"But if what you say is true, then whoever wants to hurt Ryan and his position might just invent something," Jared said.

"Yes, but if those blogs or Twitter accounts, or whatever, were to show some pictures of Ryan holding in his arms a certain someone, whose face would be blurred, of course, with incendiary titles beneath, then they might just get that sheen of credibility that's needed to start a fire."

"Still, such pictures could not prove that the relationship is based on some sort of abuse of power," Jared replied.

"Indeed," Adrian said and accepted the argument. "They could also speak of employees who, interested in getting ahead, have no qualms with throwing themselves at their boss, thus creating a toxic environment at work. In other words, here we have a boss who doesn't mind asking for sexual favors, and, even if he doesn't insist when he's refused, some of his subordinates accept his advances and get raises and promotions because of that. How is that for an argument? The next stop is some class-action lawsuit, provided that whoever would want to do that to Ryan would stoop as low as to bribe some other employees to testify against him."

"Damn, you make one fine devil's advocate, Adrian," Jared said.

Mike appeared to be equally impressed and also a bit panicked. "Then that means that if someone saw us --"

Jared felt compelled to intervene. "Mike, Adrian is exceptionally good at providing worst-case scenarios, but I don't think you need to worry so much. However, as far as his solution goes, I wouldn't completely give up on it. Are there any chances for Ryan to move to another company, though?"

Mike groaned and covered his face. "I don't think so. He just got here, so to speak. And he's related to the former boss."

Jared patted his shoulder. "Let's try not to dramatize things so much. One thing you can do, Mike, for now, is to see about your work, as usual, and just let nature follow its course."

"What do you mean?" Mike asked.

"You might not feel so strongly about Ryan as time passes. Of course, you will need to be proactive. Stop texting him, and do not try to see him more often than is needed. The chances are that your crush will fizzle out. You two have known each other for a week. And you can meet other guys."

“I’m not good at meeting other guys,” Mike said quietly.

“J, our friend here has a big-time crush on his boss. I know you mean well, but let’s think for a moment,” Adrian said. “So, he kissed you? How did that happen after you texted him?”

“He took me home. He told me I could not text him and stuff, and I agreed. But then I tried to delete his number from my phone, and he stopped me. And then he kissed me.”

“With tongue?”

“Adrian, really,” Jared said. “What matters here, and I believe it’s good, in a way, is that Mike is not the only guy still hung up on what happened between them. It looks to me like Ryan likes Mike just as much as Mike likes him.”

“J, I know you want to cheer me up, but please don’t just say that,” Mike pleaded.

“I’m not that saying that.” Jared began to feel a little worked up. Mike had such a bad impression of himself, and it wasn’t warranted at all. As a friend, he felt compelled to make Mike see himself more as he was, and less how his personal issues told him. “Why would he kiss you? Why would he drop everything on a Saturday night and come to see you? Why would he stop you from deleting his number from your phone? The answer is simple. He wants you.”

“And you could quit, get hired somewhere else, and live happily ever after,” Adrian concluded.

“I don’t have the guts to do that,” Mike said. “I’m sorry. You guys are just trying to help me. I’m the missing link.”

“You’re not the missing link,” Jared protested right away. “Give yourself time to see how you really feel. There is no point in complicating things for now. You don’t have to quit. And there are two people in this. If he’s interested in you, Ryan will have to find a solution, too. This is not only something you should struggle with. All right?”

Mike nodded. He leaned his head into Jared’s shoulder. “Thank you, J. You always say the right things to make me feel better.”

“And I don’t?” Adrian made a sour face.

“You’re the action man,” Mike said with a small snicker. “I have the bestest two friends I could have in the entire universe in you. It’s only because of you that I can function pretty much normally in the real world.”

“Nonsense!” Jared protested.

“That’s not true!” Adrian said at the same time. “Mike, you’re a great guy. Of course, if you need J and me to tell you that every day, we have no problem with that.”

“None at all,” Jared added. “Hey, how about we play some D&D? I just got a new game I wanted to show you.”

“Nerd,” Adrian said and snorted.

Mike smiled. J knew what could make Mike feel better, and that was his plan for the day.

Jared was right, Mike pondered to himself, as he held the phone and stared at Ryan’s number. Ryan should think of something, too, if he wanted something to happen between them, after all. What that something could be, Mike had no idea, but Jared’s words had really made him feel a little better.

Having a crush, and on his boss of all people, was the pits. And he didn’t want to go out and meet other people. It was enough to have someone as awesome as Ryan to dream about. With a sigh, Mike placed the phone on the nightstand and covered himself to the chin with the blanket. It was easier to dream, anyway.

His phone began to ring. Mike took it, thinking that maybe Jared wanted to wish him good night, but he almost dropped the phone when he saw who was calling.

For a few moments, he did nothing but stare at the screen, as his hands began to sweat.

“Yes,” he answered in a strangled voice.

“Micah,” Ryan said at the other end.

“No one calls me Micah,” Mike protested, his voice still weak.

“I’d like to call you that, sometimes,” Ryan replied.

His voice was deep and cool, like movie star cool, and Mike could feel himself melting into the bed. “Why did you call?” he whispered as if hidden paparazzi could jump out of the shadows and record his conversation with his boss.

“I wanted to see if you were well.”

“I am,” Mike replied. “As well as I can be.”

“Was it a bad hangover?”

Mike took a second to understand what Ryan was talking about. “Ah, I don’t remember.”

Ryan laughed softly. “It must have been this morning, so a very long time ago.”

Mike snickered. "I got too sobered up last night, and then too depressed this morning to care about feeling it," he said without thinking.

"Depressed? Why were you depressed?" Ryan asked.

"Ah, um, I..." Mike trailed off. His palms were wet now. "It's just how I am, I guess."

"Do you usually have crushes on your bosses?"

"Not really. And come on, the other Mr. Armstrong is like a hundred-year-old or something."

"Okay, he's my great-uncle, and he's old, indeed, but let's not make him older than he is. It might just get to his head that he's immortal."

Mike registered with some latency that Ryan was joking. He laughed, but then he tried to stop. He didn't even manage to laugh at someone's jokes right. "Ryan," he said slowly.

There was a short silence at the other end. "Yes."

"I... can't stop thinking about you."

"That should be my line."

Mike gripped the phone tightly. "What should we do?"

"I wish I knew. I'm stuck. And it doesn't happen to me that often to feel stuck."

"It happens to me all the time."

"Then maybe I should learn from you what to do."

Mike sighed. "Don't get your hopes high. When I'm stuck, I just stay stuck. I'm lucky to have good friends who try to cheer me up and help me all the time."

"There will be a party at the end of next week. Everyone from the company will come."

"Ah, I heard. It's to welcome you as our new boss," Mike said as he remembered.

"Will you keep a dance for me?"

For a few moments, Mike thought he hadn't heard right. "A dance?" he whispered.

"Something just between you and me."

"Like a secret dance?"

"You could call it that, sure."

"But wouldn't people be watching?"

“Let that be my problem. Just say ‘yes’ so that I know I have something to look forward to.”

“Wouldn’t it be dangerous?” Mike remembered Adrian’s ominous scenario. “People might see.”

“We’ll be somewhere alone. I just want a dance with you.”

“Then, I must warn you. I have two left feet.”

“It’s all right. I have two right feet, so together, we will make two pairs.”

Mike laughed. “So, you’re as bad a dancer as I am?”

“I’m actually an amazing dancer, and I’m not bragging. You’ll see.”

“Ryan,” Mike said after another short silence, “why me?”

“Why you?” Ryan sighed. “I don’t really have an answer. Do you believe in attraction?”

“Like love at first sight?”

“Like that, yes.” Ryan’s voice was low and filled with promises. “In my life, I’ve been involved in several relationships. I’ve never felt the pull I feel toward you.”

Mike stopped breathing for a long moment. “You mean it?” His voice was so quiet now, he wasn’t sure Ryan could hear him anymore.

“Yes, I mean it. Mike, you don’t have to feel compelled to say ‘yes’ to my request. It’s not an order. This doesn’t come from your boss so that you know.”

“I do feel compelled, though,” Mike replied. “Because I ... like you, too.”

“Ah, good.” Ryan exhaled. “It’s a bit strange to confess like this over the phone. I’m glad you feel the same about me, Mike.”

“Call me Micah,” Mike said.

“Isn’t it strange for you since all your friends call you Mike?”

“You’re not my friend,” Mike replied.

He didn’t need to say what Ryan was. For once, Jared wasn’t right; his crush had no chances to fizzle. There was someone else kindling the fire, so, at least, he wasn’t the sole person responsible.

And that was making him happier than he could ever dream of being.

Chapter Nine – That Makes Two Of Us

Adrian studied the expensive pen in his hand, seemingly fascinated with its craftsmanship. Edward had nothing to worry about. During the week, Adrian was mostly all work and no play, but, of course, that was not at all why he cared about keeping his promises. Just like the luxury item in his hand, Edward was intriguing him and very much pleased him, which was not something he could say about any partner he had ever shared fleeting moments of pleasure with.

If someone had asked what he liked so much about Edward, he would have been hard-pressed to define it. Maybe Adrian hadn't been challenged in a while, and that was all there was to it. But there was also something else. Despite the stern facade, despite the cool control Edward tried to project, Adrian felt he could read something else beneath the surface. That made him curious and want to learn more about Edward. In a nutshell, the man was a mystery, and Adrian found himself quite taken with that.

It didn't hurt, of course, that Edward had a fantastic body and knew what to do in bed. Adrian had decidedly felt rewarded when Edward had given in each time. The game of push and pull was enough to make him get a boner right that moment, and, seeing how he was at work, that wasn't such a great idea.

Maybe after fucking a different guy weekend after weekend, everyone had started blending into plastic faces that no longer meant anything to him. Things were different with Edward. Adrian could recall, if he only closed his eyes, how Edward's upper lip curved enticingly, how his skin felt smooth under hurried fingers, how his eyes flashed with reined-in emotions, giving away their owner and what he truly felt inside.

Adrian wasn't the betting type, but he was willing to believe that Edward must have had some rigid upbringing. He was operating within the borders of an existence someone else had drawn for him, and trying desperately, even at his age, to go beyond them. That must have been why Edward was part of some selective club of perverts, or it was all just speculation, and Adrian was getting a bit too interested in another man, more than he had been in years.

That didn't mean that his fingers didn't itch to call Edward. It was late, and while Adrian was putting in the hours, maybe Edward had finished his workday and didn't mind a bit of chatting before the usual time they held their conversations. Adrian didn't want to be trained like a puppy, to salivate once the clock struck the hour his owner chose.

He was about to call when his assistant, Rachel, rushed through the door. "Adrian, we are in trouble!"

"The prints look good," Adrian said as he browsed through the folder on his desk. "What's the trouble?"

"Antonio is just scared of dogs! We can't get a shot right! We might have to consider tying him up."

Adrian sighed. "He's scared of dogs? Didn't he know what the shoot was all about?"

"He thought he would deal with pugs or something cutesy like that," Rachel replied promptly.

Adrian began rubbing his forehead. "Someone should have notified him that we were using Rottweilers in the shoot."

Rachel moved nervously from one foot to another. "I'm sorry, chief. I guess it's my bad." Rachel was a great assistant, but she tended to apply her own set of values to the most surprising situations and circumstances. "I think Bane and Blaze are uber cute. But Antonio is afraid they might kill him."

Adrian knew the pair of Rottweilers came highly recommended, and their owner was present, so Antonio should have proven already that he was a pro and could shoot a damned commercial without pissing his pants. However, that was an unexpected drawback. It had been a bit of a hassle to book Antonio, as he was a model in high demand right now, and his brooding dark looks were an excellent match for what they had in mind.

Now, he would just have to postpone the shoot and find someone else, which was unfortunate, seeing how everyone worked so hard to meet deadlines and go beyond the call of duty for their clients. In this case, the company selling premium food for dogs, and an important one at that, couldn't be too happy with the delay.

"Rachel, please, comfort Antonio, while I try to solve this."

"Yes, boss," Rachel said, military style, and then ran out of Adrian's office.

He hesitated for a few moments, but then he grabbed his phone. Edward answered on the second ring. "Could it be that my watch no longer shows the time correctly? I thought you would still be at work."

"What can I say? I'm an unpredictable man," Adrian said. "Actually, I was wondering how good you really are with dogs."

"Are you gagging for your collar that much?" Edward teased.

"Gagging." Adrian chuckled. "Sometimes, Your Majesty, your vocabulary surprises me. No, I'm not gagging for anything. It's only that I'm shooting a commercial right now, and my first choice for a model is terribly afraid of the two Rottweilers that should star in the shoot with him. Or the dogs don't like him. I'm not exactly sure, but this is messing up my schedule big time."

"That's terribly unfortunate. Is there anything you wanted to ask me?"

"Yeah. Do you know someone who's good looking, doesn't mind starring in a commercial that pays pretty well and also has a love for dogs?"

"Is this your trying to avoid to ask me the question directly? I'm not interested in monetary compensation, but otherwise, I believe I fit the description."

"I thought you might be busy," Adrian said and smiled to himself. "Oh, so you consider yourself good looking?"

"I am a bit better than average; I like to think. Of course, if it's an Adonis you want for this commercial of yours, I will politely decline."

"Nah, you're perfect. It would really help me if you came down here right now."

"You're as demanding as ever. How did you know I would say 'yes' to such a thing? After all, it's as remote as possible from my line of work, and I don't think I made myself as available as you believe me to be."

"I think, Your Majesty, that you have a hidden desire to do things that are out of your comfort zone just so that you can prove that you can, and nothing and no one could ever stand in your way."

"You shouldn't have worked in advertising, Adrian. I believe that it would have suited you better if you played the shrink, seeing how you have a knack for psychoanalysis."

"It helps, though, even where I am," Adrian said. "So, you're willing to work for nothing? That's not exactly possible."

"Just write down whatever you want. No, better, write a check for one dollar. I will make sure to collect from you the due payment."

"Hmm. Sounds promising. How long until you get here?"

"Not long. Just wait for me."

"I won't do anything else in the meantime," Adrian promised courteously. He called for his assistant as soon as he put the phone down. "Rachel, you can tell poor Antonio that he's free to go. Also, make sure to be tough about negotiating how much of the fee he's still paid."

"Oh, he said he just wanted out of here. I think I negotiated pretty well," Rachel said with a large smile.

"Ah. I see. Most probably, you played with the dogs and tried to convince him to do so, too."

"That must have had a role in how fast he wanted out of here. He'll be happy when I tell him he can go. So, did you solve the problem, chief?"

Adrian's reply was a knowing smirk. Rachel showed him two thumbs up.

"Who's the model? Don't tell me you managed to get Bruno! OMG, I love Bruno! He's just so my type!"

"And also very much married," Adrian said.

Rachel's face fell comically. "A girl can still fantasize, right?"

"Our model for the shoot will be here soon, so you don't have to worry about a thing."

"Do I have to prepare him for meeting the dogs?"

"Like you did with Antonio?"

"Just take money off my pay," Rachel moaned. "I know I screwed up."

"Nah, torturing you is way more fun. Plus, if I were to punish you by cutting from your paycheck, I would have to complete way too much paperwork."

"So, aren't you going to tell me who this guy is?" Rachel asked again.

"It's a surprise."

"I can barely wait," Rachel said and went out the door, most probably eager to play some more with the dogs.

"Is there a fountain of youth buried in your backyard, or you're secretly out of work and get your beauty sleep in the afternoon?" Adrian asked the moment Edward was in his office, comfortably sitting on one of the chairs across his desk. Edward looked as if he had just walked off a catwalk, minus the scrawny, anorexic figure. The suit was new, Adrian could tell, and the dark green, which Edward appeared to prefer, made his eyes deeper and more magnetic than usual.

"One, a fountain can't be buried. And two, did you just call me a slacker?"

"Actually, it was a compliment I was aiming at." Adrian played with his pen while he looked at Edward.

He got up from his desk, with a sudden eagerness to examine Edward head to toes. Edward just turned imperceptibly in his chair. He had crossed his legs, and he was balancing one foot slowly as he watched Adrian in turn.

Adrian didn't think himself the type to be into kinks. But there was something weirdly attractive in the curve of an ankle covered by a silk sock, the hem of the pant leg stopping just at the right

length, and the expensive shoe moving hypnotically as if the person wearing it was trying to perform magic.

“I do care about these shoes. You’re staring as if you can’t wait to chew on them.”

Adrian cleared his throat, annoyed that he had been caught ogling his guest. “I’m just a fan of the brand,” he said in an irritated voice.

“Hmm,” Edward purred. “You know you can be honest with me, Adrian. Don’t tell me you crafted a lie just so that you could drag me here and stake your claim once more. Are you actually the misbehaved dog I’m supposed to take care of?” As he said those words, Edward leaned forward and examined Adrian with seductive eyes.

“No, and stop trying to give me a boner,” Adrian replied.

“Are you sure you’re not the one more at fault than me here? It’s not practical to stare at me like you would like to strip me naked while I’m here to help you with a work-related task.”

“Right,” Adrian said dryly. He moved his eyes away from Edward. Staring too much was bound to become dangerous. Apparently, he couldn’t be in the same room with the other without instantly thinking about sex. “Let me see where the airhead I have as an assistant is so that we can get this show on the road.”

As if summoned by magic, Rachel burst through the door without knocking. For some reason, she had the dogs with her. “Chief, is the model here already? Mr. Rogers, their owner, got impatient and said he needed to leave.”

Ah, that explained the dogs. “So you kidnapped the dogs?” Adrian asked.

Rachel just nodded. Then she noticed Edward. Adrian observed, not without amusement, how her eyes grew as big as saucers. He had an inkling Bruno, Antonio, and all the other models Rachel had ever worked with had just been demoted one place to make room for the king. Rachel wasn’t Adrian’s assistant for nothing. She had an eye for beauty, but also for something deeper than that. As much as she was an airhead, she could tell things about people, things that weren’t visible to the naked eye, and that was why Adrian wouldn’t have traded her for anyone else. Edward stood up, buttoning his jacket carefully.

“Hello,” he said in a cool, measured voice. “Are these the two miscreants?”

The Rottweilers must have gone through a bit of excitement, as their tongues were lolling out, and they seemed to be interested in Edward, too. They were frolicking around Rachel’s legs that it was a wonder she could still stand on her two feet. That had to be one of those moments when Adrian was glad his assistant didn’t wear high heels and impractical clothes.

“Please, release them...” Edward hesitated for a moment and looked at Adrian.

“This is my assistant, Rachel. Rachel, this is Edward. He will help us with our shoot.”

Rachel smiled broadly. “Are you sure you want me to let them free? They tend to lick everything they see and is attached to a human being.”

“Of course,” Edward replied. “Please, Rachel, now.”

His voice was firm but not unpleasant. With a shrug, Rachel freed the dogs from their leashes, and the Rottweilers hurried to assault Edward, seemingly attracted to him and completely ignoring Adrian.

Edward put one hand in the air, opening the palm. “Sit.”

The two Rottweilers stopped and assumed the standard position immediately.

“Wow,” Adrian said, not afraid to express how impressed he was. He turned toward Rachel only to see her seated on a chair by the door. “Why are you sitting?” Rachel made just a vague gesture with one hand. Adrian shook his head in mirth. “Well, we don’t have all day. Rachel, control the dogs. Edward, please follow me.”

“I will take care of them,” Edward replied. “How are they called?” he asked Rachel.

“Bane and Blaze.”

“Which one is which?”

Rachel dutifully pointed out.

“Do you have a dog at home?” Edward asked Rachel.

Rachel shook her head.

“Good. You don’t lack the passion, but you lack discipline. A dog would walk all over you. If you ever think of getting one, make sure you go through basic training first.”

“With the dog?” Rachel asked, listening fascinated to every word Edward said.

“With yourself,” Edward replied. “Shall we?”

Adrian shrugged. “Sure thing.” He wasn’t entirely sure what he had just witnessed and how come Rachel hadn’t felt insulted by Edward’s words. Apparently, within a couple of minutes, Edward had managed to have both the Rottweilers and Adrian’s assistant trained to dance to his tune.

“He’s gorgeous,” Rachel whispered. “Who is he?”

“An acquaintance,” Adrian replied, in a whisper, too.

“Ah, you’re sleeping with him,” Rachel said matter-of-factly.

“Aren’t you jumping to conclusions?” Adrian asked.

“Adrian, you don’t have acquaintances. You have your best friends whom I know, and guys you’re sleeping with.”

“That’s scandalous, to say the least. A lot of people in this industry are my acquaintances. Am I sleeping with them all?”

“Just with the hot ones,” Rachel replied promptly. “And, on any hot-o-meter in this world, this guy is smoking!”

Adrian just shook his head. For a few moments, he ignored Rachel so that he could observe what was happening with the shoot. Edward was now sitting in a lavish armchair, with a glass filled with supposedly expensive alcohol in one hand. The message was something along the lines of life’s finest pleasures for both pet owners and their pets, so in the other hand, Edward held a dog treat.

Too bad it was only an ad for dog food. Edward could obviously sell much more expensive items, but Adrian had a feeling his lover had replied positively to his request solely because it involved dogs.

One thing was true. Anyone seeing that commercial would fall in love with the distinguished model featured in it. Adrian pursed his lips; he needed to get a hold of himself. Even if Edward was sexy as hell, Adrian didn’t plan on losing the game.

As soon as the shoot was over, the dogs were all over Edward, which irritated Adrian, despite his better judgment. It appeared that Edward had decided to reward the two mutts for being still and well behaved during the shoot.

While everyone began fawning over Edward, Adrian started concocting a plan. Whether Edward would agree to it or not wasn’t in the cards. And it wasn’t exactly a plan, but his own blood boiling with desire for a man who could kindle his fire with just one look.

Rachel was right about one thing. Edward was smoking hot, without being as handsome as others, and what he had was more than skin deep. What was just as much more than skin deep was the depth of Adrian’s attraction.

And why on earth did he feel so hot under the collar while Edward ordered those stupid mongrels around? He was no dog!

“How can you be so insufferable sometimes, and yet so charming when surrounded by people?” Adrian questioned as he grabbed Edward by one arm and began walking with him out of the building. After the shoot, it appeared that everyone and their mother wanted a piece of Edward. And, much to Adrian’s surprise, Edward had been nothing but accommodating and beyond polite with each of his newly found fans. That, of course, had gotten on Adrian’s nerves much more than he wanted to admit, which was unimportant seeing how he was supposed to have Edward all to himself.

“Oh, but it’s all a façade. Couldn’t you tell? It takes a lot of effort on my part to be charming.”

“Ah, so you’re trying to say that, when you’re with me, you’re actually yourself?”

“Adrian, I’m not made of glass, but I have to warn you that dragging me around like this is a bit unpleasant. Are you mad that I helped you?”

“Of course not. I’m mad that you treat everyone else but me so well.”

“Ah, the green-eyed monster,” Edward said with a chuckle. “It’s evening already, and the only place we should both be is in bed.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” Adrian said airily.

“What I meant, each of us in his bed,” Edward hurried to add.

“Too late. Now we’ll go where I want.”

“Why are you a brat?”

“Why do you like dogs more than people?”

Edward scoffed in disbelief. “Where do you get such ideas? Oh, you want me to train you. Pup, this is not the time, nor the place --”

“I have just the perfect spot in mind. And the time couldn’t be better,” Adrian said promptly. He hailed a cab without letting go of Edward.

“Where are we going?” Edward expressed his stupefaction.

“I’m not saying anything. But you don’t get to walk into my workplace, charm everyone out of their undies, and then walk out on me.”

Edward leaned into him as soon as they were on the backseat, and Adrian had said the address to the driver in an abrupt voice. “I could leave my shoes at your place, you know?”

Adrian grimaced a bit exaggeratedly. “Do you think I have a foot fetish or something?”

“Who knows? I am barely scratching the surface with you. You do intrigue me, Adrian, and I don’t hide it.”

“Then let me intrigue you some more.”

Adrian pulled Edward close and said not another word. He cared only about one thing now, and he couldn’t focus on anything else.

Edward frowned a bit as he stared at the frontispiece of the building in front of them. “Did you take me to the old baths?”

Adrian’s only reply was a non-committal grunt. He pulled Edward after him.

“It is only a certain amount of weirdness I can accommodate, as open as I may be to various experiences,” Edward said. “And don’t you find it a bit unpleasant that there’s no one around? The building hasn’t been in use for a few years now. There may be squatters.”

“It’s locked. There’s a restoration project on someone’s table. Someone important, I heard.”

“And? Should I admire its architecture? Ah, could it be that you’ve been here when it was still in use? That might explain your behavior. But, still, Adrian, you’re too young to be nostalgic. You must have been... seventeen, eighteen? While it was open, I mean.”

“I know a way inside,” Adrian said instead of replying.

“You and at least a few homeless people. I’d say that it would be a good idea not to disturb them. You wouldn’t like anyone getting inside your house when you least expect it, would you?”

“Let me just show you something.”

Edward sighed but didn’t protest anymore. “After you, then.”

Adrian took Edward around the building until they reached the back. He searched an old pot for a rusty key, and then he opened the back door. Edward shrugged and followed him as they went inside. Using his phone, Adrian made a bit of light. The place did bring memories. It was dusty, and everything seemed frozen in time, but he could still recall everything as if it had happened the day before.

He stopped abruptly when he reached the main room. If he closed his eyes, he would hear the languid laughter and the water splashing. And if he focused enough, he could still feel warm lips on his neck and arms holding him tightly.

“All right, Adrian. I have entertained you more than enough. I’m not exactly fond of having my clothes sent to dry cleaning tomorrow, and I like this suit.” Edward’s voice interrupted his reverie.

“This is where I had sex the first time,” Adrian said abruptly.

Edward remained silent for a moment. “I see,” he said slowly. “How old were you?”

Adrian turned and waved the phone turned flashlight around, casting long shadows everywhere. “Eighteen, you were right.”

“Someone as sensual as you, I would have expected an earlier start.”

“I was a good kid.” Adrian snorted. “I haven’t always been this open and accepting of my sexuality.”

Edward appeared to look around with different eyes. “Who was he?”

“His name wouldn’t say anything important about him. It was him I was thinking of that night when you got pissed at me.”

“I wasn’t pissed. Just a little disappointed,” Edward explained. “Don’t tell me his name if that’s what you want. But tell me what matters.”

Adrian pointed his phone at Edward and looked at his face for a few seconds. Edward blinked and moved his eyes away, but his lips were curled in a fond smile. That was all Adrian wanted to know.

“Alexander. That was his name. He took me here on our first so-called date. I met him through a dating app.”

“And a good kid like you... how did you react?” Edward asked.

“I got a huge boner,” Adrian said and chuckled. “From there, it was easy for him to get me where he wanted.”

“Was it during that first date that he had sex with you?”

Adrian just nodded briefly, although aware that Edward was most likely to guess subtle cues from him than actually see them. “And I thought I was in love.”

“It’s natural to feel strongly about the person you were first intimate with.”

“That wasn’t it. I might have been a fool, but I wasn’t stupid. We were in a relationship for a while. I didn’t just fall in love with him like an idiot because he took me to see naked men.”

Edward moved around as if he was examining the place. “You said it was right here that he had sex with you. Were others watching?”

“I think so. At the time, I thought it was kinky, although a bit too kinky for me. What am I saying? I was shocked.”

“Rightfully,” Edward commented.

“I was horny, and I was barely discovering sex. What I didn’t know was that falling in love with a guy I met on a dating app and had no qualms about having sex in public wasn’t a good idea. Don’t think that I judge him for that. I had fun.”

“When did it stop being fun?”

Adrian looked around again, making the light dance over the walls. “When I told him what I felt. I’ve never seen anyone turning from hot to cold in an instant like that.”

“So that made you behave the same with your lovers?”

“They were never my lovers,” Adrian explained. “They were sex partners. And I never promised anyone anything. Actually, I was always careful to tell them I wasn’t relationship material. But that wasn’t all.”

“What happened?”

“He started behaving like an asshole, avoiding me, telling me stupid lies. And then, one day, when I came here, I found him with another boy, pretty much like me, and he was pulling all the same stops on him. Then I realized that I believed him to be a different person, someone better.”

“So this is a temple of lust and betrayal,” Edward said, his steps muffled by the dust. “Maybe it’s not too bad that it’s closed.”

“Maybe,” Adrian said and smiled. “I tolerated him being a cheater. For a while,” he added abruptly.

Edward stopped.

“Aren’t you going to ask me why?” Adrian broke the silence after a while.

“You’re showing me something real,” Edward said matter-of-factly. “You run the show.”

Adrian nodded pensively. “I thought I would never be able to be with someone else. I felt desperate. I guess you can’t easily imagine me being so pathetic.”

“Pathetic? No. Just young,” Edward replied. “So, how did you escape his clutches?”

“He began being a total asshole to me. He went as far as to humiliate me in front of his friends, describing in detail how he fucked me.”

Edward sighed, and it sounded heartfelt.

“So, as you can see, I’m not keen on letting anyone fuck me again. Or screw me over.”

“Point taken. Did you want me to understand this about you? It’s understood. How did you get rid of the asshole?”

“Maybe it was the straw that broke the camel’s back, but it was when one of his friends hit on me. And let’s just say that he didn’t do it kindly, but by calling me names and trying to put me down. I punched that man in the face. I could have beat him bloody, that upset I was. Luckily for me, he was a total coward and ran away after I landed the first punch.”

“That also happened here?”

“Yeah.”

“So, it is also a temple of blood and revenge,” Edward said.

“If you want to think about it in such grand words. But it wasn’t revenge because it wasn’t exacted against the one who deserved it.”

“Did you just leave then?”

“I did.”

“It was the smart thing to do. The wise one, too.”

For a few more moments, they remained silent. Edward was the first to walk toward Adrian. He placed one hand on Adrian’s shoulder and squeezed it in sympathy. “I appreciate your telling me this.”

“I didn’t bring you here just so that you could pity me,” Adrian said in a slightly amused voice.

He could tell Edward was smiling. Just to make sure, he directed the flashlight toward the other’s face.

“Do I get it that you want to write another chapter?” Edward asked flirtatiously. “After lust, love, betrayal, and revenge, what’s next?”

“Control,” Adrian said directly.

Edward chuckled. “Is it what you want?”

“Yeah,” Adrian said directly.

“That makes two of us, then,” Edward replied and pressed his lips against Adrian’s mouth.

Desire was a notion which Adrian had explored thoroughly throughout the years. After Alexander, he had vouched that he would take what he needed and give back only how much he deemed appropriate. The result had been a superficial desire, the type to leave behind more hunger, and a need to chase down the next thrill.

Now it wasn’t fleeting. Edward’s lips on him tasted of wanting similar to his own, and delving into it appeared the only reasonable thing to do. It was in the fragrance he could smell on Edward’s skin, in the air around them, the shift happening inside them both.

Adrian pulled Edward close and searched frantically for a way inside his clothes. “Feel free to send me the bill for the dry cleaning,” he whispered as he struggled with Edward’s belt.

“I will,” Edward said in a teasing voice. “I won’t ever cut you any slack, Adrian.”

“Face to the wall,” Adrian ordered curtly.

They were in total darkness now, save for what the small windows, nooks in the walls up above them, allowed them to see.

There was no need. Adrian liked to feel, and his hands moved to cup Edward’s buttocks, enjoy their firmness, and then snuck one finger between them.

“I know we exchanged that medical information you were talking about, but I still need to ask. Raw?”

Edward chuckled softly. “I hope you didn’t just get my hopes up for nothing. I would love to feel the real you, Adrian. No rubber.”

Adrian murmured something under his breath. That was one thing; the other proved his complete lack of preparation. He should have thought about details, such as lube, before dragging Edward to the old bathhouse to fuck him.

Therefore, he needed to get by with what he had at hand. He crouched and gave Edward’s crack a long lick with his tongue. The instant reaction was a hitched breath and a small laugh.

“You do not have to spend too much time there,” Edward suggested.

“No way. It’s going to be a wild ride.” Adrian pushed his tongue out as far as he could. Pulling Edward’s butt cheeks apart, he began to give his lover the attention he deserved.

It was all right to admit to himself that Edward was his lover. After all, seeing how his longest relationships after Alexander had been one-night-stands at best, this was a relationship, even if an unconventional one.

He adored Edward's tight hole. As a top, he had met all types, and he wasn't the kind to discriminate. But this, this was great all around, promising the squeeze and the pleasure. Adrian also knew he would be welcomed into Edward's body and that he would be able to take from it as much as could and wanted.

Edward's breathing became a bit heavier. "You know your way around nerve endings; I get it."

The scolding didn't put Adrian off. "You're extremely sensitive, Your Majesty. It's a pleasure to test and see how high you would go."

"I'd say that you should stick your fingers inside if you want to prepare it as you should."

Adrian laughed and began alternating between kissing and licking Edward's hole and pushing two fingers in, helping the tight ring give in slowly. As unprepared as he had come here, he had no intention to enter like that.

He coated his cock with plenty of spit and then steadied Edward with one hand. "One day," he thought out loud, "I'll ask you to wait for me lubed and opened up. I'd like to enter you the moment I see you."

"Your desire for me truly flatters me. But I must ask for you to get to work already."

"So impatient." Adrian laughed but obeyed.

His cock was welcomed by pleasant body heat, and his desire surged even higher. "For control," he whispered in Edward's ear as he pushed inside.

"For control," Edward whispered back and turned slightly so that he could reach for Adrian with one hand.

Who needed romance and fairytales? Here he was, balls deep inside the man he wanted like crazy, and they were both on the same page. Nothing they didn't want could come from that.

Adrian moved, but this time chose to feel Edward's desire completely, not wanting to miss a single moment. With one hand wrapped around Edward's hard cock, he began moving amply. It was amazing without a rubber. Maybe it was mostly in the mind, but that was what he felt; skin on skin, no barriers between them.

This had the potential to become something extremely good. Adrian used his other hand to reach Edward's mouth and offer a thumb. Greedily, his partner sucked on it, and Adrian cursed softly as his hips moved.

The sounds they made bounced off the walls, and Adrian felt a sense of freedom like he hadn't experienced in years. The shadows of the past could stay there, as unmoved as the walls, and broken like the things around them. They meant nothing anymore.

“Inside? Please, tell me it’s okay to --”

“Inside,” Edward whispered. “Fill me up, Adrian.”

Adrian grunted, and his hand on Edward’s cock moved frantically. Yes, maybe they were both making a little more out of it, but it was all worth it. The orgasm that hit them both had the magnitude of an aftershock.

“Oh, damn, oh, damn,” Adrian chanted, his entire body loose, released.

Dazed and out of bounds, that was what he felt as he finally moved away, his cock coming out spent and still leaking. But it was all right. Edward used something to clean his cock, and most probably did the same for his ass, and Adrian just registered everything like it was happening to someone else.

“Well, history is rewritten, I believe,” Edward said in his usual cool and confident voice. “Or is it just complete, now?”

“You can tell me anything you want right now, Eddy,” Adrian said and laughed. “This was frigging amazing.”

“Eddy? That’s highly inappropriate.”

Adrian snorted. “I know. And I don’t think it fits you. I just wanted to annoy you a little. Don’t tell me now it wasn’t pleasant for you, as well.”

There was a short silence, and Adrian sobered up a little. Could it be that he was wrong, after all?

“It was delightful, Adrian,” Edward confirmed. “Really good.”

“How good, exactly? Like your top ten? Top twenty? Worthy of the greatest hits of all time?”

“Stop begging for compliments. This isn’t like you. But I appreciate your eagerness. And now, that we’re free to fuck bareback, I’m expecting more of you once we reach a bed.”

“Hmm. Then I’ll have to energize myself all week so that I can show you a marathon at the end of it.”

“This weekend, we’ll go where I promised I would take you. I want you to make a great impression on everyone, Adrian, and I should suggest that you do more than just energize yourself.”

“Like getting a haircut?”

Edward laughed and ran his fingers through Adrian’s hair. Then he pulled at it. “Maybe we should leave the hair alone. This Latino lover look truly suits you.”

“That must be the blood from my father’s side. I’m lucky to have his genes.”

“And am I glad,” Edward said with a chuckle. “I will send you a suit and a pair of shoes.”

“I can dress up nicely on my own.”

“I know. But I want you to be perfect. I want everyone to either desire you, envy me for having you by my side or both.”

“Is this secretly some weird debutante ball? And I don’t really care about other people wanting me. I want you to want me.”

“I do want you. I’m not making a secret out of it. Is my coming all over these old walls with your cock deep in my ass, not enough proof? But I told you, Adrian. You are, for the time we spend together, my project. I want you to be a true Adonis, Casanova; you name it. I want you to be able to seduce anyone.”

“Hmm, still not very interested in that. Did I manage to seduce you already?”

Edward laughed. “We’re honest with each other, right? And we both agreed we want control. So I guess you already know the answer to your question.”

Adrian tsked, but decided to let it slide. It could be whatever Edward wanted to call it. He had a different plan, and, as long as he was the one not to lose his self-control, he would be just fine.

“It was quite an interesting night, I believe.” A low chuckle followed Edward’s words.

The evening was calm and beautiful. Adrian inhaled, tasting the air. Everything seemed fresh and new like a beginning one had dreamed of for so long. He watched amused as Edward struggled with some invisible wrinkle on his suit. Given what they had been engaged in until a bit earlier, it was a wonder their clothes didn’t look much worse.

“Feel free to send me the bill,” Adrian said, as they waited on the sidewalk for their rides to arrive.

Edward threw him a quizzical look. In the streetlight, his face was a game of shadows, but Adrian knew how Edward looked at him. He had come to know his unconventional lover, over the course of their few encounters. The sense of familiarity wasn’t bothering him as he had feared before. Instead, it made him feel like he had the upper hand.

“For the dry cleaning,” he explained, without hiding his amusement.

“It was a joke.”

“I know. Is your chauffeur coming to get you?”

Edward confirmed and stepped down on the street, hands in his pockets. He looked into the distance, and Adrian admired his profile. “What does he think of you and your habits of meeting men late at night?”

“He’s a professional. He knows better than to think of anything.”

“That’s what you believe,” Adrian pointed out. “He must think of something.”

“And dutifully keeps it to himself. I do not explain myself to the help,” Edward said in a miffed voice.

The help. So, Edward was a bit of an aristocrat to use such expressions deliberately.

“Eddy doesn’t suit you at all. Your Majesty, on the other hand --”

“Yes. That’s suitable,” Edward replied. Then he burst into healthy laughter. “I am not as pretentious as you think.”

“Yes, you are. Just that you must have some pretty high standards when it comes to snobbery.”

Edward mimicked being in a state of rightful indignation. “Did you just call me a snob?”

“You just called your chauffeur the help. I mean, who does that? The queen of England?”

“All right. Point taken. I can barely wait for you to meet other people from my world on Saturday. I expect a full characterization for at least a few of the most prominent figures.”

“Is this like a secret society? Hey, can I get rich by snapping pictures and then selling them to tabloids? That sounds like a great plan for retiring early.”

“Don’t even think about it. Their lawyers would love to pick you apart.”

“All right. Understood. But it already sounds like a boring party.”

“I think you’ll be plenty entertained,” Edward said.

A black limousine pulled close to them.

“Can I get a goodnight kiss?” Adrian said. “Since you don’t care what your chauffeur thinks.”

“I’m not that coarse, Adrian. But if you can’t live without it --”

Adrian didn’t need another invitation. He pulled Edward close and pressed their lips together. He didn’t hesitate and pushed his tongue inside Edward’s mouth, teasingly, only to pull back and enjoy the slightly dazed expression on his lover’s face as he did that.

He squeezed Edward's hand. "If you can't wait until Saturday --"

"I will," Edward said brusquely and climbed inside the vehicle. He kept the door open for a second. "Good night, Adrian."

Adrian replied by bringing two straight fingers to his forehead into a lazy salute. The genuine smile on Edward's lips he caught before the car door closed was enough for him to know that, so far, he had played his cards right.

"What am I going to do until the weekend?" Mike moaned, knowing that Jared was the only one in the whole world capable of not judging him right now. He wasn't sure about Adrian, who could at any moment conjure scenarios involving scandals, paparazzi, lawsuits, and who knew what else.

"There, there," Jared said soothingly and patting his head.

Mike leaned into his best friend's shoulder and closed his eyes. It wasn't that he didn't usually like to mop around at home, but Jared's apartment was much comfier, and Mike loved it. Jared had a way of making any place he lived in a small paradise. His cushions were the softest, and the cocoa he made was the sweetest, and not in a diabetic way or anything.

"As long as you feel so strongly, and your feelings are answered the same --" Jared started.

"I'm confused, J. If he doesn't want us to be together, what does he want?"

"I think," Jared said patiently, "that Ryan feels the same pull toward you as you feel toward him. In any romance novel, it should be enough. The rest are just obstacles. You two will surely find a way to one another."

"When you say it like this, I believe it, too. But he's still my boss, and this feels wrong," Mike complained.

"Hey, so far, if we don't count that first, um, thing you two did together, you haven't done anything wrong. Yes, you drunk-texted, and he took you home, but --"

"He kissed me," Mike said quickly.

Jared exhaled. "Are you trying to make my comforting you a difficult job, aren't you?"

"Sorry, sorry," Mike hurried to say.

"Look, Mike. He's not pressuring you into anything. He's conflicted over this, but he wants you, too. So he asked you for a dance."

“I’ll die,” Mike said dramatically. “The moment he touches me, I will combust. I will turn into ashes right there on the floor. You will have to use a broom to pick me up.”

“Ah, and have you already thought about where you want me to spread your ashes?” Jared asked, obviously amused. “Please don’t say the Himalaya. Go for something exotic and warm, like a tropical island.”

Mike snickered. “I’m a worrier, right?”

Jared shrugged. “It’s okay. That’s who you are. And Ryan must be falling in love with you --”

Mike straightened up. “Do you think that?”

Jared smiled and patted his head. “It’s not so unusual to believe, regardless of what might go right now through your head. Ryan sees you, really sees you. That must be why he can’t let go of you. I know, for a fact, that you’re charming and smart --”

Mike groaned. “You’re such a mom, J. Only you could see me like this.”

“Mike, you’re not the ugly duckling you think you see when you look in the mirror. Yes, you’re not some skin magazine fantasy, but you’re interesting. And looks aren’t everything. You’re the smartest guy in our group. And you’re caring and just awesome. Are you going to stop me yet? I can go on like this through the night if need be.”

With another snicker, Mike shook his head. “How am I going to look in a suit? Will I even be able to pick one that doesn’t look like it’s hanging from a tree or something?”

“I’ll come shopping with you,” Jared promised. “You will make a good impression on Ryan, don’t worry. Although I have a feeling that he won’t be too busy staring at your clothes. Most probably, he will imagine you without them.”

“Like there’s a whole lot to imagine,” Mike said.

“Ryan likes your type, so there’s nothing to worry about. And be a little more confident about yourself. You have a lot to offer.”

Mike sighed and cuddled next to Jared. “Hey, J, how are things with Chris?”

“Good, I guess.”

“Are you two talking over the phone all the time like Adrian does with his boyfriend?”

Jared laughed. “I’m sure Adrian would have something to say about the word ‘boyfriend’. But it’s not like that with Chris. I mean, I wouldn’t mind long conversations over the phone, but he’s busy all the time. I guess I have to live with that.”

“You like him a lot, don’t you?”

Jared sighed. “I’ve never met anyone like him. You know, mature, sophisticated. I feel a little like I’m getting into something that’s going to go way over my head. I don’t have Adrian’s confidence. Our mutual and dear friend wouldn’t have qualms about seducing a prince in a ballroom during an live broadcast event, but I’m nothing like that. I feel like Chris is out of my league.”

“Seriously, J? Is he like your boss or something?” Mike joked.

Jared pulled at his hair until he made him protest. “You and Ryan must feel the same, from what you’re telling me. Chris is a bit... slippery, I guess? I say something, he says something, and it’s like, even if we don’t have an argument, he’s the one who decides who’s right.”

“Is he manipulative, then?” Mike asked.

He sensed the moment of hesitation in Jared. “Maybe I’m just trying to see the negative too much. Any relationship needs work. So I’ll have to work on mine, too. It’s not like I’m a child who allows being guided. Chris may be older than me, but he’s not my dad or anything. I’ll find a way to get on the same level as him. If he weren’t so sexy,” Jared added with a sigh.

“It does make everything more complicated, right?” Mike said. “I forget if I had breakfast if I see Ryan once. And then I find myself eating again. Yesterday, I must have eaten three lunches.”

“You mean three sandwiches,” Jared said, a bit reproachfully.

“Something like that. Do you think being in love with someone could make you fat?”

“Only if you overeat,” Jared replied matter-of-factly.

They both burst into laughter. “I’m glad I’m sharing all this with you. Adrian means well, but he would put me to work out, get muscles, and get confident starting right now.”

“He’s a man of action. Let’s not hold it against him. I’m just wondering why he is working so late tonight.”

Jared’s phone pinged. Mike grabbed it from the table and handed it to its owner. Jared chuckled. “Go figure. Here is what kept him.”

“Sorry, boys. Got laid tonight. Edward is amazing. Kiss you both.” Mike read the message out loud.

“Will Adrian marry into some royal family if he gets hitched with this guy?” Mike wondered out loud.

“Hmm, then we will really have a problem with dressing up. You know, for the wedding.”

Mike and Jared shared a look, and then they both burst into laughter.

“Let’s not tease Adrian too much,” Jared suggested, as soon as they both regained their breath.

“He might get pissed and forget to send us the invitations.”

“We can’t have that,” Mike said, just as determined. “My lips are sealed until that fateful day. Then I’ll laugh at him hard.”

“That’s my plan exactly,” Jared confirmed.

“Is it okay if I sleep here tonight?” Mike asked.

“Of course it’s okay. At least I’ll know you don’t lose half a night playing video games.”

Mike smiled contently. Sleeping early for a change, and in Jared’s super comfy bed, sounded like a great idea.

Chapter Ten – No Walking In The Rain

Mike felt good, almost like laughing for no reason. One night sleeping next to Jared, and he was as good as new. His friend was good enough to be rented by the hour or sold in a bottle, and just as he thought that, Mike realized how weird that must have sounded. It was all for the better that no one could hear his thoughts, or they would have believed him to be an absolute basket case. Jared would have gotten the joke, but Mike still chided himself internally just for thinking something that could be misunderstood.

“Mike, aren’t you in a good mood today?” One of the janitors asked him and offered him a broad smile.

“Yeah, I slept so well.”

“That’s good, that’s good. Young people today, always glued to their phones, they never sleep.”

“I know,” Mike said with a long sigh. “I often do that. Don’t sleep, I mean.”

“So, how did you manage to sleep so well?” The man asked him as he saw about his business. “Just so that you remember and repeat it.”

“I slept with my friend,” Mike said without overthinking.

The janitor straightened up, and Mike bit his lips. Of course, that sounded wrong. But it appeared his verbal blunder wasn’t the reason why the janitor was so serious all of a sudden.

“Good morning, Mr. Armstrong,” the janitor said quickly.

“Good morning, Danners. Do you have everything you need?”

“All here. I’m almost finished on this floor.”

Mike turned in slow motion. He had said the wrong thing, and Ryan had been there to overhear it. Was the universe having an elaborate plot against him?

“Mike,” Ryan said and nodded as he brushed past him without even looking down.

“Ry – Mr. Armstrong,” Mike said automatically.

He needed to bite his tongue. He should get one of those medieval torture devices that sent a rusty nail through the victim’s tongue so that they never spoke again against the regime, the church, planets turning, or who knew what else. This morning, he had a knack not only to think the wrong thing but also to say it out loud.

Guided by nothing but instinct, he took off after Ryan, his sneakers making squeaky sounds on the polished floor. “Mr. Armstrong,” he said in a heartbeat, “I was wondering if you could spare a moment.”

“I’m already late,” Ryan said in a terse voice. “Can it wait?”

Mike could continue to be his usual self. He would say ‘yes’, and then he would spend the entire day, if not the whole week, torturing himself over the misinterpretation of his words. “It would only take a minute,” he insisted.

Ryan stopped and eyed him carefully. “All right. Should I step into your office, then?”

“It’s way down.”

“Exactly.”

“We’ll take the elevator!” Mike said brightly.

Ryan appeared a bit surprised but followed him. Mike could feel sweat coming off all his pores. What was he doing? Was he really stopping his boss from attending some important meeting only because his big mouth had run like a broken mill? Apparently, he was.

Fortunately, the elevator was empty when it stopped. Mike hurried to keep the door and invited Ryan inside. No, he wouldn’t inhale Ryan’s sexy cologne. Holding his breath was impossible, though. Cursing at himself, he followed Ryan inside and closed the door, probably using way too many moves to appear that he was still acting like a normal person.

“Well?” Ryan asked.

Mike was standing with his back at his boss, registering his presence as the elevator began moving smoothly. Everything at their company was top notch. Soft music ran in the background, and the place smelled great. Well, not as great as Ryan, that was sure.

“I didn’t sleep with Jared!” Mike blurted out.

“What?” Ryan asked, visibly irritated.

“What I said earlier, it’s not true! I mean, I slept at Jared’s house, in his bed, with him, but we only slept.”

The way he said it, it sounded like he was digging his own grave.

Ryan sighed. “Why would I care, Mike? Do you have any idea what this looks like?”

Mike froze. “I’m sorry,” he mumbled.

The elevator stopped, and he got out. He almost slammed the door in Ryan's face. "Sorry!" He exclaimed. "I had no idea you would get down --"

Ryan's eyes were menacing as they bore into him. Mike took a few steps back and considered, for a moment, to make a run for the server room and hide there. There was no need to do that because Ryan grabbed his arm and pushed him in that direction.

He could protest. He could ask Ryan what he thought about how that looked like now. But Mike remained silent. His curiosity involved other things. Ryan pushed him through the door to the server room and then closed it behind him.

"Mike," he said in a tone that brooked no contradiction.

"Yes," Mike replied in a meek voice.

"Do you want to drive me nuts?"

"Um, no?"

"No? Then why do you get me in close quarters with you? Do you think I'm some sort of robot once I put a suit on?"

"Um, no?"

"Is this your usual way of carrying a conversation?"

"Um, yes?"

Ryan let go of his arm and pushed both hands through his hair. "All right." He appeared to struggle with himself not to burst into... something that Mike had no idea what could be. He didn't know the guy that well. "About Jared."

Mike stiffened. "He's just a friend, I swear."

"Do you usually sleep with your friends?" Ryan crossed his arms over his chest and looked at him with a quirked eyebrow.

Somehow, that looked a bit strange. Despite himself, Mike snickered, then he pursed his lips, hoping Ryan hadn't noticed.

No chance for that. "Something funny?"

"No, just... your eyes... are funny," Mike managed to say with some difficulty. His tongue was like lead in his mouth. Pissing off his boss, aka his crush, aka the man who kissed like an angel, aka Ryan Armstrong who was now puffing through his nose like a dragon, was a bad idea for starting his morning. Yet, there he was, doing all that.

“Funny? Like funny how?” Ryan moved toward him, cocking his head and quirking that eyebrow even more.

Mike began laughing without controlling himself anymore. Oh, God, he was so going to get fired now. But, suddenly, Ryan started laughing with him. They stared at one another, laughing as they had just seen the silliest show on earth.

Mike managed to gain back his breath. “Ryan, I swear, Jared is just a friend. But when I’m sleeping with him, I sleep so well, that’s all.”

Ryan caught him in his arms. Mike had to look up and strain his neck a little. All right, now things weren’t funny anymore. They were tense, and too much in a good way to be a good thing. “You don’t know me, so let me tell you this one thing. It takes little to make me jealous.”

Mike could swear he was blushing. He had to. His cheeks were on fire, and the tips of his ears were burning. He moved his eyes lower.

“Why are your cheeks getting red?” Ryan’s voice was deep and had the superpower to send a tsunami of sensations throughout Mike’s body. The fact that Mike could also feel the other’s hot breath on his face didn’t help either. “So cute.”

Mike looked up now after staring stubbornly at Ryan’s chin. Their eyes connected. Ryan’s eyelids dropped, and Mike wondered why. He wouldn’t be kept in the dark long. Ryan’s lips descended on his like summer rain.

It lasted little, though. Ryan pulled back with a long sigh. “Mike,” he started with regret written all over his handsome face. “You’re truly something. But I need to behave.”

To say that he wasn’t shaken would have been a lie. But Mike struggled to regain his composure. “Sure. I mean, I should, um, behave. Not pull you here first thing in the morning,” he added quickly.

“You didn’t exactly do that.”

Mike exhaled. So, he was off the hook.

“But you did contribute to it,” Ryan added. “I have a business to run. So, stop messing with my head.”

“I’m not,” Mike protested.

“Oh, really? Making me jealous the moment I see you doesn’t count as that?”

“I didn’t want to make you jealous. I didn’t even know you were there.”

“Ah, so you intended to keep it all from me. Your sleeping,” Ryan made air quotes, “with Jared.” Then, he laughed again. “I’m just pulling your leg. I hoped there was an explanation, and thank you for giving it to me.”

“You’re welcome.”

“You’re always this polite?”

“I try to. You know, when I’m not awkward and nervous.”

Ryan chuckled and shook his head in mirth. “Have you thought about what I asked you? About this weekend?” The deep dark eyes were hypnotizing. Mike couldn’t tear his eyes off Ryan’s face.

“It’s been everything I kept on doing this entire time,” Mike admitted in all honesty.

Ryan exhaled. “Me too. Let’s see each other there.”

Mike didn’t step down and didn’t protest, as Ryan’s hand cupped his cheek for a brief moment. He had so many questions. Why? What would happen once they met at that company party? Would they dance in front of other people? Most probably not. But what would happen then? That remained the biggest question.

And it would have to wait for an answer until it happened. If he called Jared now, his best friend would tell him to wait and see, without becoming overly anxious and playing out scenarios in his head.

Then he would just focus on work. That would make the crazy thoughts in his mind shut up for a change. Because there was no way, there was absolutely no way Ryan Armstrong could fall in love with him, as Jared had said. Maybe it was a fling; Mike wasn’t sure he could cope with that being true. Ryan had said the opposite; Jared believed there was a chance for romance, hearts beating as one, and all that jazz.

And Mike? Well, he needed to rein in his emotions. If this was how falling in love looked like, it seemed like a pretty dangerous thing. Right now, he wanted nothing but to start dancing around his desk, dreaming of how he would feel, dancing in Ryan’s arms.

On days like this, Jared wasn’t thankful, as usual, for the silence. His work was partly done in crowds, and partly in absolute solitude, as he focused on post processing his photos so that they would become magazine-worthy.

But today, the solitary nature of his passion that fortunately was the way he made a living didn’t cut it for him, for some reason. The number one cause of the restlessness he felt was strongly

linked to his love life, or, better said, its peculiarities. He could understand Mike and Ryan being forced by circumstances to keep a low profile for their interactions. Adrian and Edward had their own agreement. Yet, still, he was the one who felt unhappy. Where Mike was hopeful and anxious, and Adrian was cocksure and determined that he would have things happen his way, Jared felt that he was nowhere.

He and Chris didn't have any reason to hide their relationship, as far as he knew. And Chris, as busy as he was, didn't belong to the rarefied layers of some sort of aristocracy like Adrian's sophisticated lover.

It was raining, unnaturally so for the time of the year, and the laziness covering the city with its muddy blanket was getting to him. Jared took a sip from his tea, still not convinced to go back to his computer and continue the retouching work on his latest batch.

He had never been in a relationship. Everything was new and mind and soul-consuming. He didn't even need to close his eyes to recall the sensation of Chris's fingertips tracing invisible trails on his skin.

He was daydreaming on a workday, in no mood to do what he usually loved doing. Jared exhaled and looked through the rain-streaked window. Would it be okay to call Chris? Tell him how much he missed him already?

Physically wise, their relationship was great, beyond outstanding. They fit in bed, or at least that was what Jared hoped it was true on both sides. Yet, it still felt like some strange relationship faux-pas to call Chris out of the blue and ask him to meet. As adventurous as Chris seemed when they were together, in his work, he appeared to be the epitome of seriousness. Disturbing him from his daily routine, which probably included manipulating gazillions of dollars and talking to important people, so important that probably never moved on foot like normal people, was not, definitely not, the right thing to do.

Jared picked up his phone. "Hi," he said softly, the moment Chris picked up.

"Hi, sexy," Chris drawled.

Good. That meant he wasn't caught in an important meeting.

"Do you think we could meet?"

There was a short pause. "Where?"

Always the efficient man.

"I might sound crazy, but I love walking in the rain."

"Only walking?"

Jared breathed out. The thrill of anticipation was making his palms sweat. He moved the phone from one ear to the other. “Yes. No.”

Chris’s soft chuckle sent eddies of warmth down his spine as if there were lips touching each sensitive spot in their wake. He was in it deep.

“I might sound indecisive, but I’m actually a pretty average person,” Jared joked.

“Nothing about you is average.”

Just the right words. Chris knew what to say to mess up his head. There was no wonder he was successful in his line of work. Jared frowned for a second. Was Chris successful? His penthouse, expensive clothes, and manners said everything about it, but had Chris ever told him anything about his work?

He was getting worked up over details, once again. That wasn’t important. Their relationship was still too young to include discussions about how their days went; one day, they would get there. The stage they were in involved walks in the rain, in the middle of the workweek.

Jared’s voice went low as he explained to Chris where he would like to meet.

“I’ll see you there,” Chris promised him.

Was he all right in the head to ask for a date out of the blue like that? It was too late for any regrets, and it looked like Chris had agreed to it.

Jared put the cup of tea on his desk as he rushed to get dressed. A fraction of an inch was missed, and there was liquid dripping on the wooden floor. Jared cursed and turned to clean up the scene of the crime. His mind was a bit in pieces these days, he thought to himself, as he patted the wet area with tissues. He needed to pay more attention to details.

That didn’t stop him from feeling like a teenager rushing off to his first date. Chris was his first boyfriend. While he often told himself not to believe in fairytales, he hoped Chris to be the one. On his part, he would do all that was necessary to make it happen. And if Chris was busy most of the time, it meant that they only needed to make the best of the hours they had for themselves.

His old umbrella was in a sorry state, but in a place with sunny weather in summers and dry winters, it was to be expected. With a shrug, Jared tucked it under his arm. He had a feeling that he wouldn’t make much use of it, anyway.

Not a soul in sight, as he had suspected, Jared pondered as he looked around. If there was one person in the entire city to know all the parks with all their secrets, that had to be him. The place was no longer trendy, and the few metal bars that had once served to those wanting to either

exercise to get muscles or display the said muscles were rusty and looked as abandoned as the rest. Stubborn vegetation had found its way through the cracks in the asphalt, another sign of neglect.

Jared had picked this spot because it was like that. The chances of anyone disturbing them were slim. The only worry he now had was that Chris might miss the place. Chris had counterattacked his doubts earlier over the phone by saying he was a bit of geocaching aficionado, but Jared seriously doubted that was the case. His lover was humoring him, and that was a good sign.

Now, if only the satellites in the sky handling triangulation or whatever they were doing since Jared wasn't as technically inclined to care, would carry Chris's steps to him. Jared tipped his head backward, balancing the crooked umbrella on his shoulder to look at the sky. Sending map coordinates over the phone could hardly be considered romantic.

He just hoped all the rest was romantic enough. The drops falling on his face were warm, there was no one else in sight, and Jared felt his skin getting hot, only thinking of Chris rushing through the rain to meet him.

"I thought you said that you liked walking in the rain."

Jared turned on his heels at the sound of the voice. He smiled as he looked at Chris, at the rain making his dark hair shine, the way he had both hands stuffing the pockets of his jacket, looking like a movie star.

Maybe it was just his mind, his seduced mind running away with him, but that was how Chris looked to him. Darker stains of water marked the shoulders of his jacket, but he didn't seem bothered at all. He looked younger than his age, standing there, in tight jeans and expensive kicks. Jared had expected to see him in a suit, prepped up like for a meeting with wealthy clients, not like this.

Not that he was complaining.

"Well, for now, as you can see, I'm not walking."

"Don't be a chicken, Jared. Do you like the rain? Prove it."

Jared laughed. He dropped the umbrella to the ground with large, theatrical moves.

"I wasn't expecting you to get rid of your belongings like that," Chris commented, visibly amused.

Jared walked over to him. "Now I'm walking. Don't complain."

He was about to link one hand through Chris's arm, but Chris snuck one hand around his neck and pulled him in for a kiss. For a second, he was baffled; not that he hadn't expected it. After

all, nobody calls their hotshot lover in the middle of the day, when ordinary people work, for a walk in the rain.

Chris's lips were hungry on his, and his initial surprise turned into the same lust. Jared could feel another hand sneaking into his hair, pulling it free from its string. In the silence around them, the sound of their kisses was loud like thunder.

The sky above was grey, but it wasn't cold. Jared hissed as Chris managed to reach under his t-shirt and pinched one nipple, hard. A fine rain was wetting his shoulders, too, now. Unlike Chris, he hadn't even bothered with a jacket.

Chris pushed him toward the old metal bars, not missing one moment to kiss him, bite him, and torture his skin. He seemed rougher than usual, but Jared couldn't blame the guy. He wasn't, obviously, the only one with expectations from their meeting.

"Turn," Chris ordered shortly, and Jared obeyed. "Hold on to that."

"Like this?" Jared wrapped his fingers around the rusty metal bar in front of him. "I should be glad this is no thunderstorm."

He gasped as his ass was smacked one time, hard.

"No mouthing off," Chris said abruptly.

Jared felt his lips curling into a smile. So that was the game they played. He had to be the naughty one, making his lover give up on some fantastic deal that could fill up the coffers for years and years, all for a thrilling rendezvous.

The next move was unexpected. His t-shirt was pulled over his head and let to hang on another metal bar; it moved slightly in the wind, like a flag of surrender. Now he felt exposed a little more than it was comfortable.

"Oh, wow," he whispered.

Chris's hands covered his chest and brushed over his nipples over and over again. Jared pushed back his ass to meet the other's crotch in the middle.

"Easy," Chris called softly. "Your delicious rump is going to get it soon enough."

Jared could feel his heartbeat stepping up, ringing an emergency. The place was deserted, yes, but anyone could walk in on them.

Chris placed a kiss on his shoulder, chasing down small droplets of rain like a thirsty man. If there was one rational thought left in his mind, it was long gone. Chris continued to stimulate his nipples while kissing his way over Jared's shoulders and upper back.

He didn't need to do anything except to hold on to the metal bar in front of him like it was his lifeline. These were the words Chris spoke into his ear, between soft licks and grunts that gave away the desire that ran between them like electricity.

The rain fell calmer and calmer, as their need grew higher. Chris knew what to do, using just one hand to unbutton Jared's jeans and pushed them lower. Then, his fingers moved to tease Jared's balls from behind, the skin between them and the asshole. A rogue thumb then slid inside the crack and pushed against the opening.

"Not a very good boy, are you, Jared?"

"I guess not," Jared murmured in reply. The warm rain falling down his back made him shiver, but not because it made him cold. Each frisson had to do more with how sensitive he felt everywhere, his skin on fire.

And he could blame it all on Chris and his maddening hands and lips everywhere. Now the fingers that had teased all his erotic spots were focused on his backdoor. Jared gasped a few times, as his unwilling resistance was breached, but he was thankful that at least Chris had come prepared, and his ass got the desired consideration.

This was no walking in the rain. It was fucking in the rain, plain and simple. Not that there was anything plain and simple in how Chris's fingers moved around, opening him, punishing him, only a little, and making the entrance large enough for what was to follow.

A few smacks on his wet skin made Jared moan shamelessly. Chris pushed his cock inside, the lube making it reasonably doable, but still too tight, so tight that his breath caught in his chest, in his throat, coming out eventually in the shape of a keening sound.

"Easy there," Chris encouraged him, and then he bottomed out in Jared's ass.

Jared knew that it had to be the craziest thing he had ever done. And Chris seemed to like public sex since this wasn't the first time they were doing it in plain sight. Of course, this was much forward and riskier than before.

Chris wrapped one arm around Jared's chest to steady himself. As if he could read what was on Jared's mind, he whispered into his ear, "I don't care if anyone comes. I will continue to fuck you. Do you understand, sexy? Do you understand how crazy you make me?"

Jared wanted to have a comeback to that. But the idea, only the idea that someone could walk up on them and witness them like that, hot body on hot body, wet skin smacking against wet skin, made him weak to the knees.

"Would you like that? To be seen while I'm taking you? How I own you?" Chris continued to tease his ear with small licks and dirty words. "Your expression right now," Chris said as he made Jared turn his head, "drives me insane. Do you have any idea of how you look?"

Jared couldn't make a sound that would make sense. The desire was boiling inside him, beyond safety levels, and was rendering him speechless. Not that he was quiet. No, he was moaning and grunting and gasping and begging while Chris fucked him.

It was like something inside him was coming loose, undone. Chris knew how to move, how to choose the right angle, how to hold him. Jared could barely stand while his pleasure grew hot and heavy, spreading its tendrils like lightning on a dark sky, sending his sanity ablaze.

Suddenly, Chris changed tack. He stopped the moving of his hips and began fondling Jared's cock. It was an assertion of dominance, in a way, as Jared saw it, as the hand on his cock wasn't loving, but firm; it wasn't careful, but determined. Then it let go and cupped his balls, and Jared shivered.

"You're such a lovely boy. I like holding you in my hand like this."

Jared understood what Chris meant by that. His manhood, Chris was holding it.

"Now, come for me, beautiful boy," Chris whispered in his ear, as he began pumping Jared's cock.

This time, he moved again, and between the sensations in his ass and the hand squeezing his hard-on, Jared knew he was playing a losing game. He moaned loudly as he came messily; he looked down, impressed with his own load, as it spurted from Chris's skillful hand.

"Good boy." Chris kissed his neck.

His true reward followed quickly. Without a condom between them, Jared could argue with anyone who cared to contradict him, that it felt better. Or maybe it was just his desire to have Chris so close to him.

Chris pulled out of his ass after a while, all the time allowing Jared to feel each twitch of his cock that still didn't seem to go all down. When Chris came, Jared noticed, he lasted a while. The only term of comparison was himself, which wasn't much, but Jared thought that had to be the case. Chris was a man who knew a few things about how to take care of his own pleasure.

"You look nice like this," Chris commented and slapped his ass one last time. He played a little with his cum, smearing it around.

Jared breathed out and steadied himself with some difficulty. "And I thought we would romantically have a nice walk in the rain."

Chris chuckled and picked Jared's t-shirt, to hand it back to him. Jared winced as he pulled the wet fabric over his skin.

"Now, I need to send you home," Chris said.

He didn't look messed up at all. His hair was all wet, and his clothes weren't any better, but Jared could bet he didn't look as messed up as him. Chris was careful, tucking his cock back into his jeans, and then kissing him one more time on the lips.

"Take a hot bath, drink something to regain your strength, then go to bed, and dream of me."

"Is that an order?"

"Sure, why not?"

Jared wanted to spend a little more time together, but Chris was right. He needed to go home and try not to catch a cold. His blood was cooling down, too, and now the fine droplets still falling didn't feel as warm.

"I'll take you home," Chris said.

"Don't you have work?"

"It could wait while I fucked you. I think it can wait while I take you back home safely," Chris replied with a smile.

Jared just nodded.

"Your umbrella." Chris pointed out at the item on the ground, its metal sprigs sticking out everywhere.

"I don't think I could use that again. But I'll take it to a trash can," Jared added hurriedly.

"Such a good boy," Chris commended him again.

Jared burst into laughter. "Do you want me to call you daddy or something?"

Chris's smile was cryptic. Jared had to settle for no answer at all.

On the backseat of a cab, they held their hands together but didn't speak too much. Chris appeared not to mind the driver as he leaned in and kissed Jared sweetly before bidding him goodbye.

Later that evening, Jared meditated for a while over how his date hadn't gone as he had imagined it. But that didn't make it wrong, just different; and Jared decided that he needed to lower his expectations of what relationships were. No, modify them. There was no lowering them if things were different.

And, that night, he did dream of Chris, a reenactment of their encounter, only that, this time, it was followed by a slow walk in the rain.

“You look great!” Jared turned Mike around, patting down some invisible creases. “I think Ryan will fall head over heels when he sees you. I mean, again.”

Mike blushed profusely. Even if it was his best friend complimenting him, he still felt a bit embarrassed. Yet, he had to admit that the deep purple silk shirt and the dark suit looked good on him. He no longer appeared lanky, with stooped shoulders. In the full-size mirror, he stared at a new and improved version of himself, lean, graceful. The straight shoulder cut made him sit straight without any efforts or reminders.

“Don’t I look a bit, I don’t know, like I’m trying too hard?”

“It’s all right to try a little harder when your crush invites you to have a dance with him.”

“And I’m not weird? Or funny?”

Jared looked at him over his shoulder in the mirror. “I wouldn’t use either to describe you right now. I’d said you look classy. And sexy.”

Mike snickered. Jared smiled at him. “You’ll be fine, Mike. I’m glad for you.”

“Jared, is it okay for me to feel so queasy in my stomach?”

“I suppose those are the butterflies. It’s all right. They are completely normal, given the circumstances.”

“Okay, if you say so.”

Jared’s encouragement could work wonders for his mood. But, as cautious as he was, he couldn’t bring himself to express all of his enthusiasm and excitement. Fears, such as someone seeing him and Ryan and getting the wrong idea – or the correct one! – were almost gone from his mind. All was supposed to be done in moderation, and that was his middle name.

“You’ll knock him off his feet, I’m sure,” Jared continued his pep talk.

“I’d rather he stands, you know, so that we could kiss.”

“Good point. I won’t say ‘don’t be nervous’ because I think Ryan likes you and your insecurities all bundled up together.”

Two simultaneous pings noticed them both they had a new message.

Jared was the first to pick his phone up. “Can you believe this dude?”

Mike looked at his phone, too, and moaned. “Now, I’m back at being the ugly duckling.” From a pic on the shiny screen, Adrian stared at him, all dressed up in what looked like a very expensive

suit. It was very conservative looking, which only made Adrian's rebellious looks to stand out more.

Jared patted his back. "You're a gorgeous swan, too. Just look, you're transforming," he added, pointing at the reflection in the mirror.

Mike sighed. "Thank you for everything, Jared. You're the best friend I could ever have."

"I'm glad you feel this way."

"Do you have any plans for the weekend? With Chris?"

"We'll probably spend it in bed, fucking," Jared replied. "Not that I complain. Just as the next red-blooded guy on this planet, I enjoy fucking. Only that... never mind."

"What's wrong?" Mike asked. "I mean, you can talk to me if you want."

Jared sighed. "I'm probably overthinking everything. I feel he kind of... dominates me? Ugh, I'm just talking nonsense."

Mike turned away from the mirror. "Hey, I don't think that. If that's what you feel, it means something he does makes it that way."

Jared's answer was a strained smile. "Then, here it is. Everything we do, it's his choice. He doesn't even like the word 'boyfriend'. He prefers to be, some sort of protector or whatever, for me. I asked him, jokingly, of course, if he wants to be called 'daddy' and he didn't reject the idea. I mean, he said nothing."

"Have you tried talking to him?"

"Not hard enough, probably. And that's my fault. I think I need to make my point of view clear enough. I can't just go around, complaining, while I'm not even trying."

"I'm sure he'll listen to you. I mean, who wouldn't? You're always so nice."

"I guess. And you're nice, too. Now let's pay for your outfit and then get you a haircut. Nothing extreme, I promise. But just enough for Ryan to see that you made an effort."

"All right." Mike touched his hair, all self-consciously.

"You'll be fine," Jared promised him once more.

Adrian felt a small tremble of anticipation in the pit of his stomach. Yeah, he wasn't used to luxury except now and then, so wearing a suit that must have cost thousands of dollars and being chauffeured around were all new to him. To hide his slight discomfort, he cleared his throat and

looked out the window. Edward had sent his employee to get him, and that had been a bit of a surprise. Now they were heading to Edward's place, apparently.

The winding road climbed, and Adrian began to understand. They were out of the city and now heading toward the area where only high-end real estate could be seen as far as eyes could see.

He snorted under his breath as the property came into view. A frigging mansion. He wasn't completely surprised. Even if Edward worked, he didn't do it for a living, obviously. He came from money, big money, by what Adrian could say while looking out the window, at the manicured park - calling it a lawn seemed unfit - and the tall white colonnades guarding the front.

"We're here, sir. Please allow me to get the door for you," the chauffeur said politely.

Adrian felt a bit weird to wait in the car while the chauffeur got out and hurried to hold the door. Rich people were kind of assholes. What? Did their hands fall if they opened a damned car door? But he didn't want to cause an unwarranted scene or make the chauffeur uncomfortable, so, for the moment, he played along.

He thanked the chauffeur and then buttoned up his jacket as he took in the front door. He had a spring in his step as he hurried up the marble stairs. If it were a butler getting the door, he would tease Edward over the silver spoon in his mouth for days.

It wasn't another employee, though, but Edward himself. He appeared to be in casual dress as he welcomed Adrian, wearing a loose shirt with matching pants and loafers that made him look more approachable than usual.

His face broke in a broad smile as he saw Adrian. "Adrian, you look amazing."

"Thanks. But don't tell me you're going to show off at your fancy club wearing these clothes. Not that they don't look good on you, but I fear that I would look well overdressed in your company."

Edward laughed. He grabbed Adrian's hand and pulled him inside. "I will change, obviously. But I wanted to show you my humble abode, first."

"Humble was the first thing that came to my mind, the moment your chauffeur pulled us into the driveway."

Another good-natured laugh followed. Edward pulled him by the hand and began walking around, explaining things. Adrian didn't quite listen. Between the lavishness of the place and Edward's warm hand on his, he must have lost his sense of hearing.

A grand staircase led to the upper floor, and Edward continued his lively presentation of the place as they walked up.

“And this,” Edward said as he pushed open a door, “is where I sleep.”

Adrian grinned. Edward was enthusiastic as a twelve-year-old hosting his first sleepover, and Adrian wasn't any better. There had to be a reason why Edward was showing him his inner sanctum. Without hesitation, Adrian walked inside, following his host's invitation.

“A big place,” Adrian commented. “Any staff lurking around, doing the vacuuming?”

“No. The employees in charge of the place work normal hours, and they don't live here. And, of course, they have the weekends free.”

“Really? And who makes Your Majesty his tea, then?”

Edward smirked. “You're pulling my leg. I knew you would. That's why I wasn't sure, at first, if I should show you the house.”

“Your chauffeur doesn't work normal hours,” Adrian pointed out.

Edward shrugged. “No chauffeur does. It's the nature of the job.”

“So, he has to sit there, in his car, waiting for us, with nothing to do?”

“No, there is a part of the house he can use if so inclined. I'll send him a text when we're ready.”

“Ah, I see. So, no maid could walk in on us and scream in a sexy French accent?”

“No, and why should she scream?” Edward asked, his eyes glinting with mischief.

“Because,” Adrian said matter-of-factly and pulled Edward into a kiss.

Edward leaned into his touch but pressed his palms firmly against Adrian's shoulders. “You shouldn't wrinkle your suit.”

Adrian sighed, pretending to be heartbroken over that little warning. “I knew to wear such a thing would be a pain. No one ever smiles in those photo shoots advertising such luxury clothes. I always suspected that all those models must have some sticks up their anorexic asses.”

“Good thing such clothes, as you say, come in larger sizes, too. You look great in the suit I picked for you, Adrian.”

Edward was already making a beeline for the door when Adrian caught him by the elbow. “Hey, give me some sugar.”

“Sugar is bad for you, Adrian. You know, rotten teeth and all,” Edward teased him but allowed to be drawn back.

“I like living dangerously,” Adrian replied and closed his lips over Edward’s enticing mouth. “Can we have sex at this fancy party?” he asked and let Edward breathe for a moment.

“No, not us, at least,” Edward said mysteriously. His dark green eyes were shining, as were his lips. Adrian wanted to smooth him so hard until he couldn’t breathe anymore. “It’s all about showing off, and, of course, titillating other people’s senses.”

“Titillating? You’re intriguing me more and more.”

“Don’t worry. While you’ll be on display, so to speak, I won’t allow anything more. It appears that I feel a tad territorial tonight.”

“What? If you hadn’t been this much into me, you would have shared me around or something?” Adrian quirked an eyebrow, only half-joking.

“No. But in the past, I did allow my partners to enjoy the attention of others quite overtly. Just to be clear, that is not going to happen tonight. I will allow everyone to be seduced by your gorgeous looks from a polite distance, nothing more. Anyone dares to touch you, you come to me.”

Adrian burst into laughter. “Like I’d let a bunch of rich perverts to feel me up just like that.”

“No, not just like that,” Edward said airily. “They could offer you what you may think to be obscene sums of money, and that for more than just to feel you up, as you say.”

“Oh, screw me sideways. So, you allowed some of your former lovers to have sex with the highest bidder or something like that?”

“Only with a condom,” Edward said. “And never to suck off anyone. Their mouths belonged to me for the time being.”

“Well, at least, you were a bit territorial even then,” Adrian said as he contemplated the new findings inwardly. “By the way, I promise not to give in unless I’m promised an entire golf course or something extreme like that.”

Edward patted his cheek. “Don’t even think about it, Adrian. There are plenty of fools in the world, and you’d be surprised how willing they can be to part with their cash. If it’s not hard-earned, it’s easy to kiss it goodbye over a whim.”

“Ah, and that’s why you work, to have a sense of value for the cash you’re spending,” Adrian said.

“And, of course, because I’d rather not spend my active years twiddling my thumbs.”

“That’s great. Now, you should have told me I would witness people having sex in public and stuff like that.”

“Our club is private; there’s nothing public about it. But, of course, many encounters have the potential of voyeuristic value, which is why some don’t mind flaunting their perversions in this manner.”

“Perversions? I thought it was a club for upstanding gentlemen.”

“Your language must have rubbed on me. You keep talking about them as a bunch of perverts. I consider them, and myself included, to be capable of living as free as a person can.”

“All right, but given the circumstances, if I had known, I would have jerked off at home. Now I’m going to be a walking boner,” Adrian pointed out.

Edward placed one hand on top of his crotch. “I can see that you are already that. Hmm, this must be painful,” he teased, both with his words and his fingers as he traced the shape of Adrian’s cock through the fabric.

Adrian winced. “Now, I’ll have to hold you responsible.”

Edward purred, as his eyes became hooded and inviting. “Responsible? Your ability to get it up so fast qualifies you for the position, Adrian. Of course, any consequences, I’ll assume them all.”

“Then give me a hand already or something.” Adrian challenged Edward with his eyes, not moving at all and enjoying the sensation of being handled like that.

“A hand? We risk staining your suit,” Edward pointed out.

“Oh, so you’re willing to see me walking about, pitching a tent, then?”

“No.” Edward leaned toward him and whispered in his ear. “I’m not going to give you a hand, but something else.”

“What?”

“Head,” Edward said simply.

Adrian’s cock twitched desperately. Okay, so maybe pushing Edward toward the enormous bed, impeccably made, and ramming into him until they both lost their voices, wasn’t in the cards. But getting his cock sucked sounded pretty good, too, unless Edward just wanted to tease him, and he would really have to live through the torture of visiting a kinky sex club as he tried hard to behave.

It was no joke. Edward dropped to his knees and fiddled with Adrian’s belt, his eyes never leaving Adrian’s.

“Your Majesty, you’re too sexy for your own good. Are you sure your patients don’t fall crazy in love with you? Your coworkers? People on the subway? Oh, wait, you don’t take the subway.”

Adrian lost track of what he wanted to say. Edward nearly chomped on his cock, stopping his teeth close to the skin, like some kind of kinky warning. Then Adrian felt the hotness and moisture of the mouth wrapped around his cock, and he didn't care about teasing Edward at all.

Instead, he looked in the mirror installed by the bed, and his breath began quickening, just as his heartbeat. Damn, he looked sharp in that suit. The beautiful man servicing him on his knees was there to complete the picture.

"Oh, fuck," Adrian whispered. Edward was working him hard, efficiently, but that didn't make it any less pleasant. "You're such a good depthroater, Your Majesty. Make sure not to choke, though." The immediate response was his cock made to hit what was probably the back of Edward's throat if he could tell. "Or choke, I don't mind. I'll give you first aid if need be."

He was trying to be funny just to take the edge off what he felt. Edward was too good, so much better than his casual one-night-stands or random quickies. It wasn't fair that he was this good. It meant that Adrian would come soon. "Fuck," he whispered in frustration as he began shooting in the warm mouth tormenting him.

There was a point in what Edward had told him. No risk of staining his suit as Edward swallowed it all.

With a broad grin splitting his face, Edward got to his feet. "You taste great, Adrian. I love it." He patted his lips gently.

Adrian smirked and took Edward by surprise as he knelt in front of him.

"Adrian, what are you doing? There's no need --"

Even someone like Edward could be made to shut up for once. Adrian found the way to pull down Edward's pants fast, and soon it was his mouth on a hard cock. Edward could run his mouth all he wanted. The desire was reciprocal.

Edward didn't protest anymore. Instead, he ran both hands through Adrian's unruly hair and held his head to fuck his mouth. Adrian didn't mind; actually, he enjoyed someone a bit rough from time to time. Too many people fell to his feet and acted obediently. Adrian liked someone with a bit of spunk.

Speaking of which, he wasn't the only one with loaded balls. Edward didn't voice his release in coarse words, and his moans were subdued, held in, but Adrian could really appreciate the mouthful.

He stole a glance in the mirror. That position was jerk off material, too, with him dressed so nicely, and giving his lover head like he meant it.

Edward was breathing hard, and his eyes were glassy when Adrian stood up.

“Nice meal, Your Majesty. I appreciate the flavor.”

Edward laughed, but he looked a bit wasted. “I see you’re learning fast. I’m glad you like it. As they say in porn, there’s more where that came from.”

“I’m counting on it. Now, do we brush our teeth, or we go to your party and let others smell cum on us? That might make some people crazy, seeing what a bunch of perverts they are.”

Edward laughed as he straightened Adrian’s tie. “I don’t dismiss your idea altogether. But let’s look the part. Here is a mint,” he added, as he went to pick up a bowl from the nightstand.

Adrian laughed and took one. “I’m glad you’re so well prepared.”

“Always.” Edward flashed a broad smile at him. “Now, I will go downstairs to dress.”

“Do you need any help?”

“Let’s be serious for a moment, Adrian. If you came to help me, we would not leave the house.”

“Point taken. Can I jump up and down on your bed?”

Edward pursed his lips comically. “This isn’t a sleepover, Adrian.”

Adrian smirked. “But it will be, right? Once we’re done with the perverts.”

Edward laughed and shook his head. “Sure, why not?”

“Yes,” Adrian shouted his victory, closing one fist and bringing his elbow down. “I’ve always wanted to have a sleepover with someone as sexy as you.”

“You shower me in compliments,” Edward said. “Make sure to save a few for the people I will introduce you to. I want you to be courteous.”

“Sure thing. Now go downstairs and dress up. My balls are refilling, so you’re on the clock. In five minutes tops, if you’re not ready, I’m coming for you.”

“Five minutes? All right then, let’s not wait one precious moment,” Edward replied.

Adrian watched Edward’s behind as he walked out the door. That was one nice ass, and he would so love to tap it. Later, of course, since obligations came first, but he would do it, without a doubt.

Chapter Eleven – Hurtful Truths

Adrian traced invisible lines on Edward's hand, taking advantage of the fact that it laid flat between them, like an invitation. Edward smiled as he stole a glance at him, but one of his fingers began tapping, so Adrian placed his entire hand on top to stop it. "You can't be nervous," he said matter-of-factly. "These are your people, right?"

In the backseat of his luxury car, in his luxury clothes, spelling privilege, and money from head to toe, Edward Hastings was nervous. Adrian couldn't quite believe it, but it didn't take a psychic to realize that a lot went through Edward's mind at the moment.

"You don't have to do this if you don't like it," Adrian added, seeing how Edward remained silent, lost, most probably, in his own head.

A short laugh was the answer. "There's nothing I like more in the world." The voice inflections were a tad harsh, and, for a second, there was a glint of something foreign in Edward's beautiful eyes. From smooth green, they turned to cut emerald, and Adrian looked engrossed at the transformation. Edward was, undoubtedly, a man with layers and shadows, too.

"All right. If you say so. What am I supposed to do, again?"

"Be polite. Tend to me and only me. Refuse any invitation, even if it may sound harmless. These are not ordinary people."

"Am I joining the Freemasonry or something? Now I get why you wanted me to wear better clothes," Adrian joked. "I would appreciate knowing about it in advance."

Edward laughed, but it wasn't his free laugh from before when they had been at the house. "Nothing of the kind. But rich people, Adrian, are in the position of enjoying freedoms like no other. That means they mostly believe that they have a right to treat others like objects or pawns in their little games. I believe you have the mental strength to resist. Others have failed before."

"Damn. The plot thickens. All I have to do is to stay true to you, right?"

Edward confirmed with a small grunt as he kicked off some invisible lint from his suit jacket.

"Then, it's the easiest thing I've ever done."

Edward stared at him for a long second.

"What?" Adrian asked.

"I was expecting a follow-up to such serious words."

Adrian laughed. "You won't get a confession out of me so easily, Your Majesty." He relaxed and stretched like he was already bored out of his wits. "I'm a tough one, and I'll show it to you."

“Counting on it, Adrian.” Edward leaned in and placed a small kiss on the corner of his mouth.

Adrian cursed inwardly for not catching the move so that he could enjoy kissing Edward thoroughly.

“We’re almost there,” Edward said, straightening back into his place and looking ahead like he was expecting to go to war.

The moment was lost. But there would be plenty of other moments, and right now, Adrian didn’t mind. Edward had given him some heavenly head just earlier so he couldn’t complain. Whatever Edward thought was so important about this stupid sex club, he would forget about in due time. Adrian had a plan to make Edward spill out ill-timed confessions. And, when that happened, he would have the man all to himself to do as he pleased.

“Man, are we in Monaco?” Adrian whistled as he looked at the rows of expensive vehicles that had to be all limited editions or something. No, limited couldn’t cover what he was seeing. Exclusive sounded more like a term that fit the fleet of cars already parked in front of what looked like an old but majestic building. “Are they really okay with having sex at the museum? It doesn’t sound that kinky to me. More like creepy.”

Edward smiled. “I love your sense of humor, Adrian, but let’s just keep it to ourselves. And, of course, it’s not a museum.”

“Right. It’s more like a crypt for vampires. Wait, is that why you’re so sexy? Are you secretly a vampire?”

“If you haven’t noticed, I have no trouble walking in the sun.”

“You’re a hotshot vampire and a doctor on top of everything. In all your thousands of years of existence, you might have found a cure to that.”

Edward shook his head. “I’ll take that as a compliment. Hopefully, I’m not as pale as those creatures of the night.”

Adrian caressed his lover’s cheek briefly. “Maybe you could use more time in the sun.”

“Well, it’s already evening, so let’s plan such an outing for a different time. Now, let’s face the music.”

“As you say, boss. Your wish is my command.”

The chauffeur came to hold the door for them, and Adrian somehow expected to be welcomed by the harsh lights of cameras when he climbed out of the car. Luckily, there was no such thing, and there was no red carpet, either, which was, again, something he had expected.

The impressive marble staircase that took the guests inside the belly of the beast was just the beginning. Adrian leaned and whispered into Edward's ear, "Am I supposed to act impressed? Because I am, and trying to keep a straight face might make my muscles hurt."

"It's your first time. All is forgiven."

"All right, then. Wow."

"Duly noted."

Adrian noticed the somewhat rigid stance of Edward's body but didn't comment on it. Before getting to know the guy better, he had thought him to be a cold fish. It was all right. Edward could be as much of a cold fish as he wanted with anyone but him.

It was a bit childish of him, but when the back of Edward's hand brushed by his, it took him some effort not to grab it so that they could walk inside holding hands.

At the entrance, he allowed Edward to walk in front, but he kept one possessive hand on the small of his back. Already, Edward was greeting all kinds of nobodies, and Adrian felt instantly territorial.

Everyone seemed rich, dressed nicely, and by how they greeted Edward back, they might have had more than friendly interest. Something in their eyes told Adrian Edward was a prize, whether he knew it or not. Lingering stares were aimed at him, as well, but he focused on Edward, not wanting to gawk like a child taken to see the circus for the first time. Also, he wasn't entirely sure he could control a teeth-showing snarl if he looked too hard around.

The place had a vibe, and it wasn't a pleasant one, Adrian could tell. It wasn't creepy, or a museum, or a crypt, but it was cold. It might have had something to do with those tall granite walls. The interior was lit a giorno by impressive candelabras and chandeliers that appeared to take up more real estate than it was physically possible. The light came out of everywhere, and yet it still felt like there was something inside sucking it in.

It could be the heavy burgundy curtains draping the large windows, but Adrian doubted that. The place was supposed to give the illusion of warmth, but it performed poorly. Around them, people have already started to mingle, and Adrian allowed himself a few looks around.

There were clearly at least a dozen people who looked striking and as they had just descended from the covers of fashion magazines. Adrian noticed a man in his late fifties who was quite clearly showing his age, touching the ass of a twenty-something who laughed and threw his head back, for the instant delight of his handler.

He shrugged. So rich people came here to flaunt their young and beautiful lovers. Was that the only thing he was to Edward? He could playfully ask, but that was a question for later. For now,

he needed to act like he wasn't that impressed at all by the lavishness of the place or the behavior of the guests.

"And who is this handsome fellow you've brought with you tonight, Edward?" A man in his thirties, just expensively dressed as the whole lot, approached them.

His angular features made him unique, and Adrian supposed that some would consider him handsome, but, instinctively, he felt put off. Maybe the man used too much hair product because it shone a dark blue in the bright lights.

The way he held his lips as he talked was presumably pleasant, and it could be a method to sweeten the poisonous words spewed if Adrian's intuition was correct. Everything about him was too studied, to the point of looking fake. Probably, even his icy blue eyes were contacts, not real.

"William," Edward greeted the stranger politely. "This is my companion, Adrian."

William offered a meek hand, and Adrian took it, stopping right in time from grimacing at the sensation that he held something wooden and at least partially dead in his hand.

"I was hoping to see you tonight alone for a change. It has been a while since that pretty thing you used to bring along – what was his name? Raphael something? --"

"Ralph," Edward corrected the other promptly. "His name wasn't that exotic."

"But the things he did with his tongue surely were," William replied, his full lips stretching into a strange smile.

Edward made a small grimace. Adrian frowned. Hadn't Edward said something about how he didn't allow his lovers to service anyone with their mouths? Apparently, a pretty thing called Ralph had broken that rule.

"I found him boring," Edward said. "And I supposed you did, too, since I haven't noticed you bringing him around, either."

"Oh, Edward," William placed one hand on Edward's arm, holding on to it like he was about to fall and needed the support, "don't tell me you're still mad about that. Here, at The Awakening, it's all about awakening one's true nature."

"In Ralph's case, his true nature was that of a whore," Edward said in a light tone.

William seemed taken aback by Edward's words. "I had no idea you used such words."

"One learns," Edward replied. "Now, if you'll excuse me."

Adrian didn't suppress a smirk as they left William there, staring after them, like a child after the ice cream truck. At the last moment, William's eyes shifted from Edward's back to Adrian, and his expression hardened. Adrian showed a bit of teeth and quirked an eyebrow. *Whatcha gonna do, punk?*

William pursed his lips and set his chin high as he turned on his heels.

"Adrian?" Edward's call made him turn, too.

"Who's the creep?" Adrian whispered.

"William? He's not a creep."

"So you say. He stole your last boyfriend and fucked his mouth or something."

Edward cleared his throat discreetly. "Let's not talk so freely here."

"I'm whispering so low I can barely hear myself. This party sucks already."

Edward stopped and faced him. A smile never leaving his lips, he fixed Adrian's tie. "Then, please forgive me. I will make it up to you."

"Promise?"

"I always keep my word, Adrian."

Adrian caught Edward's arm before they would start walking again. "You know, the rule you told me to play by? It goes for you, too. No fooling around."

Edward patted his cheek. "No need to worry. I'm a very selective man, and my tastes are not easy to match by what's on offer."

"Some dudes around here look like frigging supermodels."

"I'm not interested in them," Edward replied. "I'm only interested in you. Better?"

"Much."

Edward freed his arm but only so that he could wrap it around Adrian's. "William is a poor, tortured soul. So that you know."

"He's in love with you," Adrian said.

"Hmm," Edward offered in reply.

"You know it."

"And there's nothing I can do about it."

“You know, you sound a little cruel right now.”

“Do I? I’m only fair.”

Adrian shrugged. Edward was right, after all. If it was not reciprocal, it wasn’t, and that was all there was to it. “Has he been in love with you for long?”

“I don’t know exactly. It could be years. But he will only be a friend. What? Do you feel threatened already?”

“Already? Hey, is this secretly your fan club? I swear, everywhere I look, people look at us like they want to fuck you. What am I talking about? They’re eye-fucking you, for real.”

“You’re mistaken, Adrian. Everyone you see here has secrets and hidden agendas. When someone looks at you like they want to fuck you, it’s one of two things: they really want to have sex with you, or they want to screw you over. I belong to the second category — you, to the first. And make no mistake. I bet most of the looks you noticed were aimed at you, not me.”

“What a fucking clusterfuck,” Adrian murmured under his breath. “Why are we here, again?”

“Because it’s fun,” Edward replied with a small shrug.

The way Edward hanged on Adrian’s arm, he was close and warm. Adrian felt a sudden urge to embrace him, kiss him, and drag him out of there. “If you say so.”

“Edward!” Another man smartly dressed, shouted from across the room.

He was in his thirties, tall and lean, and the feline grace of his walk put him Adrian on guard right away. His face was smoothly shaved, and Adrian could swear his eyebrows must have been manscaped. His most striking feature was his platinum blond hair that looked almost white. In contrast, his eyes were dark, and they appeared almost unnatural on his pale face, but dangerously appealing nonetheless. He was followed closely by another man, a slightly older one, shorter, and plain-looking. However, there was something dignified in how the second man held himself that made Adrian pay attention to him more.

“Ben!” Edward let go of Adrian’s arm so that he could share an embrace with the tall man. “Mr. Wright.” He bowed politely toward the other.

“Wow, new boy toy!” Ben exclaimed, and he shamelessly guided his attention toward Adrian.

“Oh, Ben, please, don’t do it,” Edward said.

“Do what?” Ben pretended not to understand as he moved to stand in front of Adrian. “Oh, he’s so exquisite! Such a beautiful complexion! May I touch him?”

“Hey, jerk,” Adrian said as he kept a cold smile on his face. “Keep your hands to yourself, or we’ll have a problem.”

Ben gasped exaggeratedly, placing one hand over his mouth.

“Adrian,” Edward said in warning.

“Hey, I can’t keep being polite if he treats me like I’m a monkey or something.”

Ben seemed to have recovered from the earlier shock. He snapped his fingers, which, for Adrian, at least, seemed like a strange thing to do.

“I like him. Does he have a name?” Ben asked, never removing his eyes from Adrian.

“He also has two mean fists if you care to know,” Adrian replied, his grin broadening.

Edward cleared his throat, but Adrian wasn’t going to let anyone walk over him.

“Benjamin,” Ben said and offered his hand. “Call me Ben.”

“Adrian.” He shook Ben’s hand and enjoyed the firm grip. “So, did I pass the test or what?”

Ben laughed and placed his other hand over Adrian’s, holding it. “Did I tell you how much I like him?” He directed his question at Edward.

“Only seconds earlier,” was the wry reply.

“Finally, you realized that looks aren’t everything,” Ben said. “Adrian,” he turned toward Adrian again, “I’m glad Edward finally went for wits, too, not only for a pretty face. Not that you’re not pretty.”

“Hey, I take offense to that,” Adrian joked. “I’m not pretty. I’m not a butterfly.”

“Of course not. You’re a bull. A fighting bull.”

Adrian burst into laughter. “Then, don’t flaunt anything red in front of my eyes.”

“Not even if it’s a sexy thong?” Ben leaned in, and his eyelashes batted in an exaggerated gesture of seduction.

Adrian shook his head in mirth and laughed. “Not unless it’s someone I like wearing it.” He stole a glance at Edward.

Shadowed eyes stared back at him.

“Good answer, Adrian,” Ben congratulated him. “We should mingle a little more, right?”

Adrian shook hands with Mr. Wright, too, as Ben whispered something to Edward that he didn't catch.

"Are they together?" Adrian asked as the couple was out of earshot.

"No. Just close friends."

"What did Ben tell you?"

A small smile lit up Edward's lips. "I can't tell you. It's a secret." His genuine smile faded fast as another man approached them.

Adrian looked at the stranger, more and more curious about the crowd. This one was in his forties, and he appeared strong and bulky under his nicely tailored suit. His entire demeanor expressed aggressiveness, and Adrian felt an itch like he needed to take a fighting stance. His eyes and hair were both dark. The hair was cut short, military-style, and he didn't appear to manscape like Ben. The planes of his face were harsh, and his lips were turned outwards, in an almost vulgar manner. As he got closer, he towered over both of them with his height. In a nutshell, he was intimidating, and Adrian didn't like Edward's reaction to him.

"If it isn't Eddy boy," the stranger said as he stopped in front of them, both hands in his pockets, making no sign that he even noticed Adrian's presence.

"Brown," Edward acknowledged the newcomer stiffly.

"Hmm. I see you have a new plaything with you."

Adrian made a small move, but Edward caught his arm. "He's not a plaything. Feel free to mistreat your partners as you see fit, Brown. Now, we have things to do, and you're standing in our way."

Brown didn't appear to care about Edward's words and moved toward Adrian. Then, abruptly, he grabbed Adrian's crotch. Just as fast, Adrian closed his hand on the massive wrist and squeezed.

Edward was scandalized. "Brown, cut it off," he whispered angrily.

"Or what?"

"Or I'll break your fucking arm," Adrian said calmly.

To his surprise, Brown let go of his crotch. An ugly smirk split his face. "I thought playthings were to be used. I like the strong ones best. A real challenge to break."

"He's not a plaything," Edward said again.

“Let’s go,” Adrian said and took Edward’s arm. “He’s not only an asshole, but he’s also mentally challenged.”

“What did you say?” Brown pushed himself in his face.

“I will call security if need be. You know the rules, Brown.” Edward began to scout the room and raised his arm.

Brown caught it and pulled it down. “No need to get your panties in a twist, Eddy. I was just messing around with you.”

“And I’d rather you didn’t.”

“I bet.”

Edward didn’t care to reply to that and just walked away. Adrian kept the staring contest for a few moments until Brown moved, too.

“What the fuck was that?” Adrian asked.

They were now climbing the grand staircase to the first floor, where music and laughter could be heard.

“An unfortunate incident. Let’s not make too much of it. He’s just someone who enjoys testing boundaries.”

Adrian wanted to know more, but then he realized what all was about. “I can’t believe it. It’s fucking high school all over again.”

“High school?” Edward appeared surprised at his words.

“Well, so far, we’ve met the guy who’s been crushing on you for years, your BFF and his quiet companion, a frigging bully... What’s next?”

“Next is some real fun, the kind I can bet you never had in high school,” Edward replied.

They were now on the first floor, and Adrian stopped dead in his tracks. Sex club was, after all, a good definition of the place. There were dancing poles around which sexy dancers floated, a real sex show on what looked like a stage with couples in various positions of intercourse and images projected on the walls with close-ups of sex acts, as well.

“Oh,” Adrian managed to say. “Okay. Just like any sex club in the world, I guess.”

Edward laughed. “Right. Let’s get to our places and enjoy the show.”

“You won’t let me fuck you. How the hell am I supposed to enjoy this?”

“I’m certain you can show restraint. And we’re here also to find a few things about your true nature.”

“There’s hardly any need for that,” Adrian replied. “I can tell you directly. I’m a horny dude who wants nothing but to get into your pants and stay there for a while.”

“Around you,” Edward gestured, “do you see anything you like?”

Adrian shrugged. “They’re all fucking sexy. But I’d rather do you.”

“Good,” Edward said shortly. “Now, let’s take place at our table.”

They had a table. Adrian just shook his head. All right, he had seen striptease shows, pole dancers, and people fucking. But everything around them right now was much more than that and far beyond.

He joined Edward at a table on which expensive drinks were neatly arranged. He sank into the plush loveseat and enjoyed the proximity he had to share with Edward. “Can I at least kiss you?”

Edward seemed amused. The light was subdued here, making everything look more erotic. “I took care of your needs at home. And I hope you don’t intend to take me in front of everyone.”

Adrian sighed. “You have a point there. I wouldn’t want these perverts to start looking at you, thinking they could have a piece of you.”

“You assume that I’m more liked than I actually am. Poor William is not the norm; I can assure you.”

“Why does Brown have it in for you? Did any of his boyfriends run to you in the past?”

Edward sighed. “He’s like that toward everyone. It’s what he does.” He shifted in his place and looked away for a moment.

Adrian could bet there was more to that story, too. But he pretended not to care, anyway. He was there to run some serious research.

A pretty twink dressed in a skimpy outfit made from a tight pair of shorts and a top that stopped just above his perky nipples materialized to their table and placed menus in front of them without a word. Strangely enough, he bowed rather stiffly, a contrast to his provocative clothes. He walked away, and Adrian started curiously after him. He didn’t make an effort to swing his hips.

“Why is he pissed?” he asked the first thing that came to his mind.

“Normally,” Edward replied, “the waiters would wear their normal uniform. Someone seems to have been in the mood for a little practical joke tonight. They wanted to make things a little kitschy. You know, like we’ve just walked in the gay version of Hooters.”

“So that little waiter is pissed about having to walk around in those tight shorts?”

“You can say that. Germaine is a perfect waiter. He doesn’t appreciate such jokes.”

“Then why is he here?”

“Just like anyone else, for the money.”

Adrian shrugged. He then noticed that there were two pairs of menus, one with royal blue covers, and another the color of red wine. “Why are there so many menus?” he asked.

Edward smiled enigmatically at him. “Let’s see, shall we?”

Adrian picked the red menu. A cursory look over the words in there made his eyes as big as saucers. “Wow.”

“I knew you would say that. Shall we pick something?” Edward winked at him.

Mike stood there, motionless for a while, taking in his own reflection in the glass doors. Jared had been right about everything, down to the last details, such as the way his hair curled right above the collar of his shirt. He looked good, better than he ever recalled, and it made him feel a little out of place like he was no longer living inside his own skin.

“Going in, Mike?” One of the guys in Accounting who had always been friendly toward him as that appeared to be his natural personality, patted him on the back.

“Yes,” he murmured and joined the flock of employees flooding the venue booked for the event.

He sat at the table with some guys from the IT department, as it appeared to be some unwritten rule about sticking to the people who were in the same field, but paid little attention to the food or the conversation, the humming of bees around him.

All he could think about was Ryan and the promised dance. He couldn’t fathom how they were supposed to dance together in that room fully packed with people. Also, there was no music and no dance ring. When Ryan took the microphone and began congratulating everyone for a job well done, regarding a big project the company had been involved with for the last few weeks, Mike became suddenly focused.

Not that he listened to the words. A few employees were called forward and presented with accolades for their activity, a sign of appreciation from the management. There was a bit of a ruckus as the respective employees expressed their delight and gratefulness at being singled out. Ryan insisted that the whole team, the entire company, was responsible for their latest resounding success, without making everyone feel left out. At the same time, he let everyone know, between the lines, that hard work would always be rewarded.

Mike was thankful for not being called out. He didn't know how he would manage shaking hands with Ryan, touching him, in front of everyone. Yet, a feeling of excitement nestled in the pit of his stomach. Tonight, at some magical moment, like Cinderella, he would dance with the prince. Details didn't matter.

Apparently, there was a dance ring, only that it was located in a different room where everyone started to move as the food began to settle in their bellies, along with the exquisite drinks served. While some couples courageously attacked the dancefloor, showing off their prowess in more than just business matters, others preferred to mingle. Mike gravitated between groups, not that he liked to do that on purpose, but because different people called him out, asking him this and that. A few of his female coworkers congratulated him on his new look, which left him embarrassed and a bit flushed.

He had no recollection of how he ended almost bumping into Ryan. His boss turned graciously around and asked him in a loud enough voice for everyone to hear, "Are you okay, Mike?" He had no chance to reply, as a gentle whisper followed. "Meet me on the roof."

The words had been spoken so softly that he was not entirely sure he had heard correctly. What was the way to the roof? He murmured excuses to no one in particular as he found his way out of the ballroom.

An employee in impressive livery was tending the crew in charge of clearing the tables. After a few moments of hesitation, Mike dared to ask him if there was a way to reach the roof.

"Would you like to admire the stars, tonight, sir? We have a few astronomy binoculars installed on the roof."

Mike just nodded and swallowed nervously.

"Right this way, sir," the employee said politely and gestured for him to follow.

He walked out of the elevator and then up the few stairs leading to the door to the roof, barely hearing the latest of the employee's instructions on how to identify the most visible constellations. Inwardly, he felt a bit guilty about not paying attention to the free astronomy lesson generously offered by the employee on their way up.

His heart was in his throat, and as much as the Cinderella comparison had been swirling around in his mind like a broken record, he knew he was just that. For one night, he had transformed, and he was about to dance with his Prince Charming.

It was a bit windy, and Mike shivered slightly. Noticing the binoculars mounted where the employee had told him they would be, he walked over to them. Maybe he would do a little bit of stargazing while waiting for Ryan.

Adjusting the focus proved to be a bit of a technical challenge, but with all things technical, Mike found pleasure in discovering how they worked. Not the same thing could be said about his interactions with other human beings. People were unpredictable, intimidating, challenging.

His fingers played with the center knob. Ryan hadn't said a thing about when to meet. Maybe he had said something, and Mike had missed it, too busy to listen to the pounding of his heart? There was no sure way of telling, and, right now, Mike felt a bit stupid and childish. He had rushed to the roof with one thing on his mind.

The stars were bright tonight, or the pollution wasn't as bad as usual. Mike sighed. Through the lenses, they seemed so close, yet they were so far away.

"Are you interested in astronomy?"

Mike turned on his heels at the sound of that voice, managing to smack one shoulder against the mount. "Not until tonight."

Could he be any more nervous? The warm wind brushed Ryan's hair, played with it, as the distance between them grew smaller and smaller.

"Can I have this dance?" Ryan offered him one hand.

Mike took it, wondering briefly if his palm wasn't too clammy already and whether Ryan would be put off by that. "There's no music," he pointed out.

Ryan smiled and, even in the blue light that shone on them from the roof illumination system, drawing shadows around them, Mike could tell how gorgeous the man in front of him was. Now he understood that expression, 'so happy you could die'. It was fitting. Mike couldn't care about anything in the world right at that moment. He was swept off his feet, hopelessly in love.

Ryan didn't let go of his hand as he used the free one to pull a small white case from his pocket. Wireless headphones. Sure, how obvious was that? Mike wondered and took them. A closer look told him that Ryan already had his on.

Only for a couple of moments, Ryan let go of his hand to select the song they would dance to.

"I should warn you," Mike said. "My two left feet are bad left feet."

Ryan caressed his cheek briefly and pushed his phone back into his pocket. "Just follow my lead. You'll be all right."

Mike nodded. Ryan circled his waist with one arm, resting his palm flat against the small of his back. He took Mike's hand with the other, linking their fingers together. The music flooded his ears, and Mike's eyes grew wide. "Are we really going to waltz?"

Ryan couldn't quite hear him, so Mike did what he had been told. He leaned into Ryan's first move, and his feet, his two left feet, the bad ones, suddenly were touched by magic, because they fell in synch with Ryan's rhythm and with the sound of music.

They were swirling around, and Mike didn't feel dizzy at all, even if he had never liked getting into a Merry-go-round, not even as a kid. His gaze was drowning in Ryan's dark one, and for now, they were connected, moving like a single body, in complete harmony.

He was either uncovering a hidden talent for dancing, or Ryan was a master of the waltz. Most probably, it was the latter because Mike was pretty sure he had no superpowers.

Everything was perfect, the sweet air of the evening, the warmth of Ryan's body, their eyes never leaving each other. Mike felt, deep in his gut, that this would be a memory he would fondly recall for years and years.

The music stopped, and so did Ryan. And Mike crushed into him, as he failed to realize he was supposed to stop, too.

"Sorry," he said, and he looked up.

Ryan kissed him, and Mike's mind exploded to smithereens, incapable of dealing with the assault. It was a deep, passionate kiss, and he couldn't recall anyone else ever kissing him so completely. It wasn't just a kiss; it was the fusion of two human beings, and they were there for each other like all the lovers of the world had always been.

And then the kiss was over. Ryan removed the headphones from his ears, and Mike mimicked his action, offering the tiny pods back to their rightful owner. The headphones disappeared into one pocket, and Mike followed the gesture.

"Mike," Ryan started.

Mike looked up, afraid of what he might see. Ryan was serious, the corners of his mouth dropping. The magic from their dance on the roof was gone.

"I can't be with you."

He nodded, not knowing what he could say to that or what was expected from him.

"No, you must listen."

"All right," Mike murmured.

"I want you like I can't recall wanting someone," Ryan said. "But there is something you need to know. Where I worked before, there was a scandal."

Mike's ears perked up. "What sort of scandal?"

Ryan took a step back as if he needed to put some distance between them for what he was about to say. “A sex scandal. The worst type. I was accused of sexual harassment.”

Mike licked his lips, feeling them dry like paper. Hadn't his friends alluded at the possibility of people seeing them together as some sort of precisely that? But Mike knew that wasn't it. He was shy and awkward and remote from social life as one could possibly be, but he knew what was happening between Ryan and him. “That's not what's happening here, with us,” he said with a stubbornness he had no idea he possessed.

Ryan let out a small frustrated sound. “Mike, you're not listening. I was accused of that.”

“I don't believe it,” Mike said with conviction.

“You don't know me. Are you going to tell me that you would believe me if I said I was innocent?”

“Yes.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that. I know you enough.”

Ryan laughed softly. “Never change, Micah, please, never change.”

“My friend Jared says the same.”

“He's a smart one then.”

For a few seconds, they remained silent. Mike pondered over his next few words, but then he asked, “What happened?”

“Are you sure you want to know?”

“Yes.”

“All right.” Another sigh followed. “I made the mistake of dating an employee. He told me to keep it a secret, arguing that others would think he was privileged by his relationship with me. I agreed. At the time, it didn't seem like such a big deal, and I didn't need disruptions at the workplace. And, then, quite suddenly, he turned on me. Or maybe not so suddenly. Things had started to grow stale in our relationship. No, he didn't come to me to break off the relationship. He sent his lawyer.”

“What a jerk,” Mike murmured.

Ryan rewarded him with another smile. “I thought I knew him. But, apparently, that wasn't the case. Secrets have a way of being found out. When some other employees confronted him, he

blamed me, said that I was the one forcing myself on him. At first, I was angered. But, at the same time, I didn't want to destroy his life, as much as he wanted to destroy mine. Actually, that wasn't quite true. He only wanted money."

"And what happened after that?"

"I settled." Ryan pushed one hand through his hair. "God knows how awful I still feel about it. It was an admission of guilt, and I had to do it so that I didn't hurt the company's reputation. At least, that was what my lawyer convinced me to believe. There was also the matter of the other employees who knew about the so-called sexual harassment. So, part of the deal was for me to transfer to another workplace."

"That's unfair," Mike said, a bit too loudly.

Ryan snorted. "Are you telling me about it? It feels like I didn't learn my lesson, though. The first thing I do once I land here is to pick you up from a bar."

"I would never do this kind of thing to you," Mike said stubbornly, closing his fists and taking a stance.

Ryan shook his head and looked down, his shoulders slumped. "It doesn't matter. As I say, things like this, they always come to light."

"I would never accuse you of anything," Mike said, with growing desperation.

"Yet, others might. I'm sorry, Mike. You don't even know how much. But in the world we live in today, rumors spread like wildfire, and the truth is weak and can't put it out, no matter how much you struggle."

Mike swallowed, feeling a little sick to the stomach. "Then why did you call me here? Why did you dance with me? Why did you kiss me?"

Ryan pushed both hands through his hair and pulled at it to the point that it looked painful. "Because I wanted this memory with you. I can't abandon my position. My family made it clear that I should keep clean of any scandals and that I need to make things work."

"They don't believe you?" Mike shouted and then covered his mouth quickly.

"They do. But they also care about the business that made the Armstrong family into the wealthy influential name it is today. For everyone's sake, I need to give up on you, but I wanted you to know that it's not with an easy heart that I do this. Goodbye, Mike. I wish I could have come to know you better."

Ryan caressed his shoulder in passing as he walked away. Mike stood there, petrified. Was that it? Everything? The end? Ryan hadn't even asked him if he would move to another company. For him, it felt like a given that they needed to go their separate ways.

It wasn't fair. It sucked like hell.

"You're busy? On Saturday night?" Jared didn't like the sound of his own voice as he said that.

"I wanted to see you just as badly," Chris replied.

Jared would have liked to see Chris and look him in the eyes when he came up with these excuses. That would have given him the chance to see if they were just excuses or the truth. But, over the phone, he had to settle for whatever Chris wanted to happen.

Maybe he was getting a bit paranoid. Or maybe he wasn't paranoid enough. Just as he wanted to talk to Chris about the nature of their relationship, this had to happen. It was like something always slipping through his fingers.

"All right. I suppose it can't be helped," Jared said, trying to make his voice sound light and unworried.

There was a small silence at the other end. "We will see each other soon."

How soon? As much as he wanted to ask that, he decided to keep his mouth shut for the moment. There was no point in getting pushy or clingy. Jared hoped he wasn't that pathetic. He had wanted a relationship, and relationships were work. That was something he really needed to keep in mind if he wanted to make things work. They were just at the beginning of their relationship, whatever it was.

"All right. Have fun working or something," Jared joked.

Chris chuckled. The sound of his laugh was making Jared feel as if something was tickling his ear. Maybe he was too serious for his age.

"Will you be all right? Will you find something to do since our plans fell through?"

"Are you kidding me? I'm a young dude in a city filled with possibilities."

"I hope you're joking," Chris teased.

"Yeah, you caught me. I have Internet access. There's always something to do."

"Just make sure not to tire your pretty eyes."

"Okay, mom. Just go to work already."

“See you soon, beautiful.”

Jared sighed after he finished the conversation. That was great; what could he say? Mike was living his fairy tale, Adrian was living his kinky fairy tale, and he was stuck at home on Saturday night.

As if someone could read his mind, his phone rang. Jared stared for a second at the caller’s ID and then took the call. Chris wasn’t the only one who could brag about having to work on that Saturday evening.

“Jared, hey, long time no see,” the energetic voice he knew quite well began.

“Hi, Sam. What’s the deal?”

“Straight to business, right?”

“I know how much you hate wasting time.”

“Great. I know it’s a long stretch, but do you think you have the time for a little meeting?”

“As it happens, my plans for the evening didn’t happen, so I’m free.”

“Excellent! Then, here’s the deal. I have this little sunshine with me --”

“Oh, this is bad,” Jared moaned.

“No, no, she’s a darling, really, but she has this idea that she should meet the photographer who will take her pictures before --”

“Wait, I didn’t agree to anything,” Jared said and smiled. It was fun to tease Sam once in a while.

“You’re killing me here. Please say ‘yes’. She’ll pay for your time, including tonight. Plus, she’s paying for dinner,” Sam said cheerfully. “And not just anywhere. Let’s just say that this restaurant has one shiny Michelin star, and it just got it.”

“No way. So I should dress nicely, then.”

“Put on your best suit. And, of course, keep your hopes low about the food. Some people might survive on leaves, but I’ll get a burger before going.”

“That’s a good idea,” Jared admitted. “So, do you care to share more details about this job?”

Sam began talking quickly, and Jared listened carefully. As usual, the guy had a penchant for mixing gossip with technical details, and he had to pay attention if he wanted to do his job well.

“You’re so young and pretty,” the lady who was picking the tab for the dinner said in a falsetto voice.

Little sunshine. Yes, it sort of worked for her, seeing how sparkly she was. But Jared knew exactly what he needed to do to make sure that her pictures turned out all right. In a way, Sam’s idea hadn’t been bad at all. Jared also liked to get to know his clients a bit, especially when they were supposed to sit in front of a camera.

“Will you show me to the little girls’ room?” The client batted her eyelashes at him.

Jared exchanged a glance with Sam, who shrugged and sipped from his glass like it was entirely reasonable for middle-aged ladies to ask such things.

“Sure,” Jared said and stood up. He also needed to ask one of the employees to guide them in that direction, but he didn’t want to offend the client.

As they were there, Jared chose to remain at a respectful distance. He studied the large fern that served as a functional divider so that nobody could observe the clients going in and out of the toilet. From behind the greenery, however, one could have a good look at the reception desk; behind it, a man with a caricature mustache was inspecting the patrons quietly and wrote something in a little book.

For Jared, it was a common pastime to observe people. As he tried to say stories when taking pictures, it helped him to note down mentally the tiniest transformation that happened on a human face.

In this case, the caricature mustache stretched and curled up as its owner smiled affably. A couple of men in suits then blocked Jared’s line of sight.

“Oh, certainly,” the mustache man said in an exaggerated voice. “A table for Mr. Reeves and,” there was a short pause, “Mr. Reeves.”

Jared froze and took in two strangers. No mistake, that was Chris. Was he there with a business partner? But Mr. Reeves and... Mr. Reeves?

The other man turned, and Jared stared at his profile. He was handsome, as they say, in a classic way, and he could be in his thirties by how he carried himself. He leaned toward Chris and laughed. “I’ve always loved the sound of that. Mr. and Mr. Reeves.”

When Chris turned, any doubts Jared might have had disappeared from his mind. “As I do, too.”

The two shared a smile that spoke of a long relationship and tacit understanding. Jared felt the ground under his feet shaking. Chris and the other Mr. Reeves followed the receptionist’s indications to reach their table, luckily in a part of the restaurant that was out of sight.

“Are you all right, dear?”

Jared shook his head and turned to face his client. The lady seemed genuinely worried.

“I’m fine, Mrs. Daniels,” he murmured.

“You look a little pale. Please don’t tell me you can’t hold your liquor. I should have never forced you to drink with me.”

“No, no, I’m fine, please don’t worry,” Jared said politely.

Polite. That was what he was. So polite that he had failed to ask Chris for some semblance of commitment, the way he saw it. And now, Chris was sitting somewhere in the same restaurant, with his – what? husband? – having the time of his life.

He could confront him, make a scene, but that wasn’t him, Jared thought. No, for now, he would go back to his table, see about his business meeting, which was real, and pretend that all was fine in the universe. His crumbled dreams played no role in any of this.

Chapter Twelve - The Awakening Of Edward Hastings

Adrian munched on his lower lip as his eyes danced on the menu in front of him. Rich people did nothing by half, or so it seemed. “So we can have our balls licked and stuff?” he asked Edward directly.

Edward chuckled. “I would like to believe that you feel more adventurous than this, Adrian.”

“Also, all this, I want you to do it to me, not someone else,” Adrian added.

“It wouldn’t count as cheating,” Edward said.

“Why? Some dudes would come and perform this sort of stuff on us, right?” If he looked around, he could tell some of the patrons were already serviced by personnel specially trained. Not far from them, a beautiful twink was jizzing in a guy’s glass. His companion had probably ordered a blowjob or a ball licking by the expression of pure ecstasy on his face and how funny the table seemed to move.

All right, that stuff was getting his cock rock hard, but he had a different perspective from Edward.

“It would be just a rendered service,” Edward explained.

“Nope. It would be cheating,” Adrian concluded. “So, no, we won’t order anything.”

“Just look a little more,” Edward insisted. “You can’t disappoint me like this.”

Adrian had a mind to argue, even if it could put him on Edward’s bad side. It was a risk he was willing to take. After all, they were in an exclusive relationship, and he wanted to make sure that his partner understood it. Also, he had an inkling that Edward was still testing him, and he didn’t plan on losing. As appealing as the idea of having beautiful twinks swallowing his cock was, Adrian liked to believe that he had started to be a bit more elevated lately, mainly because of Edward.

Even if it wasn’t a relationship in the old fashioned sense of the term, what he had with Edward trampled everything else, regardless of how exciting it sounded on paper. He continued to read the special menu just to convince Edward that he was giving it as much thought as possible.

“What’s this?” Adrian pointed at the bottom of the page at the golden symbol that appeared to be a key crossed by heavily drawn metal bars. When he touched the symbol, he realized it was embossed.

Edward grimaced. “Just Brown’s repertoire being included because he’s a bastard who likes to flaunt his abilities.”

“Brown? That bully from before?”

Edward nodded and pretended to look at the menu, although Adrian could tell he had to know it by heart by now.

“All right, we’ll do that, then.”

Edward quirked an eyebrow. “You don’t even know what it is about.”

“What is it about?”

“A vulgar display of Brown’s ability to break into his current acquisition.”

“So it’s a show. Does it take place in a dungeon or something?”

“Close enough. The basement. Why would you want to watch a BDSM show, Adrian?”

“Because this guy got to you and quite easily just earlier. I want to know why.”

“There’s nothing to know,” Edward protested. “He’s annoying, and that’s the end of the story.”

“Well, you told me to pick something from the menu, and I did. So, since you don’t want to say why he bothers you so much, we’re going to watch him. When is this show scheduled?”

“There are a few events that will take place first. Brown’s show, when it happens, is usually the last.”

“Then let’s sip some of these expensive cocktails in the meantime. And I want to kiss you.”

Edward didn’t seem in a good mood anymore. Adrian was sorry for making him uncomfortable, but he wasn’t there to behave like an obedient dog. “If you want to kiss me, you will have to work for it,” Edward said.

Adrian smiled. “So, you want me to make you shine, right?”

“Did I say anything about that?”

“Not directly, but, pretty much, yes. So what’s to do around here to make it happen?”

“Adrian, I don’t intend to lend you to anyone, and I know you’re not the type to sell out, so that leaves us with not so much. I would have liked you to prove your prowess by ordering as much as you could from the menu, but you are stubborn.”

“And you don’t get it,” Adrian replied. It was funny to be the one with a clear head for a change. “All these handsome men around me don’t amount to how much sexiness you have in your pinky. How about that?”

Edward stared at him, and then he smiled. “It was a mistake to bring you here. I’m afraid you want a relationship.”

“I’m not falling for that trap, Edward. You are not by far as sneaky as you think yourself to be. I want to fuck you, and I think you’re sexy as hell, but I have zero feelings for you.” Just as he spoke the words, Adrian was fully aware he was lying through his teeth. He just hoped Edward wouldn’t read him.

“Then why refuse to indulge in this sex buffet?” Edward gestured around them.

Adrian shrugged. “Once you taste caviar, you don’t just go back to eating corndogs on the street.”

“Is that supposed to be a compliment?”

Adrian smiled and placed one hand on Edward’s thigh, as high as he could. “Take it as you want. And we’ll see what this Brown guy is made of. I bet he’s lame.”

“Actually,” Edward pursed his lips, “he’s quite good at what he does.”

“Oh, so you admire him. That explains a few things.”

“I don’t admire him. Where do you get such ideas?”

“I’m not going to reply to that. I see you’re a bit pissed, and I think you’re frigging sexy with pouty lips like this. It makes me want to give your sexy mouth a workout.”

Edward blushed and averted his eyes. Adrian had a feeling that he was starting to get what Edward was really about. He was on the right path. As superior and almighty as Edward acted, there was something he wanted that no one was supposed to learn about him.

“I need to go to the bathroom. I hope you’ll be even more pissed when I get back.”

Edward threw him a killer look. Adrian just needed a small pretext to get the lay of the land, and that without Edward following his every move. He could always pretend that he got lost a little if his absence were too long.

On his way through the rows of tables where shameless sex acts happened in full display, Adrian noticed the waiter from earlier walking toward what looked to be a well-stocked bar. He reached for him and caught his elbow slightly. Germaine turned on his heels with an annoyed expression on his pretty face but schooled it into a neutral demeanor the moment he set eyes on Adrian.

“How can I help you, sir?”

“It’s actually Adrian.” He hoped his friendly tone would out the waiter at ease, but no such luck.

“I’m not allowed to call patrons by their names.”

“Okay, cool. Listen, could you please give me some pointers? What’s around here to do to, you know, make my partner look good?”

Germaine threw him a sidelong glance. "You are here with Mr. Hastings."

"Yes."

"You don't appear to be his usual style."

"Correct." Adrian was increasingly curious about where that was going.

"Then I surmise that the," Germaine hesitated for a second as if he was careful to choose the right words, "temptations around don't appeal to you."

Adrian shrugged. "Color me not impressed."

His remark was met with a thin smile. "I don't quite believe you, but you do appear clever enough not to give in. It's all but a shiny bubble."

"Hmm," Adrian acknowledged Germaine's description of the orgy surrounding them.

"There is the contest, of course, but, usually, it is all about who appears to be the most depraved."

"The contest?"

Germaine moved closer to him, holding his tray so that he could disguise their conversation as something related to drinks and the like. "Masters bring their playthings here," he said, as his voice dropped to a whisper, "so that they could prove themselves better than the rest. It's all a pissing contest if you're asking me, but they use pawns for it. I don't see you going low for this kind of thing."

"Hmm, and is there anything, in particular, I should know about this contest so that I can increase my chances to earn first place?"

Germaine seemed taken aback by Adrian's question. "Are you like the rest, then?"

"No way." Adrian could bet his smile was proof enough because he noticed Germaine returning it. "And your effort is much appreciated. I tip well."

"People don't tip here. It is understood that we're paid enough, so there is no need for such commonplace practices. Assholes."

Adrian could bet Germaine could use being tipped. He got that. "Well, I'm not like most people here. So if I say that I tip, I will."

"All right. Just for the record, I'm not holding my breath, no offense."

"None taken. I'll let facts prove my worth. Now, shoot."

“The judges are a bunch of ill-mannered, sarcastic, and jaded pricks. They believe they have seen everything and tried everything. It takes a certain amount of twisted perversion to prevent them from yawning. So, you must shock them if you want to prove yourself.”

“Okay. Anything else?”

“The prize is more than just bragging rights for the owner. It’s also a ten grand check.”

Adrian chuckled. “What a bunch of cheapskates. I bet that’s pocket change for them.”

“It is,” Germaine admitted with a sigh. “And it adds to their greed of seeing other people groveling at their feet for what they consider peanuts. What I want to warn you about is that others won’t hesitate to throw all their dignity out the window for this. Not only for the money but also for the vain hope that they could become part of this world. So, be aware.”

“Thank you for the warning. And I won’t forget that you helped me.”

“All right. The best of luck, Adrian. It should start in ten minutes, so you should hurry.”

Germaine offered him the last details when Adrian felt a shadow hovering over them. The next thing he saw was a paw grabbing Germaine’s chest. “What’s up, tits?”

Germaine turned red as a beet and tried to move away from the invasion.

“If it isn’t Brown the Bully,” Adrian said. “Aren’t plenty of naked people willing to be abused around here? Why do you have to harass the working staff?”

Brown stopped fondling Germaine’s chest. The waiter seized the opportunity and scurried away. “Eddy’s nasty gorilla.”

Adrian snorted. “Better a gorilla than an oversized squirrel.”

Brown quirked an eyebrow.

“Earlier, you were all after my nuts,” Adrian explained.

Brown laughed. He pointed a finger at Adrian. “You think you’re funny.”

“And you just sexually harassed a waiter. For the record, he’s not on the menu.”

Brown’s grin turned crooked. “Germaine has something up his ass. But I like the ones who play hard to get the best.”

“Something tells me he isn’t playing hard to get. He just doesn’t like you.”

“I can have dozens of boys like him,” Brown replied.

“Then go fondle their tits,” Adrian shot back. “This guy just isn’t into you.”

“And you know this how?” Brown narrowed his eyes and watched Adrian carefully. “You’ve been here for five minutes tops, plaything.”

Brown wanted to rile him up, but Adrian was prepared. “His nipples turned inward, disgusted by your touch.”

“Again, funny. Not.”

“I don’t give a damn what you think, and I’m not here to entertain you, anyway.”

Brown laughed, a loud, obnoxious laugh. “So far, you’ve proven yourself plenty entertaining, trust me. But if you hope to be the one and only for that exquisite diamond lily you came with, you’re wrong. He doesn’t need you or anyone like you. Let’s say it’s not your fault. Your blood runs red, and his is blue.”

“That was almost poetic,” Adrian said and offered an all-knowing grin. “Some people might believe you chose the wrong hobby.”

For a moment, Brown seemed unsure of whether he understood Adrian’s allusion or not.

“I convinced Edward to attend your little show. I’m curious.”

Brown quirked an eyebrow, and then his lips stretched into a smile. “Good job, plaything. You’re basically bringing Eddy exactly where I want him to be.”

“Edward doesn’t like you at all. For me, he will endure the ordeal of watching you playing dom to some unfortunate fellow.”

“Oh, we will see about that,” Brown said and made his teeth flash for an instant.

Adrian did feel a bit unsettled, but he chose not to show it. “We’re going to sit in the back and laugh all the time.”

“Immature,” Brown commented. “But that’s Eddy’s MO for playing safe. He would never fall for a man-child, hence his criteria for choosing his playthings. You won’t last long. Now, I should mingle with people of my own status. If I were to spend too much time with you, I might get contaminated by your middle-class mannerisms. And I can’t have that. Toodles!”

Really, who said that these days? Adrian had to admit he was intrigued. And now he needed to rush and get himself registered for the contest. Edward must be fuming by now, he thought, but he also believed that he would be forgiven once he proved himself.

Getting accepted and allowed to climb on the stage had been a breeze, but now Adrian was staring in stunned silence at a young man flexing himself with all his might. At the same time, the judges, a colorful group featuring all ages and fashion styles, appeared to be anything but interested in the display in front of them. He had no idea the human body could be that flexible. It seemed that everyone was willing to test his limits once he got there, and that made Adrian despise equally the rich dudes throwing such contests and those who felt desperate enough to participate.

“Adrian, Adrian!” Someone called for him in an irritated voice.

Adrian looked down and saw Edward, who was struggling to draw his attention. He crouched and waved at Edward, who rolled his eyes and walked closer. “What’s up, boss? Or should I call you master?”

Edward pursed his lips. “Get down from there,” he whispered angrily. “This is no place for you. I chose you because I thought you wouldn’t be interested in such mundane things as money.”

“Your Majesty,” Adrian said lovingly, “I’m here to make you proud.”

“Nonsense,” Edward jabbered on. “These people only make fools of themselves. Are you this willing to play their game?”

Adrian chuckled. “Don’t worry. I won’t play their game; I’m going to break it.” With that, he stood up and walked over to the line, without one look back. Edward would just have to wait and see.

He was the only one with all his clothes on, but Adrian hoped that would make the judges pay attention to him in particular in that sea of naked bodies. The spectators were in a frenzy, catcalling, and throwing dirty words at the naked men on stage.

Adrian pretended not to see anything. He knew exactly what he needed to do. So, when he walked in front of the savage group of judges, he was ready.

“And what are you supposed to show us,” one of the judges searched his name, “Adrian?”

“Me, not much, and that’s exactly the point. I am a master of restraint.”

A man in a feathery hat all colors of the rainbow leaned forward and watched him through crystal-studded eyelashes. How he could see anything was beyond Adrian’s comprehension. “Enlighten us.”

“Bring anyone here, have him do whatever he thinks he can do, and I won’t get it up for him,” Adrian said with determination.

“So you’re impotent,” the judge shouted, making the entire room burst into laughter.

No, the situation wouldn't get out of hand, Adrian decided. Well aware of the sardonic smile on his lips that made the one on the judge's face fade, he said it loud and clear, "No, there's only one person who does it for me. For him, and only him, I can be hard for hours." He knew Edward was watching him, but Adrian didn't plan on turning and looking back because that would have weakened his resolve.

"That's an interesting skill," another judge commented. This one appeared older and wore a perfectly tailored suit. "But we want to see you naked."

"No deal," Adrian replied.

"You're out of line," the older judge said. "You don't make the rules here."

"Rules are boring," Adrian said and made sure that the judge's eyes met his. "I don't care for rules."

The judges whispered to one another. Eventually, the eccentric one said, "Fine. But you must allow the others to touch your cock. I suppose you would at least let us see that. You know, to judge just how limp it can be while being stimulated by our finest pleasure givers."

Laughter followed. Adrian shrugged. "Okay."

"And, to make sure that you are not simply an impotent brought in our midst to have us look like fools, your owner will have to come on stage and prove to everyone he can get you hard. With just a touch."

Adrian tensed. If Edward said 'no' to that, the plan would fall through. There was silence, and all the judges looked past him, obviously at the person who needed to agree to that.

"It's all right," Edward said, quite loudly. "I'll let Adrian prove himself first."

Adrian exhaled. "Then bring it on," he said, and the eccentric judge gestured for a group of young men dressed in scanty clothes to come forward. They smiled like the world was their oyster; Adrian begged to differ.

Adrian winced while his cock was licked, sucked, and rubbed for the umpteenth time. At this point, he was starting to get worried over being able to get it up for Edward. His resolve had been steel. It hadn't been easy, but it hadn't been hard either, pun intended. All he had to do had been to look around and see that flashy world for what it was. They fooled themselves over being in it for the pleasure, but Adrian only saw the glint of greed in some eyes, and that of ugly satisfaction at making other human beings behave like that on the faces of the ones in charge.

If he had been there only for the kink, he would have enjoyed the show for what it was and for the kink. He would have skipped the ugly bits, and skimmed over others, and gotten his pleasure as usual.

But now, he was involved, and under the harsh lights projected on stage for better viewing, many of those around him looked ugly under all that polish. He drew one deep breath when he was finally left alone.

“Well?” He turned toward the judges.

The one with the feathery hat pushed a long pencil against Adrian’s flaccid penis, bending over the table awkwardly. “I am, indeed, impressed. It’s unconventional, and we’re all here about achieving satisfaction. But, yes, you convinced us. There is only one last part. I hope your owner can make you come. I seriously doubt you have a working sex organ there at this point.”

Edward jumped on the stage. He appeared slightly flushed, and Adrian realized that being on display like that must have had that effect on him. Right now, he didn’t know whether it was a good or a bad thing. Adrian grunted and forced a smile as Edward’s smooth hand covered his cock. Their eyes met. Then Edward moved his away. “I will make him hard, but I will not have him come for you because there is no such agreement.”

The judges gasped in collective indignation. Apparently, Adrian wasn’t the only one breaking the rules tonight. He lost himself in the sea of green as he stared into Edward’s eyes. Not getting it up? What a joke. Edward only had to wrap his hand around him, and his cock grew to full length.

Edward only turned him slightly so that everyone could see. Adrian didn’t care. He was proud of his cock, but mostly, he was proud of the man beside him. Edward pushed his cock back inside his dress pants, making him grunt. Now the problem was to get it back to sleep. But it was a small suffering compared to how shocked everyone seemed to be.

Adrian leaned in and whispered in Edward’s ear, “Did I break the game or what?”

“We are not satisfied at all, and, just for the record, no one should ever try to pull the same prank on us again, but,” the judge with the enormous hat said, “in the light of how interested everyone has been in this contest round compared to our past sessions, it is our unanimous decision to offer the prize to Mr. Adrian Rossi.”

Everyone clapped as if on cue.

“I think I must collect my check,” Adrian said to Edward.

Edward stopped him. “If you want to break the game for real, you shouldn’t.”

“Just wait and see,” Adrian promised.

He took the check and stared at it, while the judges fawned over him for a while. Not satisfied, my ass, Adrian thought. “Thanks for the dough,” he said and jumped off the stage.

Everyone followed him with their eyes. Adrian made himself way through the sea of people until his eyes fell on the person he wanted to see. Germaine’s eyes turned into saucers when Adrian dropped the check on his tray. “I told you I tip well.” And then he added, “Maybe split it with the others?” He gestured to the other waiters leaning against the bar, in as much shock as everyone else.

“Sure,” Germaine said, and his face stretched into a smile.

The working staff began clapping now, and this time, Adrian knew that their admiration and gratitude were genuine. If the other people in the room took offense, they either knew how to hide it well, or they were in too much shock to understand what had just happened. In their perfect little world, most probably, no one believed that a guy below their station could give away that kind of money on what seemed like a whim.

Adrian liked to believe that it was a calculated move. In that world, in which he only had to be because of Edward, he needed allies with eyes and ears everywhere. Yes, calculated, he told himself once more as he watched Edward walking over to him. The green eyes were shining, and Adrian couldn’t recall seeing them like that. There was a key to that man’s heart, and Adrian believed that he had just found it.

“I think we need to withdraw to one of the private rooms for a little breather,” Edward said, loud enough for those around them to take a hint.

They did appear interested in making his acquaintance now, but Adrian couldn’t care less. Now he just wanted to see the inside of a private room in that place. Edward linked one hand around his arm and guided him away from the crowd.

Adrian plopped down on the fluffy pillows on the giant bed and put on a smirk. “So, Master,” he said as he placed his hands under his head and crossed his ankles, “what did you think?”

Edward began pacing the room. There was a sort of energy going through him, and Adrian was curious to learn all about it. “That was... different, Adrian!”

“Yeah, different,” Adrian confirmed. “But did you like it?”

“Why did you do it?”

Adrian paused to think his next words carefully. “Your rich world is full of assholes, Edward, and not the nice kind. I wanted to show them that a middle-class gorilla like myself can take them down a peg or two.”

“So you didn’t do it for me, then?” Edward seemed intrigued.

“I’m not going to lie to you, Edward.” Adrian was well aware he was walking a thin line. But Brown’s words from earlier were still irking him. If he wanted Edward, really wanted him, he needed to show no signs of weakness, no matter how honest they were. “I didn’t think of you at all,” he added, lying through his teeth.

Edward stopped and looked at him. And then, he burst into laughter. “I thought you were an honest man, Adrian.”

Ah, damn, caught. “Hey, I’m trying. I’m still to figure out how to make you fall head over heels with me.”

Edward laughed out loud. “That is an ambitious goal, Adrian. But I don’t fall head over heels. Never.”

“Famous last words,” Adrian said with a smirk. “We’ll see about that.”

“Oh, Adrian,” Edward said, and his voice was now kind, “you see how I live. It’s not that I don’t want to, as you may think. It’s that it’s impossible. I’ve seen everything and tried everything.”

Adrian laughed. “Oh, damn, the plight of the rich. Should I pity you now? I’m here to tell you that all you’ve seen here is one hundred percent garbage.”

“Excuse me?” Edward said, slightly affronted.

“Yeah. Is anyone here in it for anything genuine? That guy put his arm up his own ass to his elbow. And for what? If he had gone to star in some porn movie and done that, at least he would have been paid fair and square.”

Edward seemed a bit puzzled. “So the sex acts around us, tonight, didn’t impress you at all?”

“At first, they did. But it’s not my kind of party.”

“You’ve been to some sex parties before, a lot tamer than this one. I thought you would like this no-restriction type of entertainment.”

Adrian shrugged. “The motivation is all wrong. Fucked up for real. When I went to sex parties before, I was there to feel pleasure pure and simple, not score points on some invisible leaderboard that only some jaded rich people cared about. I understand that everyone’s hanging on this social ladder, but life is more than just about impressing your peers and trying to climb a little higher.”

Edward watched him in disbelief. “Wow, Adrian. I didn’t know you mastered in psychology.”

“I’ve learned some since I work in advertising, and one needs to know how the human mind works. But I’m not a shrink if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Well, I’m impressed. But I feel a bit insulted. Tonight, you looked down on all of us.”

Adrian pushed himself up. “No. Don’t lump yourself with the others. And I did think of you, too. I wanted you to be the top dog for a change, even if only for a little while.” He walked over to Edward and stopped in front of him. “How did it feel?”

Edward cocked his head. His hands were in his pockets, and he didn’t appear interested to touch Adrian. But the eyes didn’t lie. They glinted in the soft, subdued light, and he was licking his lips now and then. “It was exhilarating for a moment. Most of the time, I worried that you would make total fools of us both.”

Adrian put his arms around Edward and pulled him close. “Then you should have a little faith.”

It felt so good to kiss. Edward’s lips were firm and pleasant as they press slightly like they wanted to bite him. Adrian wasn’t at all about doing things by half. He caught Edward’s bottom lip with his teeth, and then he launched a full-scale attack. Edward allowed it for a short while and then pushed him away.

“We’re supposed to be here only so that I can scold you for your behavior. It’s what everyone thinks.”

“I don’t give a fuck what everyone thinks,” Adrian replied. With a wince, he adjusted the snake in his pants. It was enough to kiss Edward once, and he was ready.

“Well, it’s also that show you wanted us to attend. It should start shortly. Unless you changed your mind.” Edward examined his watch.

Adrian had a mind to skip it. But he was here tonight because he needed to know everything about Edward. “Okay, then let’s do that, too. Hey, aren’t you supposed to yell at me now just so that others think you really ripped me a new one?”

Edward laughed. “The rooms are soundproof, Adrian.”

“Ah, great.” Adrian pulled Edward to him once more and, this time, when he kissed him, he made exaggerated obscene sounds.

“Won’t you stop it?” Edward scolded him, but his voice was low, and his face was flushed again.

Adrian needed to check, though. He put one hand on Edward’s crotch. Yeah, that thing was rock hard. He gave it a short rub through the dress pants. Edward grunted in response.

Adrian pulled away. “So, let’s see what Brown the Bully has in mind as entertainment.” He didn’t repress a smirk as he noticed Edward biting his lips in palpable frustration. “Don’t worry; when we get back home tonight, you’ll get fucked into tomorrow.”

That seemed to have a desirable effect on Edward. The lip-biting intensified. A little frustration didn’t hurt anyone. “Sometimes, you’re a bit of a prick, Adrian.”

“Hey, delayed gratification should feel good, right?”

“What do you know about delayed gratification?”

“Hmm, not much. But I’m learning,” Adrian said cheerfully.

The basement was, seemingly, properly decorated for the occasion. The walls had been modified so that the basement did give the feeling of a medieval dungeon, but, of course, the air conditioning units discreetly hidden in the ceiling pumped fresh, clean air for everyone to breathe. The electric torches on the walls were a nice touch, but Adrian still believed everything to be artificial and forced. These people were trying too much. Maybe having too much money had that effect on some. They could no longer tell genuine from fake.

“We should sit here,” Edward said.

Adrian had told Brown that they would sit the farthest in the back, but now he felt that Edward was too shy to sit in the front row. That was something he couldn’t accept; anything this Brown dude thought he had on Edward, even if it was only an imaginary advantage, it had to disappear tonight.

“No, let’s just stay over there,” Adrian proposed and pointed at the front row.

People were starting to push them from behind, so Edward made a small frustrated sound and followed him. Adrian threw a cocky look around. If they hadn’t understood it by now, these people had to, now. He was no plaything, and Edward wasn’t his lord and master. They were partners.

A massive X-cross was placed in the middle of the stage. A curtain fell, preventing the audience from seeing what was going on, and people around began whispering excitedly.

“Have these folks never been to a school play?” Adrian whispered in Edward’s ear.

Edward threw him an annoyed look. “For the record, Adrian, making me sit in the front row tramples how happy you’ve made me feel tonight.”

“You’re such a spoiled brat,” Adrian said. “But I have the remedy for you, don’t worry.”

“How can you call me a brat? I’m older than you.”

Adrian smirked. “It doesn’t matter. When I get to spank your lovely ass, you won’t feel this superior.”

Edward gasped, and then the height of his cheeks colored. “Sometimes, Adrian, you just say the strangest things.”

Right. Adrian smiled, satisfied with himself.

The curtain lifted, revealing a handsome young man, muscular and displaying body hair in all the right places, tied to the X-cross, and wearing a black cover over his head down to his chin. His beautiful muscles were already stretched, and there was a thin film of perspiration that made his skin glisten, most probably in anticipation of what would follow.

Brown came into view, as well. His jacket was gone, and he had rolled the sleeves of his dress shirt up to his elbows. The man did have a dangerous appeal, Adrian thought, as he followed, just like anyone else, how Brown moved to a nearby table. He seemed focused on the torture tools displayed in front of him, letting his hands hover over them as if he wasn’t already decided what to use first.

Not for one moment did he turn toward the audience or say anything. For what it was worth, he did seem invested in what he was doing.

“Are we going to witness something illegal?” Adrian asked Edward.

“No. Everything happening here tonight is consensual.”

Adrian had a mind to tell Edward how Germaine had definitely not given his consent to have his chest fondled by no other than the man on stage right now. He had a feeling Brown wasn’t that particular about following the rules.

Could it be that why Edward felt attracted to him? Adrian examined surreptitiously how Edward’s face changed as he watched Brown. Yes, there was an attraction there. Adrian could see a certain degree of aversion, too, but even that contributed to the fascination he could read in those aristocratic features.

Whatever it was, Adrian would get to the bottom of it. It was clear as day that Edward despised Brown, but it was a part of that man that he felt drawn to, nonetheless. Brown knew it, too, and that made Adrian even more determined to win that battle.

Eventually, Brown settled for the first instrument he intended to use. Adrian had to admit that it looked frightening. It was a dark spear made of metal with what looked like a very sharp tip. The audience gasped, and the tied man jerked his head in its direction, probably dreading what would happen to him next.

“The human body,” Brown began reciting in a low husky voice, “is a beautiful thing. It can take so much. And it can also draw pleasure from pain.”

The sharp tip of the spear connected with one of the perky nipples of the tied man. The instant reply was a loud hiss.

“Of course, it is all about knowing that fine line and exploiting it,” Brown continued. The metal tip grazed around the nub of flesh, teasing it. “Too much, and you’ll cross it.”

A sharp cry followed. Adrian winced. It looked like Brown liked to illustrate his words with actions. Was that what Edward was into? Blood play? Adrian stared at his partner and saw that Edward was as aghast as he was.

Could it be that he had been wrong about Edward’s attraction toward that nasty man playing dom in front of them only because he could abuse his power?

“Don’t worry. It was just a small demonstration of what could happen if you’re not careful,” Brown said.

Adrian took in the devilish grin on Brown’s face. He obviously enjoyed the dread he instilled in the audience more than the torture he applied to that young man who had had the unfortunate idea that it would be good to place himself at the whims of that rich prick. Adrian could only hope the pay was good enough.

Brown continued to tease the young man’s skin, descending on his abdomen until the sharp tip rested against his cock. “There are many ways of teasing one’s flesh. But maybe sharp objects aren’t exactly what would work best. Don’t you think?”

Adrian stared in disbelief at the fucking prick. He knew precisely where Brown was looking. Or, better said, whom he was looking at. He wasn’t talking with the audience; he only had eyes for Edward.

The expression of disgust on Edward’s face had faded; now, what Adrian saw was the fascination he had thought he had caught a glimpse of earlier that night. So, Brown would put on a show only for Edward. That was interesting.

But Brown was wrong. He must have thought that having Edward watch him would give him all the pointers to drive home that hidden attraction and take advantage of it, but he was wrong. Adrian was the rogue character here. He would use Brown’s experiment to his advantage. If Brown thought he would get something out of it, he was wrong. So very, very wrong.

“Will you get on with it?” Adrian said out loud. “Some of us don’t have all night, and this is starting to get boring.”

A few laughs here and there made the tension in the room drop a notch. Edward squeezed Adrian's leg. "Adrian, please."

Yes, he had been a bit out of line there, but Adrian had no intention to allow Brown to lure Edward into his dark fantasy so easily. After all, he needed to make him do his best, or his worst, whichever it was.

"I apologize for the interruption," Edward said out loud. "It won't happen again," he added and threw Adrian a brief look.

He shrugged and then smiled. Edward stared at him a little more. "Sorry," he said loudly, too. Then he looked right at Brown. It was on, as it seemed.

"It's all right, Eddy," Brown said haughtily. "You don't have to apologize. It is understandable. Outsiders are bound to misstep."

It didn't matter. At least, some of the magic was gone. Even the young man tied to the BDSM device seemed less tense. It was all about having the right strategy and sticking to it. Adrian adjusted his position and then threw Edward a sheepish smile. Edward's lips pursed, but Adrian could tell he was fighting a smile of his own.

Brown returned to his charge. He again looked in Edward's direction, so Adrian rested one hand casually on Edward's knee. Nothing made competition more exciting than a bit of old-fashioned jealousy.

This time, Brown picked what looked like a medical sonde, so Adrian's curiosity was piqued. With one hand, Brown began to arouse his sub, and a few gasps of admiration followed. The young man was particularly well endowed. Even Adrian had to suppress a whistle of genuine praise. It didn't appear to have been surgically improved, either, and nature's gifts were nature's gifts, after all.

Seeing that beautiful cock rise to its full length and girth did have an effect on his own, too, so he crossed his legs. Then, Brown showed the urethral sound to the audience and then began teasing the small leaking entrance with it. The sub whimpered, probably aware, to some degree, of what was happening to him.

Brown removed the object and added more of what looked like some sort of clear lube to his charge's cock. With the thumb, he spread the liquid over the head, too. He proceeded again, and it appeared that he knew when to stop.

All right, Adrian had to admit that what he was seeing was strangely arousing. He would never stuff his pee-hole with that kind of thing, but the guy on stage appeared to be enjoying it, so who was he to judge?

It was fascinating, indeed, to watch the sound descending more and more, swallowed by that glorious penis. Brown began to move it slowly, and the cries from his sub were mostly of pleasure. He added one hand on his charge's balls, fondling them slowly.

When Brown removed the sound, and his hand, too, everyone watched the beautiful eruption. That guy must have been loaded, Adrian thought, as he stared at the ropes of white exploding upward like a volcano. So Edward had been right about Brown being good at what he was doing.

Medical fetish. Noted. Adrian looked at Edward, but unlike most people there, he didn't appear that impressed. Hmm, so maybe that wasn't it.

It had to be what Brown must have thought, as well, because next thing, he changed tack. He pulled his sub from the X-cross, allowing him a breather, and gently coaxing him into straddling a leather seat. He then grabbed a paddle, which Adrian considered a step back from the sounding episode.

Edward straightened into his chair. Adrian observed him from the corner of his eye.

Smack! The loud sound made everyone do the same as Edward. Brown must have had a heavy hand because there was a red spot where the paddle had landed, and the sub cried out in response.

"Sometimes," Brown said, slightly turning so that he could, of course, stare at Edward, "delight is all about intensity and quantity."

The paddle rose and fell, and the sub quivered under that treatment. He also pushed his ass higher, probably to have the paddle land on other spots, too, but Adrian noticed that the guy was sporting a massive erection again.

Brown grabbed his sub's cock and pulled hard at it. He straddled him, facing the audience and manipulating the hard cock so that everyone could see it. "And sometimes, if your partner is a dirty dog, you must give it to him like this."

Edward shifted in his seat, and Adrian observed him. Oh, so that was something; but what could it be? The position? The spanking? The dirty talk? It didn't matter; Adrian would try everything.

He still recalled how Edward had brought that collar for him to wear; maybe he had tried to communicate something with that. But who dared to put someone like Edward Hastings on a leash? Adrian smiled.

Gotcha.

On the stage, the sub impressed the audience once more with a substantial release. At this point, Adrian suspected that the guy must have been on semen enhancing pills for some time. Next to him, Edward licked his lips, like he just witnessed a delicious meal being cooked in front of him.

All right, and that was noted, too.

“Never forget,” Brown said, “that you must give your partner what he wants even if he doesn’t admit it.”

Adrian smiled. Good advice. But it worked only if you truly knew your partner. He suspected Brown to be an arrogant bastard who didn’t give two shits about his partners’ pleasure. It just happened that he drew his own satisfaction from making his subs come so hard so that he could impress his peers.

Otherwise, the guy was still an asshole. Adrian watched as Brown put his sub into a sophisticated system of ropes, suspending him from a hook in the ceiling.

To each their own, Adrian thought, and his eyes were drawn by another beautiful erection the guy was sporting. At least, he seemed to enjoy all that. This time, Brown pulled the guy to him and then fiddled with his own fly. Oh, so he wanted to show Edward his cock, as well.

Brown stuffed his charge, going in fast. Probably the guy was already lubed because it didn’t look like too much of a struggle. For the show, Brown wanted to prove that he could go in like that, in one go. By how other people gasped and whispered, it had the desired effect.

Adrian didn’t mind the straight-up fucking. And the sub did look nice, restrained like that, and seemingly forced to take it. For a third time, a no-hands release seemed like a stretch, but Adrian was interested in seeing it, nonetheless.

Again, next to him, Edward seemed to find it challenging to sit in his chair. Adrian squeezed his knee hard enough to draw his attention. “After this, we’re going home,” he said.

Edward just nodded imperceptibly. Adrian wasn’t entirely sure he had been heard.

Brown dropped his charge from the ceiling and put him on all fours. With all those ropes cutting into his skin, the sub must have been praying for release for some time now. It was also the moment when Brown decided to pull the cover from his head. Everyone leaned forward to see him well. There were a few laughs in the audience, and Edward made a small, surprised sound.

“What is it?” Adrian asked, feeling left out.

“That’s, um, the heir to a certain pharmaceutical empire,” Edward said evasively.

The guy was in shock over being exposed, Adrian could tell. His eyes were roaming over the audience, and everyone was talking most probably about his public humiliation now. Adrian pitied him; he probably hadn't consented to that bit.

But Brown enjoyed it immensely, and he was now pumping the guy's ass hard. Since he was tied up, the young man couldn't escape, and his struggle was real.

Adrian could tell that he felt truly humiliated. His eyes were squeezed shut, and his cheeks were wet, probably with tears. With a triumphant cry, Brown came in his ass, and then he stood up. Mercilessly, he turned his sub with his ass to the audience. He was shaking, and cum was pouring from his ass.

Brown pulled apart his ass cheeks, to give the audience a better view, and then he slapped them vigorously. "Should I give our little wonder boy here a little help to come a third time?" he asked.

Raucous laughter followed. Adrian observed Edward again. He was among the few who didn't laugh. His face was flushed, still, but it looked like he struggled with what he was feeling.

Some lines weren't supposed to be crossed. Adrian stood up and offered Edward his hand. "I think we're done here. Let's go."

Edward schooled his face into neutral. "It's not over, Adrian. Please, sit."

Adrian didn't budge. "And I say, let's go. Now."

The people around them started to notice their conversation.

"Will you please sit down, boy?" Brown called for him from behind.

Adrian noted with satisfaction the frustration in the guy's voice. His big finale and someone was ruining it. Geez.

"Eddy, make him sit. He's been an annoyance all evening."

Adrian turned toward Brown this time. "His name is Edward. And, regardless of all the refinement and sophistication you pretend to display, you're still nothing but a bully."

The audience gasped in surprise, this time directed at Adrian. He turned toward them, too. "How can you laugh at him?" He pointed at the prone shape on the floor, still shaking, and most probably sobbing by now. "It could be anyone of you there. How can you lack empathy like this?"

There was no reply. Everyone watched him, hanging on his every word. "As long as the sub is in for the pleasure, I say 'go for it'," he added. "But sorry. I cannot fap to this." He gestured at the scene behind him.

Adrian stared at Edward. "Are you coming?" he asked in a voice that didn't leave any room for second guesses.

Edward just nodded and stood up. Adrian hooked one arm over his shoulder and walked through the people still staring at him like he was an alien. Maybe, in that world, he was. With much difficulty, he stopped himself from flipping the bird at Brown on his way out.

"You should never bring him again!" Brown yelled at their back.

"Don't worry, you fucking bully. I won't come again," Adrian replied.

He took Edward and walked away. He had seen enough, and he didn't need a repeat experience. And Edward didn't need it, either.

They were in the back seat of Edward's limousine, minutes later. Edward was silent, and Adrian didn't know how to interpret it. But the time for games was over. He pulled at his tie until it became loose. With one move, he pushed the button that lifted the privacy screen, separating them from the driver. In another, he was all over Edward.

"What are you doing, Adrian?" Edward asked in an annoyed voice.

"Hush. How about being true to yourself for once?"

With steady moves, he wrapped his tie around Edward's neck, making sure it was close enough to the skin, but not too tight to hurt.

"There." Adrian moved away but kept the end of the tie in one hand.

Edward remained silent, but it was a different type of silence, now. Adrian could tell, without looking, that Edward was staring at him.

"I just think you need a collar is all," Adrian said.

Edward moved closer and put his head on Adrian's shoulder. Adrian caressed his face with his free hand, brushing his thumb against moist lips. He smiled when his thumb was caught and sucked in, then bitten playfully.

Thanks for the lesson, Brown.

Chapter Thirteen – Awake

Edward leaned into his shoulder as they walked inside the house as if he was drunk. Adrian was pretty sure they hadn't imbibed that much so it had to be something else. Throughout their ride back, Edward had proven fascinated with sucking on Adrian's thumb, and shivering lightly whenever touched.

Adrian just hoped it wasn't because of Brown's stupid show that Edward felt like that. It had to be because he had dared to put a collar on Edward, albeit not a suitable one. He would see to that, and soon.

"I'm sure you have a toy room," he said as soon as they were inside.

Edward nodded and walked in front. Adrian reached for him and then searched for the end of the tie. He pulled at it to make Edward heed. There was no one else around, so they were safe to roleplay as much as they wanted.

Edward threw him a heated look, but he didn't protest. He continued to walk, with Adrian holding him like that until they were in front of a black door. Maybe it was a bit too obvious, but Adrian doubted that the personnel who took care of the house ever dared to comment on certain secret habits of the master of the house.

Edward pushed the door open and then flicked the lights on. Adrian walked inside and stared at the austere design. The furniture was sparse, only a black leather sofa, and armchair, and a table that was covered with a large piece of the same material. The floor was granite or some other type of stone, polished to a shine.

"Toys," Adrian asked curtly. "Where are they?"

Edward gestured toward a cabinet in one corner that Adrian must have missed the first time he had glanced around the room. He let go of the tie to walk over and pull open the drawers. Now it was no time to express his surprise; but, after all, he had expected some of that. The first drawer contained nothing but collars in all shapes and sizes.

"Undress," he ordered Edward without throwing one look back.

The rustling of clothes let him know that his order was obeyed.

"When I turn, I want to see you on all fours."

Movement followed. Adrian smiled to himself. He took a hard look at the collars. He had to pick and do it correctly. A fussy aristocrat like Edward probably expected him to guess everything now. It was in his DNA to succeed, so Adrian went for the heaviest of the bunch without one moment of hesitation. It was a training collar, the type that came with heavy metal insertions needed to exhaust a dog's strength and make him yield.

He turned with the collar in one hand and read the surprise in Edward's eyes. Edward was obediently sitting on all fours, completely naked on the polished floor, a blurred reflection of his nakedness in it.

He was a marvelous specimen, Adrian thought to himself. Unlike the first time, when he had tried to convince himself that he wasn't impressed, now he believed Edward to be the sexiest man alive. He wasn't a twink, and he wasn't overly muscular, either, but he was beautiful like an old statue, his body lean and strong.

Adrian could feel his resolve shaking. His cock twitched painfully in his pants. Damn, he needed to get off so badly. But this was about conquering Edward for real.

"This one will do," Adrian said with confidence and walked over to Edward.

He crouched to fix the collar around Edward's neck. Edward looked down obediently, and his shoulders sagged a bit as if the weight of the collar did that to him. It was pretty heavy, Adrian had to admit. He let his fingers linger around Edward's neck, enjoying the small shiver shaking that beautiful body.

Adrian risked one look across the reversed arch of Edward's back. At the other end, the two mounds of flesh rose enticingly. He barely kept in a sigh. Delayed gratification, he told himself.

He stood up again and then went back to the cabinet to look for another item. He needed to keep it simple and efficient; that was one way of not doing it wrong. After a few moments of deliberation, he picked a training stick, although he knew that he would use it in ways much different from a real dog trainer.

With the stick in one hand, he moved back to Edward, who was waiting obediently on the floor. That had to start hurting, all determination and arousal aside. He used the stick first to draw an invisible line on Edward's back from the tailbone to the collar that sat firmly around his neck. Then, Adrian brought the tip of the stick to his own lips and kissed it.

Edward watched it with curiosity. Adrian pointed the stick at him.

"What?" Edward asked.

Adrian smiled. "I've never had a dog, but I know a few basics. You should know what to do, too. It's not food for you to lick, but --"

Edward rolled his eyes and stuck out his tongue to lick the tip of the stick.

"Good boy," Adrian praised him. "Now, hop on the sofa."

Edward obeyed, but Adrian could tell that he was unhappy about being made comfortable. Well, they would see about that just a bit later. Adrian plopped down on the sofa, with Edward next to

him on all fours. Steadily, he let the stick to the side and opened his fly. With firm moves, he pulled at his strained cock until there was a clear bead of precum in its eye.

Carefully, he then picked it with the tip of the training stick and then offered it to Edward, who hurried to lap at it this time.

“Suck. No hands.”

Edward threw him a look as if he wanted to challenge him, but Adrian stared at him. The green eyes looked down, and their owner dropped his head to grab Adrian’s cock between his lips. The training stick was quickly abandoned. Adrian did not need it anymore.

“You’re such a good cocksucker,” Adrian praised him. With one hand, he began to caress Edward’s back. Bobbing his head up and down like that, with the heavy collar on, had to be a feat, but Adrian could tell that Edward welcomed the strain by how enthusiastically he did his job.

His cock was released for a moment. “If you’re too gentle, I won’t like it,” Edward warned.

Adrian stopped his caress. So someone wanted to play a little rough. But Adrian had his own set of values, and he would impose them on Edward without fear. He grabbed one muscular buttock, squeezed it, and then slapped it hard.

Edward had already returned to his sucking, but he gasped and dropped the cock from his mouth when Adrian spanked his ass. If Edward thought he would go easy on him, he needed to reconsider. Adrian could still recall the spanking he had gotten from Edward, not such a long time back. And he remembered that Edward had spared nothing while reddening his behind that time.

“Suck,” he ordered curtly.

Edward seemed even more enthusiastic now. To think that he had had the man all backward. The things he wanted to be done to him, Edward did to others in the not so transparent hope that he would be served his own lessons back. Lucky for him, Adrian was a keen observer.

Also, it frigging paid off. His cock was in absolute heaven. Edward slurped and used his tongue to tease the head and the sensitive skin under it over and over again. Adrian continued to spank that glorious behind, but this time, Edward didn’t stop.

Like this, he would come way too fast. He needed to up the ante somehow, and he recalled one particular thing Edward had seemed to like watching earlier that night. He snuck one hand between his lover’s legs from behind and caught his hard cock. Pulling it back, he brought it into a position he could use. Edward’s slurping intensified.

Adrian could feel his lips quirking into a smile. If Edward thought it would be this easy, he needed to think again. He removed his hand from Edward's cock and pulled his own from the hot mouth, as well.

"Get on the floor," he ordered.

Edward obeyed fast. Adrian could swear that if the man had had a tail, he would have wiggled it furiously by now. With one hand, he grabbed his cock and began pumping it slow, his release too impending to risk spilling it prematurely.

"Open your mouth. Here comes your treat."

Edward stuck his tongue out, and Adrian could swear that he had never seen a sexier image in his life. Maybe he would snap a picture sometime and then put it in a super-secret folder so that he could fap to it later.

Right now, there was no time for that kind of stuff. Adrian pumped his cock hard as he got closer. He pushed Edward's head back, pulling it by the hair, enjoying the gone look in the beautiful green eyes.

"Move your tongue, show me how much you want it," Adrian whispered.

Edward began rolling his tongue slowly, lasciviously, licking his lips in passing. Adrian cursed and began spraying his lover's face, making a real mess out of it. Edward's tongue moved so fascinatingly now, trying to catch everything but failing.

Adrian laughed as he regained his breath. "You're such a messy boy. Here, I need to teach you how to eat properly. On all fours again."

Edward obeyed while he still used his tongue to catch the elusive drops of cum. Adrian knelt next to him, grabbed his cock from behind again, and began moving his hand fast. Edward started breathing sharply, and his entire body shook.

"Let me help you, you messy boy," Adrian said lovingly and began licking Edward's face for every droplet of his earlier release, only to push it into his lover's open mouth.

The position was awkward, and the arm he used for jerking Edward off was starting to hurt, but it was all in the presentation. He was sure now that Edward would come and fast.

He didn't have to wait long. Edward gasped and moaned into his mouth while still being fed cum, as he exploded in Adrian's hand.

Adrian didn't suppress a victory shout. "Yes!"

He pulled Edward into his arms and brought his face near his. Resting with his back against the sofa, he stood there, listening only to the sound of their breathing for a while.

Maybe Edward was a bit tired now, but Adrian didn't intend to put him to work. On the contrary, he wanted Edward just to lie down and welcome everything obediently. He stood, and Edward followed him with sleepy eyes. Adrian made a small gesture for the sofa, and Edward climbed on it.

"On your back," he asked softly.

Edward obeyed. His chest was still rising and falling a bit fast; his lips were moist, and his gaze was dreamy. Rogue locks had evaded the carefully brushed hairstyle and now glued to the tall forehead, a sign of being spent. Adrian climbed on the sofa, too, and pushed Edward's knees to his chest. He observed the naked body in front of him for a while, in silence.

With two fingers, he began teasing Edward's backdoor. A small shiver was the answer. Adrian stood only so that he could get what was needed. His cock was conveniently hanging out, as spent and delighted as Edward, but Adrian trusted his stamina to get it all back in full force.

This time he teased the tight hole with lubed fingers. Some he poured on his cock, making it slick and ready for action with steady pulls, which Edward observed slowly, through his eyelashes.

You're so beautiful like this, Adrian wanted to say, but he rightfully feared that Edward would scoff at such a declaration. The man in front of him needed something else to let down his guard and allow anyone in. Doe eyes and soft words were not enough to break him.

"One thing," he said.

The sleepy eyes made an effort to stare at him.

"Have you ever been involved with that asshole?"

"Brown?" A quirked eyebrow expressed surprise.

"Yeah."

"No. I would never."

Adrian placed his cock at the tight entrance, ready for delving. "Have you ever thought about it?"

"No."

"Fantasize about it, then?"

There was a short hesitation. "No."

"I will never be a prick like him, and that's a promise." Adrian pushed in, eliciting a short gasp from Edward. He didn't wait for another reply; he clamped his mouth hard on Edward's and

kissed him deeply. There was still the faint taste of cum there, but that only made Adrian more heated.

He moved amply, making sure to gain momentum before slamming down hard and making Edward squirm. All the time, he didn't allow either of them to breathe; Edward needed to understand that there was someone in the world who could give it to him as he desired.

Adrian withdrew each time to the point of almost being out completely, only to bottom out inside Edward's ass over and over again. The stop and go strategy was arousing, but Adrian knew he needed more if he wanted to achieve his goal. So he started to speed up. At one point, he released Edward's mouth only so that he could hear him moan and curse and say all the dirty words that surely didn't belong on the tongue and lips of someone like him.

Adrian wasn't sure if he was the only one to bring Edward to his level or whether, secretly, that was who Edward truly was. They were two acrobats, walking the same rope, from opposite directions. If they were careful, they would reach each other into a tight embrace.

"Adrian," Edward whispered. "No more, it's too much, I'm going to --"

Adrian bit down hard on the arched neck, presenting itself so prettily. He was sure it was a mess between them and that maybe Edward wouldn't be able to sit once the arousal and the pleasure of the night would fade away. But, for that moment, it was everything they both wanted.

Later, Adrian kept Edward close to his chest while touching his collar once in a while. He was dying to ask a lot of things, but tonight was not, by far, a good time to do that. They were scratching the surface, and Adrian liked what he discovered. Now, he only needed to be patient.

"That guy, will he be all right?" he asked instead.

"Hmm?"

"Brown's... I don't know how to call him. Sub?"

"I will check on him tomorrow. We're not close, but I feel like I should do it."

"What do you think happened that he fell under that asshole's spell?"

"It wouldn't be hard. Brown knows too much about everyone. And he's a real charmer when he wants to be."

"Still. It's written all over him that he's an asshole."

"Callan is young, and," Edward sighed, "he has been kept on too short a leash by his parents. I have no idea how Brown got to know him in the first place. I've only seen him once at The Awakening."

“The asshole knows how to pick his victims,” Adrian said through his teeth.

Edward laughed softly. “Your pissing contest tonight was a sight.”

“Did you enjoy it?”

“I have to admit that yes, I did, albeit shamefully. I should be above such things.”

“Was it really okay to leave this young man, Callan, in Brown’s clutches tonight?”

“Brown wouldn’t dare to go further than he had already gone. And he achieved his purpose.”

“Or not. I kinda pissed on his parade.”

“You did. Callan will be fine, Adrian. I don’t want to sound cynical, but people with a lot of money often tend to fly over any sort of trauma like it barely touches them.”

“He appeared pretty desperate to me when that asshole exposed him.”

“Yes. And yet, I still wonder whether he would not dismiss everything the moment I call him tomorrow with the intention of offering him comfort.”

“Because of pride, maybe.”

“Or because not many things can touch someone like him. Momentarily, I’m sure.”

“How can you know that? You don’t really know the guy.”

“That’s true. But Brown has pulled all kinds of shenanigans up till now. People tend to forget all about his misdeeds, for some reason.”

“For some reason? You don’t know it?”

Another sigh followed. “I do. Rich people keep to themselves and are a pretty tightly-knit group. No word of Callan’s humiliation will ever get out. And I have seen people forgiving Brown for more than this.”

“I don’t even want to know.”

“Correct. And I won’t tell you, either. You’re too pure to be contaminated by such things.”

“Me? Pure?”

“Yes, you are. You have no idea.”

Adrian wondered what sort of comeback he could have to that. “I’ve done plenty of stupid things in my life.”

“Shut up. You don’t even know what truly stupid means. All right, maybe you do, but at least, you’ve never been evil on purpose.”

And like that, the balance between them was reversed once more. Edward might have been the one with the collar, but he was in charge again, and he made Adrian feel the age gap between them and not only that.

Edward stood with a groan. “I have a feeling I will experience some well-deserved pain when I wake up tomorrow.”

“I can offer a bit of massage first thing in the morning.” Adrian smiled and took in Edward’s behind, while his cock twitched in sympathy.

“I’m afraid I’ll have to pass. You should go, Adrian.”

Edward’s voice was switched to neutral in a heartbeat.

“Excuse me?” Adrian wasn’t sure that Edward really meant that. He was turned, and Adrian couldn’t see his face. “I thought I would spend the night.”

“Hmm, not a good idea.”

Adrian ran one hand over his face. So Edward wasn’t that easy to conquer after all. “What’s this about?”

“Sundays are dedicated to certain activities, and I can’t indulge a bed partner, as sexy and satisfying as he might be.” Edward turned to him and smiled. Then he caught Adrian’s chin and shook it gently. “I need to be at my best tomorrow.”

In charge. Adrian couldn’t believe he had fallen for the act. Could it be that Edward had played him and had him walk right into a well-crafted trap? No, it couldn’t be. There were way too many uncontrollable factors involved.

“Really? And what were you tonight? At your worst or something?” He didn’t want to sound petty, but he couldn’t help it. They had just had the best kind of sex, and now he was dismissed like a random booty call.

A shadow passed quickly over Edward’s attractive features. “I believe you could say that.”

So maybe not so much in charge and in control, Adrian thought. He stood and pushed his cock back in his pants. “Talking about being hot and cold.” Suddenly, he wasn’t that much in the mood for games. They had just shared something real. Or was it only in his head?

“Adrian,” Edward said reproachfully. “Sleepovers are earned.”

“Right? What do I have to do to you next time? Strangle you while I fuck you?”

It was annoying to see Edward just slightly amused at the suggestion. “Let’s not slip. We had fun together. Now each of us should sleep in his own bed. After all, I am quite certain my body would hate me if I gave in again, and that is why I should keep you as a reward. If we’re getting too familiar, I might get bored of you.”

Adrian could feel his jaw hurting. “Fine,” he said through his teeth.

“Come now,” Edward grabbed his ass and gave it a tight squeeze. “You know I like you.”

“But not too much.”

“Maybe too much.”

“How is that a problem?”

“It can be. I don’t do relationships, Adrian. I have my reasons.”

“Care to share them?”

“Let me fuck you, and I’ll tell you.”

“Ha! Nice try.”

He would find out, all in due time, Adrian was sure. Now he needed to rein in his neediness. As much as he would have loved to sleep in Edward’s bed and wake up with him, the fact that Edward was playing hard to get only made things more challenging. And he was always up to a challenge.

“So, when are we going to see each other again?”

“Next weekend would be a safe bet.”

“Are we going to that stupid club again?”

“No. I’ll take you somewhere truly nice.”

“I hope it’s nothing like this Awakening crap.”

“Nothing like that. I promise.”

“Will you call?” Adrian wanted to slap himself silly. He needed to tread carefully. Edward didn’t have to think that he was desperate; it would just ruin things.

“On the dot, as usual.”

“Can I kiss you?”

“May.”

“What?”

“May I kiss you? That would be the correct phrase.”

“Shut up, already.” Adrian pulled Edward close and relished in how the taut body in his arms relaxed as they kissed. He would find out all about Edward and get the satisfaction of truly bringing him to his knees.

It wasn't even about that, but Adrian didn't want to admit that he felt smitten. There was a vague sensation, hovering at the edges of his mind, that maybe, just maybe, he didn't have any idea what he was getting himself into. So far, Edward's penchant for a bit of rough play hadn't come as a big surprise. But how Edward acted, how cool he can be after being in the throes of ecstasy just earlier, Adrian couldn't quite wrap his mind around it.

Jared tossed and turned the entire night. In the end, he had managed to avoid Chris and his husband at the restaurant, although he had thought a few times about how making a scene would have gone down. He would have shocked Sam and Mrs. Daniels, for sure, and they would have only been collateral victims. Also, he didn't need to cause a scene. It was beneath him.

Still, the mix of anger and disappointment he was feeling got the better of him once he was back home. How could he have been so stupid? Chris's avoidance of talking about their relationship in a serious manner, his affable, but distant behavior whenever Jared had tried to make things clear, even his somewhat offhanded methods while having sex, all those made good enough signs for him to have read them already.

Maybe Chris was so aroused when they were together because of the illicit nature of the affair. And to think that he would catch the eye of a man like that! He had thought it a bit strange at the time, and now he knew the reason. Chris just wanted a side piece; only chance had made it that Jared had managed to occupy that position.

What else could he have lied about? Was it all true about his profession? Or not? What about that penthouse where he lived? Could it be it was only a fuckpad? It didn't sound that hard a thing to believe, looking at things retrospectively.

Jared grabbed the pillow and smashed his face a few times with it. How was he going to handle the situation? Only the thought of confronting Chris about it made him sick to the stomach, just as the thought that he had been picked up and used as if he were an object, not a person.

Fury and disappointment mingled in his mind. Maybe he was young and not at all versed in this world of dating, but he couldn't fathom why Chris had thought it would be a good idea to pick him up from all the young people in the city. Why him? Was it written on his face that he was

gullible? Was he too polite? Was that a sign of stupidity? He felt tempted to reply 'yes' to the last one.

He stood and sat on the edge of the bed, his face buried in his hands. He needed to end things and fast. And he had to do it without showing how affected he was. That kind of satisfaction was not something Chris would get out of him. Jared imagined himself being cool and collected, telling Chris their relationship, whatever it was, couldn't work out. If he were someone versed in the ways of the world and sophisticated, he would do that.

Only that Jared Boyle was as far from being that as someone could be. That meant that he needed to enact a different type of scenario in his mind. But first, he wouldn't call Chris at all for several days. Maybe it would all die on its feet, whatever they had, and Jared would continue without going through the shame of being used by a married man.

He ran his hands over his face, again and again, rubbing his eyes and trying to chase away the last grains of insomnia from them. If he couldn't sleep anymore, he just had to wake up. Maybe coffee was a good idea, after all.

He was in the kitchen, fixing the bitter medicine when his phone rang. It was seven in the morning. Adrian was probably sleeping like a log after a night spent fucking, and Mike, well, he probably did the same if things had worked out with Ryan.

As he walked back into the bedroom, Jared played different scenarios in his head. Could it be it was some emergency? He hurried to pick the phone from the nightstand. His face fell when he saw the caller ID.

For a couple of moments, he debated whether he should take it or not. But postponing it meant that he would only prolong the uneasiness and disgust he felt with himself for falling prey to a player like Chris. At twenty-five, he should have known better. He hadn't been born yesterday.

"Yes?" he asked in a voice he hoped that it sounded calm and collected.

In his ears, it was too loud and strained.

"I can't sleep anymore. I'm thinking of you," Chris said in a low, seductive voice.

Was his husband still sleeping, so Chris needed to whisper so that he wasn't caught in the act of calling his lover on the side? The thought alone made Jared's gut recoil.

"Hmm." That was all he could manage. How did one react to such a situation?

"I was wondering if I could see you today. And sorry for calling so early. I was hoping to hear your sleepy voice. But," Chris hesitated for a moment, "you sound awake."

Awake. That was a good word to describe the situation.

“Yes, I am very much awake,” Jared said, trying to rein in the need to shout obscenities at Chris and then end the conversation.

“Good.” There was another moment of hesitation. “I have the perfect place in mind. I heard seven different publications consider it as one of the most romantic getaways around. Don’t worry; I will take you back before midnight so that you can catch some sleep in your own bed.”

Oh, how considerate.

“A romantic getaway?” Jared could feel his hackles rising. “Do they have rooms for three?”

“Three?” Chris made a small pause. “What are you talking about?”

“Ah, you know. Since your husband might want to come with us.” Jared hoped to dear God he didn’t sound bitchy. It was only this much he could do to rein in his emotions.

Chris remained silent. Then, the seductive whisper from before turned to ice. “Have you been following me?”

Jared let out a small nervous laugh. “Isn’t it rich to accuse me of stalking you when you’re a fucking cheater?” As much as he had told himself to keep his calm, it didn’t look like it was possible.

“Then how do you know?”

“Are you still busy accusing me? Aren’t you even going to apologize?”

“Saying ‘sorry’ won’t solve anything.”

Jared couldn’t believe his ears. He had a mind to end the conversation and finish things right at that moment. “Why are you cheating on your husband, Chris?” He couldn’t ask why Chris had cheated on him, Jared. That was not how things worked, regardless of how he felt inside. And Chris’s husband was, even more, a victim because he had said and heard some vows and had trusted the man next to him to value what they shared. Jared couldn’t even fathom how that man would feel if he found out about his husband’s philandering. He didn’t think he was the first illicit affair Chris was indulging in, as a married man who should have known better.

“And no, saying ‘sorry’ won’t solve anything. But it would at least prove that you’re a human being, not a fucking asshole.” Jared didn’t shout this time, and he was proud of himself for being able, at least, to control his voice.

“I never meant for you to find out.”

Jared squeezed the phone in his hand. “No shit,” he said through his teeth.

“Not like this, I mean.”

“Not like this? Were you planning to tell me? How? Dropping it in casual conversation? *And by the way, you’re a side piece, and I’m actually married!*” Jared stopped and bit his lips hard. Without intending to, he was shouting again.

“You’re making things unnecessarily complicated.”

Jared could swear he was starting to see red. “I don’t know what you mean by that. Wake up your husband and ask him whether he thinks the same thing. I’m curious what he has to say.”

“Are you threatening me? That you’re going to tell my husband?” Chris’s voice was still cold, and Jared could bet, calculated.

“I’ve just had enough of you. No, I’m not going to tell him. Although I should, because he deserves to know. But I don’t know him, I don’t know who he is, and I was taught a long time ago to stay away from getting involved in other people’s business unless they’re my closest friends. I just have one question. How the hell do you live with yourself?”

“Watch it, young man --”

“True, I am young, compared to you, at least. But I really thought we were together.” Jared hated himself for letting that last bit slip. It was clear as day that Chris was an unapologetic asshole, and that he didn’t appear to have one ounce of remorse in him.

“I was trying to curb your enthusiasm. And I thought young people are more about flings than serious relationships.”

“Young people. You make it sound like I’m just another person walking by. If you truly believe that about me, then you’ve never listened to a word I said. And I think it’s fine. Because it proves that you’ve never wanted to know me at all.”

“That’s not true.” Coldness turned into sharpness.

“Chris, let’s face it. You just wanted someone convenient so that you could get laid whenever you felt like it. I just don’t get it. Your husband is very attractive.”

“So, you did follow me.”

“No, you arrogant fuck.” Jared couldn’t believe he was capable of talking to someone like that. “It just happened that one of the agents I work with invited me to dinner yesterday so that he could introduce me to a client. I guess I was lucky to set foot in the same restaurant as you.”

“Lucky?” A small snort accompanied that single word.

“Yes, lucky.” Jared set his chin high, although Chris couldn’t see him. “Otherwise, I would have just continued to believe you. What did you think, Chris?” He needed to ask, even if it made him sound pathetic. “That I was just some stupid kid you could play as you wanted?”

“Not exactly.”

“This is the last conversation we’re ever going to have in this life,” Jared said. “If you have anything else to say, go ahead. I have a life to live. And rest assured, your husband will find out. Not from me, don’t worry. You will slip one day. And then you’ll lose him. It’s true that I don’t know him, but I have a hunch that it will be your loss, not his.”

A short laugh was the answer. “It’s true.”

“What?”

“I did think you would be easy.”

Jared could feel the blood draining from his face and then rushing back to his head. “Oh, did you?” The words fell from his mouth, tumbling one over the other.

“Yes. But I’ve come to know you a little, despite what you’re saying. You’re more than a pretty face and a nice body, Jared.”

“Should I address my deepest thanks?”

“This sarcastic act doesn’t suit you.”

“Tough luck. It’s the only one I have available right now.”

“My husband knows.”

One single sentence and Jared fell silent. “Do you think I’m a complete idiot? And what? He also sleeps on the side, so it’s all ‘kay. Is that it?”

“We’re in an open relationship, yes.”

Jared shook his head. “I don’t believe you. Why didn’t you tell me anything, then? And when you say that he knows, he knows about me or about your sleeping around, in general? Fuck, I can’t believe I went bareback with you!”

The realization hit him in the middle of his chest with the force of a hammer. Caught in his disappointment, he hadn’t even thought about what that meant.

“We’re responsible adults. We test regularly.”

“Like that’s supposed to make me feel good. You could sleep with who knows how many people. And your husband, too, if what you’re telling me is true. Why did I trust you?”

That was a rhetorical question.

“You trusted me because you wanted to.”

As much Jared wanted to come back with a nasty retort, he knew that there was a grain of truth in that. “Yes, I think so.” There was no point denying it. “I wanted a relationship so badly that I decided it would be better if I ignored the signs.”

“That’s not it.” Chris sounded so full of himself that Jared wanted to reach him at the other end and strangle him. “You trusted me because you liked me. I like you, too, Jared.”

Jared caught the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger and squeezed. “Of course. I’m very likable. I’m totally side piece material.”

“That not what I meant. You put words in my mouth and thoughts in my mind.”

Jared decided that he wouldn’t allow being pulled in an argument that couldn’t lead to anything good. “I’m done with you. I have no idea why I feel the need to tell you this since it’s obvious.”

“It’s not. We do have something, Jared. I see how learning about my being married must have shocked you --”

“That’s the understatement of the year. You and your husband can go and have fun for as long as you want and with whomever you want. But I don’t see things the same way. You cheated on me, the way I see it. And you can’t stop being a prick about it, too. Talking about adding insult to injury.”

“That’s not my intention, and you’re overreacting. We can talk about this like adults. I can even introduce you to my husband.”

“No, thanks,” Jared said dryly.

“I don’t want what we have to end. Think about it, Jared. We can have a lot of fun together.”

“Seriously? It’s not fun what I’m after.”

“Sure. You imagine yourself an idealist. Maybe you need a bit of a wakeup call.”

“I just got it, thanks. I’ll know better from now on.”

“Well, I see that you’re difficult to talk to. If you reconsider, you have my number. I hope you’ll call.”

“I really can’t believe you.” Jared could feel the bitter taste of disappointment on his tongue. “Whatever you think you’re doing right now, stop. I’m not interested.”

“Be it as you say. For what is worth, I did and do like you. And the sex has been amazing.”

Jared closed his eyes and exhaled. “Telling me I was a decent fuck won’t change how I feel about you. And you could go ahead and find plenty of guys who might be interested in what you

offer. A lot of people wouldn't mind having a sponsor instead of a boyfriend. I guess that's what you wanted to provide."

"Just as a token of my appreciation."

"My head hurts already. Goodbye, Chris. I hope what you say about your husband is true so that he doesn't suffer from your cheating. Or I don't. I don't know which alternative is worse. But you should delete my number. I'll do that with yours."

Jared didn't wait another moment. Trembling in anger, he ended the conversation, and then he did as he had promised. For good measure, he turned off his phone, too. Now he had the entire Sunday to wallow in misery with no one to disturb him from it.

Moping around the house proved to be a tedious affair, after all. Jared tried to work for a while, then he fell asleep, only to wake up with a headache. To think that he had wanted a relationship that badly. It hadn't been worth it, after all. He needed to create a different strategy. Maybe he needed to wait for a boyfriend to happen as a natural thing –

It hadn't been like Chris and he hadn't happened naturally. Jared had thought the attraction to be real since, at the time, he had had no idea of Chris's careful strategy. Could it be that Chris had waited that night for just any young man coming out of the club so that he could pick him up? It sounded like something Chris would do, the scumbag.

Their last conversation had been the most honest they had ever had. At least now, Jared knew who Chris was, for real. He rubbed his forehead and grimaced. He wasn't going to start crying, was he?

A loud rap on the door startled him. Had Chris gone completely out of his mind and was now trying to bring down the door? He stared through the peephole and then opened the door quickly. A much disheveled Mike was standing in front of him.

"Oh, thank God you're okay!" Mike cried out.

Jared accepted Mike's tight embrace without reacting, first. Ah, damn, he had forgotten his phone turned off. And for a worrier like Mike, that must have been an ominous sign.

"There was no sign of you on your social media, either," Mike began jabbering. "I was worried sick."

Jared knew better than to make fun of Mike's reaction. He patted Mike on the back and then closed the door, taking him inside.

“Were you working? On Sunday?” Mike peeked into the space Jared had appointed as a small office. “Wait, why are you so quiet? Did anything happen? Something happened, I’m sure.”

Jared placed one hand over Mike’s mouth and smiled at him. “Mike, it’s okay. I’m here. Breathe, okay?”

Mike nodded but pointed at Jared’s hand, clamped over his mouth. Jared moved his hand away quickly.

“Something did happen,” Mike said with conviction. “I rarely see you sad.”

“I’m not sad,” Jared protested, not really knowing where and how to start. It wasn’t like him to complain all the time, and he didn’t feel like starting to do that now. “It’s just that --”

“Yes?” Mike asked, his eyes wide.

Jared felt the need to comfort Mike. Secretly, how Mike needed him made him feel good about himself, and he thought that it must be proof that he was a decent person. Why would Mike hurry to him each time he had a problem?

“Wait, what happened with Ryan?”

Mike’s face shadowed. “Later. What happened to you?”

Jared sighed. “Chris is married.”

“What? Is he cheating on his wife? I mean, he’s cheating on you? I mean --”

“He’s married to a man.”

Mike stood there for a moment, baffled. “Wow,” he whispered, and the corners of his mouth dropped. “I don’t know if that’s worse or not.”

Jared shrugged. “I found out by accident. Last night, he canceled our plans, and it happened that Sam, one of the guys who bring me clients, contacted me and invited me to a business dinner. And in that posh restaurant, guess who I see?”

“Chris with his husband?”

Jared nodded.

“What did you do? And what did he do?”

“He wasn’t aware I saw him. And I kept a low profile all evening. I confronted him this morning.”

“Did he come here?”

“No. Over the phone. We had a really interesting and eye-opening conversation. Apparently, Chris is in an open marriage, but he didn’t care to let me in on that little secret. Actually,” Jared added with a small snort, “he pretty much said that he would have told me at one point. What point that could be, he didn’t say. Hell, he even said that he would introduce me to his husband. Can you believe it?”

Mike shook his head, and his eyes were filled with empathy. Jared smiled when Mike embraced him again. “He’s a total scumbag, and he doesn’t deserve you.”

“Thanks for saying that, Mike. I think it serves me right. I was so obsessed with having a relationship that I lost track of what was the most important thing. I needed to make sure Chris was the right choice for me, not just find excuses and explanations – But never mind me. I’m much in the mood for a romantic story.”

Mike fidgeted. “I don’t have one to tell. We did dance on the roof --”

“On the roof? Wow!” Jared massaged Mike’s shoulders and guided him toward the kitchen. “Let me make you some cocoa. I know exactly how you like it.”

Mike’s phone went off. “It’s Adrian. He asks me if I found our mother hen.”

Jared rolled his eyes. “Tell him ‘no’ just to see how he would react. No, no, no. Just tell the truth. Although I bet, he gave you hell for being too worried.”

“He did say something like maybe you took a trip to the Bahamas and now make some beds shake in rooms with the ‘do not disturb’ sign on the door. Therefore, your phone turned off,” Mike said quickly.

Jared offered a crooked smile. “Oh, yes, and he had called me this morning to ask me to go with him to some romantic getaway. I think I will never get some people. Or all of them. I don’t know. I suck at relationships without having any experience whatsoever.”

“It’s not your fault,” Mike said as he typed a message for Adrian quickly.

“So, you danced on the roof.”

Mike made a sad face, and with him, it was for real. “And then he told me we could not happen. Do you remember how Adrian said something about sexual harassment lawsuits and whatnot?”

“Yes.”

“Ryan almost lived through one. He settled, but --”

“Wait, did he harass someone?”

“Not really.” Mike sighed. “He used to date some guy from the company he was in charge of before coming here. And then, things got stale, and that guy wanted some cash.”

“What a story.” Jared didn’t want to taint Mike’s image of Ryan with his current disappointments regarding men, most of all because he honestly thought that there had to be good people in the world left.

“So, Ryan had to pay him so that he didn’t sue, but Ryan’s family is now adamant that he must keep a clean image and all that.”

“Oh.” Jared didn’t know what to think. “But he has never harassed you.”

“I told him that, but he said, just like Adrian, that people wouldn’t see things the same as me. They would start spreading rumors.”

“Oh, damn, poor you.” Jared pulled Mike into a hug.

Mike’s phone let them know there was a new message. “Adrian wants to come over. Also, he says that you should turn on your goddamn phone.”

“Oh, right. I simply didn’t want Chris to call again and ask me for a threesome.”

Mike put his hand up. “I’ve been in that situation. It’s not as funny as people might think.”

“Sure it isn’t. How does Adrian do it? How does he waltz from one kinky situation to another, with no regrets?”

“I think he just likes having fun,” Mike said with a shrug. “You know Adrian.”

Jared sighed. “It’s definitely good to be at peace with yourself. Also, since he doesn’t care about relationships, he doesn’t need to get annoyed with the same things as us. So what are you going to do about Ryan?”

“I don’t know. He tells me he can’t remember feeling about someone the way he feels about me, and then he gives me the boot. I mean, not the boot. I mean --”

“Here’s your cocoa,” Jared interrupted him. “There is one solution, as you know.”

Mike nodded. “I can quit and work somewhere else. This should eliminate any conflict of interest or whatever that is. I don’t know much about these laws.”

“I’m no better myself. So, how do you feel about quitting?”

Mike stared at his hands for a while. “I don’t know. I’ve never worked anywhere else. I don’t know if I can adapt.”

Jared patted his arm in sympathy. “Take baby steps, Mike. And maybe try to learn a bit more about Ryan first. I don’t want to be a cautionary tale, and I’m sure that Ryan is a great guy, but you need to show a bit of interest in him.”

“That’s a good idea. I’ll ask Google.”

“It’s a good place to start.”

“Am I late to the party?” Adrian said jovially and gave Jared a hug.

“If by party, you mean cocoa and biscuits, you’re not late. I have plenty left.”

“Don’t bother.” Adrian patted his shoulder energetically, making Jared sway a little. “Why was your phone turned off?”

“Long story.”

“Good. I have plenty of time.”

“And I don’t mind hearing it again,” Mike added, as he emerged from the kitchen.

“Is it that good?”

“No. Actually, it’s pretty bad,” Jared replied.

Adrian didn’t smile or joke. He watched Jared with a serious expression on his face. That meant that he paid extra attention.

It was good to have friends, Jared thought. He could cry on their shoulder and tell all the bad things he wanted to say about Chris, knowing someone will listen. And that was a pretty important thing, after all.

Chapter Fourteen – I'm Not Okay

Adrian stole a look at his phone, made a move to grab it, and then decided against it. There were only minutes until Edward would call, but he still felt impatient. What was wrong with him? He had had that one in the bag, so to speak, only to be kicked out the door after the deed. Did he want a relationship with Edward, after all? With such an unconventional man?

He used to think of himself as free and unconventional, too, but this impatience, right now, told a different story. Throughout the day, Adrian had dreamed of Edward, with his eyes wide open. Now he was supposed to focus on work and not on what Edward would say or how his voice would sound like when he eventually called.

There had been no phone call on Sunday, and that because Edward had told him that obligations slumped him. But now it was Monday, and the clock was crawling slowly toward seven PM. The waiting was killing him, and Adrian had partly decided to spend more time at work only so that he could keep his mind busy.

Edward was pretty addictive. Adrian shifted in his chair and then decided to stand and walk around for a bit and stretch his legs. He didn't have to close his eyes to picture Edward waiting obediently to be fed a healthy dose of cum. Adrian felt even a fit of small anger growing. What kind of relationships had Edward been in before him? The pervert that he was, he must have experimented with all sorts of things. Adrian wanted to believe that he was unique, and Edward had even said something to that extent. Still, he didn't want to fall into the trap of a false sense of security.

Edward could call everything off with the snap of his elegant fingers, and Adrian didn't want to think of what it would mean. For years, after Alexander, he had guarded himself so well. And now, he cared again, and the thought was unsettling.

As long as he believed himself to be in control, it was all right. With Edward, two nights ago, it had felt like that. Adrian had felt like a winner, a conqueror entering a surrendered city. But the keys to the kingdom weren't in his pocket. Edward had eluded him with practiced ease, despite their hot lovemaking.

Only thinking of that made Adrian want to slap his cock, and not in the fun way. Was it okay to let himself care? Edward wanted a partner to play with, not a boyfriend, not even a lover in the traditional sense. What was he getting himself into?

The phone rang, and Adrian almost jumped on it, but then he reconsidered. He took two seconds, and then, as if he was slightly surprised by the call, he picked up.

"Is it seven already?" he asked in a voice he hoped was both relaxed and charming.

"So says my watch. Are you still at work?"

“You know, some of us still have to work for a living.”

“Your situation leaves nothing to be desired, or so I understand.”

“I can’t complain. I love my work. What about you?”

“I love my work, too,” Edward replied in a playful voice.

“I know you do. But you don’t have to slave your life away; it’s a matter of choice with you.”

“Do I sense a hint of jealousy? Trust me; you shouldn’t care so much about all that.”

“It’s easy to say when you have a frigging grand staircase leading to the first floor.”

“Ah, I see. You can’t help but tease me. Why are you pissed, as you would say, Adrian?”

“I’m not pissed.”

“I can sense you are.”

Adrian moved the phone from one ear to another. “You kind of left my dick hanging in the wind.”

“I recall letting you leave only after being completely satisfied.”

“You’re not a sex expert,” Adrian retorted. “You can’t know that.”

“Or is it that the source of your dissatisfaction comes from a different place?” Edward talked as if he mused to himself.

“Stop psychoanalyzing me. You’re not a shrink, either.”

“But I’m in charge of your wellbeing, and, right now, I know for a fact that you are discomforted.”

“Discomforted? Pissed sounded better.”

“I thought so. Come on, Adrian, say it. What’s eating you?”

“You sent me home like I was a booty call.”

“You’re a bit above that,” Edward teased him.

Adrian was beginning to feel more irritated. “Oh, so I am that.”

Edward laughed at the other end. “I see that you’re getting all hot and bothered over how I treated you. But it could not be helped, Adrian. My obligations --”

“What obligations? Stop being so secretive. After seeing *The Awakening*, I don’t think anything else could shock me.”

“I’m afraid my obligations are the opposite of that. They involve dull, tedious affairs. On Sunday, I visit my family, and I entertain some of their guests. I am always required unless I have some emergency to take care of.”

Adrian felt himself cool down a bit. He hadn’t seen his parents in a while, so he needed to commend Edward on being such a dutiful son. Maybe he would call his mom and dad later; they were on a cruise, somewhere, having fun, as they deserved.

“All right. I get that. So when do I see you?”

“This weekend.”

“Fine.” He didn’t know what else to say. If he insisted for them to see each other sooner than that, he would just sound childish, and he might just annoy Edward.

“Dream of me, Adrian. I’ll surely dream of you,” Edward promised with a low, sexy chuckle.

That made Adrian smile. All right, so maybe Edward wasn’t that difficult to turn into a real boyfriend if need be. He just had to play the game and get better at it so that he could beat his opponent.

Something was not right, Mike could tell, as he looked at the data coming in. His diagnosis tools were trying to calm him down, but he knew the signs of a cyberattack when he saw one. He could try to reroute the traffic, but he wasn’t particularly sure that it would work. The company needed information to function, and now the useful information was lost in a sea of spam.

He grabbed the phone and called the ISP provider. Like on cue, the landline phone on his desk began to ring. People must have started to notice, as well. Mike held his phone between his cheek and his shoulder and reached for the other.

“Yes, I know, it’s a DDOS attack,” he explained shortly. “No, miss, I’m sorry, I’m not exactly in charge of the Internet. Just don’t do anything.”

Mike put back the phone and prayed for someone at the ISP provider to pick up. While he tried to communicate with the tech service, the landline phone lit up. Between explaining the problem to the tech service guy and trying to appease the people who needed to do their work, his patience was wearing thin.

As he suspected, the tech support guy offered to reroute the traffic, and that pretty much meant that all of it, good or bad, would go into a little black hole. His fingers danced on his keyboard,

as he chose to ignore the angry landline phone, while he reconfigured the firewall. Unfortunately, the tech support guy wasn't much of help, which was precisely what he was afraid of.

The alternative was simple and complicated at the same time. He was just the server guy, after all. He could just let the ISP provider handle things and sit with his arms crossed. Or he could try to use his little software that could reroute the traffic to the cloud, and then he could contain it there and analyze it until the storm weathered off.

That was a bold move. If he did it without talking to anyone in the company, he might just put himself in a vulnerable position. But if he didn't act fast, who knew how many other things could go from bad to worse?

He needed to call the IT department. By now, they had to know that something fishy was going on. With a not so heartfelt thank you, he ended his conversation with the tech support and grabbed the landline. "Please, don't call here for a while, as I need to get in touch with the IT department," he said quickly to the angry person on the other end.

"This is the IT department. What the hell is going on?"

"We're under attack," Mike said.

"Thanks, Captain Obvious."

Mike didn't know which of the guys in IT was talking to him, but there were some snotty bastards there. "Tech support at the ISP provider tells me they could reroute to a black hole."

"Oh, great. Just fantastic. Did you tell them to stuff their black hole up their holes?" The snotty bastard laughed at his own bad pun on the other end.

"I need to have confirmation from above for this."

"We can't do that. There's a whole bunch of emails and other communication that would go down the drain, too."

Talking about who was Captain Obvious now, Mike thought and rolled his eyes. Now there was no time for useless chatting. "Can you guys give the green light for this?"

The snotty bastard fell silent. "No, we can't do that."

"All right, so what am I supposed to do?"

"I don't know. Aren't you the server guy? This is a server problem. Just deal with it."

The line went dead. Mike shook his head. So like some people to wash their hands and pretend they had no responsibility. He called the first upper management number he found on the list. The person on the other end declined responsibility, as well.

Mike was starting to sweat. He was lost in a sea of communication problems because he didn't have who to ask what to do. One after another, the people he kept calling declined to assume it, telling him that it was his problem to solve, or they just keep sending him up the hierarchy. But Mike couldn't go for one solution or another without having some higher-up tell him they agreed to it.

In the end, there was only one office in the building – of those that mattered – that he hadn't called. Ryan's assistant spoke to him in an affable voice, and then he put him through.

“Yes? Micah?” Ryan's voice sent instant shivers down his spine. And he also called him by his given name, which, for some reason, in his mouth, sounded different.

“Mr. Armstrong,” Mike said and then gulped, quite audibly.

“Why are you calling here?” Ryan sounded puzzled. “Is this because of Saturday --”

“No,” Mike said quickly. The words began pouring from his mouth. The last thing he needed was for Ryan to recall the events on Saturday. Anything but that.

Ryan listened in complete silence. “So, what are our alternatives?”

“Rerouting to a black hole. Only one alternative, so it's not an alternative --” Mike began to babble.

“Is there an alternative?” Ryan asked, his voice not one ounce angrier or upset.

Mike hesitated. “There might be one.”

“All right. What is it?”

“It's something I made,” Mike asked. “I've tested it, so it should work even with large amounts of data.”

“How does it work?”

“I reroute everything to the cloud, and then I analyze it there so that I can identify the malicious data.”

“Will that save the real traffic that comes to us?”

“It should,” Mike replied.

“Do it. You have my permission.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Mike didn't wait for a reply from Ryan and got to work fast. There was no time to waste. Was Ryan still thinking of Saturday? Mike shook his head. Now was really not the time to think of all that stuff. He had a lot of work to do.

He was still deep in work when he heard someone coming in. “I know, I know, I'm still working on it. The attack might last for twenty-four hours or so --”

“Have you eaten anything?”

Mike turned so fast that the headphones on his head tried to pull him back, their cable entangled, most probably, around his chair. Why was Ryan there? And he looked his usual gorgeous self, so Mike felt his throat getting dry like the Sahara Desert.

“It's almost nine, and you're still here,” Ryan explained as if he was some child. “Have you eaten anything?”

“Um, I had something --” Mike stopped, trying to recall when it had been the last time he ate and what it was. It was Monday, so he probably had the turkey sandwich. He liked to keep things well organized, and that included his daily and weekly diet. Funny though, he couldn't recall eating the sandwich or how it tasted like. His stomach rumbled, suddenly aware of the absence of food.

“I'm going to order something. What's your pleasure?”

Mike continued to stare at Ryan, who was getting busy with his phone. “Why are you here?” he asked in a meek voice. “This will take some time, and I don't know how long it will be. But the program is already starting to learn so --”

Ryan threw him a look that made him weak to the knees. Such a good thing that he was sitting. “You've been working for seven hours straight, Micah.”

Again with the name, Mike moaned internally. Why did Ryan enjoy so much to torture him? “It's my job, sir.”

Ryan quirked an eyebrow. “It's only us here. You can call me by my name.”

“I don't think I should,” Mike said stubbornly.

“Ah.” Ryan seemed to have forgotten about his phone now and the call he wanted to make. “Then it's like I'm your boss, and you must do everything I say, right?” As he said the words, Ryan made a small gesture with one hand to illustrate that whatever it was, it had to remain between the two of them.

Mike couldn't imagine telling anyone about what he and Ryan had. Not that they had much. And he would actually tell Jared and Adrian if anything happened. No, nothing would happen!

"Your lips move in a funny way. I'm your boss, and I'm ordering you to call me by my name and to eat. How is that?"

"Thank you, but --"

"No 'buts'. It looks like you're saving the company from quite the pickle. Can you identify where the attack has come from?"

"That would be difficult. Right now, saving the real data is more important. And I hope that my program will learn some interesting things so it can recognize the patterns next time it happens."

"Your program, you say."

"Yes." Mike looked down. "It seems to work and since you didn't want to go with what the IPS provider wanted to do --"

"It wasn't an accusation. Actually, I'm very impressed. And glad that you're here, working for this company."

Mike just nodded.

"I'm going to order something healthy and filling. You continue to do your thing. And I will be quiet. You won't even know I'm here."

Mike turned toward the screen of his computer without a word. He knew Ryan was there; he could smell his sexy cologne, and even sense the air displacement where he stood. Focusing on the task at hand would be so difficult now.

Ryan seemed genuinely interested in what Mike explained as they ate. It was easier than he thought to keep the communication between them at a professional level. Of course, it served that he didn't look at Ryan at all.

"I'm sorry if I let you down," Ryan said out of the blue.

"It's okay. I understand everything," Mike replied while keeping his eyes down.

"Are you always this accommodating with your lovers?"

Mike snickered. "What lovers?"

"Don't tell me you're a virgin."

“No, of course not.”

He could feel Ryan’s steady gaze on the crown of his head.

“So, are you going to reply or what?”

“Um, I don’t know what to say. Wait, what do you want me to say?”

The program was working his magic, so he could allow himself this little break.

“I want you to say exactly what’s on your mind. Leave nothing out.” Ryan’s voice was still a tad playful, but not as much now.

“Getting through this attack is on my mind,” he replied, hoping for an easy way out.

“You know what I mean. Have you thought of me since Saturday? Because, stupid me, I’ve only thought of you.”

Mike shifted in his place, but he still didn’t look up at Ryan. “That’s not fair. You decided to break things off. Not that we had... things,” he hurried to add. “We had nothing.”

“We had that magical evening when you took me to that romantic cocktail bar.”

“And the dance on the roof,” Mike added, without thinking.

Ryan moved and placed one hand over Mike’s wrist. It was warm, and Mike could feel his pulse quickening. “I can’t seem to take you out of mind. I was trying hard to push any thought of you away, and then you called to tell me about this situation.”

“I had been trying anyone else for minutes until I got to you,” Mike replied. “I didn’t bother you on purpose.”

“I’m glad that you did. But, for a second, I thought that you were doing something foolish and brave by calling me. I thought you called me to tell me what a coward I was.”

“That’s not what I think of you.”

“You should. What is it about you, Micah?”

“Could you please, not call me that? It sounds kind of intimate.” Mike hoped his voice didn’t quiver. He had little to no control over the beating of his heart.

“It’s maybe because I want to be intimate with you.”

Mike shook his head. “Your reputation is at stake. I don’t want to be the one responsible for ruining it.”

Ryan sighed audibly. “Then my reputation is, indeed, in good hands. I’m the only one at fault for pining over you when you obviously are okay with the situation as it is. It’s all right. I guess it will come to pass. I’m sorry. I have no idea why I’m saying all these things.”

Ryan curled his fingers around Mike’s wrist and used his thumb to brush over the place where the pulse could be felt.

Mike pulled his hand free. “I’m not okay,” he said quietly. Ryan didn’t say anything, and Mike thought he might not have heard him. So he looked up and stared at Ryan. “I’m not okay.”

Who moved first? Mike wasn’t sure. But he was soon in Ryan’s arms, and their lips connected, drawn by a supernatural force. Now he was okay. Ryan squeezed him tightly, and Mike followed his lead, angling his head to make sure that their kiss was as deep as they could handle.

Ryan broke the kiss and looked at him. “I don’t know what I’m doing,” he whispered and let their foreheads touch.

“I do,” Mike whispered.

Maybe he was possessed when it came to Ryan. Maybe he was a bit insane, and he was putting both of them at risk, trying to pull such a thing at work. If anyone walked in on them, they would both be in trouble.

But he couldn’t think of all that. Right now, the only thing that mattered was to grab Ryan and kiss him forcefully. He was overly aware of how clumsy he had to be, but he couldn’t be bothered with that, either. There was a small shaking in his hands as he tried to open the buttons on Ryan’s shirt. Underneath that fabric, he would find everything he needed, the man he had been dreaming of for the last weeks.

Ryan steadied his frenzied attack by grabbing his wrists. Of course, this was wrong. No, he was wrong to assume anything.

Then Ryan kissed him again, and his worries melted like snow in spring. This kiss wasn’t the hungry one from earlier. It was sweeter and subdued, and it made his mind spin. When it ended, they stared into each other’s eyes.

“I can’t ask anything of you,” Ryan said softly.

“You can ask everything of me,” Mike replied, feeling stubborn. He didn’t move his eyes away.

“It would be wrong.”

“It wouldn’t be.”

“I thought I was your boss, and you were supposed to kiss my ass,” Ryan said, his eyes warming up.

“I would kiss your ass for hours,” Mike let out, and then he blushed. The stupid things he found himself saying. Ryan’s kisses were like a shot of alcohol to the brain. He couldn’t think clearly and, apparently, anything could leave his mouth without censure.

“I would do the same with you,” Ryan said back.

The ping from the computer, letting him know that the program needed him broke the magic. Mike shook his head and hurried back to his battle station. He couldn’t look at Ryan now, so he pretended to be more interested in what happened on the screen than it was necessary.

Ryan placed his hands on Mike’s shoulders, massaging them slowly. “You are a great person, Micah. I’m glad I met you.”

“But we can’t do this,” Mike added.

“I know.”

“I need to work,” he said. He squeezed his eyes shut for a moment and then blinked fast. He needed to chase away the annoying moisture in them.

“I’m glad you’re my employee, too. It’s great for the company,” Ryan said. “Never leave us, okay? Will you promise?”

He couldn’t promise that. His being employed there was what made things so complicated. But, against his better judgment, he nodded.

Ryan ruffled his hair and then placed a small kiss on the crown of his head. For a moment, Mike felt his resolve weakening. One moment in life, he could be foolish, screw the consequences. But, as he debated with himself, Ryan moved away. The door opened and closed very slowly as if Ryan didn’t want to bother him at all.

“This is not exactly the kind of place we usually hang out,” Jared pointed out, as soon as they were inside and took place at a table.

“I’m trying to get out of my comfort zone,” Mike replied.

“Ah, is it because of Ryan? What happened?”

The rhythmic song blaring over the speakers and the dancers on the ring singing along and not exactly in tune made for quite a noisy atmosphere. But it was a Wednesday, Mike wanted out of the house, and as much as his choice had surprised Jared, he had to admit that the place had its charm.

They grabbed two pints of beer and took place at a tall table. Watching the dancers was comfortable from that vantage point, and it was as if the people there put on a free show for the bystanders. Jared found himself tapping his foot to the rhythm of the music.

Mike drank from his pint and grimaced. Jared laughed. “Hey, it was your choice. Is it really bitter?”

“Clearly more bitter than whatever I’ve ever put in my mouth.”

“Come on, don’t avoid it. What happened with Ryan?”

Mike sighed. “We kissed again. He told me he had been thinking about me, and, you know.”

“I don’t know if you’re not telling me. Have you told him that you consider finding another place to work?”

“I don’t consider it,” Mike said right away. “Yes, I do. But I need to take small steps, like coming here. And he wants me to stay and work for the company.”

“Ah, so you told him of your intentions.”

“No. I just helped with a problem, and Ryan was glad, and, well, he told me never to leave the company.”

“And the part where you two kissed, when did it happen?”

“Just a bit earlier in that conversation.”

Jared shook his head. “Even if he told you to stay, that doesn’t mean that he won’t be glad if you make this move so that you can be with him.”

“I don’t know how to tell him this. I’m afraid that it would be too bold of me to go to work somewhere else. And what if I make a mistake? What if Ryan is not, you know, the one?”

“Frankly, Mike, I think being more open to change would do you good. Okay, don’t do it for Ryan’s sake; do it for yours. You have potential. I know you’re a good coder.”

“You don’t know the first thing about that.” Mike snickered.

Jared rolled his eyes. “Yes, I know, I’m the artistic type in our little group. But you’re the guy who knows how to code, even if I don’t know exactly what you’re good at. Maybe you should try freelancing as I do.”

“It would be too scary for me,” Mike said.

“Well, then it’s good that we’re here, drinking the most bitter beer I’ve ever tried, and watching people dance. It’s new, and it’s good for you.”

Jared let his eyes travel over the dancers. A tall guy, in a cowboy outfit, seemed to be the star on the dance ring. His partner, a young woman who appeared to be completely smitten with him, was trying hard to keep up while he showed her some moves.

Jared watched the dancer and took another sip from his beer. Damn, the guy was really too on the nose with that outfit. He even wore boots, and the shiny buckle in front drew Jared's attention on more than one occasion. All right, maybe it was also because those jeans were really tight, and Jared could tell that the guy was packing some real heat; that was why he was staring so insistently.

The song stopped, and the dancers took a breather. Jared continued to stare at the cowboy, who was now engaged in quiet conversation with his partner. He wore his checkered flannel with his sleeves rolled up, and Jared couldn't help but notice the sinewy forearms. Clearly, he seemed to be a fan of physical work. Without having a thing for that Brokeback Mountain look, Jared had to admit that the outfit looked good on the guy. When he slightly turned, Jared bit his bottom lip unconsciously. That was quite a scrumptious behind, what he was looking at right that moment.

He shook his head. He wasn't there to ogle straight men in cowboy dress. Maybe just a small extra peek because he was curious about the guy's face, too. Since he had worn his hat low while dancing, the cowboy's face had been obscured. Jared looked up when the man turned again as he shook hands with people.

Coincidence or not, the cowboy was looking straight at him, and their eyes met. Only for a second, because Jared quickly looked away. He had a feeling staring at a man in such a place would not score him points. The one thing he needed to do right now was to swear off men for a while. The last fiasco was still too fresh in his heart and mind.

Not that he even considered having anything to do with the sexy cowboy. In the short seconds their eyes had met, Jared had registered a few things, such as a strong jaw and thick eyebrows shadowing a pair of dark eyes. From that distance, he couldn't tell much else, but the cowboy looked like someone who spent a lot of time in the sun. He had that rugged look about him, something of a Marlboro Man in him.

Mike was nursing his beer, and he seemed lost in thought. Jared felt instantly guilty. He placed one hand on Mike's shoulder. "You know, Mike, it's best if you do everything in your own time. Don't allow anything or anyone to pressure you. I'm glad you took me here tonight. Even though this beer is undrinkable if you're asking me."

"Thank you, J. You must still be hurting after Chris, and you're still the one to comfort me because I can't make up my mind about what I really want."

"I think you know what you want. And it's good that you're thinking of getting out of your comfort zone."

Mike seemed to ponder over something. “Would you think badly on me if I met with Ryan, you know, in secret?”

Jared grimaced, but he tried to smile. “You wouldn’t be happy this way, Mike.”

“I know,” Mike moaned. “But I want him so much.”

Jared was about to start comforting Mike again, when someone bumped into him from behind, making the table shake. The beer pints lost their balance, and their content splashed everywhere, including on his favorite t-shirt.

Annoyed, Jared turned, decided to give the clumsy patron a piece of his mind. He froze for a second as he stared into a pair of dark eyes he had seen just earlier. The cowboy smirked at him. “So damn sorry about that. Can I buy you, boys, another round?”

Jared had no idea what irked him all of a sudden. The guy looked as if he could hold himself on two feet just fine. After all, he had been dancing until earlier. So that couldn’t have been an accident. Maybe the cowboy had heard them talk, and just thought it would be a good idea to make fun of them, two gay guys in a place like that.

“No, it’s all right,” he replied in a clipped voice. “We were just leaving, anyway. Mike, let’s go.”

Mike didn’t protest at all. Maybe it was for the better that they didn’t have to force themselves to drink that foul beer, Jared thought.

“Hey, don’t leave on my account,” the cowboy drawled.

Jared stared at him, now completely annoyed. The dark eyes were glinting with mischief. Jared felt like he wanted to punch the guy in the nose; it looked like others might have felt the same, because it was clear the anatomic part in question had been broken before. Not that it made the cowboy less charming. He had that appeal of a man who usually got away with anything, in particular in his relationships with women. There was both grace and strength in how he held himself.

“We’re not leaving on your account,” Jared said, making sure to pour as much acid as he could in his voice. “We’re just leaving, period.”

“Ah, that’s too bad. And I ruined your t-shirt, too. Can I get your number? I should pay for the dry cleaning.”

“It’s a frigging t-shirt!” Jared didn’t know he could have a short fuse, but it looked like that uncouth cowboy was meddling with his electric system. “It doesn’t need dry cleaning!” Mike pulled at his elbow. “Mike, let’s go.”

He marched out, with Mike hanging from his arm.

“Come by again,” the cowboy called after him.

Jared didn't turn to shout his reply. “Not in this life!”

He had no idea he had it in him to be this not-nice person. It was completely new, and it felt a bit liberating. Mike was still pulling at his elbow once they were out in the street. “Sorry about that, Mike. The guy just got seriously on my nerves. And now I'll have to take the smell of that nasty beer out of my t-shirt. Can you believe people like that?”

“Jared,” Mike said, his eyes wide.

“Hey, don't look so scared. I wouldn't have gotten into a fight or anything.”

Mike just shook his head. “I'm not scared. But I think that cowboy really wanted your phone number.”

“What? No way! He was just trying to get on my nerves. He must have heard us talking, and probably thought himself clever with that prank.”

Mike snickered. “J, it's so not like you to be this dense. That's usually my area of expertise. That guy was looking at you as if he wanted to eat you. You know, in a good way.”

Jared stopped. “Nah, you must be imagining things.”

“I'm not,” Mike said stubbornly.

“All right, so maybe he wanted to make fun of the gay guy who landed by accident in his bar or something. That must have been it. He danced all the time with some girl.”

“Ah, so you noticed him! He must have noticed you back.”

Jared had to admit that the cowboy hadn't seemed aggressive at all. The look in his dark eyes had been playful, sort of come-hither. No, he shook his head; now, he was the one imagining things. The guy was attractive, but that didn't mean anything.

“We should just head back home and catch some sleep.”

“He really liked you,” Mike said with conviction. “Oh, look, he's coming.”

Jared turned only to see the cowboy jogging toward them.

The man tipped his hat. “Sorry about earlier. My friends told me it would be the perfect pick up line. They're a bunch of assholes when they want to be. So, here's how I usually do it.” He offered his hand. “I'm Shane.”

Jared stood there without saying a word. Mike nudged him. He shook his head and offered his hand, too. “Jared.”

“Nice to meet you, Jared.” Shane held his hand for a while.

He then offered his hand to Mike, too, but he only shook his curtly.

“Here is my number,” Shane added and gave Jared a napkin on which a number had been written down in thick, blocky lines. “Just in case you change your mind about that dry cleaning.” And then he winked at Jared like that was supposed to be reparation enough for that t-shirt. “Sorry about ruining your night. I hope you guys will come again. Have a good evening.”

With that, he jogged back to the bar, leaving a much flabbergasted Jared behind. It was indeed a sight to watch him go.

“Didn’t I tell you?” Mike began to talk excitedly. “He really digs you!”

“Whatever,” Jared said. “I’m not in the mood for a new complication right now. Cowboy wannabes named Shane sound like quite the complication to me.”

Mike picked the napkin from his hand, folded it carefully, and then stuffed it into Jared’s right pocket. “There. Just in case you change your mind about complications.”

No, he wouldn’t change his mind about complications. It wasn’t like him to move on so fast, not that he had any experience with relationships, except for whatever had happened with Chris. He sighed, and Mike squeezed his shoulder. “You know, that guy was a total asshole. At least, there’s a bright side. You’re not the one married to him.”

Jared burst into laughter. That was, indeed, a relief. All he had to cry over was some two-week relationship or so. It did count as a long one, compared to the fleeting flings he had had in his life. “You know, Mike, maybe I’m not meant to have a relationship right now. Maybe I should, you know, just have fun for a while, no strings attached.”

“Will that fun include calling a certain handsome cowboy?” Mike nudged him playfully in the ribs.

Jared snorted. “I don’t think he’s my type.”

Mike snickered. “You two were eye-fucking each other just earlier. I could sense the electricity.”

“There was no electricity,” Jared protested, but he had to admit to himself that he felt flattered at the thought that a handsome man like that could be interested in him. But he was beyond that. Just as flattered he had felt when Chris had hooked up with him the first time, and where had that taken him? No, this time, he would be a lot more careful. He wouldn’t be the kid with stars in his eyes dreaming of a relationship.

“I’d say it was.”

“I won’t ever come back here, so there’s no chance to see him again.”

“You have his number,” Mike pointed out. “Maybe the best solution, as they say, is to get back in the saddle. Oh, the saddle. I just made a pun. Because he’s a cowboy and all that.”

“He dresses like a cowboy. That doesn’t mean that he’s one,” Jared said.

“Well, he looks the part quite well.”

“There are no farms around here, so he can’t be a cowboy.”

“Maybe he’s just visiting. And that’s your chance for a fling,” Mike continued. “I think that’s what they prescribe on those relationship advice sites.”

“Mike, I think this is another case of you getting things a little bit wrong. What advice would that be?”

Mike shrugged. “What if Shane is here only for a few days? There’s nothing for you to lose. You can meet him, hop back in the saddle, and then kiss him goodbye. Like literally.”

“How come you’re so shy in your relationships, but you’re pestering me to have a one-night-stand with a sexy cowboy?”

“Ah, so you like him! And it’s easier to give advice than follow it. It’s just that he seemed to like you, for real. It seemed all genuine.”

“Well, I’m not going to fall twice for the same trick. I thought Chris liked me for real, as well. And look where that got me.”

“It’s not fair to judge all the guys by taking Chris as the measuring dick. Oops, I meant stick. Measuring stick. Did I make another pun? It must be that awful beer. I had half of it, I think.”

Jared patted Mike’s back. “Then you’re a true hero. I couldn’t manage more than one sip or so.”

He couldn’t consider jumping back in the saddle so quickly. It wasn’t like him, despite his bravado about having fun and all that. Maybe he would just throw away Shane’s number when he was back home, and Mike couldn’t see him do it.

Jared was busy gathering his pictures from the wall. He had just been part of an event gathering young photographers, and, in his book, it had been a bit of a success. As a freelancer, he needed to network, at least once in a while, and there were occasions he could use, like this one, to create new connections.

Also, it felt nice to have his name out there, even if along with others. Chris was wrong. He could make a name for himself without any help, especially not from a man who considered him a side piece and nothing more.

“Jared Boyle?”

He turned at the sound of that voice. For a few moments, he stared at the stranger, a handsome man in an expensive suit. There was something familiar about him, but Jared didn't know where he had seen him before or whether there was just some uncanny resemblance to someone he knew.

“Yes,” he replied.

The mystery was cleared right away. The stranger offered his hand. “Andrew Reeves.”

Now Jared knew precisely where he had seen the man before. He pursed his lips and ignored the extended hand. Maybe he was petty, but if what Chris had said to him about having an open relationship was true, Jared wanted nothing to do with Andrew Reeves.

It hurt that he was so handsome, too. His curly hair was just a tad too long to be considered business-like, but not completely rebellious. Just as the night he had seen him the first time, Jared thought he had something of a classic beauty in him. Why would Chris go out and try to have fun on the side when he had such a man at home? His manner seemed polite and charming, too.

The hand withdrew. “I must apologize for my husband.”

Jared turned and continued to take the pictures down, reining in with difficulty the need just to rip them from the wall, stuff them in his bag, and storm out.

“You know, you made quite an impression on him,” Andrew continued. “It's not often that this happens with Christian. He's quite pretentious.”

Christian. Pretentious. Of course, Andrew must have known his husband a lot better than Jared had managed over the short time they had seen each other. No, not seen; they had just fucked. He continued to remain stubbornly silent in the hope that Andrew would take the hint and then a hike.

“I just want you to know that he didn't mean any harm.”

Jared felt his jaw hurting. This time, he turned, and said through his teeth, “Oh, I think he meant everything he did and every word he said.”

And he did harm me. Jared left those words unspoken.

Andrew put his hands up in a gesture of appeasement. “He should have told you about me.”

“Right. Preferably before he took me to bed.” Jared had a mind to use more harsh words, but it wasn't the right place for that, and it wasn't like him to throw nasty words around, anyway.

“I can see why he likes you,” Andrew said, and he appeared amused.

“Of course. I look like an easy lay,” Jared said in a low voice.

Andrew quirked an eyebrow. “You don’t know the first thing about being married, Jared. Routine can become annoying. It can kill passion.”

Jared threw the gathered pictures on the table in front of him and then crossed his arms over his chest. “And yet, some people manage to remain married all their lives without cheating on each other. I wonder how they do it.”

Andrew chuckled and shifted his weight from one foot to another. Maybe that conversation was not easy for him, either. Jared wondered what Andrew really wanted.

“He told you the truth when you two last spoke on the phone.”

“Too late,” Jared replied. “The moment he tricked me into sleeping with him --”

“Tricked you? What are you? Twelve?”

Jared swallowed thickly. He had a feeling that Andrew and Chris deserved each other. “No, I’m not twelve. But let’s just say that married men shouldn’t go around, pretending to be single, just so that they can score with someone other than their spouses.”

Andrew seemed a bit taken aback by the tone of his voice. “He told me you were pretty desperate to get in bed with him. Maybe you just ignored the signs.”

Jared turned to the remaining pictures once more. His head was hurting already. “I assumed I was dealing with an honest human being. Rest assured that I won’t make the same mistake again.”

Andrew released an exaggerated sigh. “You’re young, and you’re overreacting.”

“Why are you here?” Jared asked, ignoring the other’s arrogant attitude.

“I wanted to know you.”

“Tough luck, then. I’m not interested in knowing you.”

“Hmm. Chris does like the most the ones with an attitude. Why were you alone the night Chris met you?”

“Well, that’s none of your business.”

“Let’s say that it’s my educated guess that you couldn’t score, as you say. So the moment someone paid you any attention, you jumped right into it, without thinking of the consequences for a moment.”

Jared made a conscious effort to breathe. The nerve on that guy was fantastic. He tried to ignore how those words pulled at his insecurities, threatening to unravel them all. “All right, whatever.”

“And you’re flippant, too.”

“It must be part of my charm.” Jared had finished taking all the pictures down, but he didn’t want to turn and face Andrew. He had a feeling he would jump to strangle him.

“Too bad. Let me give you a little piece of advice. If you want to have fun in this life, drop the attitude.”

Jared shook his head. All his time with Chris, he had tried to be nothing but understanding and accommodating. And now Chris’s husband was there, hurling insults and accusing him of being the opposite of that. But it was all right; he could take a deep breath and ignore everything. “Are we done here?”

He took his pictures and stuffed them in his bag, without sparing Andrew another look.

“It looks like it. You’re a pretty boy, Jared, but pretty looks alone won’t get you far in life. It’s how you use them that counts.”

Suddenly, it struck Jared, what had pushed Andrew to come to meet him like that and then insult him. There was an undertone of jealousy under all that arrogance. “Are you talking from experience?” Jared looked directly at Andrew.

From up close, he noticed a few things this time. Andrew seemed to be in his forties, like Chris, but his face was a bit too puffy if he looked carefully. Could it be that he was doing Botox shots already? What kind of person in their right mind did that at such a young age? And his lips were curled into an ugly smile that took from the handsomeness of his face.

Suddenly, he felt pity. He sighed and hiked the bag on his shoulder. “I would wish you and Chris all the best, but I don’t think that would be appropriate.”

Andrew seemed pretty pissed now. Maybe he didn’t like to have some things said back to him. “Oh, to be young and naïve,” he hissed. “Do you think you can land another man like that? In your lifetime?”

“It’s okay,” Jared said promptly. “I can live with the thought. And I’m pretty glad you landed Chris, and not me.”

He pushed past Andrew, ignoring the annoyed huff that followed. That had been one hell of a conversation, and now he needed to breathe in some fresh air.

To think that he had been so gullible! Jared focused on his breathing as he marched out of the building. As much as it felt like he had done pretty well, especially at hiding what he truly felt, and how Andrew's words hit a little bit too close to home, he was drained now.

But, seriously, what was all that nonsense that he couldn't land a partner to sleep with? That was bullshit. At the same time, Jared thought as he slowed down his pace, there was a part of the blame he shared, although he wouldn't admit it to an arrogant bastard like Andrew or Chris. He had gotten too fixated on the idea of having a boyfriend. At his age, who did that?

All right, so Adrian was – sort of – in a relationship, and Mike was pining over his boss, but where was he, Jared? Apparently, he was nowhere he felt good. And maybe Mike was right, and he needed to get back in the saddle, if for no other reason than that he needed to prove himself that he wasn't undesirable.

He knew that Andrew had said those words to hurt him. If he were smart, he would just let it slide. But all of a sudden, he needed the confirmation that he could be with someone because he wanted to be and because there were people interested in him.

There was no moment like the present. Without overthinking things, he pulled the folded napkin from where he placed it in his bag for safekeeping.

“Hi there,” Shane drawled.

Jared froze. What was he doing? Was he going to say? Why hadn't he thought this through? What was he supposed to say? *Hey, are you ready for a romp in the hay?*

Now there was no turning back. If he cut the conversation, he couldn't ever call Shane again without having explanations readily at hand. “Hi,” he eventually said.

“Who is this?”

‘Nobody’ didn't sound like a good answer. “It's Jared. You ruined my t-shirt,” he explained in a clipped voice, which he hated right away. He sounded like such an asshole.

“Ah, Jared.” At the other end, Shane perked up right away. “Are you in the mood to get together?”

Straight to the point. Jared felt a bit like taken for a ride by an ocean wave. He could just decline, but then, why had he called in the first place? “Sure. Right now?”

“Yeah.”

Jared couldn't believe himself as he listened to Shane. It looked like the guy already had a place in mind. At least, it wasn't the one with the awful beer.

Chapter Fifteen – Back In The Saddle

Jared pushed his hands into the pockets of his jacket, adjusting the bag on his shoulder, and walked purposefully into the bar. Yes, it wasn't the one with the awful beer, but it didn't look any better. The same blue-collar workers populated the pub, and there were some people there who looked like they had just gotten back from working the fields. Maybe it was a look that was coming back in fashion, Jared mused. The difference was that no dance ring was in sight. Per se, he had nothing against the audience, but he couldn't see how he and Shane could get acquainted in that kind of place. He suspected that public displays of affection between two gay guys wouldn't be a welcome sight.

He scouted the area for Shane, and when he didn't see him, he decided to take place on one of the tall stools and order himself a beer. No, he would make it a tequila. Maybe a stiff drink would make the bad taste in his mouth after meeting with Chris's husband finally go away. The bartender was a morose man in his fifties that served him his drink without the faintest shadow of a smile. Jared wasn't bothered by it; probably, the bartender wasn't exactly into that rowdy atmosphere and hated his workplace. There was some sports match on the large HDTV mounted on a wall, and the audience was being part of it all.

He grabbed his shot and grimaced. Then he gestured for the bartender to hit him again. The man gave him an unreadable look, and then he put a half-full bottle in front of him. That was bold of him, Jared thought, but he decided to leave the man a tip. Maybe he would smile a little then.

The booze, on the other hand, was good. Jared didn't quite recall when it had been the last time he had done shots. If Shane didn't show up, at least he would have a good time by himself. He reached for the bottle so that he could fill his glass again, but a rough hand covered his. "Have you started partying without me?"

There was an unmistakable drawl in that voice, and Jared smiled, despite himself. He tried to turn, but Shane's warm body kept him a prisoner. Talking about bold, for real, this time. "I didn't see you, so I thought you'd bailed on me. Or that you're running late. Take your pick."

"Bail on you?" Shane was talking into his hair, and Jared felt a bit overly conscious. They weren't in a gay bar, after all.

Or were they? Jared tried to look around, but Shane was still keeping him trapped. If he recalled correctly, he hadn't seen any women inside. It looked like there was an all-male audience. Was it a gay bar? What kind of gay bar was that?

"Um, would you mind allowing me a bit of space?"

"I do mind. I have to stop you from bailing on me."

"Why would I bail on you?" Jared wondered out loud.

Shane spoke into his hair again, “Because you surely look like you’re not too happy to be here.”

Oh, damn. Jared knew that he was an easy to read kind of guy, wearing his soul on his sleeve and all that. He used to believe it was a positive trait, but now, he wasn’t so sure. It meant that he was easy to take for a fool, too.

But that would end tonight. He was at that bar, with Shane seriously crowding his personal space because he had chosen to be. Now all he had to do was to avoid getting involved. Easy-peasy. It was just a hookup, although it seemed to start in a weird place, with an odd bartender, but with pretty damned good tequila.

“It would be easier to talk if you just sat by my side.” Jared patted the empty seat next to him.

“I have a table. Let’s go. And take the bottle with you.”

“Then let me pay for it first. The bartender might think I’m trying to run away with his booze, and he looks like a guy who doesn’t take such things lightly. I don’t want to be responsible for being the guy who ruined his day completely.”

Shane burst into laughter. “Old Charlie? He wouldn’t think that. And I’m sure that if he left this bottle here, he has serious doubts you’d be able to finish it. It’s his way of weighing the clientele.”

“Old Charlie might just be surprised,” Jared replied, feeling a bit competitive. “I must ask, though. Do you come here often?”

“It’s close to where I live, so yeah.” Shane wrapped one hand around his and pulled him from his seat.

“But it’s not,” Jared leaned in so that he could whisper in Shane’s ear, and still somehow manage to beat the loud noises around them, “gay, is it?”

Shane chuckled. “I don’t know. Some guys might be, though. I’m not judging.”

Jared had a feeling that Shane was pulling his leg. “Really? You’re not one? Then what are you doing, holding another dude by the hand like this? Experimenting?”

“I think I’m past that stage,” Shane replied.

They sat at a table in a corner, Shane plopping down next to him on a wooden bench. They had no glasses, Jared noticed. “Hey, maybe we should --”

Shane took the bottle and took a hefty sip.

“—get glasses,” Jared completed his sentence, his eyes never leaving his date for the night.

Shane was dressed pretty much the same as the other night when Jared had met him, although it could be a different checkered flannel. But the hat, and the tight jeans, and the boots were all there. For a moment, Jared wondered what he was getting himself into.

“Booze is better straight from the bottle,” Shane explained with a sly smile.

Jared could feel his lips twitching. There was something about Shane’s smile that was infectious. “Not any booze.”

“Any booze,” Shane said with conviction.

“Even champagne?”

“Yeah, even champagne.”

“Of course, if you’re some racing champion who just got first place,” Jared retorted. “And now, how am I supposed to drink after you?”

“What? You’re worried I might give you the cooties?” Shane asked, and his grin grew bolder.

“It’s not exactly hygienic,” Jared pointed out.

“Ah, then when I’m going to kiss you, you’re going to think the same?”

Shane sat close to him, and Jared was overly conscious of his body heat. There was something about that man that made him pretty weak to his knees. He was truly masculine, with his shiny belt buckle, and his cowboy hat, and his sexy grin. Maybe it was the shot making its way into a kick, but Jared felt like licking Shane’s lips, just to learn how they tasted like.

Right now, maybe of the probably expensive tequila that would go on Jared’s tab. Not that Jared could hold that against Shane since he had been the first to start drinking by himself.

“You’re quiet, so that’s a bad sign,” Shane said with a small sigh. “All right, I’ll use a condom on my tongue. Would that work for you?”

“A condom on what?” Suddenly, the idea of seeing Shane trying to fit the rubber on his tongue seemed awfully funny to him, so he burst into laughter.

“Hey, don’t make fun of me,” Shane complained, but his eyes were twinkling. “And what’s to laugh? I’ll do anything it takes to kiss you tonight.”

Jared reined in his laugh, with some difficulty. “What makes you think you’re going to kiss me tonight?” For some reason, he felt like being a bit of a tease.

“A man can hope,” Shane offered. “Right?”

“Sure,” Jared said and grabbed the bottle to take a sip, too. Man, that was sure to make them both drunk, even faster than shots.

“You drank after me,” Shane said, and he seemed happy when saying that. “So, after all, I don’t have to put a condom on my tongue?”

Jared snickered. “You’re funny, you know?”

“I’m trying,” Shane said.

“But it’s not like we can kiss here, right?” Jared gestured around.

“Everyone’s watching the game,” Shane replied. “I don’t think anyone would notice.”

“Yeah, right,” Jared said with a snort. “So you won’t mind being burned at the stake tonight, huh? Just for the record, I don’t like to live dangerously.”

Shane laughed. “Then, we’ll go somewhere else we can kiss.”

“Your place,” Jared said, feeling emboldened by the tequila in his system.

“Sure, why not?” Shane took the bottle again. “It surely tastes sweeter now.” He winked at Jared and drank.

Jared liked how easygoing Shane was. That was what he needed, and Mike was right. Shane was fun, and they wouldn’t see each other after tonight. “You said you lived close?”

“Yeah,” Shane said, “it’s because --”

“Then let’s go,” Jared said. There weren’t many times when he felt this courageous. Most of the time, he wasn’t the initiator. But that, too, would change tonight.

“Right now?”

“Yes. Is there a problem? Are you all talk and no action?” Jared teased Shane again.

Shane pushed his hat back and looked at him. “Me? No action? It looks like you want me to prove myself to you.”

“Sure thing, that’s what I want,” Jared said. “You might look like a cowboy, Shane, but I’m not sure that you know how to ride.”

Shane gave him an almost serious look, but his eyes were laughing, as much as it looked like he wanted to keep a straight face. “That hurt, you know?”

“You also look like you have tough skin. I think you’ll manage,” Jared said and added a wink since that seemed to be part of Shane’s way of communicating.

“Hmm,” Shane said.

Hmm? What’s that supposed to mean?

“Let’s go,” Shane said and pulled him up.

Great, he was a bit tipsy now. But he had used to be a champion at doing shots, and that wasn’t supposed to fade with time. It was like riding a bicycle, right?

“Wait, I need to pay for the bottle,” Jared said as he followed Shane through the crowded pub.

“Don’t worry; I have an open tab here. Old Charlie will take care of it.”

“So, you really are a regular.”

“Would I lie to you?” Shane asked and gave Jared a smoldering look.

Damn, the guy was a complete charmer. Good thing Jared had sworn he wouldn’t be as stupid as he had used to be. Now, he was all in for the fun, and not something else. Shane could lie to him all he wanted because it didn’t matter. Jared had no plans for the two of them beyond tonight. And if Shane was as handy with certain parts of his body as he was at making charming conversation, it was a win-win situation. Jared would get over his nasty breakup and have fun while at it.

Shane was quiet on their way to his apartment, which, indeed, was close, and Jared felt a bit overly-conscious. But Shane’s hand holding his was warm and reassuring, and that meant that they were both into this.

Jared had to lean against the doorframe, as Shane opened the door. He took his time looking Shane up and down. Everything about his body made Jared feel a familiar, yet new, heat in the lower part of his abdomen. Shane was lean and strong, and Jared could already see himself wrapped around that sinewy body, enjoying its strength.

“Welcome to my humble abode,” Shane said with a smile and invited him in. “And, please, stop biting your bottom lip. I had an entire complicated plan of seduction in place.”

“You did?” Jared walked inside and smiled as he took in the small, but nicely appointed place.

It was a bachelor’s pad all right, but it looked comfy with the plushy carpets and the cozy sofa Jared could see in the living room. It also seemed like Shane really was into that cowboy stuff since there were pictures of horses hanging on the walls. He got closer to examine them; they were really good photographs, he could tell.

“Do you happen to like taking pictures of horses?” he asked directly.

“No,” Shane replied and squeezed his shoulders shortly. “I’m just the guy hanging them on the walls. Please, make yourself comfortable. This time, I’m planning to bring glasses.”

Jared turned and caught Shane by one arm. “I think the earlier tequila already did its trick. Come here.”

Shane gave him half a grin, but he allowed Jared to pull him close into a kiss. It was like instant electricity, how their lips fit, and their noses didn’t collide, and Shane knew precisely how to angle his head so that they could kiss completely.

Jared’s bag slid from his shoulder and fell on the floor with a small thump, taking him by surprise. He accidentally bit Shane’s bottom lip. And that was all about the perfect kiss. Some seducer he was, Jared thought, feeling a deep need to roll his eyes at his own clumsiness.

“Please, let me get that for you. And your jacket. I’ll hang them both in the hallway, is that all right?”

“Sure.” Jared cleared his throat and tried to hide his sudden nervousness. Did he really know what he was doing? There was a bit of tequila in his system, but it was only liquid courage, so it had to work with him, not against him.

Shane came back right away. “Please, sit down, Jared.”

Jared followed the invitation. The way Shane spoke was so interesting. He was polite, but he didn’t lack boldness. And when he was saying Jared’s name, he let the rhythm drop, allowing his voice to become more quiet and thick.

Jared wanted to taste Shane’s mouth so badly. He waited until Shane was next to him on the sofa to attempt a second kiss. This time, to steady himself, he caught Shane’s cheek in the palm of his hand and went straight for the prize. There was a promise in what he was doing now, a promise that he was finished being the guy who always waited on the sidelines, always allowing others to give him what they wanted to give.

Shane didn’t shy away from his kiss. On the contrary, he deepened it, exploring Jared’s mouth slowly, with soft rolls of the tongue. Jared felt like he would come from kissing alone, with a man like that. Rough on the outside, sweet on the inside; were such men even real?

No, he needed to get a hold of himself. Shane was an amazing seducer, that was what he was; he was also a fantastic kisser, which only meant one thing: he must have had a lot of practice. And Jared now knew a thing or two about seducers. They weren’t a likable bunch. They took advantage.

No, tonight, he would take advantage. He moved so that he could straddle Shane’s lap, and that without breaking the kiss. A small moan of frustration escaped his lips when he needed to let go of Shane’s mouth so that he could adjust his position. But Shane caught him by the waist and

pulled him close. Jared pushed away Shane's hat and ran his fingers through the dark mane of luscious hair. How could he look so much like a cowboy, and so much like a dream man? Not that the two things excluded one another, Jared had to admit. The rough sexuality coming off Shane was enough to make his head spin.

That, or it was a combination of that and tequila. It was a good combination, the kind of thing that could let him go wild a little.

Shane teased his lips, biting them softly, more with his mouth and less with his teeth. Jared grabbed a hand full of hair and forced himself on Shane. Their kiss was suddenly up a notch. With that, the rhythm of their bodies changed, too. Jared was struggling a little, wanting fast out of his clothes so that he could feel Shane's rough hands all over him. By how he kissed, Shane had to be an awesome lover.

Their mouths were welded together, though, and that made any move close to impossible. It looked like neither of them wanted to let go, and that meant that they needed to give up at one point. It couldn't be soon. They were practically breathing through one another.

Jared felt the tie keeping his hair being pulled away, and next, a hand was buried in it, the roughness of the gesture making his desire increase tenfold. They pulled away from one another at precisely the same moment and looked into each other's eyes.

"We better take this to the bedroom, right?" Shane asked with an almost sheepish smile.

This tall, strong guy couldn't be shy, right? Jared pushed the thought away; was he being silly now? "Yeah, this sofa is way too small," he replied.

Shane stood up, and Jared hooted as he was hiked up in his partner's arms and carried with ease to the bedroom.

He took little in as he was placed carefully on a large bed. Now it was no time to admire the furniture. His eyes set on Shane. The look in his dark eyes was unreadable. Jared could swear Shane looked a bit nervous as he unbuttoned his flannel shirt with brisk moves. He was soon distracted from such thoughts by a beautiful hairy chest and a suggestive treasure trail pointing at the treasure guarded so well by that shiny buckle.

Jared licked his lips as Shane got rid of his shoes fast, and his hands went for the belt. He even pushed himself up on his elbows so that he could see the show. There had to be no better man for him to get back in the saddle with, after that fiasco with Chris. Rebound sex clearly had its perks.

Shane had to be a man sure of his raw sexuality. He exuded it through all his pores, and Jared wanted to drown in it for one night, one hour, one minute. Shane pushed down his jeans and underwear in one go.

“Wow,” Jared said as his eyes fell on the magnificent erect member. “Locked and loaded.”

“You can bet,” Shane replied. “I get it that you want me to undress you, right?”

Jared laughed. “Sorry, I was too caught up in the show.”

“Do you like what you’re seeing?”

“Are you kidding me? You’re like a walking wet dream, for both men and women.”

“I’m a bit shy of the idea of shaving,” Shane said and rubbed one hand over his chest.

“Are you kidding me? You’re perfect as you are,” Jared replied.

“Ah, you’re just saying,” Shane drawled playfully. “I bet you’re all smooth under those clothes.”

“There’s only one way to find out, right?” Jared suggested teasingly.

Shane jumped on the bed like a playful kid ready to unwrap his Christmas present. He moved slowly as he began to pull at Jared’s t-shirt. His fingers were rough, indeed, but they were kind, and Jared trembled when they started to caress the skin on his lower abdomen. He reached between Shane’s legs and caught the beautiful cock in one hand.

“You’re not playing fair,” Shane complained. “I should tell you, Jared --”

“Don’t tell me anything tonight, Shane,” Jared stopped him. “You’re a handsome man, and I want you, madly. There’s no need for any seduction or artifice. This is between you and me, all right? Nothing else matters.”

He couldn’t explain why it felt as if Shane was having second thoughts, but Jared was eager to put his mind at ease. To make sure that he wouldn’t back down, Jared changed his position and buried his head between Shane’s thighs. Not only was his cock beautiful, but it smelled and tasted nice, oh so nice, too. Shane replied with a small desperate grunt at having Jared’s lips wrapped around his manhood.

A sudden thought stopped Jared. He wouldn’t make the same mistake, right? He stopped and looked up at Shane. “Are you married, Shane?”

“Married?” Shane seemed genuinely surprised. “No.”

“No lover, either? Boyfriend?”

“No.”

“Good. Just checking. I’ve had enough of two-timers in my life.”

And if Shane were one of them, it would be totally on him. Jared wouldn't see him again tomorrow, so it didn't matter. He grabbed Shane's cock with one firm hand and pushed it into his mouth completely. Even Shane's cock fit well in his mouth, as impressive as it looked. Jared was happy with what he was given. Shane began pulling at his clothes again, and Jared stopped only so that he could allow his partner to undress him. Soon enough, he was as naked as Shane was. The rough hands were on him, on his back, caressing it, then grabbing his ass, while Jared did his best at giving Shane a blowjob.

"As I thought, you're so smooth," Shane whispered.

Jared stopped for a moment. "It's just something I got used to. You don't have to do it. Actually, I think it's better if you don't. You're so sexy that you must get hit on a hundred times a week."

Shane replied to that with a chuckle. "Your lips are so good on me. And you're so beautiful." Again, the last word was like a breathed whisper, as if Shane was happy to let it out. Such an absolute charmer, Jared thought with his mouth full of the said man's cock. But he wasn't being used, and that was all that truly mattered. He was exactly where he wanted to be and nowhere else.

He increased the pressure and the rhythm, but a hand on the back of his neck stopped him.

"I want to be inside you," Shane said simply.

"Sure," Jared replied and pushed himself up. He wiped his mouth with the back of one hand and then caught Shane staring at him. "What?"

"You have a wonderful mouth."

"Um, thanks?" Jared said playfully.

Shane reached out for him and brushed his fingers against Jared's lips. The gesture felt so intimate.

Such a charmer. Jared needed to hold on to that thought, or else he would make this more than it was. And that wasn't at all what he wanted it to be. He was done jumping to conclusions. Now all he wanted was to jump back in the saddle, as Mike had put it.

"Well, condoms, lube?" he asked, moving slowly away from the touch.

Shane smiled at him. "Sure." He was quick to bring everything and place it on the bed.

Jared picked the box of condoms and ripped it open. "Wow, new."

"Yeah," Shane admitted. "And I thought I was getting my hopes high. But at least I'm well prepared now, so I should pat myself on the back for doing the right thing."

Jared didn't quite understand what Shane meant by that, but he was more than eager to start. Valiantly, he grabbed the lube, too. "How do you want me?"

Shane blinked a couple of times.

Jared rolled his eyes. This shy act had to be a killer; not that Shane needed it, but it definitely made a tall guy like him look as gentle as a lamb. If anyone ever thought of resisting him and his looks, that must have been the finishing blow to that guy's resistance.

"Do you like me on my back? On all fours? Up against the wall?" Jared joked and wiggled his eyebrows at Shane.

A short laugh was the reply. "Yes."

"Hmm, and by that, you mean... what should we start with?"

Shane reached for him and touched his cheek. "If it's all right with you, I'd like to ride you from behind first."

"Ride, right," Jared said with a small snicker. "I suspect that you didn't forgive me for provoking you earlier. Then doggy style it is."

Jared placed himself on all fours and wiggled his ass. "Well, is this what you want?"

Shane gulped audibly. Jared bit his lips not to laugh. Shane really didn't have to act like such a virgin. A man like that couldn't be one; it had to be against the laws of nature and men.

The rough fingers he knew so well now touched his backdoor, coated with lube. Jared shivered, but he reined in the wave of sensations threatening to make him lose his head too soon. Shane made a small strange sound as his fingers delved into Jared's heat.

"Are you okay, there?" Jared felt compelled to ask.

"Yeah, more than okay. You're so wonderfully tight. Will my cock really fit in you? You have such a pretty little thing here."

Jared shook his head and let out a sigh. "Well, we should see soon enough, right?"

He heard the condom wrap being ripped and steadied himself. After a few moments, his buttocks were caressed gently. "Damn, what an ass," Shane whispered reverently. "So tight and round."

"And it really wants your juicy cock now," Jared encouraged him.

"Is it all right, so soon?"

"Just go slow. There's only this much you can do with your fingers, and I like being opened by a cock more than anything."

“Here I come, baby,” Shane said softly.

Jared was pretty sure Shane wasn't ironic at all when saying that. A small shock of pleasure mixed with a bit of pain short-circuited his brain for a brief moment as his tight ring of muscles was attacked. “That cockhead,” he murmured.

“Is it too much?” Shane asked, his voice a bit strained.

“No, just go, don't mind me too much. I've seen your cock, and it's all expected, I promise.”

Shane caressed his back, tracing invisible lines down to his ass. When he pulled apart the buttocks to make more room for himself, Jared wiggled his ass a little and then squeezed the cock inside him.

A small hiss was the immediate answer to his actions. “Are you really trying to make me come fast? You don't play fair.”

“I didn't promise you that, did I?”

Jared gasped as he was grabbed by the hair. It was clear that Shane knew what he was doing because it didn't hurt; still, he couldn't move as much as he wanted.

“Now this is what I call riding, baby,” Shane said with a small laugh.

“Oh fuck me,” Jared let out as Shane bottomed out inside his ass. That would admittedly seem like less of a good idea tomorrow. But tonight, Jared was all about having his body wrecked by that handsome man.

“I am fucking you,” Shane replied playfully. He pulled Jared by the hair so that he lifted him off the bed. Jared angled his head, aware of Shane's intention. Even in that uncomfortable position, Shane's kisses were the best. “So damned beautiful,” Shane murmured. He used his free hand to caress Jared's chest and touch his nipples.

“You could be rougher,” Jared asked as the fingers brushing his chest were doing nothing short of teasing.

“I don't want to be rough. You look like you could bruise easily.”

“A little bit of nipple pinching never killed anyone,” Jared replied.

“Like this?”

Jared's answer was a small moan. “Yes.” Damn, he was drooling; it was like Shane knew what was going on with him because he brought his fingers to Jared's mouth and wet them. After that, he moved them back to Jared's nipples.

It was an unconscious move, but Jared became aware of how he was slamming back into Shane as he was fucked and teased like that. Shane whispered into his ear, “Easy, hot thing. You’re going to burn us both too soon.”

“I thought you were the guy with his hopes high and an unopened box of condoms. Are you trying to tell me that this is all I get?”

“Oh, damn, baby, I hope you know what you’re saying, ‘cause it’s only this much a man can take.”

Jared moaned loudly when Shane’s hand moved to his cock and began pumping it. The cock inside him was hitting him at the right spot, hammering it over and over.

“Is it any good like this? Do you like it, baby?”

“Can’t you tell?” Jared barely managed through gasps and moans. “I’m so close; I think I’m going to pass out.”

“That’s nice to hear, ‘cause I’m at my wit’s end here, too.”

There was a simultaneous cry of victory coming from both of them. Jared couldn’t believe his rebound sex was happening with a guy with whom he seemed to be so sexually compatible. It wasn’t just a thing of giving and taking; they moved like they had been known each other since forever.

Jared plonked down on the bed, face first, and let out a long satisfied moan. A kiss on his sweaty shoulder made him shiver in the aftermath. He was so sensitive now; maybe he should drink tequila and go to bed with cowboy wannabees named Shane more often.

No, he wasn’t an alcoholic, and he wasn’t planning to become one. And he didn’t plan on getting high on Shane, either. A little buzz was all right, but nothing more.

He felt Shane moving about, probably to get rid of the condom. That didn’t take long because Shane was soon on the bed, next to him, pulling him close and giving him a sloppy kiss. Jared giggled and rubbed his mouth. “I don’t know why I’m drooling so much.”

Shane laughed. “I was thinking the same thing. Baby, you were great!”

“Thank you for the compliment, but I don’t want to steal all the credit. After all, you did all the work.”

Shane nodded and grinned. “Should I get it that you liked it then?”

“Liked it? I loved it. You know how to have fun, Shane. I’ll give you that. Are all cowboys now all down with the Brokeback Mountain thing?”

Shane shrugged. "I don't know. I didn't see the movie."

Jared lifted his head so that he could stare at Shane. "Are you kidding me? Get out of here."

"I don't know. And I think I was about twelve when it came out and all. Is that a serious offense or something? Can you forgive me?"

Jared slapped Shane's chest playfully. "Of course I forgive you. I mean, I guess that plenty of guys didn't see it, no matter how much they must be into the alternative lifestyle. Also, I had to fight my friends Mike and Adrian to have them watch the movie with me when I got my hands on it. So, I guess you're off the hook."

"Are Mike and Adrian your best friends?"

"Yes. Mike, you know him."

"From the other night, yeah. He looked like a guy who would watch tearjerkers."

"Yes." Jared smiled. He had no idea conversations could flow so quickly with someone he barely knew. "Maybe I didn't have to fight him that much. Adrian, on the other hand, ugh. He's a tough guy. You wouldn't catch him shed a tear if he were to cut a ton of onions."

"I can cut onions without shedding one tear," Shane bragged.

"Good for you. So, you're a home cook, too?"

"Yeah. You'll see it all when I serve you breakfast in bed tomorrow."

"Hmm," Jared cleared his throat. This was a one-night-stand, and one-night-stands usually didn't include breakfasts, even when served in bed. "I don't know. I still have to work tomorrow and--"

"It's okay," Shane stopped him.

Right. Why was he apologizing now? Shane knew it, just as well as he did that all they had was a night of steamy sex, and then they would both be on their merry ways. Therefore, he didn't need to apologize at all.

"Ready for round two?" Jared asked as the silence was starting to get uncomfortable.

"Ready when you are," Shane said with a smirk.

This time, he didn't need to offer suggestions. Shane took it upon himself to climb on top and part Jared's thighs with his. Being held down would have typically made him a bit uneasy, but, with Shane, all that strength wasn't intimidating; it was reassuring. By his side, some might feel like they could take on the entire world.

And he was projecting again, Jared chided himself. Shane was good in bed, and he knew how to use his body so that he didn't make his partner feel overwhelmed or intimidating. So unlike Chris, who had seemed to have a purpose in life to make the other submit.

No, he wouldn't think of Chris tonight. What was with him, running those comparisons?

"Are you okay, baby?" Shane asked softly and caressed Jared's lips with his.

"Sure, why are you asking?"

"For a moment, there, you had such an intense look on your face that I thought I might be doing something wrong. I'm not crushing you, right?"

"No. Actually, I'm surprised. A guy like you could easily do that. Not that you're fat or anything. You're the opposite of fat. I'm sure you have a very low percentage of body fat. Not like a bodybuilder... oh, no, why am I blabbering, and why aren't you stopping me?"

Shane shut him up with a kiss, and Jared felt his worries melting. There was no better rebound sex like good rebound sex. No, excellent. No, fantastic. Out of this world, amazing... Shane deepened the kiss, and Jared forgot what he was thinking, or why he had been bothered by anything just earlier. All that mattered was tonight.

"Will you take me like this, please?" Shane murmured as he struggled to put on another condom without getting too much away from Jared.

"I remember you saying 'yes' to taking me on my back, so knock yourself out."

"Don't mind me if I do."

Jared embraced Shane tightly and let his mind go. This time, there was less of the urgency from earlier, and more of how Shane could move. And what moves he had. Jared lifted his knees as far up as he could and pulled them toward his chest so that Shane could have a better angle.

"Oh, damn, oh, fuck," Jared moaned as Shane took advantage of that right away to begin pounding him into the mattress.

So they were back in urgency mode, but Jared had no regrets. Maybe he would have some tomorrow, but he could live with that. Shane had great stamina, although he was getting all sweaty, too. Jared licked his throat, letting his tongue flicker over Adam's apple.

"You're killing me here," Shane whispered. "You're killing me, and you know well what you're doing."

Jared used a bit of teeth to tease the skin. That seemed to send Shane into berserk mode because the bed was starting to make the sounds of rickety old bones at high frequency. He gave up on the teasing, not because he didn't want to see how far he could push Shane, but because he

couldn't keep it in himself. Coming without hands involved, he voiced his pleasure out loud. Shane stilled inside him and growled like a victorious barbarian. Jared was supposed to find that funny, but he didn't. He found everything about Shane so damned good.

"Baby, baby, baby," Shane sang as he kissed him. "So hot, this time, too."

Jared felt flattered. But Chris had flattered him, too, and he didn't want to walk the same path again. As amazing as the sex was, he needed to convince himself that it was nothing but sex.

He remained in Shane's arms for a while, as they both fought to regain their lost breath. Later, he wouldn't recall when he fell asleep.

Jared woke up some many hours later and only because someone was kissing him on the cheeks, the neck, and the shoulders.

"I know that you said you had work tomorrow, so I thought I should steal some time. Can I?"

"You're asking me for permission, but you've already started," Jared chided Shane teasingly.

"I have," Shane admitted. "It was nice waking up with you in my arms, but I thought it would be nicer if I got a taste of you again."

"You're the greatest seducer ever, Shane."

"I am?"

"Don't play the modest. What time is it?"

"A bit after five. I guess you don't usually wake up this early, so can you forgive me?"

"Only if you complete the last part of the agreement."

"Which was?" Shane asked, seemingly busy with kissing Jared's body everywhere.

"I think it was taking me against the wall." Jared yelped as Shane grabbed him and climbed out of bed with him like that. "I was just kidding!"

"I've never been one not to rise to a proper challenge. If that's what you want, then sex against the wall it is."

Jared didn't believe that it was possible except for short scenes in porno movies, but Shane looked like he could, indeed, rise to any challenge. Shane supported his body with his strong arms as he pushed him into a wall and then bit his neck. Jared cursed under his breath. It was funny to feel Shane moving around while holding him with one arm so that he could grab a condom.

“I really don’t think you will be able to put it on like this. Let me help,” Jared offered.

With a short grunt, Shane put him down gently. Jared got on his knees and took the condom from Shane’s hand, while, all this time, he kept eye contact. Shane had an intense look of his face, so intense that it made him shiver a little.

To stop himself from thinking anything, Jared got handy with the rubber. As he began rolling it down on Shane’s hard as a rock cock, he used his mouth, too.

“Oh, you have such a sweet mouth on you,” Shane whispered. “Even through the condom, I can feel your heat.”

Jared looked up and stuffed his mouth as much as he could. Shane gave him a smirk, but his eyes were warm. A hand rested on the back of Jared’s neck.

“Yes, baby, you know how to polish that cock,” Shane continued to praise him. “Now, get your gorgeous ass to me to get it ready.”

Jared obeyed and stood up, then turned. Shane worked one hand between his buttocks, going a bit lower to play with his balls, too. That was enough to make him push his ass back in the hope of getting more of that. Shane kissed his shoulder and then began applying lube. He was so gentle when he did that; Jared closed his eyes and let himself prey to the sensation. He could already feel the effects of their earlier lovemaking that night, but he didn’t mind being taken one more time.

Shane stopped for a moment before entering him. “And this one’s for the road, baby. Just so that you don’t forget me.”

Jared squeezed his eyes shut; this was, after all, about forgetting, but saying anything could ruin the mood, and he didn’t want that. What he wanted was right now.

“Brace the wall and keep tight,” Shane asked.

Jared didn’t need any more indications. He was ready to be sent up to high heavens again. Shane held him with both hands planted on the hips and began slowly. There was a sense of rhythm in anything Shane did. Jared had no idea what the man did for a living, but if he ever wanted to offer his services as a lover for hire, he could be a top seller.

The rhythm intensified. It was so easy with Shane to follow him into what he did. It could only mean that he had a lot of experience, as expected from someone looking as yummy as him. Jared moaned and cursed as his body was shaken like a building in an earthquake. Shane hadn’t forgotten the lessons from their previous lovemaking. One of his hands went rogue to tease and pinch Jared’s nipples and then directly for the cock bouncing freely.

“Oh fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck,” Jared said under his breath. “I can’t anymore, Shane --”

“Don’t worry, baby, I got you,” Shane whispered into his year. “I got you.”

Shane just knew how and when to say the right words. Jared’s body shook, and he registered, through the waves of his release, as Shane did the same as him. Could it be that Shane always waited for him, for the right moment, so he could let go, too? That was the most endearing thought.

“Too bad you can’t hang around for breakfast. I make some killer pigs in a blanket.”

“For breakfast? Wow,” Jared said as he hiked his bag on one shoulder. He was ready to leave, but yet, he didn’t feel like doing it.

Shane only had a pair of loose-fitting pants on him, and he looked still as delicious as last night, with his bed hair and warm dark eyes. Jared didn’t even dare to stare lower; he couldn’t trust himself not to rush into Shane’s arms and rub his cheek against that manly chest.

“So, I guess this is it,” he said brightly and offered Shane his hand.

Shane looked a bit puzzled at the offered hand, but then he took it, only to pull Jared into a tight embrace right away. “You were awesome, baby. The whole night.”

Jared patted Shane’s back, wanting to make this last gesture something of a friendly thing, not the warm, definitely more than friendly, thing that it was. “Gotta go.”

“Sure.” Shane released him. “I’ll send you a picture with my pigs in a blanket. Maybe it will change your mind for the next time you’re sleeping over.”

Next time. Right. Well, it was pretty standard to mention future meetups that would never materialize. Was it? Jared thought. He didn’t quite remember. One-night-stands had made so much of his love life for as long as he could remember – with a few exceptions and one he didn’t want to think of right now – and yet, he couldn’t recall whether people used to say that.

“Maybe. Who knows?” Jared shrugged. He was about to leave when he noticed the longing look in Shane’s eyes. He hurried and kissed his cheek briefly. “Just for the record, you were the awesome one last night, Shane.”

Shane laughed, pleased with the praise. “Just like with dancing, it takes a good partner to shine.”

Ah, and that made Jared recall how Shane had danced with that woman the night they had met the first time. Maybe Shane was batting for both teams; Jared didn’t care to know that. Also, that was his cue that he wasn’t supposed to overstay his welcome.

“Bye,” he said with a broad smile he didn’t really feel.

“Bye, baby,” Shane drawled as he held the door.

He had lied about having work in the morning. For him, it was back in bed with a cup of tea after taking a long hot shower, which he needed terribly. There wasn't much he needed to do today anyway. Just lying in bed and having a day off sounded like a plan. Well, not for the entire day.

His phone chimed. Jared took it and stared at the picture.

Don't they make your mouth water?

Jared chuckled. Yes, they did, and if Shane was as good a cook as he was a lover, then he was quite the man. He began writing a reply, and then, he stopped. It had been only a one-night-stand. An awesome one-night-stand, but nothing else. He turned off his phone and went to sleep. Waking up at five and getting fucked against the wall weren't usually part of his modus operandi.

Chapter Sixteen – Friends

“So,” Adrian drawled playfully, “what have you been up to, J? I can feel it in your voice.”

Jared straightened up and winced at the dull ache in the lower part of his body while adjusting the phone to his ear. “Are you a psychic now, Adrian?”

“Hey, you sound sleepy but pleased. You either landed a job with National Geographic, or you got laid.”

“Yeah, right. I’m already on my way to Alaska, to take photos of ... what do they have there? Reindeers? You know I’m more of a portrait guy.”

“Yeah, I know,” Adrian replied, sure of himself. “And that leaves us with my second guess. You got properly laid.”

Jared laughed. Damn, he was giggling now? Geez, good sex had some serious side effects. “Yeah, I guess I got laid,” he said and stretched like a lazy cat.

“Wow. Nice. So, who was it?”

“Just a one-night-stand. No one important.”

“I thought you didn’t want one-night-stands anymore.”

“Usually, I don’t. But this one hit the spot just right.”

“I guess so. You’re giggling.”

“Yeah. So, what are you up to later? I’ll call Mike, too.”

“Sure. I just wanted to check on you. You seemed down lately and all.”

Jared cleared his voice. “I know. I would never want to make you, guys, to feel down, too.”

“You could never,” Adrian assured him. “So, that means you’re over that scumbag, right?”

“I might be. I guess it only took a cowboy and a proper ride to get him out of my system.”

That was not entirely true, but Jared didn’t want to linger on those thoughts by telling them all to his friend. As soon as his mind took that path, there was a mix of anger and sadness threatening to take over his sanity. He didn’t want that. He wanted to be strong.

“Wow, a cowboy, nice. Like a real cowboy, though?”

“I don’t know. He definitely looked the part. Hat, and boots, and a charming drawl.”

“So, are you going to see this guy again or what? He sounds swell.”

“No,” Jared said with conviction. “It was just a one-night-stand.”

“Does he know it?” Adrian joked.

“Sure thing he knows it.” A discreet ping let him know he had a call in waiting. “Hold on, Adrian, there’s someone else trying to call me.”

“It’s all right. See you later, J. And you’ll tell us all the juicy details about your one-night-stand.”

Adrian said goodbye, and Jared took the other call right away without checking the caller ID. It could be Sam with some work. Getting buried in some new project sounded like a good idea to take his mind off things.

“Hi.”

The sexy twang made him stop. “Oh, hi,” he replied, without hiding his surprise.

“I was wondering what you might be doing tonight,” Shane said, without any other preamble.

“Oh, just hanging out with friends,” Jared replied.

“Mike and Adrian, right?”

Shane remembered the names of his friends. Jared was even more surprised. “Yes, they’re my homeboys.”

“Would you mind if I hanged out with you and your friends, too?”

Now that was a straightforward question. Jared wasn’t prepared for it. “Don’t you have friends you like to hang out? So sorry, that came out wrong.”

“No worries.” Shane chuckled. “My friends like to hang out in the same places. It gets boring after a while. I want to see new places, new people.”

Jared realized that moment that he knew very little of Shane and what he was doing. “You’re new to the city, right?”

“Yeah, you read me right.”

“Then, I guess I could introduce you to some venues. And to my friends, of course.”

Hanging out wasn’t hooking up. Plus, Mike and Adrian would be present. But what if they didn’t like the idea of having an outsider with them? Ugh, he should have started with that.

“So, tonight? When and where?” Shane asked directly.

“We kind of have the same routine.” Jared recited the bar address and hour. Could it be that he was making a mistake? But Shane seemed so easygoing; he would read the signs correctly. Plus, bringing a guy like that to the bar where he liked to hang out with Adrian and Mike would surely work out in Shane’s favor. Jared could bet that, by the end of the evening, Shane would have enough numbers in his pocket to fill a phonebook.

“So, what were you doing?” Shane asked, the teasing in his voice obvious from outer space.

“Just some work,” Jared replied, trying to be evasive.

“What do you do?”

“I’m a freelance photographer.”

“Wow, that’s so cool. That’s why you were looking at the pictures last night, right? What did you think of them?”

Jared stopped to think for a moment. “I’m no critic, but I’d say they’re pretty good. What am I saying? They’re stunning. Whoever took those pictures must really love horses. Do you happen to know the artist?”

“Yeah. My brother,” Shane replied.

“He has a gift, I’d say,” Jared said.

“What do you like to take pictures of?” Shane asked, cutting his words with a sudden urgency.

“I’m not that big of a nature lover. I prefer portraits. And they pay well because let’s face it, a lot of people love to look good in photos,” Jared said with a small chuckle. “You wouldn’t believe some of the stories – But I shouldn’t keep you. You must have work to do. I know I do.”

“Sorry for bothering you,” Shane said politely. “I’ll see you tonight, then?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Can’t wait to see you again.”

Jared managed a small nervous laugh. Was it customary to invite your one-night-stands to meet your best friends? He let out a sigh. Maybe not, but Shane would find someone to go home with tonight, without a doubt. He was charming, handsome, and polite—just the kind of guy to bring home to mom and dad.

“Sure,” he replied. “See you. Bye.”

Shane sounded a tad surprised at his abrupt manner, but he replied to his goodbye without another word. Jared put his phone on the nightstand like it was a grenade. Now he needed to tell Adrian and Mike that they would have someone else with them tonight.

“So, let me get this straight,” Adrian said as he brought the beers to the table, “Mike already knows the guy? How come I don’t?”

“We went to a bar where they danced in line like in those cowboy movies,” Mike tried to explain. “And this guy just couldn’t take his eyes off Jared. And Jared kept eyeing him, too.”

“I did not,” Jared protested.

“Right. You knew right away that he danced with some girl.”

“True,” Jared admitted. “What can I say? He’s nice to look at.”

“So when did you two get together?” Mike asked. “I thought you were adamant about not getting, you know, back into the saddle so fast.”

Jared sighed. “It was a spur-of-the-moment kind of thing. Chris’s husband came to see me--”

“Chris’s husband?!” Adrian and Mike asked at the same time, expressing their surprise out loud.

“Yeah. Imagine my surprise. I was at this event, displaying some of my work, and he came straight at me.”

“That must have been one hell of a conversation,” Adrian said, his eyes never leaving Jared.

“You think?” Jared replied with a snort. “Can you believe that he’s all right with his husband’s sleeping around? He also put me through some lecture about how I don’t know shit about how the world works. And low-key insulted me, because, hey, why not, right?” Jared kept his eyes on the bottle of beer in front of him, trying to peel the label with the nails of his thumb fingers.

Adrian placed a comforting hand on his back. “J, just screw them. They’re nothing to you. If they like to fool around, that’s their business. And you have nothing to worry about. You’re cool, man. You’re sexy, funny, and an awesome guy all around.”

“Ditto,” Mike added and raised his bottle. “Don’t let some douchebag bring you down. You’re much better than them.”

“Thank you, guys,” Jared said and hooked his arms over his friends’ shoulders for a group hug. As he enjoyed having his best friends close, he noticed Shane walking into the bar and looking around.

“And here comes Shane, and I hope you, guys, don’t mind having a forth with us tonight.”

Adrian was the first to notice Shane. He whistled appreciatively. “What a hunk, J. Good job, man.”

“He’s here only to hang out,” Jared said quickly.

As he suspected, Shane’s presence in the bar didn’t go unnoticed. A guy approached Shane, obviously trying to make conversation. By body language, Jared could tell the guy was getting shut down, but gently. Shane tipped his hat to him, and then, he noticed Jared, who quickly raised one arm to wave at him.

Even from a distance, Jared could tell that a bright smile had lit Shane’s face. He smiled, too, but his lips became strained. What could he do to stick to being polite, while making it clear that he wasn’t up for another one-night-stand?

Why was he thinking in such convoluted ways? Shane wanted to hang out because he didn’t have many friends he could hang out in gay bars like this one. That was all.

“Hey,” Shane said warmly.

To his surprise, Shane leaned in, and before Jared could react, he placed a quick peck on his cheek. It landed there only because Jared was quick enough to move his mouth out of the way. The moment of awkwardness was gone soon.

“Hi, Mike,” Shane said and shook hands with Mike. “And you must be Adrian. The best friend who doesn’t cry when cutting onions.”

Adrian took Shane’s hand and shook it vigorously. Jared eyed them carefully and pursed his lips when Adrian winked at him. “Cutting onions? I wonder what crazy stories Jared told you about us.”

“Not that many, unfortunately,” Shane said.

Mike moved to another seat and gestured for Shane to sit next to Jared. At the same time, he clearly ignored Jared’s pointed look. Shane sat and hooked one arm over the back of Jared’s seat like it was the most natural thing in the world.

“I don’t know what you’re drinking, but we all got beers, so we thought you wouldn’t mind,” Adrian said.

Shane took the beer bottle in front of him and held it up. “It couldn’t be better. To new friends and beginnings.”

Adrian and Mike followed his example, and Jared did the same. His eyes couldn’t leave Shane. He was really handsome. Too bad none of that was for him. He just wasn’t in a good place.

“So, you’re a bit of a mystery man,” Adrian said. “We only know that your name is Shane, and you have a knack for flannels.”

Shane laughed. “We, I mean, Jared and I, didn’t have enough time to talk.”

“Too busy getting acquainted in other ways, right?”

“Adrian,” Jared whispered angrily.

Adrian ignored him completely.

Shane chuckled and ran one hand over his face. “A gentleman doesn’t kiss and tell.”

“Good thing, Jared is no gentleman. He already brought us up to speed. So, I was just checking.”

Jared punched Adrian hard in the shoulder. “Adrian, I swear to God --”

“I’m just joking. He just told us that he met this awesome guy and wanted us to know him,” Adrian said.

Jared pinched Adrian’s bicep through the shirt, hoping that he would leave a bruise. Adrian just pulled his arm away.

“He did, huh?” Shane looked at Jared, his eyes at half-mast. “Did you really tell your friends I was awesome?”

Jared blushed to the tip of his ears. “You, guys.” His eyes thinned dangerously.

“What kind of cowboy are you, Shane?” Mike intervened, saving the situation.

“I think I must be the retired kind,” Shane replied with a small laugh.

“So, you are a cowboy!” Mike said excitedly. “Do you know how to ride a horse?”

“Yeah,” Shane admitted. “But not only that. I know a lot of things about herding cattle, but I don’t think you want to hear me babbling about my life on the farm.”

“We don’t mind,” Mike replied. “You’re the first real cowboy I see in my life. Being a city kid and all.”

“Guys, stop pestering Shane,” Jared intervened. “He’s here to learn about new things, see new places, new people --”

“If you don’t mind me asking, what is it that you do now?” Adrian asked. “Since you left your wrangling days behind you.”

“I don’t mind. I had some money saved, so now I’m running a pub. Nothing fancy, just a place where people can come and unwind at the end of a hard day at work.”

Jared’s eyes grew big. This time, he pushed against Shane’s chest to express his annoyance. “That place is yours?”

Shane nodded with a playful grin on his lips.

“I have an open tab, this is not a gay bar, although some guys might be,” Jared mocked, transforming his voice to sound annoying.

“You didn’t let me tell you anything,” Shane said. “And I couldn’t tell you ‘no’, to anything, since you were so hot and worked up.”

Adrian and Mike snickered.

“This was just such a bad idea,” Jared murmured under his breath. “Even you, Mike?”

“Sorry,” Mike said and giggled some more.

“That’s a great thing about the pub, I mean,” Adrian said. “But it is a tough market. There’s nothing this city hasn’t seen before.”

“I think I got my angle right. I have some authentic tequila suppliers that don’t sell their merchandise around here.”

“That tequila was awesome,” Jared admitted. “You guys should try it, at least once.”

“I’ll bring you some bottles. No charge.”

Adrian smiled and winked at Jared again. “This guy’s totally a keeper, J.”

Jared rolled his eyes. “Aren’t you, guys, assuming too much? Shane is here to make new friends, not to get stuck with whoever happened to --” he choked on his words. What was it that he wanted to say? Whoever happened to jump in bed with Shane? What that what he meant? Adrian and Mike clearly weren’t helping. He needed to make things clear. He didn’t know how, but he needed to.

“I saw that someone tried to talk to you when you walked into the bar,” Jared said and looked at Shane.

“Yeah. A friendly fellow. He wanted to know if I was single. I told him I wasn’t.”

“I thought you told me you got no boyfriend.” Jared frowned.

Shane stared at him and blinked. “I did.”

“When?” Jared asked impatiently. “Some time, between yesterday evening and today, you got one?”

Shane appeared disoriented like a deer caught in the headlights. Mike and Adrian were observing the scene without saying a word. “I thought I did,” Shane replied candidly.

Jared pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. “Are you talking about me?”

“Yeah,” Shane said.

“I’m not your boyfriend,” Jared said abruptly. “I mean, I’m sorry if I gave you the wrong impression, but we just --” he threw a nervous look at Mike and Adrian, who both wore deep frowns on their face, “we just hooked up. Nothing else.”

“Oh,” Shane replied, taken aback. “Do you do this often? Hook up?”

“Are you calling me a --” Jared swallowed his words. Shane wasn’t entirely at fault. He should have made things clear on the phone, or when he had left in the morning.

“I’m not calling you anything,” Shane said, and he appeared hurt. “I just thought, I mean, I thought you liked me. Why else would you call? And then, come to my place and --”

“I get it,” Jared put one hand up. He couldn’t believe he had that conversation in front of his best friends. “It’s my fault. I had no idea you would consider it something more serious than a one-night-stand. I should have made it all clear, so it’s my fault. Entirely. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you feel bad and --”

“It’s okay,” Shane stopped the cascade of words flowing from his mouth. “I misread the situation is all.”

Jared sighed. Mike and Adrian were still looking at him like he suddenly grew horns. “Well, then that’s that. You’re still welcome to hang out with us. Or you can look around, see if that friendly guy is still here. You might want to --”

“No,” Shane said shortly. “It was nice to meet you. Adrian, Mike. How much do I owe you for the beer?”

“Don’t worry, man,” Adrian said. “It’s all good.”

“It was nice to see you again, Shane,” Mike added.

“I’ll let you guys enjoy your evening,” Shane said and stood up, somewhat stiffly. “Have a good night.”

Perplexity was too small a word to describe what Jared was going through. Shane turned his back on him, without addressing him a word, not even goodbye. He watched him walked out of the bar with big, heavy steps.

“Wow, Jared, I didn’t know you could be... what’s the word?” Mike struggled. “Callous?”

“A scumbag,” Adrian said and crossed his arms over his chest. “What the hell was that, J? Huh? Did Chris’s douchebaggery rub off on you or something?”

“What are you guys talking about? I just needed to make it clear to Shane that we only hooked up. There was no point to --”

“What? Be nice to the guy?” Adrian asked aggressively.

Jared was taken aback. “Come on, Adrian. Until yesterday, you were the king of hookups.”

“Yeah, I was. Not you,” Adrian pointed out. “And what’s not to like about this guy? He’s totally boyfriend material, and you blew it just because you wanted to be a scumbag for a change, for reasons I don’t understand.”

“Wow, dad,” Jared said. “Since when are you judging me?”

The last time he had gotten into a fight with Adrian, it must have been when they were still in kindergarten. After that, they had both cried so much that their parents had had to force them to make up. Adrian never talked to him like that.

“What about you, Mike? Do you think the same thing?” Jared turned his attention on his other best friend.

Mike shifted in his chair. “This isn’t you, J. And you like Shane.”

“Maybe, but maybe he’s a player. You don’t believe how shy he acted while we – Ah, what the hell I’m talking about? You guys saw him. He’s a total hunk, okay? Tell me he hadn’t hooked up dozens of times since he had gotten here? A guy like that? If everyone had left him alone all this time, I don’t know what to think of the gay population in this city.”

“It doesn’t matter if he hooked up before or not,” Adrian said. “He’s into you, big time. But somehow, because you got hurt, you think you have the right to hurt others, too. Let me break it to you, J. The only guy you’ll truly hurt if you keep it like this is you.”

Jared moaned and buried his face into his hands. “Come on, Adrian, you can’t really think that about me.”

“I don’t think that about you. I know you’re nice, considerate, salt of the earth when the going gets tough, so my question is simple: what the hell is wrong with you?”

Jared felt himself getting small under Adrian's scalding words. "I don't want to be this nice guy everyone is walking all over."

"You got hurt by a scumbag. Don't let him infect you. It's all I'm saying. And, if I were you, I'd hurry to offer Shane some apology. Can you imagine how he must have felt, you doing that to him in front of us? We're strangers to him," Adrian added.

"What do you think, Mike?" Jared asked, his voice meek. "Do I believe Adrian here, or will that just make me the biggest pushover in history?"

Mike was also little in his chair. He didn't like conflictual situations, either, so he was obviously uncomfortable. "I think Adrian's right this time, J. I mean, Shane really likes you. And you must like him, too, since you didn't mind hooking up with him or introducing him to us. At least, he deserves an apology."

"But what am I supposed to say to him? I have no intention of being his boyfriend. A friend, maybe, but --"

"So tell him that," Mike said. "And Adrian here doesn't yell at you because he hates you. He does it because he loves you."

"Damn right," Adrian said through his teeth.

Jared sighed. "I appreciate you guys worrying about me so much. But I'm fine." He paused for a moment. His eyes traveled to the entrance. "Do you really think I hurt Shane? That guy must have really tough skin," he made a poor attempt at a joke.

"I do. I think you hurt him. Just call him and apologize. Don't let him think of you this way. You're not a scumbag, and you don't deserve to have someone like Shane think that about you," Mike said.

Adrian remained silent.

"Adrian?" Jared asked.

"Why do you ask me?"

"You're my friend. Of course I have to ask you. And I think you were right to tell me what you said. Well, to some degree."

Adrian pursed his lips. "All right. Just call Shane and apologize. The sooner, the better. No moment like the present."

"Like, right now?" Jared asked.

“Yeah,” Adrian confirmed. “If you want me and Mike to forgive you for the stunt you pulled on us tonight.”

“Okay, if it’s our friendship on the line,” Jared tried to play it down a little. He did feel ashamed now, and he knew Adrian and Mike were right. He didn’t have to change who he was because of a bad experience. “But I’m not going to be his pity boyfriend or anything. I still stand by the idea that we only hooked up.”

Adrian made a gesture with his hands as if to suggest that it was up to Jared.

“As long as you don’t insult him or make him feel bad again,” Mike said. “You’re nice, Jared. You’re not not-nice.”

Jared sighed. “All right, guys. You convinced me. I’ll just go outside to make the call. I think you two heard enough for one evening.”

He walked through the crowd and got into the warm evening air. Of course, Mike and Adrian were right, but now he felt awful. What were the right words to say? He moved under an awning, away from the rowdy groups walking in and out of the bar.

“Shane,” he began rehearsing the words he wanted to say, “I feel that I must apologize for tonight. I didn’t mean to --” Jared stopped and ran one hand over his face. “Shane, hi. I’m sorry for being a scumbag. I shouldn’t have talked like that to you in front of my friends. It’s just that I --” He stopped again. “Shane, it’s me, Jared, from ... before. No, earlier tonight. I feel like I fooled you into thinking that I – Ah, goddamnit, why is it so hard to say the right words?”

“Maybe it’s not what you want to say.”

Jared jumped back in surprise. “Fuck, you scared me! Shane, what are you doing here?”

From a dark corner, Shane emerged into the street. Jared could make his silhouette and some of his features in the streetlights. “I got mad a little, so I needed to walk it off. I don’t get mad often,” he began. “It’s usually serious when I do that. But you’re a slick city boy, so I should have known it.”

Jared sighed. “It’s not like that. I mean, slick city boy? I’m not... I mean, I obviously made you have the wrong impression of me. Adrian and Mike gave me an earful inside, so I’ll try to apologize as I should.”

“No need.” Shane waved. “I heard you trying to find your words earlier. I don’t think you really want to apologize.”

Jared stopped for a moment. He sighed, letting the air leave his lungs with an audible noise. “You know what, Shane? You’re right. I don’t want to apologize. Not because you don’t deserve

an apology, but because I've been bottling up something inside, something that had absolutely nothing to do with you, and it has made me mad."

"What is it? Can you say it?" Shane asked.

Jared considered for a moment. Maybe what Shane really deserved wasn't some half-assed apology, but the truth. "I just went through something unpleasant. I was involved with a married guy. I had no idea he was married, and when I found out... well, he was really unpleasant toward me."

"You keep saying the word 'unpleasant'. But it must have been more."

"Yes, it was," Jared said, letting out another deep sigh. "He insulted me. I thought we had a relationship, and I was nothing to him but an affair or even less than that. I slept with you for all the wrong reasons. I wanted to prove myself that I could be in control. I could just choose to hook up and feel good about myself. I had no intention to hurt you, but I am at fault for not stopping one moment to think about you and your feelings."

Shane said nothing.

Jared walked toward him slowly. "I can be your friend, Shane. I can show you around the city. I may be awful hookup material, but, as a friend, I can be nice. Really nice. At least, that's what Adrian and Mike keep telling me."

"A friend?" Shane asked.

"Yes. I'm so sorry I mislead you. I just kept telling myself that you must be a charmer and a playboy since you're such a hunk. I'm sorry about that. A lot of guys in this city would be happy to have you. I can introduce you to the scene here, so to speak. And then, I can assure you that you can have your pick."

Shane watched him closely. "Have my pick, huh?"

"Sure. Have you looked at yourself in the mirror lately?" Jared asked with a small laugh.

Shane matched it with a chuckle of his own. "So I can pick anyone I like, is that what you're saying?"

"Sure thing," Jared confirmed it once more.

"I'll keep you to that," Shane said playfully.

"If any guy in this city turns you down and he's not married, or in a serious relationship, I'll personally deal with him," Jared promised solemnly. "Hey, now that we cleared the air, and, hopefully, you don't hate my guts anymore, would you like to come back inside? Adrian and Mike are already crazy about you."

Shane shook his head. "I think it would be a little strange."

It was evident to Jared that Shane was doing his best to speak correctly, but that charming twang still rolled off his tongue like honey, with a word like 'little' still sounding more like 'lil'.

"It's okay. I put you in an awkward situation, and I'm really sorry," Jared said and squeezed Shane's arm.

"Don't worry," Shane replied. "So, if we're friends, what do we do? Do we hang out? Can I call you and that?"

"Sure," Jared said with a nod. "This isn't me trying to get out of an unpleasant situation."

"You used 'unpleasant' again," Shane noticed.

"It must have been unpleasant for you," Jared replied.

"It's okay if I hug you?" Shane asked, out of the blue. "You do that with friends, right? How about kissing you on the cheek?"

"Shane, Shane," Jared cooed affectionately, "you don't need a book of rules to hang out with me, okay? But I guess this is you teasing me over being a scumbag. Come here and let me give you a hug."

Shane didn't wait for him to finish his words. Jared snickered when Shane pulled him into a tight embrace and lifted him off the ground. He couldn't stop inhaling Shane's manly cologne, which was a big mistake because memories of last night flooded his brain in an instant. It was nothing wrong to feel a bit regretful, but he was in no position to get a boyfriend now. Shane buried his face into the crook of Jared's shoulder and kissed him there. A light frisson traveled his body, and Jared remembered, with some latency, that he was supposed to protest to that.

Before he had a chance to do that, Shane let him back on his feet and pulled away. "I'll call you," he said and tipped his hat.

"Sure," Jared replied with a small nod and watched Shane walking away, a tinge of something he knew too well nudging him to do something already.

He pushed it down. It was all too soon and too wrong. Shane deserved something else. Someone else.

He walked back inside, his head full of contradicting thoughts.

"Did you call him?" Mike asked.

"Yes," Jared replied without thinking. Then, he shook his head. "Actually, I talked to him in person. He was just outside, walking it off... I apologized. Job done. We're going to be friends."

“Friends?” Adrian quirked an eyebrow. “What kind of friends?”

Jared took back his seat and barely kept in a small wince at the slight discomfort he still experienced in his backside. “You know, friends.”

Adrian whistled as he walked down the marina and waved at Edward, who was leaning against the rail of his yacht. “So, I get that this was the surprise. Well, once you told me where to meet, I expected as much. Quite a beauty, isn’t she?”

Edward just nodded and gestured for Adrian to hop in. Although the maritime vehicle deserved much more attention than he could offer at the moment, Adrian’s eyes were on Edward. He was dressed in white sailing clothes, and his eyes were squinting in the sun. The light breeze was playing with his hair, and Adrian couldn’t help but notice the lazy smile on Edward’s lips. He had known Edward the frozen fish, and Edward the master wannabe, and Edward the too hot to handle, but this version of him was new.

Adrian had a feeling that their little trip out at sea would reveal much more than he could observe at a glance. “No captain hat?” He pointed at Edward’s head.

“I’ll be your humble shipmaster,” Edward said with a smile and a small bow. “To be a captain, I believe you should have a degree in marine transportation.”

Adrian pouted playfully. “So, I don’t get to call you captain?”

Edward laughed. He welcomed Adrian into his arms and kissed him softly. The kiss was different, too, although just as hot as any the man gave without restrictions. Adrian felt a small shudder coursing his body; if they kept at it, they might not leave the shore at all. “Hmm,” he purred as he reluctantly let go of Edward’s fascinating mouth, “I suppose I need to play the good kid this time, or else you won’t be able to sail us out of here.”

Edward chuckled softly. “There is such a thing as autopilot, but of course, you will have to be good until we get at a, let’s say, fair distance from the shore. In the meantime, you just enjoy the ride.”

Adrian nuzzled Edward’s nose with his own, earning an immediate burst of laughter in return.

“What is this?” Edward asked, but his voice was playful.

“I don’t know. I feel all giddy inside and a lot like fooling around. I’ve never been on a yacht, so I apologize in advance if I behave like a total kid.”

“Apologies accepted. Now, just lay back and let me do the sailing.”

“I wouldn’t dream of any other arrangement,” Adrian said in return.

Jared looked at the caller ID, and his finger hovered over the screen for two heartbeats. Shane hadn't called since that disastrous evening, and he couldn't just admit that he had been all needles and pins over whether he would do that, eventually. But, it was Saturday, so maybe now Shane wanted to hang out. "Hi," he said, unnaturally bright, as he tried to hide his nervousness.

"Hey, Jared," Shane drawled.

Now Jared had a pretty good idea that it was just Shane's way of talking and not some carefully crafted weapon of seduction. Still, he had had no idea until now that he would fall so easily for that accent. No, he wasn't falling for anything. It was just a way of saying.

"Hi, Shane. I mean, I already said 'hi', and I knew who was calling because, duh, I saw the caller ID – I'm babbling here, why aren't you stopping me?"

A relaxed laugh was the immediate reply. "I like it when you're babbling. You're cute."

"Ah, you didn't just say that," Jared protested. "Anyway, do you want to hang out tonight? Mike and I want to visit this new place, which everyone praises like it's gay heaven or something."

"Sure," Shane replied. "What should I wear?"

Jared paused for a moment. "I think you should just wear whatever you feel comfortable in. Your usual clothes are fine."

"Won't anyone laugh at me? Seeing that it's some swanky place where everyone might be wearing designer clothes or something?"

Jared laughed. "All right. You're just pulling my leg. The place may be a little swanky, but not too much. Mike and I, we're not top earners or anything. We go to venues where we can afford the beer if you know what I mean."

"I'll pick up the tab, so don't worry."

"I would never let you do that," Jared said promptly. "It is on us to show you around, and since you're new to the group, let us play the generous companions. Of course, that will change down the road," he added quickly. "And if you make more money than us with that pub of yours, we might become obnoxious freeloaders."

"That's fine by me," Shane said playfully.

"Ah, so you're not worried," Jared said back.

"Mike looks like a lightweight, and I know for a fact how tipsy you can get after a few shots."

“Hey, hey,” Jared protested, “we drank from the bottle. Seriously, who does that?”

“You,” Shane said and laughed.

“Just because you made me.”

“Right. I was just leading by example is all.”

“Yeah, I guess so. Now, let me give you the address, so you know where to meet us.”

“Could I drop by your place and get there together?” Shane asked casually.

Jared hesitated for a moment. That wasn't anything out of the ordinary. He would pick Mike up from his place, anyway. It was a common thing between friends.

“It's all right if you think that's weird,” Shane added.

“No, no. Here is my address. We're going to pick Mike up from home, too, after that.”

“Sounds swell. Wait, only Mike? What's Adrian up to?”

“Ugh, long story,” Jared said and rolled his eyes. “You cannot believe this guy's luck. His boyfriend is some hotshot doctor and millionaire. Right now,” Jared checked the clock on his nightstand, “he's on some yacht, in the middle of the ocean, sipping Margaritas or whatever.”

There was a short pause on the other end. “Is that your idea of fun, too?” Shane asked.

Jared laughed nervously. Whatever he did, he managed somehow to come across as a superficial ass. “I was just joking. Not about the yacht, and the millionaire boyfriend, but about the reason why Adrian is lucky.”

“What's the reason?” Shane asked.

This kind of directness was not at all something Jared was used to. But Shane seemed to ask exactly what was on his mind, without censure. It was refreshing, in a way. Jared liked it. “It's a long story, but let's just say, without running the risk of ending up gossiping about Adrian's love life, that, for a long while, it looked like there would be no boyfriend in Adrian's life. And, suddenly, he meets this guy, Edward, and he forgets about playing the king of hookups every weekend. So, I think he's lucky because he found someone he truly likes spending time with.”

“That sounds like a great reason,” Shane said. “What would make you feel lucky?”

Jared sat on the bed and pushed one rebellious strand of hair behind one ear. “I haven't figured that out yet,” he replied quietly. “I thought I knew what it was, but things didn't work out how I imagined.”

“You're talking about the married guy?” Shane asked.

“Yeah,” Jared admitted. “We’ve been together only for a little while, but – ah, let’s not talk about it, okay? Let’s have fun tonight, and, Shane, if you don’t have at least a dozen new numbers in your phone by the end of the night, then don’t call me Jared Boyle.”

“Ah, is that your full name?”

“Right. We didn’t exactly introduce each other. What’s your family name?” Jared asked dutifully.

“McKay,” Shane replied promptly.

“Shane McKay,” Jared said slowly. “Only by this name, and I could picture you, boots and hat and all, without even seeing you once.”

“Well, you saw me, though, so all you say know is only hindsight,” Shane said.

“Yeah. I suppose so. All right, Shane McKay. Drop by at nine.”

“Isn’t it a bit late?”

“There’s no real action before ten o’clock. And since we will take our time picking Mike up from his place, I think we will be there in the nick of time.”

“So, it’s really okay if I wear my usual clothes?” Shane insisted.

“I wouldn’t want to see you in any other,” Jared joked.

There was a small intake of air, like a sharp breath on the other end. Jared didn’t have time to wonder what it could be about.

“All right, then. But if anyone laughs at me, it will be all on you,” Shane replied.

“Don’t you worry. Mike and Adrian call me the mother hen of the group. Just point the bully to me, and he will eat his hat. Or shirt. The chances are he might not have a hat.”

“Counting on you, then.”

“Sure thing.”

There was a short silence. “Then I’ll see you tonight,” Shane said. “Cannot wait.”

“Yeah. Me, either,” Jared said politely.

“See ya later then, shug,” Shane drawled, and just this time, Jared was pretty sure that the guy was playing the charmer, again.

For a while, he stared at the phone in his hand and wondered if he hadn't had his work cut out for him, all on his own. As long as Shane didn't use his charms on him, he would be fine. And Shane had no reason to do that since he was now interested in making the acquaintance of many fine lads who weren't Jared.

Great. Now he was thinking with an accent.

"Wow," Adrian expressed his awe as he looked around at the vast expanse of water. "I must say that it feels a bit assuring that I still see a bit of land in the distance."

"I hope you're not seasick," Edward said, now a bit worried. "I do have antiemetic medicine on board, but I would hate to be the cause of any discomfort that might affect you."

"I'm not seasick, but I do experience some discomfort right now," Adrian said with a grin.

"What discomfort?" Edward eyed him carefully.

"Come closer, and I'll show you," Adrian said and winked at Edward.

A hearty laugh was the reply. "As a health care professional, I should take care of it right away." Edward walked over to him and kissed Adrian full on the lips. "Undress," he whispered. "I want to see you in all your naked glory."

"Sure," Adrian replied. He pulled the t-shirt over his head in one go. "How is this?"

Edward blinked a few times. "What part of all your naked glory didn't you get?"

"Doctor," Adrian cooed, "do you intend to run a full body examination?"

Edward played along. "It's required so that I can identify the cause of your discomfort."

Adrian shrugged. He never missed a chance to put his body on display. He was damned proud of it, and if Edward wanted to see him, who was he to say 'no' to that?

His erection smacked against his lower belly as he pushed down his pants.

"It's truly fascinating how you can be hard like this without complaining," Edward said.

The sun on his skin was warm, and the ocean breeze was caressing his body. Adrian had absolutely no complaints. He was pretty much in paradise, and nothing could say otherwise. He stepped out of his clothes, pushing them aside with his shoes, and performed a small pirouette. "Are you pleased, doctor? What's next?"

Edward moved closer. Adrian took a step back and leaned against the rail. He liked what he saw, Edward's moist lips, the hunger in his eyes. That was a man who wanted him, and Adrian longed

for that validation. He had been all tied up in knots after their last time; as much as Edward showed that he wanted him, Adrian didn't feel entirely sure. Each step could be on shaky ground, and the worst part was that he couldn't tell it was so.

Right now, his worries were gone. Edward stepped closer and knelt in front of him. Then he took Adrian's cock between his lips, while his green eyes stared up, without blinking. Adrian found himself lost in those eyes. Edward, with his mouth full like that, was a sight to behold.

It wasn't only that, the sensory assault of a tongue wrapped around his manhood, of lips that knew just how much pressure, was enough. It was a new feeling of wanting and longing that couldn't be quenched quickly. Adrian wanted more; he was well aware of it right now as he rested one hand on the back of Edward's neck and pressed gently. Edward went deeper, taking the cue right away.

"If the Coast Guard stumbles upon us, I don't think I can stop," Adrian whispered.

Edward's eyes crinkled at the corners, in apparent amusement. There would be no stopping involved; that was sure. Adrian cursed softly as Edward deepthroated him, but gently, not with urgency. He was taking his time, and Adrian could only be thankful for that, too, because having Edward blowing him like that, out there, away from the entire world, was, at the moment, everything he wanted.

Edward snuck one hand to caress and play with Adrian's ball sack, and that served only to heighten the pleasure. Adrian closed his eyes to focus on the sensations assaulting him. Then, Edward's hand got bolder, sneaking between his buttocks and finding soon, with restless fingers was its owner wanted.

Oh. Adrian wasn't sure. He could tell Edward to stop, but, seriously, that wasn't an option. So, instead, he shifted so that he could part his legs more and allow Edward access. Edward stopped sucking only so he could wet his fingers, and then, he went back at work with more skill and dedication.

Adrian couldn't mind such a small thing. Edward could ask anything of him right now. So, he wasn't surprised when two fingers eventually stabbed his behind. They moved slowly, but they had a purpose, and Adrian wouldn't say 'no'. But he grabbed Edward hard by the back of his neck and began moving his hips, too. There was a price to pay for everything, and Adrian had a feeling that Edward wouldn't mind.

The sensation in his ass wasn't unpleasant at all, but seeing how almost never anything got in there, it was foreign. It brought something new to the game, and Adrian felt his balls pulling tight, despite his desire to make it last for as long as he could.

There was no warning needed, but Adrian announced his impending release in one strangled cry. "I'm coming!"

Edward pushed his fingers deeper and held Adrian in his mouth down to the hilt. Adrian was grunting and moaning loudly as he came what must have been a ton down Edward's throat. "Oh, fuck," he half-complained when Edward finally let go of his ass and his cock. "That was one awesome blowjob, Edward," he praised his partner.

Edward said nothing and walked inside the cabin, only to return with a velvet case in his hand. Adrian eyed the object with a confused look on his face. It couldn't be a ring; it was too big. What the hell was he thinking, a ring? He needed to slap himself away.

"For you," Edward said and offered the case to Adrian.

Adrian took it without another word. How could someone be so cool and collected after depthroating a dude? It was beyond him. He opened the case and looked inside. He instantly grimaced.

Chapter Seventeen – Dangerous Waters

Adrian didn't make a move to pick up the object inside the case. "What's this?"

"I am certain you know well what it is," Edward replied. He kept his hands in the pockets of his pants, and he looked just as cool and collected as before. Right now, there was a half-mocking smile on his face, an expression Adrian couldn't quite make sense of.

"And you know that's not what I meant. What do you want me to do with it?"

Edward cocked his head. "It's proof of trust, Adrian."

"It's not proof of trust. It's a fucking buttplug." Adrian had a mind to throw the case back at Edward.

A small arrogant tsk was the immediate answer to his righteous annoyance. "And? Don't tell me you've never touched one."

"No need to play the smartass with me. Just tell me. What do you want me to do with it?"

Edward walked closer. Adrian knew it wasn't a good idea to feel intimidated, but there was something about Edward that made his skin go all goosebumps with anticipated pleasure, even when he did the most mundane things. Right now, there wasn't anything mundane about how Edward grabbed one of his buttocks, squeezing, and kissed his neck. "I obviously want you to put it inside."

"Are you trying to play me? This type of thing is like a gateway drug to anal, right?"

Edward's laugh was clinking crystal. It sent eddies of arousal down his back. Adrian shifted, trying to make Edward move his hand from his ass. No chance of that, it seemed. "I thought you were in control, Adrian. It's just a little thing I'm asking. I want you to feel pleasure in all possible ways when you're with me. And, since you don't allow me to fuck you, this is the best next thing. Just to make it clear, I want you to wear it while you're inside me. What do you say?"

Adrian exhaled, trying to control the new wave of arousal threatening to take over his rational mind. "You just want to move things along," he argued.

"What things?" Edward kept his lips close to his skin on purpose. Each breath, each word, was temporarily imprinted on Adrian's neck, like a small promise of future pleasures.

"I didn't forget about our arrangement. You top me, it's over," Adrian said, trying hard not to sound like a little kid who was promised a bike on Christmas, but only if he was good and brought home good grades.

"Why should we think about the end?" There was no denial whatsoever.

Edward's fingers caressed his ass. With his soaring horniness, Adrian's heart sank a little. It was fitting that they were out at sea while having this conversation. The salty air tickled his nose, and Adrian pretended it was because of that that his eyes got moist for a second. "I don't," he protested, albeit meekly. "You do."

Edward pushed himself away. He took the case from Adrian's hand and walked back into the cabin. When he walked out again, it looked like he was in sailing mode. Adrian watched him for a while, as the land in the distance began to grow in size and clarity.

"Are we going back?"

"There's nothing more to do here. You refuse to play," Edward said airily.

Adrian wanted to know what really was happening under that tall, aristocratic forehead. Ignoring that he was still as naked as before, he walked behind Edward and embraced him. "Does that mean that much to you? Me putting inside your little gift?"

"Of course it means a lot."

"Then let's just do it," Adrian said simply. "It's not like you're going to jump my ass, right?"

Finally, Edward moved his head and looked at him. "I don't see how that would be possible. While I do think I can hold my own reasonably well, you are superior in size and strength."

Adrian laughed. "You know, it would serve if you weren't so damned analytical all the time. And, seriously, what is it all about? Let's get round to it again."

Edward switched the yacht back to automatic and turned to face Adrian. "It's about trust. If you trust me, I see no reason why you would feel threatened by such a thing. Anal pleasure, Adrian, is --"

"All right, don't give me another lecture," Adrian moaned. "Let's get inside and try this. But if I lose my erection because something is stabbing my behind, it's all on you."

"Then I will do my best to make sure that you don't lose your erection." Edward grabbed his cock and guided him inside the cabin.

Yeah, he was led by the dick, all right. Even in his mind, Adrian had no witty comeback to that.

Adrian moaned and grabbed the sheets as Edward worked him with his mouth while he was stuffing his ass with that thing. Yeah, it wasn't unpleasant, and if all was about pleasure and pleasure only, he got the kink. He couldn't still shake off entirely the sensation that he was a step behind, and that Edward was running in front, leaving him in the dust.

It was only a little thing, he tried to convince himself. His kinky lover was just that, kinky. And he wanted Adrian to get into that, too.

Edward caressed the skin around his hole now filled up properly. “How does it feel? Is it too much?”

“It’s like something in my ass. Nothing much,” Adrian said, trying to downplay it casually.

“Then you must be ready for me,” Edward said with a low, sexy chuckle.

Adrian had seen Edward naked plenty, but he didn’t mind the small striptease show, as his lover threw away his clothes. Well, that was what he got for playing out of his league. People would laugh if they heard him talk of himself like that. No one was ever out of his league. That was a wise rule to live by.

But Edward Hastings was, and to himself, Adrian could admit that. Right now, he was biting more than he could chew. He was throwing himself, head first, into something he had no control over. Someone with more romantic inclinations than him could tell him that was the beauty of it all. But Adrian couldn’t repress the sensation that he was diving in dangerous waters, and if he got unscathed to the other side didn’t depend on him at all.

Edward straddled him. There was a new light in his eyes as he descended on Adrian’s cock slowly, only after lubing himself for a little while. He was tight, and that had to hurt, at least a little, but Adrian felt that he was in no position to argue. He was in no position, but on his back, period. As Edward shifted and impaled himself, Adrian’s ass pressed against the bed, and the buttplug pushed against his prostate. If heightened arousal was what Edward was aiming at, mission accomplished. But Adrian still felt a tiny bit anxious about what it meant. He would be happy to leave it as an experiment about how it would feel to fuck and be fucked at the same time. If that was all, he wanted nothing else. He wouldn’t even write to Santa this year.

A small bite on his chest made him jolt. “Are you with me?” Edward asked breathily.

“I am in you, by the looks of things,” Adrian teased back. “You should feel it.”

Another breathless laugh was the answer. “I do feel it. The question is: do you?”

Adrian grabbed Edward’s hips firmly. “I wouldn’t be so hard if I didn’t.”

“I’m talking about a certain thing inside your beautiful ass,” Edward said.

“Beautiful ass? I think those are the words to describe yours.”

“Oh, no, you surely have a wonderful behind.” Edward began moving slowly on top of him, while his fingers ran through the hair on Adrian’s chest. Just as Edward had instructed, Adrian

had let it grow. It looked like it hadn't been just a whim. Edward really liked to play with his chest hair.

"I would fuck it," Edward added.

Adrian gasped as Edward's fingers turned into claws; although blunt, the nails raked over his chest quite sharply. He could feel them. So Edward wanted a bit of rough, or so it seemed. He was also trying to provoke him, and Adrian had no intention to leave that glove down on the ground. His right hand moved to grab Edward's by the hair at the back and pull him toward him. The other grabbed his ass and began dictating the rhythm.

Again, it appeared to be the right choice. Edward began thrashing in his arms, but not to free himself. Being held like that clearly stimulated him more than anything. Maybe Adrian was the guy with something stuffed in his ass, but he was still doing the fucking. Edward was getting off on being pushed around. Adrian thought a bit of roughness was a good addition to the dish; it was the right spice to make Edward fall.

He was back in the game. He moved his hips to hammer Edward from that position. His pleasure was growing faster because the buttplug was doing its thing as his ass muscles were squeezing it, but he could still control it. If Edward wanted to put his stamina to the test, that was a great way to do it. Adrian was pretty sure he could rise to the challenge and more.

"Adrian, Adrian," Edward chanted and panted at the same time.

It was time for the victory lap. Adrian intensified his hold, and then slapped Edward's ass once, hard. That caused an instant reaction that led to a chain. In less than one minute, Edward was a quivering mess in his arms, and Adrian hadn't yet come.

He helped Edward climbed out of his lap, but he didn't allow him too much of a breather. Adrian took his lover in his arms, kissed him sweetly on his moist and limp lips, and then placed him on all fours.

"Adrian?" Edward seemed surprised and slightly alarmed.

"The thing in my ass must make me last longer," Adrian explained shortly.

He parted Edward's ass and decided that there was still enough lube for him to get going again. As he entered, he made sure Edward felt him. There was a bit of a struggle in the handsome body lying there, ripe for the taking. Adrian knew he was pushing some limits, but he hadn't been the one to initiate the challenge.

The sensations in his ass were multiplying. As he pushed himself inside, he could feel his behind reacting. He was sure that even the hair on his head must be standing from the stimulation he felt. Edward moaned loudly as Adrian began riding him like that.

Maybe it was good payback. Maybe Edward truly needed to find out how it felt to have his nerves stretched, and his manhood challenged.

“If you can’t take it, just say the word, and I’ll behave,” Adrian said, offering his lover an easy way out.

“I can take it,” the muffled reply came.

That was the confirmation he needed. He had one redoubtable adversary in front of him. Edward even dared to push his ass into Adrian’s crotch, to have him understand he was more than ready for another round.

It was showtime. Adrian used the right angle, the right pressure, and the right words as he began his rodeo stint. By how Edward writhed under him, cursing, shouting, moaning, and gasping, he was about to make a name for himself.

Whatever book of lovers Edward must have kept hidden in a safe, somewhere, Adrian wanted to be on the cover. No, he wanted Edward to throw that book away, to get rid of all the memories of anyone else who had ever been inside him. Adrian couldn’t recall ever being a possessive lover. With his first love, he had done nothing but reacted, and later, his casual flings amounted to nothing.

Edward made him feel new things. And he did it in such a way that Adrian felt challenged; at the end of their confrontation, he planned to be the victor. He would be a generous one; he would take Edward in his care and stop him from chasing elusive sensations in a long string of lovers. That was the promise he was making to himself right now.

Now, he planned to strip Edward bare of any pretension that he was in charge. Yeah, he had made Adrian wear his little toy. That was nothing. Adrian held Edward’s pleasure in his hand, and he was giving it in waves, drowning his lover in it.

It had to be after Edward had come a third time that his moans and gasps turned into a begging litany. Adrian knew there was no way he could go further than that. He knew, and still, for a couple of minutes, he insisted on going and going. Edward deserved a small lesson, just as he had served one to Adrian, earlier. If it was trust he wanted, he needed to prove himself he could offer the same.

“Adrian, please,” Edward whispered breathily. “Even I cannot --”

“Hush, love, it’s coming now.” The word was dropped casually, but Adrian knew better. Edward needed to know this wasn’t one of his usual encounters with lovers he took and discarded like boring toys.

Adrian almost blacked out when he came. He kept Edward there, using him as a vessel for everything he had felt since they met. It wasn’t only about how aroused Edward made him with

just a glance or a feather-like touch, or about the teasing and denial, or the games they played. It was about how Adrian wanted Edward to feel that this was all he needed.

“Thanks,” Adrian murmured as he felt Edward retrieving the buttplug gently from his ass. “It wasn’t all bad.”

“Of course. I wouldn’t have asked you to wear it otherwise.”

Edward’s voice was subdued. What had happened earlier must have gotten to him, at least a bit. Adrian was waiting for him to do something about it. But Edward was silent, and, for a moment, Adrian wondered if he hadn’t played his cards wrong. With a guy like Edward, one could never know.

“That was quite the display of showmanship today,” Edward said softly. “I’m afraid my entire body will hurt tomorrow.”

Adrian smiled. He was acknowledged; he had played his cards right. “I’m sorry about that,” he said, lying on one side, his back to Edward.

There was a playful slap on his butt that made him smile.

“Don’t say you’re sorry if you don’t mean it. And I know you don’t mean it. But I probably deserved it. You wanted to serve me back my own medicine.”

“Yeah, among other things,” Adrian replied, his smile never leaving his lips.

“Other things? What other things?” Despite sounding like a guy who had just come several times from being fucked in the ass by a guy with something to prove, Edward perked up.

It was all going according to plan. “That’s for you to find out,” Adrian offered the only explanation he wanted to him.

“Hmm. You’re intriguing me, Adrian. And I thought you played with all the cards on the table.”

Funny how both seemed to think in the same terms about the evolution of their relationship.

“I’m adjusting my game depending on the adversary.”

“Ah, I see. And what kind of adversary am I?”

“The kind that cannot be beaten --”

A satisfied laugh followed.

“-- easily,” Adrian carried on.

“You’re saying that I can be beaten?” Edward wasn’t fast enough to hide his surprise.

“By the right guy.”

“And let me guess, you are that guy.”

“Yeah. As simple as that.”

Edward sighed and dropped on the bed. “Adrian, you really are something. No, I must rectify that. You’re like no one I’ve ever met. When I raise the bar, you just go higher. I’m wondering how far you’re willing to go.”

“As far as needed.”

“Needed for what? What’s the prize?” There was puzzlement in Edward’s voice now.

“What’s the prize? Do you really have to ask?”

“Me?”

“Yeah.”

“You already have me.”

“Not the way I want to have you.” Adrian hadn’t wanted to take his confessions this far, but their small verbal sparring provoked him to let that one go free. Whatever, he didn’t worry. Edward could know his goals; it was the method Adrian used that was supposed to remain hidden from his knowledge. If Adrian had surprised Edward so far, and repeatedly, he only needed to do it enough times for it to make the citadel surrender. He had time, and Edward was an amazing lover in and out of bed, so all was well.

“And what way would that be?” Edward asked, his voice playful and in control again.

Adrian smirked and still didn’t turn. “I’m not going to tell you.”

“I don’t do love and relationships, and walks in the moonlight.”

“Duly noted.”

“Really? If it’s not a romantic relationship you want, then what is it?” Genuine curiosity was back in Edward’s voice.

“If you can’t figure out until the time is up, I’m going to tell you, I promise.”

“Is there a deadline, then?”

“I know you said something about six months when we got our little agreement drawn, but not really. I’m taking my time with you. You’re fun,” Adrian said flippantly, just to get a rise out of Edward.

There was no audible reaction, but silence was an answer, too. Most probably, right now, the gears inside Edward’s head were starting to turn.

Keep him interested. Keep him aroused. And keep him satisfied. There was no way Adrian would lose that kind of game. Edward was older, more sophisticated, and held a cynical view of the world for reasons Adrian had yet to find out, but he was still a human being. Adrian wanted nothing but to find the key for that lock, and find it he would.

Jared threw one last look in the mirror before letting Shane in. He would not make the same mistakes and try to be the one to impress. Plus, there was no one to impress. He and Shane were nothing but pals now, and when he met Mike and Adrian to go dancing and having fun, he didn’t exactly care what he was wearing. Still, he checked if the new jeans were hugging his ass well. It was only natural to do that since he would, maybe, hook up tonight just for the fun of it.

He opened the door to his apartment with a genuine smile on his face, nonetheless. To his surprise, Shane was wearing a dark shirt, opened a couple of buttons, and dark pants, and even the cowboy boots were gone.

“Ah,” Jared said, without hiding his disappointment. “Where’s the hat? The flannel? The boots?”

Shane laughed and ran one hand through his hair. It looked like he had just gotten a haircut, too. “I thought that I shouldn’t embarrass you and Mike tonight. I don’t want people to think you, two, cool kids, are hanging out with a country boy.”

Jared rolled his eyes. “I told you. That cowboy look is a killer. Guaranteed. Okay, so most guys hanging around these places are too young to have watched Brokeback Mountain when it came out and might not care as much about it as I did, but you could have made the entire room sigh.”

“Is it really that bad?” Shane gestured at his clothes. “Too much? Too little? What’s wrong about my clothes?”

Jared took him by the hand and dragged him inside. “Nothing’s wrong. You are a handsome guy, no matter what you wear. And you definitely look great like this.” To make sure that Shane didn’t have real doubts, once they were inside, he moved around him, examining him from all angles, and touching gently an imaginary crease on the shoulder.

“You look positively deflated,” Shane teased him.

Jared waved. "I knew you as a cowboy, and it's my idea of you. But, of course, you can be whoever you want. Don't mind me. And you look great. Sexy, even. Nothing's changed. You will still have a ton of guys throwing themselves at your feet." As conscious as he was that he was babbling like an idiot, he couldn't stop.

"You look great, too. New jeans?"

Jared made a small pirouette. "They're pretty nice, right?"

"Yeah," Shane admitted. "Just turn a little."

"Like this?" Jared turned his back at Shane.

A hand rested on the small of his back. "They're definitely nice."

For a moment, Jared considered what to do. He had a pretty good idea about what Shane must have been eyeing with maximum interest right at that moment. But, for the sake of them being friends, he would just pretend that he had no idea. Once Shane would swim in the attention of all the cute guys at the club, he would forget about Jared. He would be nothing more than a blip on the radar, soon to be forgotten. Nothing more. Blip, blip.

He turned with his face to Shane, wearing the same smile. Many times, Mike and Adrian had told him that he was at his most charming when he smiled, and even that his smile could diffuse a bomb or something. And that was precisely what he had on his hands right now. A sex bomb. Quite an accurate description for Shane at the moment. As he looked at Shane, Jared noticed the small scar gracing his chin. Without thinking, he reached for it and traced it with his fingers. "What happened here?"

"A small accident."

"On the farm? Did some horse show you some loving?" Jared teased.

"More like my brother."

"The photographer."

"Yeah, him."

"So, he takes pictures for a living, just like me?"

"Nah," Shane said. "So, are we going to take Mike now?"

"Yes. Since we're ready, I don't see any point to dally."

Jared had a feeling Shane wanted and didn't want to talk about his brother at the same time. There was no point in pushing it, although he was quite curious. What could make Shane's

brother give up on photography? A sad thought crossed his mind. “Hey, Shane,” he asked quietly, “I’m sorry that I’m asking, but could it be that your brother is no longer with us?”

Shane laughed. “You mean, like dead? No, he’s alive and kicking, the ass.”

“Ah, okay,” Jared said. “I just had a feeling for a moment, earlier, that I was touching a delicate topic. Making you feel sad or uncomfortable is the last thing on my mind.”

“Don’t you worry your pretty head about that,” Shane said and laughed again.

Still, he didn’t offer any other details about his brother, and Jared didn’t press it further. As they would become full-fledged friends, it was a given that Shane would talk about his family. All at the right time.

“I’ll be driving tonight, so I should warn you not to try to convince me to do tequila shots with you,” Jared warned as they walked out of his apartment.

“I wouldn’t dream of doing that,” Shane replied. “I’ll make you drink from the bottle.”

Jared snorted. “Why haven’t I thought that you would say that?”

“Maybe because you don’t know me that well yet,” Shane said back.

Yes. And that would change, Jared pondered as he took the stairs with Shane in tow.

“What did I tell you? We’re here at the perfect moment,” Jared said as he took his place between Shane and Mike at a table. “People are just getting used to the dancefloor.”

“Would you like to dance?” Shane asked politely.

“Sure,” Jared said, “but let’s allow Mike to gather the courage to join us first. I hate leaving him to guard the table, like a doggy.” He ruffled Mike’s hair, only to be met with a small ‘woof’ from his friend.

“No way. That could take like, a hundred years. You two go hit the floor,” Mike said. “And I’m fine, here, I really am.”

“Are you sure? We didn’t go out tonight so that you can mope around and feel depressed. I’m warning you. It’s this one dance, and then we’ll come back and drag you to the dancefloor,” Jared warned.

Mike offered him a big smile. “Just go. And you’ll see. By the time you two get back, I’ll be swimming in guys. They will all be on me like fleas on a dog. On a dog, get it?”

Shane laughed wholeheartedly. “Good pun, Mike.” He pumped his fist against Mike’s, and Jared felt a warmth growing in the middle of his chest. Yeah, they would all be friends and have tons of fun together.

Shane pulled him to his chest as soon as they were in the middle of the room, surrounded by dancers. He held Jared’s hand, pressing it against his heart, while he used his other arm to keep him by the waist. That was hardly the way two guys who were only friends were supposed to dance together. Shane moved his hips and guided Jared to the rhythm.

“You’re a great dancer,” Jared praised him, as a few envious looks landed on them.

“I’ve always loved dancing. My mom taught me a lot about that. I even know how to waltz.”

“Really? That’s impressive,” Jared said. “Don’t tell me your mom is a professional dancer, or she used to be.”

“Nah, she’s always been a homemaker. The best,” Shane replied. “I miss her a lot, most of the entire bunch.”

“Maybe she can come to visit and see your pub,” Jared suggested.

“I don’t know. She doesn’t travel a lot.”

“Then you can go see her, once you have your business up and running, and you don’t have to be present here all the time.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Shane said and fell silent.

So, family was a delicate topic, after all. Jared decided to change tack. “So, how do you find the club?”

“Swanky,” Shane replied. “Good thing I decided to get some new clothes.”

“Ugh, I told you, Shane, you look great in the clothes you love wearing. And you look great in these, as well. Now, can you tell me, do you see someone you like?”

Shane paused for a moment, and Jared watched him as he looked around. “Yeah, I do.”

“That’s great,” Jared said, with the kind of enthusiasm he knew well it was fake but hoped that Shane wouldn’t notice.

Well, it definitely didn’t take him long to move on. Jared told himself he should feel happy about it. That was why he had taken Shane with them tonight, for him to meet new people and even hook up. Hell, he could even find himself a boyfriend if he was bent on that.

“Cat got your tongue?”

Caught up in his mental verbalization, Jared had failed to notice that there had been silence between them for a while. The music was cheerful, the people around them were having the time of their lives, and Jared had just felt, for a moment, far away from it all. He shook off the sensation.

“No, and I’m sorry. I just remembered that I hadn’t sent some files to one of my clients,” Jared lied. “I just made a mental note to do that when I get home.”

“Is it important? If it is, we can just go to your place, and then come back later.”

“No, no, I will not ruin anyone’s evening just because my head is in the clouds.”

“Any reason why that is?”

“What?”

“For your head in the clouds. Any reason?”

Because they were dancing, they couldn’t stare each other in the eyes, but Jared could make an attempt at reading Shane’s body language. He seemed a bit concerned.

“Oh, it’s nothing. Let’s just have fun.”

Shane tightened his embrace without making him feel uncomfortable. Jared had a mind to tell Shane that it was a bit too tight, but it would have been a lie. It wasn’t too tight at all.

Mike could tell there was a bit of tension between Shane and Jared, or maybe the tension was just coming from Jared, who had gotten into his head that he was supposed to be nothing but friends with his latest conquest.

It had to be only a matter of time until Jared would realize that he really liked Shane. However, Mike didn’t have a clue how to tell Jared that without making him upset. If Adrian had been present, he would have known exactly what to say to make Jared open his eyes.

Speaking of which, he needed to open his eyes and look around, too. Of course, he would not be as courageous as to talk to someone while Jared and Shane were dancing, but the least he could do was to look. There were many good looking men around tonight, and Mike watched them passing by.

One guy in his twenties winked at him and made a gesture with his chin. Mike froze for a second, and then he looked to his right and his left, just to make sure that the guy wasn’t staring at someone else.

He was alone at the table. Just how silly could he be? Mike offered a small smile in return, but then he looked away. When he finally looked again, the guy was courting someone else.

And that was the story of his life, in a nutshell. Usually, his profoundly ingrained shyness was in the way, but tonight, that wasn't the case. Mike couldn't go and dance with the guy from earlier for a straightforward reason. That guy wasn't Ryan, and not even close. And Mike was, suddenly, very selective in how he chose his dancing partners. Not that he ever chose anyone, and, usually, other people chose him, but that wasn't the point.

The point was that he couldn't get Ryan out of his head, plain and simple. Any guy he looked at had to come short of something. Maybe he was too tall, or too short, maybe he didn't have the right type of haircut, or he didn't have a smile that could charm an entire room. Or maybe his name didn't start with an R, and his family name didn't start with an A.

Clearly, Mike's criteria for the ideal partner were extremely narrow. It was like finding a unique fingerprint in a database with criminals. Ugh, had he just thought right now of Ryan as a criminal? But he was, in a way, because he was a thief, and he had stolen Mike's sanity lately. How was someone supposed to function without his sanity? It was definitely useful for a number of things.

He could let his mind wander like a crazy person, as much as he wanted. The truth was there, and it was one and only. Mike wanted no other. He could tell Jared all he wanted to get back in the saddle, but he couldn't apply the same advice to himself. No way he could that. Ryan had no equal. Maybe if he had a twin –

Mike ran both hands over his face. His mind just kept on going places. What could be a good remedy for pining over someone? Dancing and hooking up with a stranger was supposed to act like that, but Mike didn't have the mental and physical energy to get himself to do that. There was a reason for his reluctance, too; he was one hundred percent sure that the treatment would fail. The ill person was a terminal emotional mess, aka him in love head over heels with his boss.

A group of men dressed up to snuff took their places at a table to Mike's right. Just for the sake of watching good looking men – it was, after all, the only palliative he allowed – Mike turned slightly to look at them. They were in their thirties, and a waiter hurried to their table, undoubtedly aware that it would be a big tip in there.

He studied the men, and soon, his breath caught in his throat. There was no way! There was absolutely no way! How the hell –

Mike chortled all of a sudden, taking even himself by surprise. One of the men at the table turned to look at him, and Mike quickly put one hand to his ear, as if he was on hands-free and laughing with a friend on the phone.

Great job, Mike. And now you drew attention to yourself.

He could make himself scarce. Maybe the only person at that table who mattered hadn't noticed him. Mike stood up, still keeping the hand at his ear, as an improvised noise-canceling device. The toilet had to be in the opposite direction from the table to his right. It just had to be.

Without throwing one look back, he began walking fast. Well, apparently, not fast enough, because he felt his right elbow grabbed from behind. With dread, he turned.

"Oh, hi, Mr. Armstrong," he said gleefully. "Fancy meeting you here."

Fancy meeting you here? Who talked like that?

"Hmm, that's strange," Jared commented as they began walking back to their table. "Where could Mike be?"

"Maybe he found a cute boy and ran away with him," Shane suggested playfully.

"Nonsense. I bet he is hiding from us because he doesn't want to dance," Jared said.

"He can't hide forever, right? How about we dance a little more? We can always check if he got back from his hiding place," Shane suggested.

"I guess," Jared said with a sigh. "Mike is a bit shy if you couldn't tell by now."

"I noticed. But I guess he's so quiet because he's very smart."

"Actually, that's true." Jared launched himself in a presentation of his friend, who was definitely off the scale when it came to intelligence.

At the same time, he could pretend that he didn't feel how close Shane was keeping him. No matter how fast the music, it appeared that Shane knew exactly how to make it ideal for a dance for two. And the envious looks around them just multiplied.

"Hmm, that should be my line," Ryan said with a playful smirk.

"Right, because normal people totally talk like that," Mike replied with a self-deprecating snort. He pushed his hands into his pockets and looked at Ryan, trying to act casual. Maybe that wasn't the right attitude when talking to his boss. He took his hands out of his pockets, and let them hang on the sides, a bit far from his body. Great, now he probably made the excellent impersonation of a tree. Maybe a willow.

"Have you finished your conversation?" Ryan asked.

“What conversation?” Mike asked. It was uncomfortable to stand like that. He shifted his weight from one foot to another.

“I was under the impression that you were talking on the phone. But it must have been my imagination,” Ryan added quickly. “Are you here with someone?”

“Yeah, friends. Jared, and someone new. He’s called Shane, and he’s a real cowboy. He even knows how to herd cattle.”

“An important skill that highly recommends him as a cowboy,” Ryan said.

Mike wasn’t sure if their conversation was normal, or Ryan was just pulling his leg. “What about you?”

“I’m with a bigger group than yours. But no cowboys, I’m afraid,” Ryan said playfully.

Yeah, he was totally taken for a fool, which he was, but that didn’t mean that he was supposed to be happy with that. What was he thinking? He was happy Ryan was there, talking to him. It didn’t matter what topic was on the table.

However, it was weird to talk to his boss in a gay club. People could just get the wrong idea.

“Well, it was nice seeing you, Mr. Armstrong.” Mike took a military stance.

“Yeah, you too, Mike. Do you come here often?”

Oh, he wasn’t off the hook. And he was just about to take steps toward the bathroom, which, apparently, was not at all in that direction. “No. It’s the first time.”

“For me, too. I was hoping you could show me around.”

“I’m afraid I don’t even know where the toilet is,” Mike said without thinking.

“Maybe we can find together.”

“The toilet?”

Ryan laughed. “Around. That was what I meant.”

“Yes. I mean, I think you must be busy with your friends,” Mike said quickly. “They must be wondering where you are right now.”

“I don’t think so. They have already ordered drinks. With that bunch, I know for sure they won’t notice my absence once they get some booze into their systems.”

“Old friends?” Mike attempted a question.

Ryan nodded.

Mike had no idea what to say anymore. It was like a Mexican standoff, only that there were no guns involved. That, however, didn't make the situation any less dangerous for him, in particular. Ryan could choose to leave anytime he wanted. Mike couldn't.

"Have fun, Mike," Ryan said.

Mike exhaled. It was only this much a human being could hold their breath. Didn't Ryan know that? "You too," he said brightly.

He turned on his heels only after Ryan began walking. Great, just great. What was he supposed to do now? All evening, he would have to look at Ryan. No, he wouldn't.

"You know, if you're only going to dance with me, that might not help you in your pursuit of the person you like," Jared pointed out.

"I think it helps," Shane replied promptly. "I know, for a fact, that showing off my talents as a dancer works like a charm. I should be more thankful toward my mom for teaching me."

Jared laughed. "Tell me more about her."

"What would you like to know?"

"Well, you said she's a homemaker, and a marvelous one. You could start from there."

"She makes an awesome potato salad. Simple dish, but I'm telling you, no one's can compare to hers."

"I like making potato salad," Jared replied. "Maybe you could ask her for some tips and tricks."

"What about your mom?"

"She's a teacher. My dad, too. High school, not university. I am their only child, so it must be because of that that I don't have any badass looking scars." Jared had little idea why he ended mentioning Shane's brother again, but he wanted to know more about the man holding him in his arms, while they continued to glide on the dancefloor like it belonged to them.

"So, did they torture you to study all the time?"

"Mom, mostly. Dad, he is too kind to force anything on anyone. But I love them both the same."

Shane didn't follow with any more details about his family.

"How do you like the city so far?" Jared changed the topic.

“Crowded, but exciting. Everyone wears a smile, but you can’t tell if they mean it. I have friends, some with ties back home, and I love my pub. I sometimes miss the open sky, the fields, all that. But not always.”

“You were born and raised there, right?”

Shane confirmed.

“Then, I should commend you on your ability to adapt.”

“Thanks,” Shane replied and pulled Jared a bit closer.

Jared had no idea how his dancing partner managed to do that. They looked intimate, for sure, to anyone watching. The song stopped. “Should we go and have a drink to cool off a little? In my case, at least. You feel free to heat up. I’m the only one who’s not supposed to drink.” He had a feeling he was like a broken record, but it was enough for Shane to look at him like that, and he felt lost. His mind was getting incoherent and incapable of forming new thoughts.

“Are you afraid someone might steal your car if you leave it here until tomorrow?”

“Steal it? I doubt it’s anything worth stealing, but no. It’s not that kind of neighborhood. It’s only that I will have to pay extra for parking, and I promised you guys I would be the one behind the wheel tonight.”

“You didn’t ask me,” Shane pointed out.

“Correct. I just got used to this role, I guess.”

“I’ll cover your parking. Just drink something with me tonight. It’s not proper hanging out without drinking, right?”

Jared had a mind to protest, but his throat was parched, and he wanted something more than a soda. Maybe one drink. Shane had a point.

They sat at the table and ordered. Jared wasn’t at all surprised when Shane asked for a bottle of tequila. Mike still wasn’t back, but that boy needed a tiny bit of liquid courage, too.

Shane rested his arm behind Jared’s back, just like that time, at the bar. It was a subtle sign of possession, but Jared didn’t care to tell Shane anything. He felt in no mood to hook up with a stranger, so that served to make potential suitors stay away.

“Guys,” Mike whispered, materializing next to them out of thin air.

“Mike, what the heck? Why are you whispering?”

“Ryan is here,” Mike whispered, and the three of them leaned together, their heads almost touching.

“Who’s Ryan?” Shane asked, whispering as well.

“Mike’s boss, and also love interest,” Jared explained in a short sentence.

“He’s not my -- ugh,” Mike protested.

“He is, and it’s complicated,” Jared continued to explain to Shane, who was out of the loop.

“He talked to me when I was looking for the toilet. I stood in front of him like a tree,” Mike moaned.

“Like a tree?” Shane asked, visibly surprised.

“Mike is a quirky guy. You’ll get used to him,” Jared said quickly. “Where is he now?”

“Just at the table at our right. Don’t look,” Mike hissed.

Jared and Shane stopped just in time.

“All right, no harm done, right. Who is he with?”

“A group of friends. Expensive casual suits, his age, all that.”

“But no potential rival, right?” Jared asked.

“I don’t know,” Mike whispered. “Would it be weird if we left?”

“Definitely.” That was Shane.

Jared thought the same. “Mike, you can’t run away every time you see Ryan. Imagine how he would feel if you did that. He would think you left because of him.”

“And that would be exactly the truth.” Mike pursed his lips. “It’s like magic, I swear. I’m thinking of him, and then, he’s here.”

“Does Ryan know Mike has a crush on him?” Shane asked.

“We hooked up once,” Mike explained. “Before we knew about the whole boss and employee situation. It’s a miracle I’m not out of my job.”

“Now, Mike, that’s not true,” Jared protested. “Ryan even gave him a raise. And no, it wasn’t because they hooked up, but because Mike is a hard worker.”

“Have you two hooked up since that time?” Shane asked.

“No, of course not,” Mike said right away.

“Why?” Shane sounded so candid Jared wanted to kiss him a little.

“Because it could be seen as sexual harassment or something,” Mike explained.

“By who?”

“People.”

“And why do you care?”

“It’s so clear you’re not from around here.” Jared kissed Shane’s cheek once. “When working for a big company, like the one employing Mike, such things are complicated. Bosses dating their employees, it’s not seen as a good thing. And Ryan suffered through such a thing before.”

“Yeah, he got accused by his lover, and he had to settle, and even move to the company he is with now,” Mike added.

Shane scratched his head. “And why do all these things matter? If you like him, and he likes you.”

Mike sighed. “He could get in trouble with his family. They count on him. The smallest scandal would be bad for him.”

“His family should support him,” Shane said, a bit louder than before.

Jared stared at him, surprised. Something had changed in Shane’s eyes; he was now frowning, and his dark eyes looked darker.

“Rich families like that, it looks like it’s always complicated,” Jared said in an appeasing voice.

“I think you should go for what you want,” Shane said, addressing Mike directly. “If it’s your boss you want, and he has the hots for you, too, I’d say screw everything.”

Mike snickered. “Screw,” he said.

Shane laughed, too. Jared rolled his eyes. The waiter interrupted their little conversation, and soon, they were facing a bottle of tequila and three shot glasses.

“Well, I think we should all get a little courage flow in our veins,” Shane said and grabbed the bottle.

Jared couldn’t agree more. By how hurriedly Mike grabbed his glass, as soon as it was full, he wasn’t the only one.

Chapter Eighteen - A Whole Lotta Benefits

“So, would you guys like to tell me the whole story?” Shane asked, after their first round of shots.

Mike looked like a lost puppy, and Jared still waited for the good buzz to start. He didn’t plan on helping his two friends finish the bottle, but he licked his lips in satisfaction. “The whole story?”

“Mike, why don’t you just go for what you want?” Shane was direct, and Jared loved that about him, yet, right now, his protective side surfaced in an instant.

“Mike is shy like that. And such complications --”

“I’m a dumbass and a coward.” That was Mike, who took the second shot and threw his head back to make the booze all disappear down his throat.

“Hey, you’re not at all a coward. A dumbass either,” Jared replied, feeling a familiar sting at the way his best friend saw himself. Mike had always been like this, shy and unsure. Jared had tried to make him think otherwise, but he wasn’t sure he was helping much. Adrian tended to be rougher in his encouragement, but that approach hadn’t worked too many wonders.

“Yeah, I am.” Mike looked down and sighed so deeply that his shoulders slumped.

Jared caressed his back, and a bit of frustration grew inside him. Why wasn’t he better at this? Mike had no reason to think badly of himself.

“Why is that?” Shane intervened. He poured another round with confidence. Jared wondered, for a moment, if they weren’t going through that bottle too fast.

“Because I should just go work someplace else.”

It looked like that particular logic eluded Shane because he looked at Jared, in search of an explanation.

“That would solve everything,” Jared said. “Once Mike is no longer an employee working under Ryan --”

“Under Ryan.” Mike snickered and hiccupped.

“Easy with the booze,” Jared warned. “In a nutshell, no one would have everything to say against them if they weren’t boss and employee.”

“So, Mike only needs to hand in his resignation, and then that’s all. He could go ahead and be with Ryan.”

“Yeah, pretty much. But that means a lot to Mike. He worked hard to get where he is now.”

“Mike, what do you think?” Shane’s attention turned to the person being the main topic of that conversation.

Jared felt a bit annoyed. Was Shane trying to ignore what he said? But, in a way, it was only fair. Mike could speak for himself, and it was only because of Jared’s overly protective nature that he often found himself obliged to speak in his friend’s name.

“I don’t know. I’m afraid to quit my job. What if Ryan’s not the one? Then what do I do?”

“You find another job,” Shane said promptly. “What’s the full half?”

Mike twiddled his thumbs. “I guess it’s that Ryan is the one and that I might not be a homeless person for long.”

“Homeless?” Shane turned toward Jared, in search of additional explanations.

Still miffed over being ignored earlier, Jared kept his mouth shut.

“If I quit, and I don’t land another job soon, I will be unemployed. Then, the months will pass, with me out of a job. I won’t be able to pay my bills, and my landlord will kick me out.” Mike was talking without pausing for a breather. “Then, I’ll be homeless.”

Shane’s eyes grew wide. “Is he always a worrier like this?”

Jared quirked an eyebrow. “Are you sure you want to ask me that?”

A puzzled look welcomed his words. Jared looked away, feeling a bit guilty. After all, Shane was just trying to help. He was the one jaded, trying to jump and notice the slightest sign that he was taken for a fool.

“Yes, I’m always like that,” Mike replied, oblivious at the exchange between the other two people at the table.

“You don’t mind me saying, Mike, but aren’t you too... What’s that word? Self-absorbed?”

“Self-absorbed? Mike?” Jared crossed his arms over his chest. “He’s the selfless guy I know.”

Shane didn’t seem fazed by Jared’s display of annoyance. “Then that’s the problem. He thinks that he is the root of all problems and the only one with all the solutions.”

Jared bit his lips in thought. “Yeah, I guess that’s true.”

Shane nodded shortly. Jared could swear Shane had stared a bit too long at his mouth right that moment, but it was gone, so it could have been nothing but his imagination.

“Mike, you’re not going to be homeless.” There was finality in Shane’s words.

“I’m not?” Mike didn’t appear, for one moment, insulted by Shane’s characterization of his person.

“If you ever run out of options, which I don’t think it’s possible, and if you’re half the brainiac Jared tells me you are, you’ll find a job fast. Also, you can always stay with one of your friends. Jared here cares for you like he’s both your momma and papa. Do you see him letting you live on the streets?”

Jared was speechless, and so was Mike.

Shane continued. “Let’s play your worst-case scenario. My good guess is that you never really thought of it to the end. So, you’re out of a job. For months. You don’t have a place to stay. Ryan’s not the one.”

Each of Shane’s sentences was met with exclamations and grumbles from Mike. Jared was still a complete mute.

“Here’s the solution. I’ll hire you. I don’t know as a what, but cross my heart, you won’t be out of a job for long. Jared here, I bet he will let you sleep in his bed, you lucky dog, until you’re eighty. And Ryan? Well, I’m sure there will be someone else if he’s not the guy you think he is. Which, again, I think you might be wrong in worrying about it.”

Astonishment was too little a word to describe what Jared felt. That little personal envy that Shane inserted at one point hadn’t been lost on him, but that wasn’t all. Simply put, things stood like that. Jared was too caught up in helping Mike never feel the slightest discomfort, and now, in a few minutes, he had been proved that he had been wrong all along.

He stole a glance at Mike. His friend was staring at Shane like he had just had the epiphany of a lifetime. “You’re absolutely right.” Mike’s voice was a whisper, but his shock wasn’t of the unpleasant type. He grabbed his glass again and downed it in one gulp. “I’ll quit.”

“Atta boy.” Shane smiled, and Jared wanted to pinch his cheek, mostly because he was envious of him and his problem-solving skills than anything else.

Mike sunk into his seat and giggled. “I can’t believe I couldn’t see it until now.”

“You saw it, but --” Jared intervened.

“Not really,” Mike replied. “I was too busy thinking of what could go wrong. Just like you, J.”

Jared opened his mouth and closed it. Mike giggled again. All right, this one was toasted. “Maybe you just had a shot too many, Mike.”

Shane placed a warm hand on his shoulder. “Let the boy grow up a little, Jared. He might puke his guts and curse his life tomorrow, but he’ll be a man.”

Jared had a mind to argue, but the satisfied smile on Mike's lips convinced him to let it go for now. "Sleep on it, Mike. It's not all bad advice Shane here offers." He turned his head to stare down the imp who was getting his tail in all things that weren't his business. A naughty smile was the answer. No wonder there. "Do you always offer jobs to people you barely met?"

Shane shrugged. "It's a solution. I didn't say it was the ideal one."

"That's not what I asked."

Shane winked at him. "I know."

Jared shook his head and smiled. Yeah, it was a solution, and one to offer Mike a bit of peace of mind while he could work out things on his own. Shane wasn't just a cowboy; he was a smart cowboy. "You put me to shame as a best friend."

"Nah, no way."

"Yes, you do."

"This tequila is so awesome!" Mike interrupted them. He licked his lips noisily. "How about more?" He raised his glass and then pushed it toward Shane, who was the designated bartender as it seemed.

Jared couldn't argue with that. And if Mike would be sick tomorrow, he had just the remedy for a hangover.

"Guys, I'm afraid we hit the bottom." Mike hiccupped.

"The bottom?"

Mike pointed at the empty bottle. "We drank everything."

Jared had a dazed look on his face, and the only one who seemed to be still in full control of himself was Shane. Mike had to admit inwardly that he was a big fan of the guy. If only Jared could see how awesome he was. Maybe he could play matchmaker somehow. Maybe there were books on how to be one, and Mike only had to google them. Right now, though, there were more pressing matters, like figuring out if getting on his feet was a good idea or not. The room was not spinning yet, but his legs were all jelly.

"We could have more," Shane suggested. "It's on my tab, so don't be afraid to splurge."

"That's not fair," Mike slurred. "You're my future boss, so I should butter you up while I still have money." Another hiccup made both Shane and Jared snicker. "Hey, how come I'm the only one toasted?"

“We might have a bit more practice under our belts,” Jared explained.

He was talking. Mike wanted to laugh so hard. Jared and Shane had sunken into the sofa they were sharing, and they leaned against each other as if that was the only thing keeping them from melting to the floor. Mike closed one eye and framed his friends with his hands improvising a rectangle. “You know, you two look great together.”

Shane didn’t say a thing, but Jared snorted. “Shane would look great with anyone. You know, make everyone shine by association.”

“No,” Mike protested, keeping his improvised frame up with some difficulty. “There is just something about you two, side by side like this. You fit. Shane is so dark and sexy, and you, J, are so cute and soft.”

“Soft? I’m not soft,” Jared said and tried to straighten up. Shane’s arm was around his shoulder, so he eventually gave up on that feat.

“I mean, your face,” Mike continued to argue. “You’ve always been the prettiest of all of us. No wonder Chris wanted you, even with a husband at home. He couldn’t resist you.”

Jared’s face darkened. Mike swallowed; of, fuck. His mind was all fogged up, but even so, he realized what a horrible thing had just left his mouth. “Oh, shit, J, I’m sorry.”

Jared waved, but he wasn’t smiling anymore. “No worries, Mike. Water under the bridge.”

“No, no.” Mike shook his head with vehemence. “I shouldn’t have said such an insensitive thing. It’s not your fault Chris is a cheater.”

From the corner of one eye, Mike could tell Shane was watching their exchange with growing interest. Clearly, he was the least drunk of them all.

“And you’re not just pretty,” Mike rambled on. “You’re also smart and funny and a good cook. And the best friend I could ever have.”

“Mike, honey, don’t worry.” Jared reached him with one hand and caught his arm. “Don’t sweat it. I mean it. I know exactly whose fault it was that Chris thought he could take advantage of me.”

“His,” Mike said with aplomb.

“Mine,” Jared replied, and his voice was hard when he said that.

Mike fell silent. “You know what, guys? How about you put me in a taxi so that I can hit the hay? You can stay here and have fun.”

“No way I’m going to leave you to ride in the backseat of some unknown car. I’m taking you home.”

“We’re taking you home.” Shane stood up and offered Jared his hand.

To Mike’s relief, Jared took it and didn’t seem as upset as earlier. “You are so cool. The best. Both of you.”

Jared smiled at him, and the hardness was gone. “You’re drunk, Mike. Let’s get you home.”

Mike was pleased to see that being on his feet was not that big an ordeal as he had expected. He turned slightly and risked a look at Ryan’s table, something he hadn’t done for the entire evening. His eyes met Ryan’s in an instant as if that was meant to be. He smiled, and Ryan smiled back. Even if the music blared around them, and the light wasn’t that good, Mike could clearly see that.

That was it. Shane was right. The full half and everything. Mike put all his strength into anchoring himself on his feet. Then, it felt like his entire body moved on its own accord.

“Mike,” Jared called for him. “Mike.”

His friend’s surprise was clear as day, but Mike couldn’t stop now. He walked over to Ryan’s table, his eyes never leaving his prize. When he stopped inches from the table, Ryan’s eyebrows shot up in surprise.

Now or never. Mike steeled himself and bore his eyes into Ryan’s. The other people at the table interrupted their conversation and turned in their seats to look at him.

All eyes were on him now. If he backed down, he was a total coward. Mike raised one hand and cut the air with it. “I quit.”

That move almost caused him to lose his balance, but Mike managed to turn it into an impulse for a pivotal pirouette that put him on his way back to his friends who were looking at him in awe.

His face was stretched into a big grin. Jared caught him into his arms. “Mike, I thought you would sleep on it.”

Ah, Jared was worried. Mike patted his head. “Don’t worry, J. It was long overdue.”

“Mike, can I have a word with you?” That was Ryan, but Mike found it difficult to turn and look at him. His feet were done for, and if Jared didn’t hold him, Mike was sure he would be a puddle on the floor.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Armstrong,” Jared said in an apologetic tone. “Mike is not quite himself right now. Please, don’t mind him.”

“All right. Will he be okay? Will you take care of him?”

There was genuine worry in Ryan’s voice, but Mike no longer had the strength to take the reins and follow up on his act of courage. “It’s all good now,” he said, but his forehead was on Jared’s shoulder, and his friend could barely hold him.

A stronger arm wrapped around his, and Mike moved his head to see Shane. “You’re the best cowboy that ever lived, Shane.”

“We will take care of him, Mr. Armstrong,” Jared said politely. “No need to worry.”

“Okay. But, please, here is my card. If you could send me a short message to tell me that Mike got home all right, I would be grateful.”

“Of course,” Jared replied.

“We will talk on Monday, Mike,” Ryan said, and his voice was stern.

Couldn’t Ryan just see it already? Mike would have explained everything at large, but his mind was jiggly pudding, and his feet were no better. Yeah, they would talk on Monday.

“Monday,” he shouted and raised one arm.

Jared caught him and dragged him along. “I’ll never let you drink again, Mike.”

“Tequila,” Mike hooted and then made a poor impersonation of a popular cartoon character of Mexican descent.

Jared clamped one hand over his mouth for a second. “Now, let’s get you out of here before we all get thrown out by the personnel.”

Mike kissed Jared’s cheek as soon as his mouth was free again. “I love you, J. You’re awesome.”

“Yeah, I know. And you really can’t hold your liquor.”

If Mike had said that he could remember how he got out of the club, into a cab, and back home in his bed, he would have been the biggest liar in the universe.

“Will he be all right?” Shane asked. “If I’d known he was such a lightweight, I wouldn’t have let him drink so much.”

“He will be fine. I’ll leave all the instructions on what to do the first things he wakes up, and he will surely call me. He didn’t have that much to drink, but I think he drank too fast.” Jared shook his head. “It had happened before, which is why I am not as worried as you might think I should be.”

“I don’t think anything,” Shane said. “You’re the boss here since you’ve known Mike for much longer than me.”

“You sure hurried to give him advice.” Jared didn’t want to sound pissed, but he was a little and couldn’t hide it.

“Sorry if I trespassed. It wasn’t my intention.”

Jared turned with a smile toward Shane. “I meant it. Not all the advice you gave Mike tonight was bad.” He tucked Mike in and brushed one hand against his forehead. Mike was already snoring and in dreamland. There wasn’t anything else left for him to do here.

“Can I know which one was not that bad?”

“Mike needs to be a little more courageous. His natural shyness, although endearing, might just stop him from being his best self. And also, happy, in this case. Ah, I almost forgot. I’ll send Ryan a quick text.”

“The poor guy looked like an angel from heaven struck him down.” Shane chuckled. “I’m not sure he understood the situation.”

Jared laughed, too, while he typed fast. “That’s true. But it’s all on Mike to explain it. And I won’t get involved since I don’t want Ryan to think that Mike has bragged all over the place about sleeping with the boss. It’s just that, the three of us, we don’t have many secrets worth keeping from each other.”

The midnight air had cleared his head a little, as well as his need to care for Mike, but Jared could feel the buzz from earlier returning, in the warmth of the room. Maybe they all needed to head over to the bed, after all.

“The three of you,” Shane said.

Jared threw him a guilty look. “I didn’t mean to make you feel excluded. We’ve known each other since forever. But I hope we’ll all get to know you, too.”

“What about you?”

“What about me?”

“Do you want to get to know me?”

“I’m pretty sure what I said covers that.”

Jared stood up from Mike’s bed and closed the bedside lamp. Shane walked out of the room without being told what to do. With the spare key he kept for such occasions, Jared locked the

door to Mike's apartment and followed Shane outside. It looked like there was some conversation they needed to have.

"Shane," he asked, the moment they were out in the street again. "Give it to me straight. Who was the guy you said you liked tonight?"

"You guessed it."

Jared fell in line with Shane and took the offered arm. There had been no talk of asking for a cab and be on their way, too. A walk on quiet streets at midnight sounded like a good idea right now. "I didn't guess anything since I asked you who it was."

"You wouldn't have asked if you hadn't known already."

Jared sighed. Well, Shane wasn't the type to beat around the bush, so he shouldn't be, either. "You were talking about me."

"Yes."

Shane disentangled his arm from Jared's hold and then hooked it over his shoulders. It could look friendly to anyone who might have seen them walking at that hour, but Jared knew better. Shane's body heat was coming at him in waves, and it felt so good. There was a kind of tiredness making his legs heavy now, and it wasn't just the booze. It wasn't all unpleasant, either.

"We are friends. We decided that."

Shane remained silent as they continued to walk. "Yeah. But there are all sorts of friends in the world."

Jared shivered lightly, and Shane pulled him close. "Beats me what you're trying to say, right now."

"Chris was that guy, the married one." Shane didn't ask. He was just stating facts, and now Jared had no idea what Shane wanted to know.

"Yes."

"He broke your heart or something."

"Or something," Jared admitted.

"So, you don't want a boyfriend right now."

"That's pretty much what I told you before."

"But you want a friend. You want me as a friend."

“Yes. You’re an awesome guy. I would hate to lose you only because we met at the wrong moment.”

Shane seemed lost in thought again. “How about another drink, Jared?”

“Maybe we had enough.”

“The night’s still young, and I’m your newest friend. You can’t let me drink by myself.”

“Are you trying to get me drunk, Shane? That’s not very nice of you.”

“It’s my plan.”

“Oh, I really didn’t think you would admit it like that. Why do you want to get me drunk?”

“It worked the first time,” Shane said.

“Ah, but then I wasn’t drunk. I had only a few shots, and I wanted it. I won’t be a hypocrite and blame it on the booze.”

“That’s good, then. Still, how about not calling it a night just yet?”

“You know what, Shane? I’d like to spend more time with you. But not drinking. I want to see you dance.”

Shane looked pleased with the prospect. “Then, we could just go back and dance some more.”

“Nah. I’m not sure that’s my kind of club, anyway. I want us to go something where you can truly display your talents.” Jared pulled out his phone. “There must be a place where they offer other types of entertainment. I think I found it.” It wasn’t the type of place where people would waltz, but it was the next best thing.

Shane observed him. “You say you want to see me dancing. Don’t you want to dance with me?”

“I just want to watch you.”

“You’re a bit mysterious. I thought you didn’t keep secrets from your friends.”

“I’m sure you still have plenty yourself. This is all about me getting to know you. You want that, right?”

“Sure. In return, I’ll ask for something, too.”

“Of course. Anything.”

“Anything?”

That question mark had to be a trap, but Jared didn't think much of it as he walked right into it. "Anything," he confirmed again, with renewed conviction.

Jared watched as Shane offered his dancing partner his hand, and together, they began twirling on the dancefloor. Social Latin dances had been the closest thing he had found to test Shane's talents, but that wasn't the only thing he wanted to check. It was clear as day that Shane had dancing in his blood. Whether it was rumba or cha-cha, so far, he had proved a redoubtable contender in the amateur dance competition that took place that night.

With keen eyes, Jared took in how Shane placed his hand on his partner's back. Tango was a passionate dance, and if there was something there to see, that had to be it. Shane's execution was flawless, and his partner, an attractive brunette in her late twenties, seemed enraptured with him.

Jared brushed his fingers against his lips. Shane had a body to die for. His face hovered over his partner's as the music played. The beautiful brunette coquettishly let her eyelids drop, and, for a moment, it seemed like Shane was about to kiss her. But, he just kept her there and didn't move until the last note died.

"What a beautiful performance!" The announcer clapped his hands and hurried on the stage.

The couples rushed out, and Shane, after saying something to his partner, jogged over to the place where Jared said. His eyes were shining, and he exuded sexiness more than before if that was possible. "So, what did you think, Jared?"

"I clapped until I couldn't feel my hands. If you and the beautiful lady you danced with don't win first prize, there's no justice in the world. Now quick, hurry back because they'll call your number."

Shane had a mysterious smile. "I don't think I'll win. There were plenty of talented people here tonight."

"Are you kidding me? You were amazing."

Shane let his eyes travel back to the dancefloor. "In your eyes, maybe I was. But, just in case I don't win, can I have a consolation prize?"

Jared didn't quite know what to make of that. "Sure thing you can have that. Hey, your partner is waving at you. Go, go."

The announcer called each couple, and then exchanged a few words with them. A meter would measure the public's reaction for the dancers once they were presented. Jared had meant every word; his hands were already numb.

He watched in disbelief as Shane and his partner came in third. Right away, he hurried to meet Shane. Seeing how much passion he put into his dance, he must have been pretty upset.

“Aw, Shane, I’m so sorry,” he started.

Shane’s partner eyed him with interest and smiled slyly. “So, this is Jared.”

Jared offered his hand. “Yes, that’s me.”

She shook his hand and offered her name, but then she quickly excused herself as she needed to hurry back to her friends.

“What a beautiful lady,” Jared commented. “I bet she gave you her number.”

Shane took him by the shoulders and guided him back to the table. “What do you bet?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t mean it like that.”

Shane chuckled. They sat, and Jared pushed a drink in front of him. “I thought you needed some refreshment.”

“That and my consolation prize.” Shane put the glass down after taking a sip. “Juice? I thought you would ply me with stiffer stuff, now that I lost.”

“I can’t believe it. You were so amazing out there,” Jared said. “And if you want alcohol, we can call the waiter.”

“No, juice is fine.” Shane looked at Jared, and his eyes were warm. “You said I could ask anything.”

“Yes.”

“And I’m also entitled to a consolation prize.”

“Two times, yes.”

“Then I want you to come home with me tonight.”

Jared swallowed, sudden nervousness a ball in his throat. Wasn’t that all that he had thought the entire night while dancing with Shane, drinking with him, watching his hands holding an attractive woman, and trying – and failing – to quench the jealousy rising in him like a tide? No, he hadn’t thought of anything. All night, all he had done had been to fight off such ideas. He was Shane’s friend, and nothing else.

“But we are just friends, Shane,” Jared said, with a note of regret.

Shane studied the glass in front of him. "I told you, Jared. There are all kinds of friends in the world."

Jared froze for a moment. Then he shook his head. "You can't mean what I think you mean."

Shane nodded.

"You're thinking... what? Friends with benefits?"

"I believe that's the term." With those words, the sexy twang was back, and the charm was turned on to the max.

"You want a boyfriend, Shane. I can't be that." Jared's voice was quiet.

Shane was looking anywhere else but at him. "I don't want that. I want a friend I can feel good with."

"Wow. I mean --" Jared found his words with much difficulty.

"You wanted to check something tonight, Jared. What did you find?"

Jared took a careful sip from his glass. Was he that transparent?

"Do you know why I didn't get first place?" Shane changed tack, without apparent reason.

"Why?" Jared could feel his throat drying like the Sahara desert at noon.

"I lacked passion. My dancing lacked the passion needed to impress the people here."

"I must argue with that. Your moves were so precise, so --"

"Void of passion. Because I wasn't dancing with the one I want," Shane said. His voice was calm and measured, but Jared felt a bit afraid that there was a volcano underneath, threatening to erupt.

"I don't know what to say." It was the truth. It wasn't fair to use Shane only because Jared felt attracted to him. It would be wrong.

Shane took his hand and caressed it. "Come with me tonight. We could be awesome friends. With benefits."

"But I would take advantage of you like I did the first time," Jared objected, albeit feebly.

"That's where the part with benefits comes in. I'd get as much of this as you. And we would be even, don't you think?"

Jared had a feeling Shane was, indeed, much smarter than he let on. He hesitated, his mind still on the obligation to push Shane and such a tempting offer aside.

“We’d have fun, the way I see it,” Shane said. “You don’t have to get entangled in a new relationship until you decide you want one again.”

“That could be a long time. I don’t want to keep you from finding --”

“If I’m suddenly sweet on someone, you’ll be the first to know,” Shane said in a solemn voice. “Because you’re my friend. And it’s you I want. It’s not that complicated, right?”

Right. Jared risked one look at Shane. “So, it’s just a sex thing?” he asked in a quiet voice.

“No. We’re friends. But you don’t have to do anything, like buying me chocolate on Valentine’s Day and all that.”

Jared laughed. “I give chocolate to Mike and Adrian every year on Valentine’s Day.”

“Then you’ll have to give me some,” Shane said. “Here is what, Jared. Give me a kiss, and I’ll know if this works out. I have a feeling it will.”

“Give you a kiss? Here?” Jared looked around, a bit panicked.

Shane laughed. “I can wait until we’re out of here and alone.”

Jared didn’t object when Shane took his hand and dragged him outside. Was he really going along with this?

Shane didn’t wait long. There were at a fair distance from the club when he pulled Jared under an awning. Jared didn’t protest one peep when Shane pressed him against the wall and put his lips on his. He couldn’t breathe, but he didn’t want to, anyway. There were so many other better things to do than that, like letting Shane take his mouth, over and over, making his head spin and his feet float above the ground.

“It’s not fair that you’re such a great kisser,” Jared said the moment their kiss broke.

“I’m putting my money where my mouth is. How was it, babe? Tell me you didn’t like it, and I’ll walk away right now. But be honest with me.”

“It’s just a sex thing,” Jared murmured under his breath.

“What, babe?” Shane’s voice was playful now, and the endearing term didn’t help Jared think clearer now.

“I would lie if I said I didn’t like it. You’re good at this, Shane.”

“So? What do you say? Do you want to be friends with benefits with me?”

“I feel like I shouldn’t,” Jared moaned.

“It’s okay if you say ‘no’, but how many times did you hook up with someone, and he sucked? Not in the fun way.”

“I guess... plenty of times,” Jared agreed.

“So I save you the grief of having to deal with that. You already know you like it, how I do you. I won’t bother you like a jealous boyfriend, and you’re free to do what you want. Plus, I’m not married.”

Oh, so Shane knew how to play dirty. But Jared realized one thing. That was a safe bet, what Shane offered. They didn’t have to think beyond that, and they didn’t have any obligations. And it felt good. And Shane knew how to make love so well. And maybe getting laid on the regular would help him see things clearly.

A whole lotta benefits.

Shane hovered, his lips close to Jared’s. “What do you say, babe? You’re in?”

Jared closed the distance between them. “I’m in.”

They had never stopped kissing on the backseat of the cab taking them home. They hadn’t while climbing up the stairs, to Shane’s apartment. And not once inside. It was a performance of sorts that they had managed to be in the bedroom, completely naked and that without letting their lips part for more than a couple of seconds at the time.

“Do you still have that box of condoms?” Jared asked.

“You’re the one I started it with, and you’ll be the one I’ll finish it with.”

“Hmm, big words.” Jared caressed the coverlet with his hands. Shane’s bed was so comfortable. And maybe all the night’s excitement was getting to him because his eyelids were heavy, and his body was sinking into the mattress like it wanted to belong there.

Shane kissed him again, and some of the fogginess cleared. Giggling, Jared began kissing back, and he allowed Shane to take off his clothes.

For a moment, as Shane stood at the foot of the bed, looking perfect with his strong chest and hard rock cock, Jared wondered briefly whether he wasn’t in his right mind anymore. Maybe he wasn’t, but he was also young and bound to make mistakes.

At least, this looked like the right kind of mistake. Shane laughed and pulled him by one leg toward the edge of the bed. “When you look at me, with those naughty eyes, you make me lose myself a little.”

Jared snickered. “Really? Like this?” He cocked his head and threw Shane what he hoped to appear as a come-hither glance.

Shane bit his lips and closed his eyes. “You’re killing me, babe.”

Was this bedroom talk for friends with benefits? Jared had no idea since he had never had one of those. But Shane maybe knew, and Jared wondered if he was one of a long string of such friends.

Shane didn’t allow him to dwell on such thoughts. Their bodies glued and fused as Shane struggled to prepare Jared. There was not much need for that. Tonight, he felt relaxed and happy, unlike in a while.

Jared dragged his nails over Shane’s naked back. “How do you know to fuck so well? Just how many friends with benefits have you ever had?”

Shane laughed but didn’t change his rhythm. Jared dug his heels into the small of his partner’s back. It looked like Shane didn’t mind as he continued his ample swing of the hips that made Jared shiver with soaring pleasure.

“You’re my first.”

“You liar.” Jared bit Shane’s chest since he couldn’t reach anywhere else.

“Cross my heart.” Shane hissed but didn’t say anything.

“If I stumble over other friends with benefits around here, I’ll kick your ass.”

“Do that. You won’t find anyone.”

Shane buried one hand in Jared’s hair and pulled his head back to kiss him again. With any other guy, Jared would have thought that a Neanderthal move. But, with Shane, everything was different, even sex, for the sake of it.

It had to be in the way he kissed, not artful, but firm, like he put in it everything he had. Their mouths melded, while Shane hammered his ass with passionate abandonment. Jared couldn’t remember feeling so much pleasure and so free at the same time.

Shane had to be the best friend with benefits in the world. He could be a little liar, saying that Jared was the first. Jared could allow it. It wasn’t that big a deal. At the moment, Shane was his friend with benefits, and, as funny as that sounded, Jared believed every bit of it.

The rhythm died down after their first crush. Jared couldn't help laughing. There had to be a mess between them, as Jared had let go to quite a bit of pent up pressure. Shane kissed him gently as they came by to their senses.

“Would you mind seconds?”

“Are you kidding me? Of course, I won't. But I'll sleep here in the morning. I still remember what a wreck I was the first time.”

Shane showered his face with kisses. “You can spend all day here if you want.”

“I wouldn't want to overstay my welcome.”

“We could hang out. Do you have any plans with Mike and Adrian? We could hang out with them, too.”

Just like friends, of course. Jared had no choice. “Sure. Let's do that.”

Shane helped him turn gently on his belly. “I love watching your ass swallowing my cock. It's the best view in the world.”

Jared laughed. “You're a little kinky, Shane. But I like it. Just give it to me like you really mean it.”

“You don't have to tell me twice.”

Jared giggled and shivered when Shane bit his shoulder. Having a friend like that was completely new, but it felt so damned good.

“Do your neighbors ever wonder what could be happening in your apartment?” he whispered breathily, as Shane moved again, making his eyes roll in his head.

“Why?”

“Because I'm sure we're making a lot of noise.”

“I'll get a new bed. But don't hold down your sweet voice. I want to hear I'm making you feel good.”

“Even if your neighbors will give us the evil eye tomorrow?”

“It's a risk I'm willing to take.” Shane snuck one arm under Jared's chest to hold him. “Now, hold on tight, babe. Here comes the thrill ride.”

A thrill ride? Shane was an entire amusement park. Jared closed his eyes and let his body lead, for once.

Mike woke up with a huge throbbing in his head. Ah, what the hell had happened? Had someone clubbed him almost to death? He groaned as he fought to open his eyes. With some difficulty, he managed to clear his vision and throw a look around. It looked like he was home, in his bed, which was a big relief.

He needed the bathroom. His mouth was a cat cemetery, and his feet listened to him like they were made of wood, not flesh and blood.

The water splashed on his face had a bit of the desired effect. Mike mumbled to himself while brushing his teeth, rinsing, then brushing again. So, last night must have been pretty wild. He had gone out with Jared and Shane, and they had had... Right. An entire bottle of tequila.

That sure as hell didn't seem like such a swell idea right now. At the moment, it had looked like fun. Yeah, Mike had had fun with the boys, and since he wasn't a lot of fun, usually, that was a victory of sorts. He hadn't made a fool of himself in front of Shane, who was new to the group, and he hadn't been a spoilsport.

Or had he? Mike stopped, his toothbrush in mid-air. Suddenly, a sensation of dread began to grow inside him. He had gotten pretty wasted last night since he couldn't drink so much without making a mess of himself.

Ryan. The memory of seeing his boss, aka love interest, at the club, had been a pretty big surprise. He had gotten the chance to point Ryan to Jared, and his friend had told him that Ryan was an absolute stunner. Of course, he had done so without drawing Ryan's attention. After their awkward episode, Mike had wanted nothing but to remain invisible to Ryan the rest of the night.

Mike shrugged. He was pining over his boss. What was new? The boys had been fun. Shane had given him some good advice on how to stop being a total coward. Like how he could bite the bullet and quit.

That meant that he needed to work on his resignation letter, which Ryan wouldn't find too bothersome. Then, he would explain everything...

Oh, no. Mike dropped the toothbrush into the sink and hurried back to the bedroom. He found on the nightstand some instructions from Jared about what to do if he felt hangover. That was the least of his worries right now.

The chances were he was unemployed. There was one way to find out if that was true. With trembling hands, he grabbed his phone.

Jared jolted when his phone began to ring. For a couple of seconds, he stared around, wondering where he was. The reality of the previous night came crashing down on him while the phone continued to ring.

Someone handed him the phone. "I think it's Mike calling."

Jared closed his eyes and then grabbed the phone. "Yeah, Mike, how are you feeling? Resignation? Oh, yes, you did say that. Calm down. I'll come over."

He didn't dare to look at Shane after he ended the conversation with Mike. But he needed to face the music eventually. Shane placed a concerned hand on his chest. "Is everything all right?"

"Yeah. Yeah. I mean, Mike just realized that he had handed Ryan his resignation last night. I need to go talk to him."

"Okay? Would you like me to come, too, or I've done enough?"

Jared smiled despite how he felt inside. "Don't worry about that. It's only the growing pains, right?"

Shane caressed his chest. "We can still hang out, right?"

Jared bit his lips. "Yeah, sure. As friends."

"Friends."

He pushed himself up and began collecting his clothes from the floor, without risking one look in Shane's direction. "Shane, listen, can you do me a favor?" he said after he was finally decent.

"Shoot."

"Let's not let the guys know that we --" He swallowed his words.

"That we're friends with benefits?"

"Yeah."

"Sure thing." Shane was nothing but accommodating. "It will be our little secret."

Jared nodded. "Yeah."

"See you later?" Shane climbed out of bed, and Jared moved his eyes away from the big dick swinging around.

"Yeah. Sure. I should go. Mike is in a lot of pain, as it seems."

Shane began getting dressed, too. When he brushed by him, Jared wondered if Shane hadn't just made a move as if to kiss him.

No, of course not. Morning breath and all that. Plus, they were just friends. They didn't kiss outside the bed, right?

Chapter Nineteen – Reverse Musical Chairs

Adrian lay in bed, his eyes on the ceiling. His mind was full, filled with possibilities and the challenge of a puzzle that carried one name: Edward Hastings. After their torrid affair on the yacht, Edward had gotten an emergency call, and apologetically, he had bid goodbye to Adrian after leaving him on the shore.

When that had happened, there had been something in Edward's eyes that Adrian wanted to think he knew exactly what it was. Edward hadn't quite wanted to let him go, and, for a brief moment, Adrian had debated whether it would be a good idea to ask to come along. But, just as fast, the moment had been gone.

If he wanted to be more to Edward than just another lover of many others, Adrian needed to up the ante. That meant that he needed to break through the impenetrable wall that was Edward's life outside his usual proclivities.

Adrian knew that Edward was a doctor and that he came from money, but details were lacking. Where did he work? Who were his parents, his family? At the Awakening, it was clear that people there had known each other from their respectable lives, but Adrian, just like others, had been an outsider.

That was what he needed to become: not an outsider, but an insider. Adrian smiled at the joke that came to his mind. He had been inside Edward enough for that, but this was about real life, not the one spent in the throes of passion and the shadows of an existence that, apparently, was meant to be kept under wraps.

Edward hadn't struck him for one moment as someone hiding his sexual orientation, but there was still the matter of his wealthy family and those secretive Sunday meetings that Edward was required to attend without fail.

Adrian knew he would get with Edward where they needed to be. Edward needed it, too, although he probably hadn't become aware of it just yet. He could run his mouth all he wanted, stuck in his pretense that he was somehow too jaded to enjoy some trite romance. Adrian knew that he needed to lay the net and wait. He could be patient and careful. There was no way he would let Edward get away from him, now that they had found each other.

With that refreshing thought in mind, Adrian climbed off the bed and hit the shower. Someday, he would get Edward to spend entire Sundays with him, but, until then, Adrian had plenty of other things to do. After showering, he would call Jared and Mike and see what they had been up to.

Mike clasped his hands together and paced the room while waiting for Jared. Had he gone completely insane? He needed to swear off booze forever; what guy in his right mind handed in his resignation while completely off his socks drunk and stupidly in love with his boss? Apparently, one Mike Cavanaugh.

He grabbed both his cheeks and then slapped them at the same time. That should teach him to be so reckless. Tequila was one hell of a drink if it could turn him into someone who dared to quit his job so that he could pursue a romantic affair with his boss.

His phone pinged, letting him know that Jared was almost there. Without waiting for his friend to reach the door, Mike went into the hallway and looked down the stairs. Jared was jumping the stairs two by two, and his hair looked like a bird's nest. Yeah, they had all drunken like bottomless pits last night, and it looked like he had taken Jared directly from his bed, and, probably, a hangover.

“Hey,” Jared said breathlessly, but brightly, like it was a good morning or something.

His eyes were shining, and his skin was glowing, but Mike couldn't quite imagine why Jared looked like that. Maybe tequila had a rejuvenation effect on some people. Clearly, Mike wasn't one of them. Jared was a lucky guy.

“Oh, J,” Mike said and collapsed in Jared's arms once his friend reached the landing.

“Hey, hey, it's not that bad. Let's get inside, and I'll make some coffee, what do you think?”

“Maybe some chamomile tea instead? My stomach hurts a little.”

Jared patted his head. “I'll figure out something. I'm sorry I got a little carried away and let you drink more than you should. I, of all people, should know how much of a lightweight you are.”

Mike allowed Jared to take him inside his apartment and then followed him like a kicked puppy to the kitchen. Without asking for directions, Jared began preparing the tea. His moves were a bit abrupt, and, through the fog of his hangover and self-loathing, he felt the seed of a suspicion growing.

“You really hold your liquor well, J. I envy you.”

“Well, you know, I might have drunken plenty of gallons of the thing in my life. Shane and his ideas,” Jared said and shook his head.

Mike scrutinized his friend, but Jared stood with his back to him, so there wasn't much to tell from his body language. The suspicion just grew stronger. “What did you and Shane do after you two dragged home my sorry ass?”

“We called it a night,” Jared said. He turned and smiled at Mike.

Mike observed Jared a little more. Bed hair. The same clothes from last night. Stupid grin on his face. Okay, not stupid, but... satisfied? Mike's eyes grew wide. "You slept with him again!"

Jared's face fell. He put up his hands and began waving. "No! No! Why would you say such a thing? I didn't! Who are you talking about? Shane? No, no, definitely no, I didn't sleep with him!"

Mike could feel some of his hangover going away. He grinned. "You so totally slept with him again. Yes, with Shane." Jared blushed so quickly that Mike couldn't believe his eyes. "What happened with being just friends?"

Jared grabbed one elbow with the other hand and stared down at his shoes. "We are friends," he protested in a meek voice.

Mike scratched his head. "You are? Of course, you can't say boyfriends without friends, so --"

"No, we're not boyfriends. Just... friends."

Mike blinked a few times. So, his brain was a complete mess, but what sense was in that? "Friends who have sex together?"

Jared nodded, although it was clear as day that he was embarrassed. Still, he wasn't denying it, so Mike was happy that at least, one time, he had read the situation right. If only he were a keen observer of whatever was happening to him or what he was doing when smashed on tequila.

"What kind of friends are those, though?"

"With benefits!" Jared snapped. Just that moment, his shoulders slumped. "Sorry, Mike. I shouldn't yell at you since it's all my fault I'm getting in this kind of situation."

"It's okay. So that you know, I'm not judging you or anything. But why friends with benefits? Can't you two be boyfriends?"

Jared continued to look down. "It wouldn't be fair," he said quietly. "I don't have much to offer right now, and it wouldn't be fair toward Shane to use him as a rebound relationship or something like that."

"And does he agree with this?" Mike asked, puzzled now.

"Agree? He came with the idea. And I said 'yes' because, obviously, I'm not in my right mind lately, and somehow, I thought, at the moment, that having a friend with benefits was an awesome idea." Jared's voice was bright again, but a bit forced.

Hmm, so Shane had come up with that. Mike was pretty sure Shane wasn't the kind of guy to do friendships with benefits, which meant that he was a bit sly, though. He could just go ahead and tell Jared that he was played, but, in this case, Mike decided to keep his mouth shut. If Jared

suspected just a smidge that Shane was using any means necessary to keep him close with the clear intention to make him his boyfriend, after all, he would shut down everything, and that wasn't an option.

Funny thing how he could see things clearly for other people, but not himself. Mike sighed. "Okay. I suppose you guys know better what we're doing. What am I saying? Anyone with half a brain in this world knows better than me what they're doing. The hell did I do, J? I messed up everything." Changing the subject would let Jared off the hook for now.

Jared looked at him now. "Oh, Mike, you didn't mess up. Actually, it was kind of heroic and a bit funny. Tequila!" He made an impersonation of Mike's antics from the previous night.

That wasn't terribly encouraging, but, yeah, Mike could admit, it was a bit funny. He snickered, and then he remembered right away that he was unemployed. "Fuck. I quit my job."

"It was just a verbal resignation, but I'd say that it reached the correct recipient, so it's all good." Jared grinned now.

Mike moaned and covered his face. "I quit my job. I am insane!"

"You're not. All right, so maybe it was a little Shane's fault for nudging you to do that, but, well, I don't think it's a bad thing."

Mike took his hands off his face. "Is Shane mad at me?"

"Mad? Why would he be? I think he worries that you might be upset with him."

"I could never be. It was my decision. I drank, got smashed, and quit my job."

Jared poured the tea and came with two cups at the table. "Look, Mike, I know that this is way out of your comfort zone, but it's all for the better. Do you want all your life to think of 'what ifs'? Now, you're free to find a new job, and also to pursue Ryan. I think it's a good trade. And you're smart and hard-working. Everything will work out for the best, you'll see." He caressed Mike's head. "Drink your tea. You'll feel better soon."

Jared's phone rang. "It's Adrian. Hey, lover boy," he said as soon as he answered. "I'm at Mike. Long night, and long story. Hey, Mike, it's okay for Adrian to come over now?"

"Sure thing. He doesn't have to ask. I could use another pep talk."

"Mike says you should hurry," Jared said with a big smile. "He's on his way," he added after finishing the conversation with Adrian.

Mike nodded. "This is some delicious tea, J. Sometimes, I think you know my kitchen much better than me."

Jared offered a warm smile. "I let you drink too much, so it should be up to me to put you back together." There was a short moment of hesitation, and then he bit his lips. "Mike, do you think we can keep it a secret from Adrian that me and Shane, you know?"

Mike snickered. "Keep a secret? From Adrian? He would never forgive you. Or me."

Jared sighed. "Yeah, I know. But I think he'll give me a lecture again, and I don't know if I can handle it. I already told Shane that we should keep it hush-hush."

"J, I don't mean to brag, but it took me a couple of minutes to realize that you slept with Shane. Don't you think Adrian will be able to tell?"

"One can hope. Promise me?"

Mike sighed. "With the risk of having Adrian keep me in one of his famous wrestling holds until I can't feel my body, I promise."

"Hey, Adrian doesn't do that anymore."

"Luckily. I'm so glad he's always been my friend because, otherwise, I could swear sometimes, he can be the biggest bully."

Jared rolled his eyes. "Are you telling me? Adrian is into tough love, something big."

They both laughed. Of course, they knew their best friend like the back of their hands. Mike could swear that Adrian would see the truth in seconds from walking through the door.

Mike opened the door to Adrian and hugged him.

"Are we a little emotional?" Adrian asked and hugged Mike back. "What happened with you two last night?"

Mike walked with Adrian into the kitchen, where Jared was now preparing a light breakfast.

Adrian kissed Jared's cheek in greeting. "Ah, you got fucked all night. Did your cowboy take you for another ride?"

Mike snickered. Jared turned to throw him a murderous glare. "Mike, don't make the situation worse."

"Hey, I told you Adrian would know," Mike said in his defense.

"Of course I'd know. When Jared gets a good fucking, it's all over his face. Wait, did you two want to keep that from me?"

Mike put his hands up in surrender. “I didn’t. It was J’s request.”

“You little traitor!” Jared turned off the cooktop. “Now I’m going to be the only one who’ll get the brunt of Adrian’s anger and famous chokeholds.”

“I thought you said Adrian didn’t do that anymore!”

“I lied.”

Adrian was all over Jared, holding him and rubbing his head vigorously. “What’s that I don’t do anymore? Spill out everything, or I’m going to tickle you!”

“I told Mike that you’re no longer a bully!”

“When was I a bully?” Adrian had Jared now in a tighter hold, and he was having fun, by the looks of it.

Mike couldn’t even feel down anymore over quitting his job. He sighed and shook his head. His friends always made him feel normal, no matter what an awkward person and bundle of contradictions he was.

“So, are you two going to tell me everything about last night, or should I tickle J until he pisses himself?” Adrian asked, still not letting go of Jared.

“I quit my job,” Mike said in one go, without one moment of hesitation.

“While you were dancing and drinking? How come?”

“Ryan was also there, and, well, I had too much to drink, and I also talked to J and Shane, and one thing led to another, and I told my boss that I quit.”

“Wow, it sounds like quite the night. Where did you find the guts to do that, Mikey?” Adrian asked with a smirk.

“By the looks of it, at the bottom of a bottle of tequila.”

“And Shane, kind of, came with the idea,” Jared chimed in.

“He just said that I could get with Ryan by quitting my job because he would hire me, and J would let me sleep with him if I became homeless.”

Adrian laughed wholeheartedly. “What a scenario. I guess that came straight from Mike’s deepest fears.”

“You know, you can let me go now,” Jared said, and Adrian released him not without patting him down as if he needed to adjust his clothes. “Ugh, thanks.”

“Okay, you boys had quite an eventful night. So, Mike, what’s next? Are you preparing emotionally for the life of the unemployed and homeless?”

Jared nudged Adrian in the ribs, and not quite playfully. “Stop encouraging him to feel bad, you bully.”

“Hey, I’m just pulling his leg. With that awesome brain of his, he’ll get hired somewhere in no time. Plus, I suppose Ryan would give him some great recommendations.”

“I don’t know about that,” Mike said. “He did ask me not to leave the company before because he thinks I’m a good worker. I have a feeling that I let him down. Even drunk, I know that I saw a look of total dismay on his face.”

Jared intervened. “He’ll get over it. He’ll lose the server guy, but he’ll get a lover. I’d say that it’s a good trade.”

Mike shook his head. “I don’t know. It could be that I read everything wrong.”

“Yeah, right.” Jared snorted. “I suppose that romantic dances on the roof are just part of how Ryan runs the company. Just how many employees did he do that with?”

“Let’s not forget about kissing, and that blowjob Mike gave him,” Adrian added.

“Hush, don’t be an ass, Adrian. Mike needs to focus on the romantic side right now.”

“Romantic? Like you?” Adrian looked at Jared with a crooked smile. “How was your cowboy ride?”

“Let’s focus on Mike here for a moment. He’s the one going through the most important change to date in his life.”

Adrian looked like he wanted to add something, but Mike could tell that Jared was too happy to be left off the hook.

“So, how long should you stay with them before you can go your merry way and romance your ex-boss?” Adrian asked.

“What?” Mike asked, a bit confused.

“You need to give them two weeks’ notice or something, right? I mean, it depends on the company policy and --”

Mike felt a new surge of terror growing inside him. “I don’t know the policy! I mean, I think I knew when I got hired, but right now, I can’t remember!”

“Hey, hey,” Jared began, “don’t get upset over details. You will know tomorrow when you go to hand in your resignation as you should. I mean, in a formal manner.”

“But it will be so awkward!” Mike covered his face and moaned. “How come I didn’t think of that? Of course, I didn’t think of much, so that’s --”

“Mikey,” Adrian interrupted him, “chill, dude. At most, it could be another month of doing what you were doing as usual. A bit of a transition period cannot hurt. You’ll have time to get used to the idea, and you’ll be able to send naughty texts to your boss, with promises of what you’re going to do to him once you’re no longer his employee.”

Jared punched Adrian in the shoulder. “Mike won’t do that. He will keep it to the boundaries of employer and employee until he’s off the hook. Then, he’ll do everything he wants.”

“Speaking of boundaries, now that Mike knows that he has our full support during these trying times, what about yours? Where did your determination that you would only be friends with Shane go?”

“They’re still just friends,” Mike intervened.

“Yeah,” Jared admitted and began staring at his shoes again.

“Friends? Like fuck buddies?” Adrian asked.

“Something like that,” Jared replied, but his voice was getting gradually quieter.

“Hmm,” Adrian said. “And what does Shane say?”

“He came with the idea,” Jared explained.

Adrian opened his mouth to say something, but Mike caught his eye and shook his head. Adrian’s eyes lit up with understanding. A knowing smirk curled his lips. “I see. I didn’t know cowboys were so worldly.”

“Yeah. I mean, I was quite surprised,” Jared replied.

“And you went with it.”

“I guess I did.”

“Don’t regret it,” Adrian warned, just about as Jared began to sigh.

“But it’s the kind of situation that warrants regrets,” Jared said. “I mean, we met at the wrong moment.”

“That’s just your opinion.”

“I’m not in a mood for a new relationship. I feel jaded, and I’m afraid I’m going to be mean and suspicious, and treat Shane badly when he doesn’t deserve it.”

“And being fuck buddies means that you don’t have to worry about any of that.”

“Pretty much, yeah,” Jared replied.

Adrian rubbed his chin in thought. Mike exchanged another look with him. It wasn’t totally fair that they were doing that with Jared present, but their friend was a bit of a head in the clouds kind of guy, and he felt the need for emotional complications. Maybe someone grounded like Shane was the best fit for him. Plus, it looked like Shane knew how to deal with Jared better than anyone could have imagined.

“Then that’s a great idea,” Adrian said. “We also like Shane, so it’s cool that he’s hanging out with us. Isn’t that right, Mike?”

“We love Shane,” Mike confirmed. “I like it that our group is getting bigger. And, you know, we never brought anyone we liked into our circle. Isn’t it a shame?”

Jared threw Mike a curt look. “This is about having a new friend, not bringing anyone we liked in a different way, right?”

Mike swallowed. “Yeah, that’s what I meant. Since we all like Shane and all. And not the kind of like that makes us want to sleep with him, I mean, nothing is wrong with that, but --”

“I get it, Mike,” Jared said, amused now. “It’s kind of crazy what I’m doing. Don’t you guys think?”

“Hey, as long as he’s a good lay, I say go for it,” Adrian said with a shrug.

“And I think so, too,” Mike added. Adrian could keep a straight face while saying that, but, for him, the struggle was real.

“Are you guys making fun of me a little?” Jared narrowed his eyes and stared at them in turn.

Great. Mike was sure he was making a face, and now Jared was starting to get suspicious.

“We always make fun of you,” Adrian replied promptly. “You’re too easy to tease.”

“I thought that was Mike,” Jared said. “Sorry, Mike, not like we think badly of you or anything. It’s just that you’re too cute sometimes, worrying about the smallest things.”

Mike smiled. “Yeah, that’s totally me. And I don’t mind, at all. And we’re not making fun of you. It’s that, just, this friends with benefits thing is too new, at least for me.”

“Frankly, I don’t recall ever having a friend with benefits, either,” Adrian added. “See, Jared, you’re advanced compared to us.”

Jared rolled his eyes. “Seriously, dudes, I’m not buying it. But I laid my bed, and I have to lie in it, I guess. There’s no turning back for now, or I’d hurt Shane’s feelings.”

Mike fought the temptation to seek Adrian’s eyes again.

Jared continued. “I need to ask you guys something. I told Shane that I want to keep it a secret from you, and he now thinks that you two don’t suspect anything. Can you keep it a secret from him that you know?”

“Sure,” Adrian said.

The answer took Mike by surprise, but usually, Adrian knew what he was doing. He would have to ask him later. “Yeah,” he agreed, too.

“All right. Thanks a lot, guys,” Jared said. “Just so you know, the moment he finds someone he wants to be with, I will just get out of the way, no hard feelings.”

“Yeah, that’s like the first rule of friends with benefits,” Adrian replied.

“And how do you know? I thought you said that you never had any relationships like that,” Jared shot back.

“Hey, I’ve never been to the North Pole, but that doesn’t mean that I cannot point it on the map,” Adrian said with a smile.

Jared shook his head. If he had any suspicions, he looked like he kept them for himself. “So, no word of it when we hang out.”

“Of course,” Adrian said. “Shane is one of the guys. We totally get it. Right, Mike?”

“Yeah,” Mike hurried to say. “Now that you know all about our crazy night, how was yours, Adrian?”

Adrian leaned against the kitchen counter. “Quiet. I slept in my own bed. Alone.”

Jared turned toward him. “Alone? How come? Weren’t you supposed to be with Edward on his yacht or something?”

“That was during the day. And we did fuck like rabbits,” Adrian said matter-of-factly. “But he got an emergency call from work, so he had to leave.”

“You don’t seem disappointed. You fucked your fill, right?” Jared teased.

“Yeah, that, too. But, you know, I like this about Edward, that he takes his job seriously. The guy has a frigging yacht, but if there are people who need him, he doesn’t hesitate. I’d say that makes him a good guy.”

Jared laughed and pushed himself against Adrian’s shoulder. “Since when are you into good guys, Adrian?”

“Since I kind of feel the need to settle down with one guy.”

Mike felt his jaw-dropping. All their teasing, his and Jared’s, about how Adrian had found himself a boyfriend, had been only that. To hear Adrian say that he wanted to settle down was the biggest thing ever. “Settle down? Like marriage?”

Adrian smirked. “Hey, let’s not jump the shark here. I’m only talking about a serious relationship, like in the kind of guy that I would bring home to mom and dad.”

“Oh, damn, Adrian, you are serious!” Jared exclaimed. “Look who’s the advanced one of all of us. And what does Edward say about it all? I thought he was against relationships or something.”

“He’ll come around. We’re getting to know each other more and more. I told him that I’d win the game.”

“What game is that?”

“The one in which I make him need me, for real. He likes to think that he’s this cynical bastard who will never do relationships. And I told him that I wasn’t after some romantic thing.”

“Aren’t you?” Jared asked a bit puzzled now.

Adrian smiled. “Well, I am, but I’m not going to let him know that. I’ll just be so deep in his business that he won’t be able to say ‘no’ to anything I ask.”

Jared seemed to ponder. “Adrian, there is a chance Edward is, indeed, the cynical bastard he claims to be. He says it without hesitation, from what you’re telling us.”

“Hush, J. Don’t project your disappointment in dudes over this. Edward just hasn’t met the right person. I mean, until me.”

Mike remained silent, although he did have to agree with Jared; Edward did seem a cold person, and Adrian was getting worked up over him. Maybe the opposites attracted, and that was why things like that were happening. Still, it wasn’t like Adrian to be blind; it looked like he was caught up in a challenge, and there was no way of telling just how involved he could end up.

“Maybe you could bring him to meet us,” he said. “I mean, it would be cool. J and Shane already met Ryan, kind of. It’s only fair that we get to meet this famous Edward.”

“It’s an idea,” Adrian agreed. “All I’ve been thinking is how to infiltrate his life outside what he does with me when I could get him more involved with mine, too.”

“That sounds swell,” Jared replied. “I’m curious to meet him, too.”

Mike watched Adrian. He seemed preoccupied all of a sudden. It was great that he liked this guy so much, but Mike knew that Adrian, as tough as he wanted to believe himself to be, he didn’t take being hurt well. When he had ended things with Alexander, he had been down for months and then chosen to be a playboy who took guys and discarded them at will. Mike could only hope Edward wouldn’t be another Alexander. It had taken Adrian so much to be over that hurt from a long time ago.

They parted ways with the promise that they would hang out in the evening as usual. Jared was barely home when his phone rang. He smiled when he saw who was calling. “Hey, Shane. What’s up?”

That was totally normal between friends. There was no need for excuses to call.

“How’s Mike? Is he all right?” Shane asked after greeting him. There was genuine worry in his voice.

“He’s fine. We helped him think up the resignation letter so that he doesn’t get cold feet tomorrow.”

“We? Was Adrian there, too?”

“Yeah, he came a little later.”

“Ah, cool.”

“We’re hanging out tonight. Do you want to join us?” Jared asked.

“Sure thing. I’ll have to do something at the pub, but then I’ll join you. Same place?”

“Yeah. We’re creatures of habits,” Jared explained. “You might get bored with us.”

“I have my doubts about that,” Shane replied. “You’re a cool bunch. And I had fun with you and Mike the other night. It wasn’t boring at all. Actually, it was pretty exciting.”

Jared laughed. “Yeah. Mike quit his job.”

“Yeah.” Shane chuckled. “But I wasn’t talking only about that.”

Jared could feel his cheeks catching on fire. “Ah, you’re teasing me.”

“Just a little,” Shane drawled.

“O-kay,” Jared replied in turn. He was new to the whole friends with benefits thing, but he could hold his own. “So, will you come to the bar directly, or should I pick you up? I really won’t drink tonight, so I think it’s a safe bet for me to be the driver tonight.”

Shane chuckled. “Are you looking for an excuse to drive me around as you please?”

Jared snorted. “Better said, I’m looking for an excuse not to drink, for once. It looks like I take the craziest decisions while I’m under the influence.”

There was a moment of quiet on the other side. “Do you regret it?”

Jared didn’t need additional explanations for what Shane was talking about. “No, not at all.” He was, sort of, lying, but he didn’t have the heart to retreat, not at this point. As long as they played it safe, no one was bound to get hurt.

“Good, that’s good. Will you wear those tight jeans tonight, again?”

“I think I’ll go for something more comfortable.”

“You look good in those.”

“Thanks,” Jared said quickly. “So, should I come to get you tonight? I’m just being a good friend, I swear.”

“Come by the pub. I’ll be there until later.”

“Sure thing. See you, Shane.”

“Bye, Jared. Can’t wait to see you.”

Jared sighed as he put the phone back into his pocket. It was nice talking to Shane. Everything seemed so simple, so direct with him. Even this friends with benefits thing. Nothing was awkward. Shane was an awesome guy all around, and Jared was happy to have him as a friend.

Maybe he could wear the tight jeans again, just for Shane.

Adrian frowned as it looked like the person on the other end didn’t want to pick up. He was about to give up when Edward’s voice came through.

“Hello, Adrian.”

“Hi,” Adrian replied, a bit surprised that Edward had picked up the phone, after all.

“Is there something the matter?” Edward’s voice was distant.

“Are you free tonight? If you are, I’d like you to meet my friends. My best friends.” Adrian spoke quickly as if he was afraid he would be refused.

“Meet your friends?” Edward said every word as if he needed the time to understand their meaning.

“Yeah. You must be done with your obligations by now.”

“Not by far.” Edward’s tone was clipped.

Adrian got a bit annoyed. “What is it that you have to do all Sunday? And it’s not until tonight so --”

“Are we doing this, Adrian?”

“This? What do you mean by this?”

“Are we having our first conflict? And over the phone?”

Conflict. Not a fight, like between lovers. They weren’t part of adversary debate teams, for fuck’s sake.

“No, we’re not.” Adrian needed to chill a little. Getting hot-headed with Edward wasn’t a good idea. He had the power of an iceberg on his side. “I just wanted you to meet my besties.”

“Intriguing,” Edward commented. “And what, exactly, would it achieve?”

“Achieve? Nothing. They’re just curious about you, and they want to know you.”

“Have you told them a lot about me?”

“Just that we fuck,” Adrian said. He didn’t like to become vulgar like that, but Edward was getting a bit on his nerves.

“I see. So they must have a strange idea of me already.”

“No, they don’t. They just know you’re the guy I like.”

Shit. Talking about slips of the tongue.

Edward laughed. Adrian wanted to strangle him through the phone.

“Honest to a fault, aren’t you, Adrian?”

“Nah, that’s not it. You know already that I don’t want to take you on moonlight walks.” Adrian was in full damage control now. He and his tongue.

“Good. Does this little meeting matter to you, then?”

“A lot.”

“Say ‘please’.” Edward’s voice dropped to a seductive whisper.

Adrian wanted to laugh it off, but he wasn’t in the mood for games. “Please, Edward, come and meet my friends.”

Another chuckle followed. “You are disarming, Adrian. Send me the details, and I’ll see what I can do.”

“That’s great.”

“Is this all?”

“Yeah. Wait. About your emergency yesterday, how did it go?”

Edward sounded a tad surprised when he replied. “There was an accident involving kitchen equipment. There were quite a few victims, and I can help when there’s a shortage of hands on deck.”

Adrian smiled. Edward’s voice warmed considerably when he began talking about his work. He sat on the couch and stretched his legs. “Tell me all about it.”

“Are you certain? I might bore you to death with medical terminology, or gross you out with details on human suffering that should never happen to anyone.”

“I’m not squeamish. And I’m sure those people were lucky to have you take care of them.”

Edward hesitated for a moment. “I suppose I can spare a few minutes and tell you all about it.”

“Go ahead,” Adrian encouraged him.

“It’s unusual to have non-sex talk,” Edward pointed out.

“Not at all,” Adrian replied, determined not to let Edward off the hook.

“All right then.”

Adrian smiled as Edward began talking. Whoever the guys who had Edward’s attention before had been, they must have been idiots not to get to know the real man. Adrian really wanted that; he wanted to get to know Edward completely. He had a hunch that he would like him even more.

“Hey,” Shane greeted him and kissed him on both cheeks, the moment he climbed out of the car.

Jared replied in kind and kissed back, although he couldn't completely deny the sudden trepidation he was experiencing when Shane let his hands lingered on his waist. "So, all done here, then?"

"Yeah. Now I'm free to hang out with you and the rest of the crew. How's Mike feeling?"

"I think we've already talked about Mike over the phone."

"Yeah, but I want to make sure that he doesn't want to strangle me the moment we see each other."

Shane hooked one arm over Jared's shoulder. It was just casual, and it didn't mean anything.

"I wouldn't worry if I were you. Mike's a sweetheart, really."

Good thing they had to get in the car and Shane let go of him. His reaction toward the simplest touch from Shane was totally out of whack. He needed to rein in his stupid attraction. The point of getting laid like friends was to take the edge off that. So far, it didn't seem to work so well.

Maybe more of the same thing was needed. The attraction would have to wear off if there were no feelings to sustain the sex. With that in mind, Jared climbed behind the wheel. A short look at Shane and his knees were butter.

Shane leaned toward him before putting on the safety belt and whispered in his ear. "You really look great in these jeans."

Jared blushed but ignited the engine without a word. Shane was just fooling around. He was too serious to play him, right?

Adrian and Mike were already at their usual table when they arrived. Mike hurried to embrace and kiss Shane on both cheeks, while Adrian offered him a manly hug. Jared couldn't be happier to see his best friends taking so well to their new addition to the group. Shane was a swell guy, and he was a great friend.

This time, Jared didn't bother when Shane let his arm hanging on the back of his chair in a gesture of possession. Since Adrian and Mike knew what was going on, Jared was no longer on guard about not letting things become too obvious. The only one not aware of what the others knew, like in a reserve game of musical chairs, was Shane. Somehow, Jared felt that it wasn't fair, but he had already complicated the situation by becoming fuck buddies with Shane and then telling him to keep it a secret.

"Mike, I can't tell you how happy I am that you're not mad at me," Shane started. "I tend to be the idea guy when no one really needs my ideas."

“I’d say you’re a guy full of smart ideas,” Adrian said with a knowing smirk.

Jared threw his friend a cutting look. Adrian met his eyes, and his grin grew bolder. He should have known that Adrian would find the situation too funny to leave it alone. Under the table, he stretched one leg and kicked Adrian subtly in the shin. The grin on his friend’s face faded a little. Jared smiled sweetly.

Mike hurried to put Shane’s mind at ease. “Don’t worry. I was the one who drank too much and then quit his job. You didn’t hold a gun to my head to do all that. I will assume full responsibility.”

“That’s great to hear. I really meant what I said. If you can’t find work fast or just need something to tide you over, I think I can use an IT guy to modernize the equipment I have at the pub.”

“Thanks, Shane. You’re awesome.”

“You’re welcome. And your boss, he’s a looker.”

“Yeah, he is,” Mike said, and let out a dreamy sigh. “Maybe, one day, we’ll all get to sit at a table like this one, with all our boyfriends.”

Jared tried to pin down Mike with his eyes, but without success. Mike was already lost in a fantasy world, probably dreaming of Ryan and how it would feel to be with him. He would just let this one pass. It didn’t seem that Shane had picked up on that allusion. Yeah, ’cause he was a straitlaced kind of guy, and he didn’t read anything into words like that.

“I called Edward,” Adrian announced. “And he might just drop by,” he added quickly.

“Really? Edward the royalty?” Shane asked. “I should have worn better clothes.”

Adrian laughed. “I won’t let him look at you too much, Shane. You’re a charmer, and I don’t like competition.”

Jared snorted. “Seriously? Since when?”

“Since I don’t want other guys to get close to my guy.”

“Your guy, huh?” Jared smiled. “Does he know?”

Adrian wasn’t easy to faze. “He’ll know, don’t you worry your pretty head about that.”

“I can barely wait to meet him,” Mike intervened. “But I should have worn better clothes, as Shane said.”

Jared patted Mike’s hand. “Shane was just joking.”

“I’m not,” Mike replied. “I don’t want to reflect badly on Adrian.”

“I can’t see how that would be possible,” Jared protested. “Plus, if Adrian thinks we’re worthy of meeting His Highness, I don’t see why we should be anything but our true selves. Right, Adrian?”

“Sure thing. And this is a test for him, not you, guys.”

“A test? Like how? Will you drop him if we don’t like him?”

Adrian chuckled. “Let’s not go down that path. But so far, we’ve always gone where he wanted and in his type of environment. I just want to see him away from that. You know, in a real light.”

“That’s kind of deep, Adrian. I had no idea you’ve matured so much lately.”

“What can I say? I’m the wunderkind.”

“Hey, hey, tone it down,” Jared said. “We love you, but we don’t want it to go to your head.”

Adrian stuck out his tongue. “Too late.”

Jared looked around for a server. They had been in there for at least ten minutes, and no one had cared to take their order. “It’s a bit busy tonight. Should one of us seek someone and tell them that we’re parched down here?”

Shane made a move to stand. “I’ll go.”

Adrian intervened. “Not you. Let Jared go. He knows the place.”

Jared patted Shane’s thigh. “It’s true. And you’re still new. Let me handle this.” He stood up and searched the place with his eyes. It was packed, all right, so he needed to head over to the bar.

Adrian waited a few moments for Jared to be out of earshot, and then he grabbed Shane by the shoulder. “Look here, lover boy, we know what your game is,” he said in a low, funny voice.

Shane grinned at him. He didn’t seem impressed. “Did Jared tell you everything, then?”

Mike whispered, “No, but we kind of figured out, and then he couldn’t deny it. Now, he thinks that you don’t know that we know.”

Shane laughed. “Wow. What kind of best friends are you, you sly foxes?”

“Isn’t that a case of the pot calling the kettle black? What’s the end game, cowboy?” Adrian increased his hold on Shane’s shoulder.

“Haven’t you guys figured it out already? I’m not going to let Jared walk into the sunset with some random guy while I still have a chance.”

“You know that he’s bent on this idea that it’s not the right moment and all that.”

“Yeah. That’s why I’m leaving him a breather. You know, to discover on his own that he likes me.”

“He likes you,” Mike confirmed.

Adrian patted Shane on the back. “Stay true to your words, cowboy. If you hurt our friend, it will be hell to pay. Mike here, he bites.”

Shane made a face like he was terrified.

“I do?” Mike asked.

Adrian nudged him playfully. “You do.”

“Yeah, totally. I’m like a vicious dog.”

“A Chihuahua?” Shane teased.

They began laughing.

“Don’t worry, guys. I really like Jared. I won’t let him get away from me that easily.”

Adrian smiled. That was a man who knew what he wanted, just like him. For the umpteenth time since he had walked in, his eyes traveled to the entrance. It could be that Edward wouldn’t come at all, but he couldn’t stop hoping.

The noise in the bar died down a fraction, just as Adrian moved his eyes away. And then, his head turned toward the door on its own accord.

Looking perfectly yummy in a casual shirt and khakis, Edward was there. He didn’t need a neon sign above his head. The guys sitting at the tables close to the entrance were gawking at him.

Yeah, that was his guy right there.

Chapter Twenty – The Boyfriend Experience

“Adrian?”

Mike’s voice was a faded sound, and Adrian had to shake his head to regain all his senses that had been snatched, in a mere second, by the guy who had just walked through the door.

“That’s Edward,” Adrian said quickly. “I’ll go get him.”

“Wow, that’s Edward?” Mike’s excitement was enough to make Adrian feel proud. “No wonder even you’re afraid of competition.”

Adrian stood up. Yeah, competition. He didn’t need some twink to steal Edward’s attention before he could reach him. His worries were ridiculous, but he couldn’t rein them in completely. Without another word to Mike and Shane, he hurried toward the door.

Edward noticed him when he was half-way and smiled. Adrian responded in kind, overly conscious of how his entire face was a grin, and also of the jealous stares around.

“You came,” he said and stopped in front of Edward. There was no hesitation in him as he hugged Edward and kissed him on the lips. He didn’t look, but he could tell the jealous stares suddenly intensified.

He grabbed Edward’s hand. “Let me introduce you to my friends.”

“Is this your usual place?” Edward inquired.

Their hands linked as they began walking back to the table, and Adrian felt a new, unfamiliar tingle going up his arm. “Yeah, this is where we usually hang out. I hope it’s okay with you.”

“It is. You don’t have to worry about little things, Adrian.”

“Worry? Who does that?”

Edward chuckled. “If it’s the boyfriend experience you want to try, just be honest and tell me.”

Adrian turned his head to stare at Edward. “The boyfriend experience?”

“Let’s just say that I’m open to new things.”

Adrian took a moment to analyze. It wasn’t enough, and he couldn’t tell what Edward’s angle was. “Maybe I want the boyfriend experience.”

“I don’t work with maybes.”

“Then, be my boyfriend.”

Edward laughed. “Will do, Adrian, will do. Now let’s put your friends’ minds at ease. I don’t want them to think that I’m some sort of alien bent on stealing their bestie away.”

A bit too cocksure, the arrogant, sexy bastard. Adrian shrugged. He would figure out everything later. For now, he just wanted to enjoy an evening with his friends and the guy he liked. It was a simple desire, and Adrian was happy to see it happening.

Jared was back with beers and carefully placing the bottles on the table. “Hey, you must be Edward.” He offered his hand, and Edward took it and shook it firmly. “I’m Jared.”

“I’m Mike,” Mike saluted from his place.

“Shane, here.”

Edward took everyone’s hand while Adrian followed him with his eyes, not wanting to let him for one moment out of sight.

They sat, and Edward began. “I can’t remember the last time I had a beer.”

Jared blushed. “So sorry. I should go look for the waiter or just --”

Edward waved and raised his bottle. “Tonight is a great moment to experience new things.” His eyes traveled lazily to Adrian as he brought it to his lips.

Adrian swallowed and froze in place. There was a challenge in the green eyes, and that mouth wrapping around the lip of the bottle held a new promise.

“That’s a great reason to drink for,” Shane said and drank, too.

Adrian followed their examples only after Jared pushed gently against his elbow, to draw his attention. It was an evening for beginnings, all right.

Happy like a kid, that was what he felt. Adrian walked outside as if he were on cloud nine. The evening had been a success. At first, everyone had been a bit quiet, probably impressed too much by Adrian’s introduction of Edward. But Edward had proven an easygoing guy, a side of him Adrian hadn’t had a chance to meet. He had told them about his work at the hospital and had politely asked everyone what they did for a living.

All had been so normal that Adrian wanted to pinch himself to see if he wasn’t dreaming. They had talked about the stuff guys talked about when getting together, and Edward hadn’t flinched or pulled away when Adrian had held his hand or wrapped his arm over his shoulders.

“How was it? Did I pass the test?” Edward asked.

They were walking hand in hand like a pair of teenagers. Adrian made their arms swing and laughed. "I must say you surprised me."

"Really? How come?"

"You're a guy who's used to, you know, the high society or something."

"And? Did you expect me to look down on your friends? Laugh haughtily like this?" Edward made a funny impersonation of an arrogant cartoonish character. "Or send the beer back because it wasn't served at the right temperature?"

"Was it too warm?"

Edward laughed and leaned hard against him, almost making him lose his balance. "It was fine, Adrian. Everything was fine. As I told you, stop worrying about little things. And your friends are great. I like them. It's been a while since I didn't have to try hard to impress people."

"That's because they were already impressed," Adrian said with a small laugh of his own.

"Of course. Everyone looked curiously at me, probably because of the crazy stories you must have told them."

"But you put their mind at ease. I didn't know you were into sports or the latest news."

"One must stay informed. It is important so that making conversation doesn't become a struggle."

"Ah, so you prepared in advance?" Adrian teased.

Edward sighed and offered him a bright smile. "I didn't want them to think I was a rich bastard with a chip on his shoulder."

"Then, mission accomplished. But isn't that what you are?" Adrian teased his partner again.

"Because of how we met? But it worked with you, didn't it?"

"Who are you?" Adrian feigned surprise. "Are you Edward Hastings or a perfect clone?"

"Now, you disappoint me, Adrian." Edward pouted but then laughed again. "I told you I would give you what you wanted. Since you asked so nicely over the phone, and I said yes --"

Adrian didn't let him finish. He pulled Edward into an embrace and kissed him deeply until his lips hurt. His breath was gone, and his heart didn't beat anymore when he looked Edward in the eyes. In the streetlight, they shone, and it appeared that Adrian wasn't the only one a bit too far gone.

They kissed again, and this time it was sweeter. Was that a walk in the moonlight, after all? Followed by a kiss? Adrian didn't want to stop at details. All evening, he had been fascinated by Edward, dreaming of how it would feel to kiss him and hold him, and not because he wanted sex like usual, but because he wanted to feel him close.

Edward stopped him after a while. "As much as the idea of public sex excites me, I don't want to risk a fine or worse for indecent exposure."

"We're just kissing," Adrian said, intent on putting his lover's mind at ease.

"Just kissing?" Edward quirked an eyebrow. "I know you, Adrian. It's never just that."

"Sometimes, I just want to kiss you," Adrian said stubbornly.

Edward brushed the back of his hand against Adrian's cheek, and, for the first time, there was something naked and unfamiliar in his eyes. That wasn't his usual look, of an arrogant man who had everything in the world. Adrian's heart leaped. Could it be that Edward wanted to open up to him?

The look was gone, and Edward's caress turned into teasing as his fingers eased toward Adrian's mouth and painted the lips slowly with the tips. "So, after all, you want the boyfriend experience," he said matter-of-factly.

"You offered," Adrian said, his heart in his throat for no apparent reason.

Edward smirked. "You're too honest to play the game to the end. That's who you are, right, Adrian?"

"Is it a bad thing?"

Edward shook his head slowly. "No. As I saw you doing at the Awakening, you're not one for games, no matter what you say. This part of you draws me in, don't you know?"

Adrian took Edward's hand and kissed the fingers. Then he linked their hands together again and began walking. "I know now," he said with a secretive smile that was mostly for himself.

"If all royalty behaves like Edward, I think I have the wrong picture about that bunch," Shane commented.

"I must admit that I was pretty surprised. After everything Adrian told us, I sincerely expected him to be arrogant and a bit annoying. After all, Adrian digs him big time, and he wouldn't be so taken with someone who would be unpleasant."

"They look good together," Shane pointed out.

Jared nodded. "It's crazy to think about Adrian being the first of us to get a legit boyfriend."

Shane took him by the shoulders. "Why is that?"

"As I told you, Adrian is not the kind to be invested in a relationship, and now that I saw him and Edward side by side, I understand that it's really happening, and it makes me happy. To you, I can admit that I was a little worried. I thought Edward would be too much the cynical bastard he painted himself to be. But the guy I met tonight doesn't appear anywhere close to that."

"Adrian couldn't take his eyes off him."

"Yeah, I know. It was a bit funny, knowing Adrian, who is always so self-assured."

Shane brought him closer. "Are you cold?"

Jared knew he was shivering lightly, but not because of the cold. The evening wasn't that chilly. He chose to lie. "Yes."

Shane pulled him into his arms and then freed him. "Let me give you my jacket."

"Ah, don't worry. And I have my own jacket. I just need to button it up. See?" Jared made a point by pulling his jacket tightly around him.

"Here." Shane seemed to be deaf to his protests.

Jared sighed in contentment as Shane wrapped his jacket around his shoulders. It was warm and smelled of Shane, comforting and reassuring like not many things in the world usually were.

"Would you like to swing by my place, or is it too late for you? Maybe sleep over?" Jared asked.

"I'd like that."

"Great. I have spares of everything. Toothbrush, all that. Even new pajamas."

Shane laughed and rested his arm on Jared's shoulders. "I hope you don't have an extra bed, though. There's no way I'm not sleeping with you if I'm sleeping over."

"I actually have a couch, but, of course, you're welcome to sleep in my bed."

"With you," Shane insisted.

Jared snickered. "Don't you have any work tomorrow?"

"I think I'm young enough to handle a night with you and taking care of my business, as usual, the next day," Shane replied promptly.

“Hmm, and what if my ass cannot handle another session of your special treatment?” Jared teased.

“If that’s the case, then we switch.”

Jared felt his jaw going slack. The words had been said so naturally that they had taken him completely by surprise. Shane hadn’t struck him like the versatile type, and Jared didn’t care too much if guys preferred to top him, as was the usual case.

“Wow,” he whispered. “Damn, Shane. You should give a guy a warning. I should have prepared myself somehow.”

“Like how?” Shane kissed his cheek quickly.

“I don’t know. Mentally or something. And you’re so laid back about it, too. Do you do this often?”

“What? Switch?”

“Yeah.”

“No.”

“No? Aren’t you going to say anything else? Like how many guys have you even allowed to top you?”

“You’d be the first.”

Jared stopped, and Shane had to stop, too. “Please, don’t pull my leg, Shane. This is serious.”

Shane turned to look at him. He appeared serious. “I’m not pulling your leg. It’s the truth.”

“And did you just decide that I should be the one to, um, pop your cherry?” Jared wasn’t sure if that expression was still in style.

“Why shouldn’t you be? You’re my special friend, after all. I don’t want to wait a lifetime to see how it is.”

“Shane, we’re talking about fucking. Like anal fucking. Do you get it?”

“I know what the words mean if that’s what you’re asking. And I’m sure you would treat me right.”

“Yeah, of course. I mean, I wouldn’t hurt you for the world,” Jared said. Somehow, he felt ridiculous standing in the middle of the street and negotiating the details of taking Shane’s virginity like that.

“Yeah. Your dick is a delicious thing, but I don’t think you could hurt me with it if you wanted,” Shane said.

Jared made a face. Now, Shane was making fun of him a little. “Really? Be thankful I’m a good guy, or I would show you hurt,” he joked. “But Shane, seriously, I’d be... the first?”

Shane shrugged. “Yeah. It’s not a big deal. And seeing how much you took from me without ever complaining --”

“Hey, I enjoy it, so there’s no need to apologize.”

“Then, I should enjoy it, too.”

“Everything is so natural and normal with you, isn’t it, Shane?”

Another shrug was the answer. “I don’t see the need for complications.”

“And yet, you decided to be fuck buddies with me.”

“What’s complicated about that?”

Jared sighed. “You’re incorrigible, Shane.”

“Is that a bad thing?”

“No. It’s actually great. Most people just hide their real reasons for doing everything they do in their lives. But you’re not like that.” Shane frowned for a moment. Jared wrapped his arm around his. “Let’s go home.”

He didn’t want to comment on what would happen once there. It was so rare for Jared to be the top that he had real reasons to worry.

Adrian and Edward walked for a while in comfortable silence.

“So, are we really boyfriends now?” Adrian asked.

“It’s not like you to be unsure,” Edward replied. “If that’s what you want.”

“I do. So, will you come and sleep with me tonight? At my place.”

Edward’s hand slid from his. “It wouldn’t be practical. I have work tomorrow.”

“I promise I’ll be good.” Adrian couldn’t believe lying came so natural.

“Ah, really? The moment I say we could be boyfriends, I don’t arouse you anymore?”

“It’s not like that,” Adrian protested. “If you need to sleep through the night, I can manage to keep my hands to myself.”

Edward wrapped his arms around Adrian’s waist as they stopped. “What about me? What if I’m the one who cannot do that?”

Adrian knew that smile. “Stop teasing me. I know, for a fact, how much you cherish self-control.”

“Are you trying to say I’m cold?” Edward quirked an eyebrow.

“I fear that a little, yes.”

“Hmm, so you do know fear. I thought you were the top dog. Do I smell a bit of insecurity, Adrian?”

The way Edward said his name, low and seductive, was enough to turn his skin to goosebumps everywhere. Elated with how the evening had gone, Adrian had lost from sight who he was dealing with. Was he moving too fast? Did he show too much? Was it a bad thing?

Edward knocked gently against his forehead. “Are you worrying again?”

“About little things?” Adrian smirked. “No way. I’m just a bit surprised. I was happy to see you come, but this boyfriend thing --”

“Is it too soon?”

Adrian brushed his hands through Edward’s hair, revealing the tall forehead. Lately, he had begun to notice all sorts of details about his partner slash current boyfriend. And he liked everything about them. “Don’t play me, please.”

Edward let his eyelids drop, and a mysterious smile curled his lips. “Like all we’ve done so far, you mean? Don’t you like it?”

Adrian didn’t know what to say. Edward was still a mystery; even after being together for a while now, he couldn’t know for sure when he was joking and when he wasn’t. That meant that he still had to keep his guard up, but, unlike before, he was in no mood.

“I’m just asking. If you can.”

Edward sighed and placed a small kiss on Adrian’s lips. “This soft part of you is killing me.”

No trace of joking in the low-spoken words this time. So, there was hope. “I like you alive and kicking, though.” Adrian chose to be the one to make light of the situation.

The chuckle that followed was a breeze against his lips. Adrian caught Edward's mouth in another searing kiss. Anyone he had been with before Edward was a fading shadow now; Adrian couldn't see himself in another man's arms, and not just tomorrow, but forever. The thought was scary, but Adrian didn't want to deny the truth it held.

"I wish I could spend the night," Edward said. "But duty calls, and, after all the stories I told you and your friends tonight, I think you know what that means."

"Of course. But we'll work out something, right?"

"Sure," Edward replied. "Now, give me one last kiss to take me through the night."

In what universe did Edward honestly think he was no romantic? Adrian was melting, and he had never been into sappy stuff. What was he going to do with all that pleasant feeling pouring honey in his veins?

"Goodnight, Adrian," Edward said softly. "It's been a pleasure."

Such formal words after a kiss like that. But Adrian couldn't find it in himself to mind.

This is ridiculous.

Jared was well aware that remaining stuck in the bathroom for twenty minutes couldn't sit well with Shane, who was waiting for him, between the sheets. After coming from his shower, smelling heavenly, with a dark desire in his beautiful eyes, Shane had nodded politely when Jared told him that he would wash, too.

What was about Shane that rocked his world so badly? Jared caught his face in his palms and rubbed it vigorously. Now was the time for him to prove himself a man. Did he want Shane that way?

A look down between his legs at his little friend that was staring at him, hard and weeping already, told him that was the truth and nothing but.

How would he go about it? Would he take Shane from the back, on all fours? Jared felt his cock twitch. All right, he needed to stop overthinking; for the sake of his cock and not blowing his load prematurely, he had to do that.

He couldn't stay there forever, no matter how nervous he was. It was, after all, Shane's fault, for wanting to have his cherry popped by some random dude. Well, Jared wasn't entirely a random choice, but still.

In through the nose, out through the mouth. Jared did that a few times, and his blood chilled a tiny fraction. He had to work with what he had. With a small prayer that he wouldn't come too

soon and make a complete fool of himself, Jared walked out of the bathroom, in nothing but his birthday suit.

His throat went dry when he took in Shane lying on his bed. He was on his belly and reading a magazine left by Jared on the nightstand. Maybe he lacked modesty since he hadn't bothered to pull a blanket over his body, but, truth be told, Shane had nothing to be modest about.

Jared bit his bottom lip as his eyes traveled along the muscular back, down to the enticing curve of Shane's butt. Something about it made Jared want to hurry and touch it, no, to squeeze it, no, to slap it, just a little –

“I know it's nothing original, but do you like what you see?” Shane's teasing words pulled him back to reality.

Jared cleared his throat. “Like? I'm absolutely impressed. And I think I've complimented you on your looks before.”

“You think? You're not sure?”

Jared narrowed his eyes. “Are you making fun of me?”

“I wouldn't dream of that. Seeing how you're going to go for my ass with that thick throbbing thing between your legs, I shouldn't, anyway.”

Jared caught his cock and squeezed it to behave. “So, it's adequate now?”

Shane laughed, and that simple sound made Jared shiver a little. “I told you. It's delicious. And I take back anything that might have made you think I was a rude boy whose momma didn't teach him better. Now, come here.”

Jared moved and stopped inches from the bed.

“Wasn't I supposed to be the one to get cold feet? Could it be that you've never topped, Jared?”

Jared shook his head. “I did, but it's just... ah, you're messing with me again.”

Shane reached for him with one hand and caressed Jared's thigh slowly. “I'm not. I really want you to be the one to do it.”

Jared snickered to hide his embarrassment. He couldn't deny the pleasure he felt upon hearing those words. “Then, don't let me keep you waiting.” He climbed on the bed and straddled Shane's ass. His cock rested against the crack like it knew it was there he needed to be. “Let me just get you ready first.”

Jared pushed his hair behind the ears and leaned over to pepper small kisses down Shane's back. As much as his cock was in a world of pain, he needed to make this right.

Shane trembled under his lips.

“Are you all right? Should I go on?”

A long exhale followed. “Please, do.”

“If you have second thoughts --”

“I don’t. It’s just my damned cock that feels like it’s about to burst.”

Jared let out a sigh of relief. “I thought only mine got crazy.”

Shane looked at him over his shoulder. “I know that being the good guy you are, you want to make it good, but can we go at it without too much foreplay? This time? Please?”

Jared didn’t have to be asked twice. “Still, I need to, you know, work on your hole a little.”

“Okay, sure. I mean, you know best.”

Shane knew it, too, because Jared recalled perfectly well what a considerate lover his friend was. But being the one in charge, he needed to assume responsibility and help Shane feel the most pleasure possible.

He moved away and took the lube and a condom. Shane shifted and then raised his ass, exposing himself. Jared gulped and looked away. Still, he couldn’t be so shy, or they would never get around to do anything.

With newfound confidence, he grabbed Shane’s buttocks and pushed them aside to reveal the puckered hole. It seemed so small and vulnerable, and Jared had to close his eyes. If he looked too much, he wouldn’t be able to control himself.

With his eyes shut, he brought his face closer; right now, he was guiding himself by Shane’s body heat, and after a second try, he managed to bury his tongue directly in Shane’s asshole.

“Oh, fuck!”

The sudden exclamation took them both by surprise. Jared stopped.

“No, please go back to it,” Shane added. “Sorry for cursing. I knew it had to be good, but I guess I wasn’t prepared for it for real.”

Jared chuckled. “For a bottom boy, you’re pretty feisty. Just let me do my job. It’s serious stuff I’m dealing with here.” To make his point, he smacked Shane’s ass once. A small hiss was the immediate reaction. “Ah, not so pleasant anymore, huh?”

“Are you kidding me? Anything you do there, it blows my mind.” Despite the words, Shane didn’t sound like he was complaining.

“Let me properly introduce you to the pleasures of rimming.” Jared had to admit that it was something that he didn’t do much, not for lack of wanting, but because the guys he usually got freaky with preferred him to be the bottom. Still, Shane’s reactions were enough to give him courage. After all, he was the top tonight, and the bottom was in his care. Not to mention, the said bottom was Shane, and Jared had to show how grateful he was for how fantastic Shane had made him feel in bed so far.

Shane moaned and grunted as Jared licked his asshole thoroughly, making sure to stick his tongue inside as often as he could and without risking to sprain it, although he wasn’t sure that could happen to a tongue, after all.

Shane’s encouragements, sometimes soft, sometimes loud, made him want to try harder. But, he couldn’t spend the entire night eating Shane’s ass, no matter how rewarding it felt to hear his partner enjoying it.

“Now, let me just make it a little larger,” Jared whispered.

He worked two fingers, well lubed, into Shane’s ass, slowly and teasingly, until his partner took his hand and pushed it forward. “I won’t break, babe,” Shane said. “I really want you.”

Jared ignored him for a bit, as he continued to add more lube and work to make the hole fit to handle his cock, at least as much as possible. Shane was pliant in his hands, but his ass was hard, as expected.

With a determined last push, Jared decided that it was time to get to the real work. He was thankful for his hands being steady enough when he put on the condom and added more lube on his cock, too. If he could help it, Shane would remember having his cherry popped as a pleasant experience.

“Oh,” Jared whispered when his cock managed to enter a bit. He didn’t dare to push yet.

Shane helped him by pulling at his buttocks with both hands. In that position, he looked so submissive that Jared had to take one deep breath. He didn’t usually dream of topping guys, but seeing a strong man like that, offering his body, a new feeling of pride grew in him.

And Shane was right. It was quite a sight to watch his cock going slower inside a beautiful ass like that. It felt nice to relate, too. He knew that Shane must have told the truth.

“Babe, your cock feels great,” Shane said in a strained voice.

“Really? Doesn’t it really feel like something is stabbing you to death or something?”

“It does hurt a little,” Shane admitted in the same breathless manner. “But it’s good, too. Ride me, babe, ride me like you mean it.”

Jared knew he couldn't stop if he wanted. His cock was already on autopilot and now using him to do its bidding. He anchored himself by grabbing Shane's ass and pushed as slowly as he could without losing his mind.

Shane didn't hesitate to help him by pulling hard at his ass to open it and pushing back to meet him half-way. From there, it was easy. Jared couldn't believe he had been so nervous about it all. It came naturally, how his hips moved, or how he angled his thrusts, in synch with Shane's moans of pleasure and verbal encouragement.

He glued his body to Shane's back and kissed one shoulder, a bit sweaty and salty. Now, he was hammering Shane's ass, aware that he was letting himself go too fast. He could blame it on Shane for being too sexy, and also on how he encouraged him to go at it.

Jared needed confirmation and also to prove that he was not some jerk. With one hand, he reached for Shane's cock that throbbed in his hand the moment he touched it. He used the other to caress Shane's chest, pulling at the curly hair and the hard nipples, wanting to make the moments matter for eternity.

"Oh, babe," Shane whispered. "You fuck me so good."

"I'm glad," Jared whispered back, wanting to make it sound like a joke, but failing.

They were both too close to give a damn, as it seemed. Shane went first, with strangled cries and whispered soft curses that sounded like praises, and Jared followed, no longer in control of his body.

When he dropped on his back, breathing hard, his eyes on the ceiling, his mind remained empty for long moments. What a freeing sensation, to focus on the other's pleasure, no longer obsessing about himself. He couldn't have seen that without Shane.

He turned his head, and his eyes met the dark ones. "Thank you," he whispered.

"Shouldn't I say that?" Shane laughed.

"You're the one who got his ass plowed. I don't think so. I'm the guy who got the long side of the stick, right?"

"No, that's me. Your stick is pretty long. I think I still feel it."

Jared slapped Shane's shoulder playfully. "Are you sure I just popped your cherry, or you've been making fun of me all evening?"

"You popped my cherry, all right. Seriously, you have a gift, babe."

"A gift for popping cherries? Wait till the boys hear about it. No, I mean, they won't hear about it. What am I, some jerk?" Jared began babbling.

Shane reached for him and shut him up with a kiss. “I don’t see any jerk when I’m looking at you, Jared. But don’t go around popping cherries.”

Jared caressed Shane’s hair. “Don’t worry about that. By the way, your ass was absolutely fantastic.”

“Thanks.” Shane grinned. “But, seriously, how come you didn’t complain before while I dicked the hell out of you?”

Jared snickered. “Those are secrets only a true bottom knows.”

“Really? So you don’t want to share them with me?”

“I don’t know. You’re a great top, Shane. I don’t want you to lose that. What are we going to do if we both prefer to bottom?”

“Maybe take one of those dildos with two heads?”

Jared’s eyes grew wide. He started laughing. “Okay, now do something to take that image out of my head.”

“Hmm, like what?”

“Like the kind of thing I kept praising you for just earlier.”

“You mean, top you?”

Jared nodded. “Yeah. You’re great at it.”

And not only at that. Jared closed his eyes as Shane kissed him and locked them both in a world of their own.

Mike took a long look in the mirror. Could it even be possible for him to look worse than that? He hadn’t gotten a shut-eye all night, and now the face staring back at him was drawn and pale, like that of a sick person. Not that he didn’t feel sick to the stomach already, which meant that, in a way, he looked like he felt.

There was a possibility Ryan must have thought that Mike’s sudden decision was targeted against him. Which wasn’t true at all! Mike washed his face one more time. It was about Ryan, and about how much Mike wanted him.

Jared had already sent him a long message to encourage him after calling twice. As much as he felt the need to lean on someone, Mike knew that it was his decision and his responsibility to assume it until the end. He would apologize to Jared later.

What was he supposed to wear while handing in his resignation for real? After a short, but intense struggle in front of the closet that offered the same clothes with minimal variations, Mike settled for his usual t-shirt and jeans. As formal as the situation was, as the server guy, he had never been asked to dress according to a code. Wearing the suit he had had on when Ryan had danced with him on the roof seemed like overkill.

Or did it? After a short debate, Mike decided to go for formal, after all. At least, this time, when he finished, he didn't look like an undead person. He took a few steps; the shoes were still too new, and they squeaked a little, making him self-aware. But he couldn't wear a suit with sneakers, or at least not that kind of outfit.

Well, the situation was already uncomfortable. Wearing clothes and shoes that he didn't usually wear was just a small ordeal compared to the rest. How would Ryan react? Would Mike remember all his lines?

With sweaty hands, he took the piece of paper on which he had written all he wanted to say. After obsessing over how many things could go wrong with his phone – on which he could have kept his message much more conveniently – from having the battery die on him to a rare malfunction, he had decided that a traditional medium would be a better choice.

Where should he keep the message? He tried his chest pocket, and then he reconsidered. The left side pocket was much better. No, the right one. Hmm, but what if he needed to do something with his right hand, and it would be awkward to reach for his pocket with the same hand? No, it needed to go into the left pocket.

All right. He was ready. He would print the resignation letter at work, and send it by email, too, just in case.

Everything was in order. Mike took one deep breath. He checked everything one last time. It would be fine; everything would be just fine.

“Is Mr. Armstrong in?” Mike cleared his throat and asked the question again since it looked like the assistant hadn't heard him.

The woman stared over her glasses at him. “He'll be in a meeting in five.”

“I'll be quick,” Mike promised.

The assistant kept her eyes on him as she reached for the phone. For a stupid moment, Mike wondered whether she could see right through him and knew what he was thinking. Not that he had impure thoughts or anything. Nothing of the kind.

“Go in,” the assistant said shortly and returned to her work without sparing him another glance.

Mike shook his arms and legs as he walked, trying hard not to draw more attention. He knocked so timidly that the person behind it couldn't hear that. But, before he could knock a second time, the voice he knew invited him in.

Ryan was at his desk, and his face was all a frown. His eyes were on some documents in a folder in front of him, and he seemed troubled. Mike cleared his throat.

"I hope you're here to tell me that you just thought it would be funny to pull a stunt like that on me." Ryan didn't move his eyes to look at him, something that unnerved Mike to no end.

"Um," he barely managed.

"Apologies accepted. You don't have to make more of it."

There was something tight like a spring in Ryan's voice as he spoke.

Mike felt his head reeling. Of all the possible scenarios he had imagined, this one was completely unexpected. Could Ryan think that he was some kind of joker? The thought poured ice into his veins.

Ryan finally looked at him. He examined him for a short while, and, for a moment, the cold façade dropped. Mike felt his knees going all jelly under that stare. He liked to think that he knew what it was about. Not that he was a presumptuous kind of guy. Not at all.

"Mike?" Ryan quirked an eyebrow. "You're forgiven." His voice became warm. "I mean it."

"No." Mike couldn't believe that was him saying that word.

Ryan's look turned quizzical. "Do you have anything else you want to say to me?"

Damned neurons. His mind was all blank. Mike walked to the desk and placed his resignation letter on the desk. "I quit," he said in a whisper.

Great. Where the hell was that speech? Mike began searching his pockets frantically. As he did that, he must have missed something, because when Ryan leaned over the desk to bring their eyes to the same level, he took Mike entirely by surprise.

He yelped and jumped back.

"Mike, please, I don't have time for jokes," Ryan said in a steady, but menacing voice.

Well, it wasn't menacing-menacing, but it sure looked like Ryan was unhappy about how Mike had chosen to hand in his resignation.

Oh, the paper was there. Mike took it out of his left pocket and stared at it. What the hell? That wasn't the message he had prepared! He was staring at a regular, white piece of paper on which nothing was written.

"I'm terribly disappointed," Ryan began.

"No." Mike put one hand up. "I had it all right here," he moaned.

"Can I ask you what could have made you so unhappy to take this decision?" Ryan asked, and his voice was pained now.

"You," Mike replied quickly. He couldn't stand there, saying and doing nothing. He would have to make do without the message he had so carefully crafted.

"I made you unhappy?" Ryan asked, measuring his words slowly.

"No! I mean, yes! No," Mike bit his lips. "I mean, I quit --"

"Because of me." Ryan sighed and ran one hand over his face. "Look, Mike, what happened was --"

"Everything to me," Mike said.

Ryan stopped and looked intently at him. "Everything?"

"So I have to quit."

"But I need you here," Ryan said softly. "We'd be lost without you."

We, as in the company. Mike searched his brain for what Jared had told him the day before. "It's about me and what I want."

Ryan let his shoulders drop. "Of course, of course. I will make sure that you will take some great recommendations with you."

"Thank you. I mean, I still have stuff to say." Mike hated his voice when it went all weird and squealy.

Ryan took the folder from the desk and began walking toward the door, choosing the side that took him as far apart from Mike as possible.

Mike couldn't say what must have possessed him right that moment because courage he didn't have urged him to grab Ryan by the forearm when he came close. And not only that. That moment had to go down in history as the second of Mike Cavanaugh's life when he had finally grown a pair.

He grabbed Ryan by the back of his neck and kissed him. The sound of the folder dropping and of papers rustling gently just made it perfect. Mike didn't use his tongue or anything but pressed his lips on Ryan's to make a point.

He released him shortly. "I quit because I love you."

All right. That wasn't part of the message. Surely it wasn't. But it was out of the bag, and Mike felt it was right, even if Ryan was probably the most surprised. He had never thought, not even in his head, that he loved Ryan, not just that he felt attracted to him and all that entailed. But it had to be true because Mike would never quit his job for a man he didn't love. It was exactly like his mother had told him it would be; he just knew that it was right, damned be the consequences.

Ryan was in shock. The assistant knocked on the door and stuck her head inside the room. "Mr. Armstrong, I don't want to interrupt, but --"

Mike grabbed the folder and the papers from the floor and handed them to Ryan. "Here, Mr. Armstrong. Go knock them up; I mean, out. Knock out, that is what I mean," he babbled.

Some heroes only had their moments, it seemed. Mike's had run out, and now he was back to being his usual messy self. But, at least, he had driven home a point.

"Sure," Ryan murmured.

"Have a great day."

"You'll still be around for the two weeks' notice, right?" Ryan asked quickly as he tried to put the papers in his folder in order.

"Yes. I will help with whatever I can," Mike promised.

"Mr. Armstrong," the assistant interrupted them.

"Then, I will see you around," Ryan said stiffly.

For a moment, Mike felt the need to laugh. It wasn't like Ryan to lose his composure, but it seemed that, right now, he wasn't entirely in control of himself. That was a good sign, right?

Mike murmured his goodbyes and walked out. Behind him, the assistant began talking quickly to Ryan. He couldn't believe he had done it. He had really done it.

"So, how was it?" Jared sounded cheerful and a bit impatient. "What did Ryan say?"

“Not much. He had to rush to a meeting, but I did it, J, I did it!” Mike tried to rein in his excitement. He was alone in his server room, but still, just in case, he didn’t want anyone to hear him, other than Jared. “I told him that I loved him,” he added quickly.

“What?” Jared was surprised. “You love him? I mean, I know that you’re crazy about him... Wait. Did you forget the message you wrote at home?”

“Yeah,” Mike admitted, his voice growing meek. “I just didn’t think. I mean, I couldn’t. But I don’t regret it. I love him. Are you mad at me?”

Jared laughed softly. “How could I be mad at you? Now, stop killing me. I really need to know how Ryan reacted to your sudden confession.”

“I think he was lost for words. I mean, he couldn’t say anything because I was kissing him --”

“What?!”

Mike had to take the phone away from his ear. “Yeah,” he said and snickered. “I told you. I didn’t stop and think.”

“Well, look who grew up overnight. I’m seriously glad for you, Mike.”

Someone knocked on the door, and Mike felt sudden apprehension. “There’s someone at the door, J. Talk to you later?”

“Sure. Kisses.”

“Kisses back.” Mike turned off his phone and hurried to get the door.

Ryan was there, his eyes burning, his face determined. Mike only managed a gasp as he was grabbed, pushed inside, and kissed. The sound of the door closing shut down his sanity, too.

Chapter Twenty-One – A Little Heat

There was heat everywhere, spreading from the point where their lips met, tendrils of lava stretching to the tiniest capillary in his body. Mike could tell his eyelids fluttered as Ryan kept him close and kissed him like he had dreamed of for so long. But he wouldn't keep his eyes closed, not now when it mattered that he was aware and fully conscious of what was happening to him. It mattered not only for the present but for the future, too.

Ryan kept Mike's head in his hands as their lips parted and looked into his eyes. He was searching for something on Mike's face, his eyebrows furrowed, but his lips quirked in the shadow of a smile. Mike blushed under that intense stare.

"Did you mean it?" Ryan asked softly as his thumbs moved to caress Mike's cheeks.

Mike bit his bottom lip. His blushing intensified. "Every word," he replied somewhat stubbornly. It was hard to sustain Ryan's gaze when he looked at him like that. The most unnerving thing was that Ryan was silent. "Why aren't you saying anything?"

"Because I'm speechless."

"Oh, good." Mike breathed out. "It would have been bad if you had hated me or something."

Ryan laughed and gave Mike another kiss, this time short and less heated, but no less sweet. "How could I hate you after hearing such a confession?"

"I don't know what to say to that," Mike admitted. "Oh, it was a rhetorical question, right?"

Ryan didn't reply. Instead, he brushed his lips against Mike's mouth, teasing it. They were still at work, Mike realized and withdrew.

Ryan rested his forehead against his and sighed. "We shouldn't be doing this here, right?"

"I'm still your employee, and you're still my boss," Mike pointed out the obvious. "I can't believe you came here and, um," he hesitated for a moment, "kissed me like this." The last words, he said quickly, afraid of their meaning and weight. "You're risking a lot, right?" He looked down, embarrassed about having triggered that reaction in Ryan with his reckless behavior.

Ryan kept him close, preventing him from stepping away. "For you, I think I can stand a little heat."

Mike wasn't sure those words were the best to describe the fire he could clearly feel as Ryan embraced him, his strong arms all around him. Still, as much as Ryan seemed bent on engaging in some reckless behavior, too, Mike couldn't allow it. He placed both hands on Ryan's chest. "Someone could walk in."

“That’s true,” Ryan admitted. “I should keep my hands off you.” As he said that, he pulled Mike closer. “If only I could figure out how to do that.”

Mike responded with a small, nervous laugh. It was a good thing Ryan held him because he wasn’t entirely sure he would be able to stand on his feet otherwise.

Ryan kissed the crown of his head. “I thought my morning was the pits until you said those three little words.”

“Why was your morning bad?”

“Company stuff. I won’t talk about that now. There are more important things on my mind.”

Mike didn’t dare to ask what things because he guessed, and also because he didn’t hope to hear them, loud and clear, not now when his heart was full and almost on the point of bursting through his chest.

“These two weeks will be the longest in my entire life,” Ryan said.

“I guess,” Mike realized as he caught the meaning of what Ryan hinted at.

“You guess?” Ryan chuckled. “You’re a bit mischievous, aren’t you, Micah?”

Mike shuddered. The way Ryan had his name like that like it was an endearing nickname, not the actual official one on his ID, made his body tremble. There was an intimacy in it, of the kind he had known little if he didn’t count his parents. His friends never called him that, and Mike liked it that it was special, despite feeling a little guilty.

Ryan caressed his jawline slowly. “You couldn’t wait to tell me that.” It wasn’t a question, although there was a bit of insecurity in how he said it.

Mike placed his hands on Ryan’s wrists and touched the skin above the shirt cuffs. It felt like such a small thing, but right now, the knowledge that Ryan was no longer unattainable filled his heart with so much happiness that slight dizziness overcame him. “I couldn’t.”

Ryan kissed his forehead this time. “I’m glad. I guess I should go back to work.”

“Yes. Me, too. Are you mad at me? A little? I know you said that you needed me here.”

“I couldn’t be. I’m not thrilled that I’m losing a hard worker and an excellent employee, but how could I be mad? What I’m getting in return is so much better.”

“Like what?” Mike mumbled. It was clear that all his courage had drained considerably. “What are you getting?”

“The cutest boyfriend I could ever have,” Ryan said.

Mike cuddled against Ryan's chest. "I'm cute?"

"Yes. Don't tell me you don't know it."

"I don't."

"Then, here you go. You are the cutest guy I've ever met."

"Do you mean it?" Mike felt a bit bold as he straightened up and looked at Ryan, his head thrown back.

"Are you teasing me now?" Ryan looked like he wanted to add something to that, but his phone began to ring. "I have to go," he said, sounding as regretful as Mike felt. "Keep in touch?"

"I'll call you tonight," Mike announced in a loud voice. Was that what one supposed to tell his boyfriend of only several hours or so? That, if he counted from the moment he had confessed. Was that how Ryan counted, too? Wait, were they even boyfriends?

Ryan grimaced as he looked at his phone, but didn't answer, choosing to turn it off for the time being. "Is there something wrong?" he asked.

Mike breathed one time, hard. "Are we boyfriends now?"

Ryan's eyes lit up. "I guess we are. Secret boyfriends, even, until your two weeks' notice ends."

"Secret boyfriends," Mike said reverently and sighed. "But no fooling around, right?"

"I suppose we could fool around a bit," Ryan said and seemed to ponder for a bit. "What do you have in mind?"

Mike couldn't say there was anything on his mind right now. There was just too much to process. "Nothing," he admitted regretfully.

Ryan caressed his head. "Then, we'll think of something, right?"

Mike nodded. Ryan kissed him one more time and walked away, keeping his hand until they had to let go. Mike dropped on his chair, feeling emotionally exhausted, but too happy to care.

Adrian had had his head in the clouds for most of the day. If the people he worked with had noticed, they chose not to say a word, and he was thankful for having such tactful colleagues. His assistant, Rachel, however, seemed to find way too many things to do around him, and, in the end, he had to ask. "Rachel, what are you doing?"

His assistant smiled brightly at him. "I just thought you needed the help." She had a thick stack of folders in her arms.

“Not that badly. Why are you sniffing around me?”

“You are in love,” Rachel said each word as she bounced the folder stack in her arms as if she cradled a baby.

Adrian threw her an irritated look. “Where do you get these ideas?”

“Hmm,” Rachel pondered, “dreamy eyes, you forgot to go to lunch, you’re staring at the clock like a kid who barely waits for school to be out --”

“Maybe I just want to go home because I didn’t catch any sleep last night,” Adrian explained.

Rachel snorted. “Right. Could it be that you didn’t sleep because you were busy banging Edward?”

Adrian sighed. If only. He wouldn’t be such a mess right now, and it wasn’t like him to be a mess because that wasn’t him. Somehow, he had let his guard down, quite happily, and now it was hard as hell to crawl back behind the armor he called his former self. He didn’t fit inside it anymore.

“C’mon, you can tell me,” Rachel added and leaned forward, the folders in her arms balancing dangerously. “Did you two get to the next level?”

Adrian stared at her, puzzled. “What next level? Is this one of your kinky ideas about what guys do when they’re together?”

Rachel made a long face. “Pull your mind out of the gutter, boss. What I mean is meeting the parents.”

“Meeting the parents?” Adrian felt dumb, repeating his assistant’s words. He shook his head. Clearly, he wasn’t himself today. “No, and I don’t see how that’s relevant.”

“Ah,” Rachel said and threw Adrian an all-knowing look. “So, you’re still in that ‘all heat, no talking’ phase?”

“No talking? You know what, Rachel? Just get out of here. I mean, take the rest of the day off, or whatever. Okay?”

Rachel pointed at the clock on the wall with a solemn finger. “Geez, boss. Thank you for the ten-minute offer.”

Adrian was surprised. No matter how often he had stared at the digital keeper of time on the opposite wall from his desk, it had barely registered with him. He needed his wits about himself if he wanted to truly take Edward and their relationship to the next level. He stood up.

“You’re leaving?” Rachel sounded surprised, and for all the right reasons. “You never leave before anyone else.”

“I’m counting on you not to tell on me,” Adrian said and began walking toward the door.

Rachel drew a deep sigh as he passed by her. “It must be love.”

“Shut up,” Adrian replied, but without bite.

“Don’t forget about me when you send the wedding invitations,” Rachel called after him as he walked out.

Adrian was in no mood to analyze his feelings, but Rachel’s blunt and well-aimed intervention had given him something to think about. All macho as he felt and pretended, he didn’t need words like those to mess with his head. There was something between Edward and him, and it had grown stronger over the last weeks, but it was in no one’s interest to jump to conclusions.

He called Edward as he climbed in a taxi. There was no clear explanation for feeling as giddy as he did.

“You’re two minutes early,” Edward’s welcome words were.

“I just left work, and I was wondering if you were up to get together tonight.”

“Like boyfriends?” Edward’s voice dropped, leaving room for interpretation. There was something conspiratorial in how he spoke.

“Exactly like that.”

“Hmm,” Edward teased, “and do you have any idea what outstanding obligations are involved with that status of our relationship? After all, you haven’t had a boyfriend in a while, Adrian.”

“Neither have you,” Adrian pointed out.

“Are you trying to tell me that I’m inexperienced?” It sounded like Edward felt affronted by the mere idea.

“In this case, yes,” Adrian replied, full of confidence.

“You’re wrong,” Edward said.

Some of the giddiness from earlier dissipated in an instant. “What do you mean?” Adrian could feel a frown forming. “When was the last time you had a boyfriend?”

“Last year,” Edward said airily. “You’re not the first to ask for the boyfriend experience.”

Adrian worked his jaw. Were they still playing, then? He had thought that was over. “So, how did you two break up?”

“In the most natural way. Once arrived at that point, the attraction faded. It was an amicable breakup if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Ah, I see. You already have the end written in your pocket, then?” Adrian said as he let his head back. He didn’t want his bitterness to show, but there was nothing else to do.

“You’re jumping to conclusions, Adrian. What are you afraid of so much? Be honest, and you’ll get an honest answer in return.”

Like that would happen. Adrian was no longer riding on the tail of some dream, and he felt stupid about it, too. Something cold grew in the middle of his chest. Edward would give him only what he wanted, and nothing else. But Adrian, he was no schmuck to be played like that.

“Afraid?” He chuckled. “I’m never afraid.”

“Big words. I am a tad disappointed.”

“Oh, you’re disappointed?” Adrian knew his voice was harsh and cutting, but he didn’t want to control it.

To his surprise, Edward laughed. “A second fight. And also over the phone. Is this how you prefer?”

Fight, not conflict. Adrian felt his anger fading a little. “You’re good at this, Edward. Too good.”

A sigh was the answer. Words followed, and they surprised Adrian once more. “Not as good as you.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere,” Adrian said.

“Really?” Edward perked up. “Do you still want to meet tonight? As boyfriends? Or what do you have in mind? What do you prefer?”

Adrian adjusted his position and crossed his legs. His body throbbed only thinking of Edward. There was still plenty of satisfaction to be had. “Come tonight by my place. But don’t expect me to be a loving boyfriend.”

“Hmm, what sort of boyfriend should I expect you to be, then?” Edward purred, sending a ticklish sensation through Adrian’s ear as if he was there in flesh and blood.

A jealous one. Like Adrian would tell the truth. “Sometimes, Edward, I think you act as your true self only when you’re brought to heel.”

Edward's laughter was sexy and uninhibited. Adrian winced. First order of things, he needed to take a shower. Cold.

"I'll keep you to that."

Adrian spent a lot of time in the mirror, adjusting his clothes, fixing his tie, and pulling at the cuffs. He would take Edward out and show him what the boyfriend experience really meant. If it was over, if that was all Edward wanted, Adrian planned to go out with a bang. Also, he had decided, a while ago, that he would fight tooth and nail for that man to be his. Yet, he wasn't unreasonable. If, after everything, Edward still told him goodbye, Adrian would move on, confident, as always, in who he was.

Regrets notwithstanding, Adrian was prepared. He threw another look in the mirror and ran one hand through his hair. Sure, he could project confidence all he wanted, so why were his eyes lying?

The doorbell let him know that his lover was there. Not one moment left to worry. It was showtime.

"Wow, Adrian, you look amazing," Edward praised him on his looks the moment he was invited in. "What's the occasion?"

"We're going out," Adrian said curtly. "My treat. I hope you're up for dinner."

Edward shrugged. "Of course. But I should pick the place and the tab. After all, I'm the one supposed to spoil you and not the other way around."

"Being boyfriends implies that I'm no plaything. You took me to your home, a party, and your yacht. It's my turn to do something for you."

"All right, Adrian. Point taken," Edward admitted and leaned forward while watching Adrian intently. "I feel like you're playing for something."

"Of course. Isn't it all just a game?" Adrian didn't waver under that intense stare. "I plan to win."

Edward quirked an eyebrow. Adrian felt a smile of triumph creeping up his lips. Without hesitating, he took Edward in his arms, stared into his eyes for just one moment, and kissed him hard. To his contentment, there was no resistance, and soon Edward was the one to deepen the kiss and make it heated. Adrian buried one hand into the chestnut mane, brushed to perfection, and bit hard on his lover's lips. Then he released him.

"We should go. I already made the reservation."

Edward's eyes were in a daze, and his tie was a tiny bit crooked. Adrian fixed it with one hand and moved his fingers through Edward's hair with the other. "There. You were looking a bit flushed."

A small chuckle followed him as he walked out, holding Edward by the hand. He couldn't feel smugger about himself if he wanted.

"It is a nice place," Edward commented, as they took place at their table. "So, you love Italian food?"

"Who doesn't?" Adrian offered a smirk.

"Right. Your family name is Rossi. Half Italian?"

Adrian nodded. "My father's side. My mom used to be an English teacher, and believe it or not, that was how they met."

"Your father was your mother's student? I hope it wasn't an illicit affair."

Adrian laughed. "No. She offered private lessons, and my father, being new here, needed to brush up on his English. According to him, it was love at first sight. According to her, she acted hard to get enough to have his attention. Apparently, I am one of the outcomes of that stubbornness."

"Which you inherited from your father, by the looks of it," Edward pointed out.

"I know it's nothing fancy compared to what you might be used to, but it's my choice, and I know you'll love it."

"Adrian," Edward said, "you worry about the little things too much. I was hoping you would be clever, too, not just handsome."

"I have little idea of what you're talking about, but I'm not the insecure type. Time will tell us who outsmarted who."

The food was brought to the table, so they fell silent for a moment.

"Hmm, it smells delicious. I can tell it's pasta," Edward said as he stared at his plate, "but far from me to make a lame attempt to guess its name."

"Strangozzi," Adrian supplied the answer. "With black truffle."

“So it also sounds yummy. Now the only thing that’s left is to see if the dish lives up to the promise held by its name.” Edward moved his hands delicately as he fixed himself the perfect bite. Adrian followed his every move until a small moan of satisfaction escaped his lover’s lips.

“It is everything and more,” Edward said. “Is there a secret reason why you chose this dish?”

“You haven’t guessed it? And I thought it would be a little too on the nose. Consider it a metaphor for us. I’m the mundane pasta, and you are --”

“The truffle,” Edward completed the sentence. “Well, I hope you do realize that you’ve just compared me to a parasite.”

“Hey, truffles are not exactly that. They actually help the roots go deeper,” Adrian explained.

Edward smiled. “I was just teasing you. It is a great dish, and the restaurant has a private atmosphere which I like. It looks like the kind of place where people propose.”

Adrian made his right hand into a fist on the table. To give it something to do, he grabbed his glass. “Far from me to steal your freedom. To the boyfriend experience.”

Edward clinked his glass against his. “I can drink to that. So far, it looks better than expected.”

“I told you a little about my parents. What about yours?” Adrian asked.

“What do you want to know?”

“What do they do? I mean, I gather that they’re loaded, but --”

“I see. If I have to define my bloodline, I’d say that it’s a mixture of industrialists, lawyers, and doctors, like me. My father is - I think the common term would be an oil tycoon, while my mother is a lawyer.”

“So, normally, you became a doctor.”

Edward chuckled. “Someone had to keep the proper percentage belonging to each category. I love my work. There had been, up until a point, various degrees of disappointment over not choosing something more productive, moneywise, but, in the end, I think they understood.”

“They didn’t want you to be a doctor?” Adrian asked, a tad surprised.

“No, the profession as a wide category was approved. But they hoped I would choose to be a neurosurgeon or something more cutting edge, so to speak.”

“I can only imagine how those fights in the family must have been like. Very polite, I assume.”

“Very,” Edward admitted. “How about you? Were your parents happy to see you working in advertising? Or did they have something else in mind for you?”

“My parents are really chill. My dad has been in the construction field all his life and thought it better to leave my mom in charge of my education. She cultivated in me a love for words from a young age. So, they were happy when I told them I got a good job. But I think that even if I taught in a public school, like my mom, they would have still been happy for me.”

“Your family sounds great.”

There was a small pause as they appeared to ponder about their families and their importance in who they were today. “What about coming out to your folks?” Adrian breached the silence with an important question.

“Ah,” Edward replied, and his eyes wandered off. “That was another very polite conflict.”

“Hmm, so they’re not happy about having a gay son?”

“Yes, you could say that.”

“At least, they didn’t disinherit you. I suppose your income doesn’t pay for that big ass mansion you live in.” Adrian just wanted to make the situation a little light. As someone who hadn’t been forced to go through the ordeal of having unaccepting parents, he didn’t want to make Edward feel sad about his own situation.

“Yes, you are correct. And I am thankful for the lavish lifestyle, don’t get me wrong. And for everything they’ve been doing for me.”

“I sense a ‘but’. Why?”

Edward sighed and studied his glass for a while. “They aren’t happy with having the Hastings line stop with me.”

“You can have kids. It’s not like your swimmers aren’t working, right?”

“Right,” Edward admitted. “But the idea of an unconventional family doesn’t bode well with my parents. Also, I have no intention to marry.”

“A woman, you mean,” Adrian let the words fly out of his mouth.

“Anyone,” Edward corrected him. “A sham of a marriage doesn’t interest me. As for marrying a man, I just don’t see myself taking that step.”

“Because it would shake your family and their values?”

“Because I don’t believe in marriage, just as I don’t believe in love.”

In Adrian’s ears, that sounded like a well-rehearsed sentence, and nothing else.

“What about you?” Edward asked.

“I’m too young for that,” Adrian replied. “I mean, maybe one day, I don’t know. My parents surely want me to get married, although they know enough about me not to press it. Of course, not all the details, but I once heard my dad calling me a Casanova, only for my mom to correct him by telling him that Casanova was straight. Apparently, that gave my dad pause for a little while.”

“Casanova. I wonder if you’d ever be inclined to write your memoirs, where I would be included.” Edward stared at Adrian, his eyes at half must, in a seductive stare.

“You would be on the cover,” Adrian replied promptly.

“Color me flattered.”

“You should be,” Adrian said with confidence. “You’re in the lead.”

“For now.”

Forever.

“Yes, I guess that you could say that.”

“Then, I should make sure that I keep things interesting enough. I wouldn’t want to lose my place on that cover too easily.”

“Should I have the check, then?” Adrian asked with a hint of a smile.

“The food was enthralling, but I’m in the mood for something else now. I hope I haven’t gotten my hopes high for nothing.”

Adrian could read the challenge in those green eyes, shining with mischief now. So far, he was in the lead. And Edward had read the situation right; it was supposed to be a romantic date.

The lights flicked, revealing the sofa and the rest of the furniture in the living room. For one moment, Adrian took everything in with critical eyes. It was just a fuckpad, and Edward had been there, but right now, there was a slight dissatisfaction coming through, and Adrian didn’t know what to do with it. Tonight, he was all about impressing his lover, and his living arrangements couldn’t cut it in that race. Maybe it was the right time to ask for a promotion.

Edward ran one hand along his jawline, interrupting his train of thought. “What’s next, boyfriend?” he teased.

Adrian closed the door behind him and pushed Edward gently toward the sofa. “Just stay here.”

“Should I make myself comfortable?” Edward smirked and pulled at his tie.

Adrian quirked an eyebrow. "Someone wants it badly."

"Hmm, I wonder what could have given me away," Edward purred. He discarded his suit jacket, too.

Adrian licked his lips. Once more, Edward took the lead, and as fun as that was, tonight, Adrian wanted to be the one in control. "Don't undress anymore."

With that, he went to the bedroom, where he had that memento from a while ago, stashed somewhere no one could find it. Now, it was the right time to take it out to play again.

"Ah," Edward said, and his eyes glinted at the sight of the leash and collar, dangling from Adrian's hand. "I brought that for you."

"To use as I please," Adrian added. "Also, the leash is new." Sort of. He had played with the idea before and had purchased the leash on a whim, although he had only thought of Edward as he had done so.

He made no artful display of wrapping the collar around Edward's neck. Again, there was no resistance, and that filled his mind and heart both with trepidation and anticipation. Edward looked forward to being collared, but for what end and how long? Adrian planned on finding out everything and have fun in the process as they moved along.

"So, you have me on a leash." Edward bit his bottom lip and stared up at Adrian, eyeing the leash wrapped around his hand.

Adrian moved to caress Edward's cheek slowly with the back of his hand. "I do have you."

Edward's eyes flashed at him. Everything about him was sex; at least, that was what Adrian saw when he looked at his lover. No, tonight, Edward was his boyfriend, so the game was supposed to have no losers. He leaned forward and pressed a small kiss on Edward's lips. As much as Edward tried to catch his mouth into a deeper kiss, Adrian didn't want to hurry.

He straightened up and brushed his thumb across Edward's bottom lip. "I don't usually play this kind of game. I mean, I like to think myself as sexually adventurous, but there is something about this thing, isn't it?" His voice was low and deep, even to his ears.

"You've made your point, Adrian. I think we both know that you can be a more than satisfying master."

"It's not about making a point, it's about playing, right?"

"Yes."

At least, Edward didn't deny anything.

“This game,” Adrian said softly, “I’ll make sure to win it for you, okay?”

There was no way of telling what Edward’s eyes were saying now, but, whatever that was, it had to be absolute. Edward adjusted his position and placed his hands on Adrian’s thighs. “Is this all right, master?” he asked playfully.

Adrian nodded. He said nothing as Edward opened his fly and took out his cock. There was just one moment they shared as their eyes met, and then new heat engulfed him. He could no longer see the beautiful green eyes and the story they had to tell.

Edward was good at sucking cock, but Adrian no longer cared about competences in the realm of sex. What mattered was to have that man, that particular man, at his feet, not because of some weird game of humiliation, but because they both knew that it was just a game that they agreed to and loved to act on just for the sake of pleasure.

He hissed as Edward took him deep, and soft, strangled moans began to accompany his moves. Adrian could feel his hair standing on end from that intense sensation, as Edward used everything he had to make him crazy. He caressed Edward’s head, enjoying the motion as he moved, and allowed him to have his first course of the kind.

“You’re the best,” Adrian whispered as he came in Edward’s mouth.

He shuddered when Edward retreated, making sure to clean up every trace of cum. When he looked up, Adrian offered a grateful smile.

“Let’s go.” He motioned with the leash, and Edward followed him.

In the bedroom, Adrian made a show of undressing Edward and kissing every inch of his skin.

Edward shivered under the touch of Adrian’s lips. “How is this about dominating me and making me yours?”

Adrian smirked and shut his boyfriend up with a short kiss. “You don’t know the first thing about possession, Mr. Hastings.”

“Oh, we’re being formal. Why?” Edward gasped as Adrian bit the inside of his thigh.

“Because everything tonight is about making it official.”

Edward’s blurred eyes turned on Adrian. “Official?”

“Yes. I’m not just saying, Edward. I want to win this game for you.”

If Edward had other questions, he chose to remain silent for the moment. Instead, he appeared to surrender to the pleasure, as Adrian increased the pressure of his kisses, the harshness of his bites, and the intensity of everything he wanted to express through all his actions.

Adrian pushed Edward on his back and straddled him.

“You appear to be awfully overdressed for the occasion, Mr. Rossi,” Edward teased him as he let his eyes travel over Adrian’s body.

“Then it’s up to you to make sure I’m not,” Adrian said with a smirk.

There was no need for any encouragement; Edward moved as much as he could being straddled like that and began to unbutton Adrian’s shirt and pushed down his suit jacket. As his hands finally found naked skin, they started to touch everywhere, finding, by the looks of it, great satisfaction in sinking into the dark curly chest hair. “I love it so much that you let your hair grow, as I asked you.”

“Anything you want, I’ll give it to you. I mean it.” Adrian allowed Edward to do what he wanted for the moment.

“You really are bent on seducing me, aren’t you?”

“Do I need a sign to say it more clearly?”

Edward shook his head. “I seriously want to get into your pants. Do you think you can indulge me?”

“Say please,” Adrian said.

“Please, Adrian, I want you. All of you.” The words were whispered, but they didn’t matter. The truth was in Edward’s eyes, louder than them.

Adrian moved and stood by the bed. He allowed Edward to undress him until he was completely naked, too. “So, is this what you need?” He avoided using the word ‘want’ on purpose.

“Come here,” Edward ordered.

It was time again to be on top of the situation. Adrian grabbed the leash and tugged it to make his intention known. Edward groaned theatrically.

Adrian didn’t allow him to complain and climbed on the bed, pushing Edward on his back again. As much as he wanted to be firm, he found himself kissing Edward so sweetly that he couldn’t believe himself capable of doing it like that. But, after all, he had not quite had a boyfriend in his life, and kisses like that had to be for boyfriends and no one else. He could live with that theory.

Edward caught him between his thighs and linked his feet behind Adrian. He was, without recourse, claimed, and he loved every minute of it.

“Just a bit.” Adrian searched for the thing he had left on the nightstand and moved quickly to make sure that he wouldn’t hurt his boyfriend in the heat of passion.

Edward made it all difficult by trying to keep Adrian as close as possible, but no one complained. When Adrian pushed inside, there was a small satisfied, although slightly pained gasp from Edward. He was about to scold Edward for being too impatient, but his mouth was claimed, just like the rest of his body, and soon there was no possibility for him to protest.

There was no possible way to punish Edward even if he wanted. He was a step ahead, and Adrian still felt that he had to give chase. It was all right; tonight was the night when everything had to come to light, and sex was a good way to prove it, just like their dinner conversation.

Edward moved and squirmed and cursed softly as Adrian moved inside him. They were one, and they fit so well that Adrian couldn't believe that there had been people before, people he had desired, even if only fleetingly.

One last push and he was done, Edward's shudders and shouts letting him know that he had reached his climax, too; there were no regrets since Adrian counted on his stamina to offer his lover all he wanted, over and over again. Edward held him close even as his cock turned soft and slipped out.

"Edward," Adrian whispered, "I love you."

Edward turned rigid in his arms, and his hand slid away from Adrian's shoulders. "You know well what I think of love, Adrian."

Adrian used his entire body to keep Edward down. He wouldn't allow him to escape, not now. "I know. And, you know what? I don't care."

Edward tsked and moved his head away, probably to avoid Adrian's eyes. "You should. I cannot reply in kind. Plus, this is still part of the game, isn't it?"

"Only because you drew the rules. It's real for me," Adrian said stubbornly.

Edward finally looked at him. "I don't understand you."

"What's to understand? I love you." Once he had said it the first time, there was no stopping it. Adrian hadn't planned for it; but the words had come naturally to him, and they had to be said. Everyone was right, Jared, Mike, Rachel. He loved Edward, and he didn't plan to hide it.

Edward chuckled, but his laughter died as Adrian didn't follow him. "You can't be serious."

"As serious as a heart attack."

"Using medical terms won't earn you extra points," Edward warned. "And you're heavy."

"I think you're all right as you are, under me," Adrian said flatly. "Hear me out, and then you're free to do whatever the heck you want."

Edward sighed. "You're being stubborn for no reason. What did you expect? For me to tell you the words back, just like in cheesy movies?"

"I didn't expect anything. This is one thing I didn't plan," Adrian admitted.

"If you didn't plan it, and it's not part of the game, then I pity you."

Adrian offered a cruel smile. "Pity me? Why? Because you think you're incapable of love? Who served you this big fat lie?"

Edward set his lips in a flat line. "Don't play the shrink with me, Adrian. I don't find it cute."

"I know you," Adrian insisted. His confidence was shaking, but he paid it no attention. He had promised himself that he would go all out, and that was what he was doing right now.

"You know me?" The words were said in contempt. "I knew it was a bad idea to meet with you tonight. Yesterday, that was my goodbye, but you were too dense to get it."

"Goodbye?" Adrian said the word slowly.

"What did I tell you, Adrian?" Edward shivered, now probably cold after their hot session. "The moment you want a relationship, it's over."

Adrian moved and threw a blanket at Edward. "You're a fucking coward."

His insult was met with silence. He sat on the edge of the bed, his back at Edward.

"You knew my terms. Why would you think yourself in love with me?" Edward insisted.

"I don't know. You're handsome, passionate, amazing in bed --"

"Rich."

Adrian turned and looked at Edward. "I don't give a fuck about your bank account, asshole."

Edward said nothing for a moment. "I think you're lying to me, Adrian. If it's love, as you say, what stops you from letting me top you?"

Adrian blinked a few times. That was an unexpected turn. "Is that your final proof of love? Putting your cock inside my ass?"

Edward shrugged. "You're a bit too full of yourself, Adrian."

"And you feel the need to say my name all the time so that you don't forget it or something," Adrian spat back.

That appeared to surprise Edward. "It happens that I like your name."

“Geez, thanks. Any other things you like about me, or did you choose me based on my name only?”

“Stop deflecting,” Edward warned. “We were talking about how you didn’t care about letting me top you. It’s a clear sign that all this time, you’ve only cared about winning. Saying that you love me is simply an insult.”

Adrian worked his jaw. Edward stood and began dressing up.

“Would it make a difference?” Adrian asked. “If I let you?”

“I guess we’ll never know,” Edward replied.

Something hit Adrian’s thigh. He picked the collar and looked at it.

“Feel free to throw it away. I don’t need it.”

Adrian buried his face in his hands, trying hard to ignore the sound of the front door closing after Edward. What exactly did he win? And what had the game been all about, after all? And why, if he had thought it was all over, Edward had still answered his call and met him tonight?

Mike took off his headphones and listened. All evening, he played video games, afraid of thinking too much of what had happened earlier with Ryan. His phone rang, and he jumped.

“What am I doing? It’s just the phone.” He took it and paused as he saw the caller ID. “Ryan?” he said. Damn, his voice squeaked again. He cleared his throat. “Ryan. Of course. Unless it’s not Ryan?”

The familiar laugh came through. “It’s Ryan all right. What kind of crazy scenario has just crossed your mind?”

“Um, something stupid.”

“Tell me.”

“Someone could have taken your phone. On the subway. Like stolen it.”

“I don’t use the subway much.”

“Ah, right. I should have thought of that. But someone could have still stolen it somehow.”

“And thought of calling the person listed as my boyfriend? That’s a funny thief.”

Boyfriend. Right. Mike melted into the sofa.

“You believe me I’m Ryan, right?” The voice on the other end was playful.

“Yes, of course.”

“Hmm, what if I’m a really clever thief, and I can imitate any phone owner’s voice? You know, like a superpower.”

Mike snickered. It wasn’t healthy that he thought of strange situations; Ryan didn’t have to play along, too. “It would be kind of a useless superpower. I mean, not quite, if I think about it --”

“Come down,” Ryan said. “You can tell me all about it face to face.”

“Down? You’re in front of my building?” Mike sensed his voice getting weird again.

“Yes, and I want to see you. Unless you’re busy, of course.” Ryan didn’t do a good job hiding his disappointment.

“I’m not! I’ll be down in a moment. I mean, not a moment-moment --” Mike began searching for his jacket. Screw it; he could handle being in a t-shirt.

“Hmm, no teleportation device yet?” Ryan teased him again.

“Unfortunately, no.”

Mike was out on the stairs in the blink of an eye. He cursed as he twisted an ankle dangerously, but the following step was on the next landing, and it didn’t hurt, to his relief. He was out of breath when he pushed open the door to the building and found himself in the street. One look around was enough to reveal Ryan leaning against the hood of a car, dressed in casual clothes, and looking even better than earlier.

It was already evening, and the lights were too dim to make out Ryan’s face to the tiniest detail, but that was what Mike thought. He hurried to meet him and had to stop to draw his breath, one foot from him.

Ryan moved and took him in his arms. “Did you run here?”

Mike just nodded. Ryan held him tightly. “Good thing I have a car, or there would be both of us trying hard to breathe.”

“Sorry about this,” Mike managed, eventually.

Ryan chuckled and kissed his ear. “I’m sorry, for making you run down the stairs at this hour.”

“Is it really okay?” Mike loved the sensation of having Ryan embracing him and feeling him all around. “Aren’t paparazzi going to chase us or something?”

“I run a company. I doubt I warrant the same attention as the Kardashians. My worry about our situation was long-term, and mostly about how the others at our shared workplace would see our relationship. But now that, as my personal superhero, you took it upon yourself to solve our dilemma, I don’t worry anymore. I’m all for not flaunting it until your two weeks’ notice passes -”

“I am, too. I mean, for not flaunting it.”

“Just for now. When those two weeks are up, I plan to introduce you to all my friends and family.”

“Wow, isn’t it a bit fast?”

Ryan caressed his head. “You take such an important step and risk on me. It’s time I pay what’s due, too.”

“I thought it would be months of trial --”

“For our relationship? Call me a lame romantic, but I know you’re good for me.”

“I won’t ever call you lame,” Mike replied, cuddling against Ryan’s chest.

“Do you remember what I told you before? About attraction?”

“Like in love at first sight?” Mike recalled every word that had ever been passed between them.

“Yes. Now, come on, I want to take you on a date.”

“A midnight date?” Mike asked and snickered.

Ryan consulted his watch with a serious expression on his face. “Yes.”

“But it’s Monday.”

“Just a technicality. Are you afraid you’re not going to make it tomorrow at work?”

“A little. I take my job seriously.”

“What’s the worst that can happen? Me firing you?”

Mike began to shake with laughter. It wasn’t that funny for a joke, but Ryan had said it, and he was his boyfriend; therefore, it was a given for him to laugh.

Chapter Twenty-Two – Midnight Dating

Mike caressed the dashboard, the combination of high-quality leather and polished wood nice and pleasant under his fingers.

“Do you like my car?” Ryan asked, throwing him a wink and a lopsided grin.

Was it okay for them to flirt like that while Ryan was driving?

“It’s a very nice car,” Mike admitted. “But please don’t mind me. And keep your eyes on the road. I mean, please. Damn, I didn’t want it to come out like this --”

Ryan’s soft laugh silenced him, or better said, saved him from blabbing like an idiot a bunch of nonsense. “It’s all right. I should keep my eyes on the road, no matter how difficult it is for me to stop looking at you.”

Mike pinched his arm surreptitiously and made a small distressed sound.

“Is everything okay?” Ryan asked him, concerned.

“Yes. I just pinched myself, a little too hard. I just wanted to make sure I wasn’t dreaming.”

“And did you?” Ryan sounded amused, and Mike couldn’t hold it against him.

“By how my arm hurts, I think it’s safe to say that I’m not dreaming. It’s all real,” he added, in a small whisper.

“Yes,” Ryan confirmed and let out a satisfied sigh. “Would you think little of me if I told you that I’ve dreamed about you all these weeks?”

“No,” Mike said gravely. “I am very flattered.”

“So polite.” They were at a stop, and Ryan reached out for him and caressed his cheek. “You’re such a good boy, Micah. And I just found my kryptonite.”

“A good boy?”

“Yeah,” Ryan replied, and there was a tiny bit of wonder in how he said that.

“You could always get a dog,” Mike said without thinking.

Ryan laughed. “I have a dog. I just don’t have any plans to date him.”

“You have a dog?” Mike asked and realized too late that he had shouted the question.

“I hope you’re not allergic to animal hair or anything. He’s an Irish Wolfhound, so there’s a lot of hair to brush.”

“Do you have him here, in the city?” Mike was starting to get it, how little he knew about Ryan. They were moving fast, without a doubt, but he was getting used to this need for speed.

“Yes, although I need to make sure that he gets plenty of exercise. And it serves that my property is large enough for him and it’s not in the city.”

“Can I see him?”

“Now? He might be sleeping, unlike us, tortured souls,” Ryan said.

Mike tried to hide his disappointment. So, that also meant that they wouldn’t go to Ryan’s home, which he hoped.

“I had all sorts of plans for tonight, but I must admit that it hasn’t crossed my mind until now to ask you. What would you like to do?” Ryan asked.

Mike stared at his hands. “Whatever you want.”

“I can tell you were disappointed about not being able to see Bran.”

“That’s the dog’s name?”

“Yes. So, tell me what you want, as direct as you can. What would you like us to do on our first date?”

“I’d like to sleep with you.” Mike put one hand over his mouth. Direct was one thing; what he had just done was simply shameless.

Ryan chuckled. “All right. I was hoping for an answer like that, but you still surprised me a little. So, no romantic midnight dating for you? Just sex?”

Mike could tell he was being teased. But that wasn’t the time to forget why he was there tonight. “It wouldn’t be just sex,” he said quietly.

Ryan sighed. “I hope you do realize you’re making me drive with a boner. It’s not exactly the easiest way to do that.”

Mike winced. “Sorry.”

“Where should we go?” Ryan asked in a strained voice. As much as he joked, he wasn’t unaffected, and Mike was glad that he wasn’t the only one with lustful thoughts on his mind. “A hotel --”

“Your place,” Mike said with determination. “And I get to meet Bran, too.”

“Well, then your wish is my command. If you can stand me for a one-hour long drive --”

“I’d go anywhere with you,” Mike said. “Even if it’s really far away.”

“Like the end of the world?” Ryan teased again.

Mike snickered. “The world is round. I don’t think there’s such a thing as an end to it.”

“Hmm, that must be true. I’ll take it as a compliment.”

“Ryan, can I ask you something?” Mike rested his eyes on the road ahead. “Do you have, um, like any second thoughts? I mean, we hardly know each other and --”

“And you’re insecure and I understand. Don’t worry. We will know each other, and I’m sure that I’ll like you more and more. The only worry I have is that you might discover that I’m a bit of bore.”

“I doubt that. You know how to kiss and, um, you’re just so considerate and handsome, and you have a dog --” Mike began.

“So you love me because of all that?”

“I love you because I do,” Mike said simply. “I just know I do.”

Ryan sighed in satisfaction again. “Am I the luckiest guy on earth tonight or what?”

Mike didn’t know what to reply to that. He didn’t expect Ryan to say the words back, although he had said plenty of things to point out in that direction. It would come with time; he was sure of it.

Mike kept in all the wow’s and oh’s threatening to pour out of his mouth, as he followed Ryan. The property wasn’t a mansion or anything, but it was above any suburbanite’s wet dream. The manicured lawn wasn’t the only thing to make it so; there were bushes and flowers everywhere, and they weren’t just the ornamental kind. Mike sniffed a few in passing, as they walked the pathway leading to the modern-looking one-story building in the back. He hurried after Ryan when he remained a few steps behind.

A large living room came to life when Ryan flicked on the lights. It came appointed with a large screen TV, although large wasn’t a suitable term to describe what that electronic equipment was. It covered almost the entire wall, and Mike wondered if it was healthy to stay this close to it. “That’s huge,” he commented, forgetting his manners for the moment.

“My friends decreed a long time ago that I’m to host whatever sports party crosses their minds. Therefore, the usual place for that sofa is far against that wall,” Ryan explained. “They’re all big boys and want to have enough room to go crazy. Also, the last TV I had suffered a small

accident. My friends decided to make it up to me by buying this monstrosity. It's embarrassing to explain its presence when someone new walks in, but I'm getting used to it."

Mike turned to Ryan with a smile. "If it's a gift from your friends, there's nothing to be embarrassed about." He was about to ask about Bran when small sounds of distress came from behind a door.

Ryan offered Mike an apologetic look and went to open the door, allowing a ball of dark fur to tumble into the room. The dog began to sniff his owner's feet and whined a little, although not loudly.

"You didn't tell me Bran was a puppy," Mike said and carefully approached the dog. "He is so quiet. For a dog, I mean."

Bran was manifesting his happiness at seeing his master home only by wagging his tail.

"It's sort of a tradition for my family and me to have Irish Wolfhounds. They take well to spending time indoors because they are a very considerate species, although they need the space to stretch their muscles. You won't hear them barking maddeningly like others do. Bran, in particular, is very well behaved." Ryan crouched in front of the puppy to run one hand through his coat and caress his muzzle with the other. "Come and meet him, Mike."

Mike had never had a dog, but he liked them as a general rule. He knelt on the carpet and petted Bran. The puppy examined him with curious eyes; the tail wagging intensified.

"This is Bran, my faithful hound," Ryan declared in a funny voice. "And this," he pointed at Mike while talking to Bran, "is my cute boyfriend."

Mike snickered as he continued to pet Bran cautiously. The dog turned all his attention on him, and Mike felt a bit measured. It looked like the measurement had a positive outcome because Bran pressed a paw solemnly against his knee.

"It's past your bedtime, buddy," Ryan said and picked up Bran. "You two will have plenty of opportunities to play, don't you guys worry?"

Mike felt a bit overwhelmed. Ryan was talking about him being his boyfriend so naturally, but, for him, all seemed like a walk on cloud nine. Any moment, and he was bound to hit the ground.

Ryan returned quickly. "Let's not make a lot of noise so that we don't excite him further. At his age, he needs his sleep." Mike nodded. Ryan walked over to him and grabbed his hand. "How about I show you other parts of the house?"

"Like your bedroom?" Mike whispered.

Ryan ruffled his hair. "Sure. Why not start with that?"

“Boy, you must think that I have only one thing on my mind,” Mike said with a sigh.

“Even if that’s the case, there’s nothing wrong with it,” Ryan hurried to put his mind at ease. “After all, the same thing’s been on my mind for quite a while now.”

Mike added nothing to that. He felt strangely calm now, and a special kind of warmth spread through his chest.

That state of affairs didn’t last long. Soon, he was inside a master bedroom, complete with an impressive bed and lavish furniture that he barely had the time to register. Ryan grabbed him and kissed him, pushing him against the wall. Mike managed a small sign of surprise, but that turned into a shameless moan as Ryan plastered his hard body over his and deepened the kiss.

Mike moved his hands to embrace Ryan, but they got caught and pushed above his head. His entire body reacted; soon, he was acutely aware of the hard throbbing thing between his legs, the butterflies dancing madly in his stomach, and the puddle of molasses that his insides were now. Ryan moved his body against him in a sequence that left no room for interpretation of his real intentions.

A strong thigh pushed his legs apart, and Mike found himself humping shamelessly against it. They gasped for air at the same time.

“Damn, I’m sorry for being such a Neanderthal,” Ryan whispered and pressed his forehead against his.

Mike could tell his body was much in need of that kind of Neanderthal if Ryan was that. “No problem,” he mumbled.

“I planned on being romantic tonight, I swear,” Ryan said. “It looks like I’m messing up from the first step.”

Mike leaned in and kissed him; he couldn’t use his hands as they were still kept in a fierce grip by Ryan. Only then Ryan realized and let go of them; he began massaging Mike’s wrists. “Damn, I’m such a --”

Mike kissed him again.

“You know that what you do is pretty dangerous,” Ryan warned him.

Mike smiled. “I know.” It wasn’t like him to be in the shoes of the guy taking the lead, but Ryan worried too much already. With feverish hands, he began to push down Ryan’s jacket and unbutton his shirt. To his excitement and surprise, there was no resistance from Ryan as he did so. He seemed too busy doing the same with Mike’s t-shirt.

They fell on the bed, both struggling, quite comically, to get out of their pants. Mike was the first to start laughing.

“Damn,” Ryan moaned and rolled his eyes, “I’m not usually such a fuckup when it comes to seduction.” He pushed away his pants and pulled Mike’s jeans, too. “Don’t judge me by my foreplay, please,” he added, begging Mike with his eyes.

Mike became suddenly aware that he was practically naked, like completely naked, in front of his crush. His laughter died, and he stared down at his body. What would Ryan think of him? He wasn’t much to look at, and it wasn’t just a figure of speech. He was pretty small, and his cock was average, he liked to think. Hesitantly, he raised his eyes, only to witness Ryan’s hungry stare.

His breathing caught in his chest; Mike bit his lips and swallowed hard. He had known for a while now the depth and weight of his attraction toward Ryan. He hadn’t stopped to think too much of how Ryan felt about it all; it looked like there was no point in having doubts or worries. That look said everything he needed to know.

“I,” he started, not knowing what he wanted to say.

Ryan moved and straddled him, his body hard above, pressing him down. Mike didn’t hesitate to open his mouth and receive Ryan’s tongue that seemed as bent on penetration as its master’s other parts. One of them, in particular, was a hot pulsing thing, conveniently aligned with Mike’s cock. At this point, Mike wasn’t even sure of what he wanted. Ryan kissed like a superstar, not that Mike had a clear idea of what that meant, but it sounded cool and accurate in his head. His kiss was everything; it made Mike’s heart beat wildly, his mind forget all coherent thought, and his entire body was yearning for nothing else but Ryan’s touch.

A hand was teasing his nipples, while their kiss grew savage. There was so much repressed desire that Mike feared that they might go mad, or explode, or do something crazy like in the movies. Asked what that could be, he wouldn’t answer. His mind was gone, his body was hot, and there was just one thing he cared about.

He was with Ryan, and it was no dream. He was Ryan’s boyfriend – just how insane that sounded? – and it was for real. And soon, Ryan would make love to him, as he had dreamed of for so long.

“I’ll be back. Don’t go anywhere, please,” Ryan said as he moved away with evident reluctance.

Mike nodded, his mouth throbbing where Ryan had kissed him hard. He looked after his lover as he moved around the room. When they had met the first time, Mike had thought of Ryan as a handsome man. Seeing him naked was another thing entirely. He had a hard, muscular body, lean where needed, tough, too. Could it be that he practiced some sports? That was another thing

for him to learn. No one had that kind of an attractive body without working hard, as Mike knew from his friend Adrian.

Ryan crouched to look for things in a drawer, and Mike straightened up to admire the line of his back. He bit back a whimper as he took in Ryan's ass, firm and round, and he couldn't believe that his mind was taking him back to his stupid fetish. Ryan had no qualms with letting his body hair grow, and although he was not some bear in the sense of the word Mike knew, he was plenty of his favorite animal.

He shook his head. It was clear as day that Ryan topped, and Mike wouldn't blow it by asking him if he didn't mind getting fucked in the ass. It was something Mike could live with. Ryan stood up and turned. He held a pack of condoms and a bottle of lube in his hands and seemed relieved. "I cannot believe that I thought I didn't have any around. Phew, dodged a bullet there."

Mike blinked. "So, you don't usually bring your lovers home?"

Ryan laughed. "What lovers?"

Mike swallowed. "Well, you know. People you hook up with."

"It might surprise you, my cute Micah, but the way I hooked up with you that evening is not my usual MO. From the moment I took over the company from my uncle, I didn't have time to land a boyfriend. Until now."

Mike's surprise came from a different source. "Are you trying to tell me that you haven't slept with anyone since you that time?"

Ryan offered him another broad smile. "Yeah. It looks like a super cute redhead blew my mind just as I barely got here, to this city, and he was a tough act to follow."

Mike grinned. That was him. The super cute redhead was him. "But, what about before?"

Ryan sighed. "This house is relatively new as my residence. And, before, let's say that I preferred other venues for carrying on with my affairs."

Mike could tell Ryan was pulling his leg a little. There would be time later to ask more questions. It looked like Ryan was fighting certain urges that weren't unfamiliar to him, either. Ryan's cock bounced as he climbed on the bed. Mike remembered it, but he reached for it with one hand. A satisfied moan from Ryan rewarded him for his actions.

Ryan kissed him quickly. "I know you must want to ask me a ton of questions. And if you want us to talk --"

"Let's don't," Mike said abruptly. He began to move his hand on Ryan's cock up and down and locked his eyes with his lover's. "It doesn't matter the order."

“The order?” Ryan asked. His eyes flashed with new desire.

“Of things. I don’t even know what it should be.”

Ryan teased him, leaning forward, but making sure not to allow Mike to let go of his cock. “What we should do now, per the order of things you want?”

Mike couldn’t believe his ears as he spoke. “Let’s fuck.”

All right, he could have said it nicer, like ‘let’s make love’, but it looked like his words had the desired effect on Ryan, who attacked him with his mouth again. This time, Mike’s lips weren’t the only prey. Soon, he was a mess of sensations, as Ryan’s mouth moved slower, his teeth grazing the skin of his neck and chest in passing.

Mike let out a small moan as Ryan reached between his legs and took him in his mouth. How long had he dreamed of this? He was sure that lately, he hadn’t jerked off to porn at all; he had had enough material, and other men couldn’t do it for him anymore.

But reality was everything imaginary adventures weren’t. Ryan’s tongue wrapping around his cock and doing strange, wonderful things seemed like nothing Mike could have ever imagined. His cock was in heaven, just like him.

“Oh, fuck,” he shouted when he realized that, lost in the sensation, he hadn’t bothered to keep himself in check.

The pressure, the hotness, the up and down moves of that sexy mouth, were all too much. Mike tried to push Ryan away at the last moment, but he met resistance, so, embarrassed as he was, he exploded in his lover’s mouth, while strong hands kept him down, making it impossible for him to move.

He threw one arm over his eyes. *Good going, Mike.* What would Ryan think of him now?

“You know, I think I told you before that I thought you must be sweet. Now I have the confirmation that you’re sweet everywhere,” Ryan said, pulling him out of his instant self-loathing, which was challenging to do while coming down from that high.

Mike put down his arm and stared at Ryan. “I came in your mouth,” he mumbled. “Like a rude person. I mean, like an asshole.”

Ryan was still between his legs, and he stared at him. Mike gasped when Ryan moved one hand to caress his balls and then snuck it lower between his butt cheeks. “I think I know what I want as compensation.”

“Of course,” Mike murmured. “How should I sit?” *Not on all fours, please.* Mike thought the look from behind had to be the most unflattering he could offer.

Ryan laughed. “You don’t have to worry about a thing, Micah. And I’ve wanted to taste you for so long.”

“But, that time,” Mike protested, “you didn’t come in my mouth.”

“We weren’t boyfriends then.” Everything Ryan said poured so naturally out of his mouth that Mike felt unnatural envy toward him. He would either have to learn the secret to do that or ask for lessons.

Ryan kissed his spent cock. Then he looked at him again. “What’s bothering you?”

“I’m a total klutz,” Mike moaned. “I don’t know how to behave.”

“Is that all? Then let me guide you. Come sit nicely on all fours, and present your lovely ass to me.”

Mike covered his eyes again.

“What? What did I say?” Ryan’s voice was teasing, but even Mike was capable of realizing that he shouldn’t put the man’s impatience to the test.

“I don’t have a sexy ass,” Mike whispered.

“Ah, how about you let me be the judge of that? Come. Do as I say, and if by the end of it all, you don’t like what I’m about to do to you, feel free to tell me. I’ll never transgress again.”

“You can do anything you want,” Mike replied, although he wasn’t sure his meek voice could pass as determination.

“Giving me a free pass? I’d be more careful if I were you,” Ryan warned him playfully.

Mike wasn’t careful when it came to Ryan; he just couldn’t. So he moved, albeit reluctantly, and presented his tiny, skinny ass. Two hands grabbed his ass and fondled it. Mike barely had time to get into the groove, when a hot tongue pressed against his backdoor.

All right, maybe it was the right time he checked he wasn’t dreaming again. No, there was no time for that. For the second time that evening, Mike lost track of whatever he was supposed to think or how he was meant to act. He let shameless sounds pour out of his mouth, as Ryan reached deep with that skillful tongue inside his ass.

“Oh,” he whispered, unsure if there were enough words in the dictionary to describe what he felt or how awesome Ryan was.

Ryan withdrew only a little. “So, you like it?”

“I’m dying of pleasure here,” Mike admitted in all honesty.

“That you’re not allowed to do,” Ryan said and smacked his ass with both hands.

“Ryan,” Mike said in a quiet voice, “could you fuck me now, please?”

Ryan’s immediate response was a small groan. “How do you know how to press all my buttons?”

“I don’t know,” Mike replied.

“I know,” Ryan said in turn. “I must have done something good in my life, and this is how karma repays me.”

That sounded a bit off. Mike looked over his shoulder. Ryan kept a straight face for a moment, and then he burst into laughter.

“Are you making fun of me?” Mike asked, a bit miffed.

“You’re too easy to tease. And I like teasing you,” Ryan replied. “Now, seeing how I don’t seem to get one thing right --”

“The blowjob was awesome. So was the ass licking,” Mike announced.

Ryan’s face lit up. “Well, thank you. Then let’s see how I fare on the last test.”

Mike pouted. Ryan was teasing him again.

“Refresh my memory. What test that was?” Ryan asked in a low, seductive voice.

Mike buried his face in his palms for a moment. What was he getting himself into? Ryan was an even bigger joker than him, only that Mike was one by accident; in Ryan’s case, it was all premeditated. “I suppose you want me to say ‘fucking’,” he said with a small sigh.

“I just love it when you talk dirty,” Ryan said and smacked his ass one last time.

Mike gasped when Ryan touched his asshole with lubed fingers. Caught in everything as they had been, he hadn’t stopped to think about how that would go. Ryan was pretty thick as he knew now, and not only from memory. His ass would get a workout; that was sure.

Ryan moved his fingers slowly, making Mike shiver with anticipation. His cock seemed to approve the treatment and was now getting hard again. It helped, for sure, that Ryan used his other hand to milk it slowly. Usually, Mike would have thought himself in an impossibly embarrassing position, but he didn’t feel that at all. It had to be all about how natural things were between them.

“If you feel anything you don’t like, anything, just tell me, okay?”

“kay,” Mike mumbled. His pleasure soared again, and he didn’t want Ryan to stop if the fate of the universe hung in the balance.

“You don’t have to worry about a thing,” Ryan added. “I think your ass is lovely, just like the rest of you.”

He had a lovely ass. Mike sighed in contentment. That was surely something he needed to remember; if Ryan said that, it had to be true.

A new gasp emerged from his mouth when Ryan moved and positioned himself behind him. Mike’s usual encounters of the kind were rushed, and most of the time, forgettable. But his first time with Ryan, he had a feeling that he would remember it.

And, of course, that was some girth, right there. Ryan mumbled and cursed under his breath, but the arousal was evident in his voice. Mike decided to offer a bit of help and pushed back.

“Easy, you don’t want to tempt the snake,” Ryan joked, his voice a breathed whisper.

“I do,” Mike said with conviction.

Ryan stood still, and Mike pushed himself into his lover’s sword harder. It was a bit of a bummer that they couldn’t go faster, but Mike’s ass seemed to lack the understanding of the situation. Now was the time for a ‘wow’ and standing ovations.

Ryan placed a gentle hand on his back. “I can hear you gasping, Micah,” he said softly. “Just let me handle this.”

Mike closed his eyes. It wasn’t that bad; Ryan didn’t have to worry, and he could take it. But when Ryan began moving slowly, offering a bit of friction, and a bit of reprieve, he had to admit that it was better. With Ryan, clearly no lover he decided to take to bed had to worry about having that thick gorgeous cock rammed in by surprise.

Now he was a ragged doll in Ryan’s arms who caressed him with one hand while holding him firmly with the other. The initial discomfort was fading now, and instead, the blunt head of Ryan’s cock brushed over the most sensitive point in Mike’s ass, now awakened and ready for action.

Ryan pushed in slowly until Mike could feel him as close as they could be.

“All in?” he asked, his voice small.

“Yes. I’m happy to report,” Ryan said in his now-familiar playful tone.

“Happy to know,” Mike replied in kind and snickered.

Ryan was, apparently, ready for a ride. Mike was on board, too. When their bodies met with a small smack, and Ryan began, Mike grabbed the sheets with both hands. Ryan wasn't just a maddeningly sweet kisser; he also knew how to love a man in bed. Mike let out his voice, glad that there weren't any neighbors to worry about.

"You sound so nice," Ryan praised him.

Unlike him, Ryan didn't moan and thrash. His breath was deep and steady, and there was something so arousing in how he sounded that Mike wanted to record his voice and play it later, whenever he wanted. He was sure that no porn in the world could rival that.

The bed shook under them, but Mike didn't care. Ryan knew how to move his hips, and Mike's only regret was that he couldn't see it. When Ryan reached for the back of his neck and held him tightly, Mike thought he would lose it. But, this time, he was prepared, and he wanted more of it. He chose to move his hips, too, not one ounce embarrassed by how their bodies meeting like that made all sorts of sounds.

"Oh, wow, Micah, your ass." Ryan's voice lost some of its composure and grew louder. "It's milking my cock so well."

That was a good thing, right? Mike surely hoped so. A new type of enthusiasm grew inside him. Now his ambition was to make Ryan come undone. There would be no other outcome but to have Ryan feel as he had felt just earlier. He squeezed his ass muscles, as much as he could, enjoying the soaring of his sensations, too.

"This is so naughty," Ryan shouted, each word pouring out of his mouth marked by another slamming of his hips against Mike's body.

"Close?" Mike asked.

"Yes," Ryan replied.

Mike had always wanted to come like that, at the same time with his bed partner. It seemed like a bit of communication was ideal for making things happen. "Me, too," he whispered.

"What a fortunate coincidence," Ryan said, but his voice didn't sound like he wanted to joke, like before. It had to be that he believed what he said.

Mike abandoned himself to the sensation of having his ass pounded; Ryan's cock felt huge in his ass, but not at all uncomfortable, and Mike knew that he had struck gold this time. He was the first to announce his release by coming and shuddering, his whole body part of that fantastic sensation. Ryan pushed one time hard, and Mike could swear he could feel everything his lover felt, which was pretty amazing since there had never been another to be so entirely in synch with.

Ryan stood inside him for what seemed both a moment and a wonderful eternity, chanting words of praise. When he let go, Mike sensed a little loss. Just then, he wanted Ryan again to assure him that they belonged together like that. Ryan moved away, and Mike heard his steps departing. It wasn't a minute, and he was back, draping his body over Mike's.

"Missed me already?"

Mike wondered if Ryan was a mind reader. "Yes."

Ryan chuckled. He kissed Mike's sweaty shoulders, his upper back, his neck. "I know you might have a hard time believing me, but it's not usual that I feel so close to someone. Tonight, you gave me a wonderful gift, Micah."

"I'm sure you had other lovers." The pleasure was fading, and now the usual worries came back.

"Indeed. But, you know, I've never heard an honest 'I love you' in my life. Before you."

Mike turned his head as much as he could from that position. "Don't pull my leg. It can't be true."

"Well, yes, it might not be. My parents used to tell me that when I was a lot younger than this," Ryan said with a smile.

Mike's mom still said that; maybe that was why he was still a big baby, even if he couldn't have any regrets. "With your looks, guys must be all over you, all the time."

Ryan offered a small, embarrassed laugh. "That's because you think I've always looked like this."

Mike blinked a few times. "What do you mean?" It was so nice to feel Ryan's weight on top of him.

"I used to be pretty skinny and nerdy," Ryan said.

Mike needed to see Ryan's eyes when saying that. So he struggled a little until Ryan moved away, and they faced each other. "You are totally pulling my leg."

Ryan shrugged. A smile never left his lips. "I'm not. In my teens, I was pretty quiet. I didn't quite fit. But I had great friends, and they dragged me with them to play games, watch sports, all that jazz."

"Did your friends take you to the gym?" Mike was impressed. With all of Adrian's efforts to make him work out harder, Mike hadn't been convinced to do more. Through no fault of his own, he was what he was. But it looked like Ryan had been more determined than him. In front of his eyes, he had a success story that could've been him if only he had worked harder.

“No, that came later,” Ryan replied. He continued to caress Mike’s shoulder as he spoke. “I wanted, you know, to get guys to like me,” he whispered and then smiled, melting Mike’s heart again. “The thing is, I somehow managed to attract mostly shallow people, or maybe I was too immature to tell apart guys with serious intentions from the rest.”

“I must be shallow, too, because I fell for your looks.”

Ryan threw Mike a playful look. “When I let myself go, and you want to leave, I’m going to hold it against you. Be warned.”

Mike smiled. Ryan said it like they were supposed to spend many years together. That was enough to make him dream with his eyes open. “I’ll never leave,” he said without overthinking.

Ryan kissed him quickly on the lips. “It’s things like these I love you for.”

Mike’s breath stopped. Was that the confession he had been waiting for? Was it?

“Something wrong? Your eyes are really wide.”

Mike shook his head. He was acting all weird. It was a figure of speech or something. “Nothing. So how come you didn’t find someone to tell you ‘I love you’ from the heart?”

Ryan sighed and smiled again. “I think I looked in all the wrong places. Inside, I think I am still that nerdy boy from before; at least, some of him is still in there.”

“You? Nerdy?” Mike snickered. He just couldn’t imagine that at all.

“Yeah,” Ryan replied, faking that he was upset. “And these guys I got with, they just wanted to have fun, and it wasn’t all my kind of fun.”

“Like sports? You watch sports with your friends, right?” Mike could feel a new kind of anxiety growing. What exactly did he and Ryan have in common, after all?

“No. I’m not talking about that. What I mean is that my lovers didn’t want to spend the entire Sunday watching some sci-fi series or play video games with me.”

Mike shook his head. He did so fast that he was sure Ryan had to think that he was having a seizure or something. That couldn’t be real. “I watch sci-fi series and play video games,” he said automatically. Great. Now he sounded like some kind of robot.

Ryan grinned. “And I’m glad to hear.”

Mike felt a bit suspicious. “Why do I get the feeling that you already knew?”

Ryan looked away and then made a funny guilty face. “All employees put down their hobbies in their resumes. I have everything on record, just in case you want to deny, later.”

Mike opened and closed his mouth. “Don’t tell me you picked me based on what I’ve written on my resume three years ago!”

Ryan was laughing now. “No, actually it was your first oral performance that convinced me.”

Mike pushed himself up. He was being made fun of, big time. He grabbed one pillow and smacked Ryan in the face with it. “Here is something I didn’t write in my resume. I’m good at pillow fights!”

Ryan didn’t appear impressed by his outburst and put down the pillow covering his face like he hadn’t just been smacked with it. “It’s good to have surprises.”

Mike stared at him, not knowing what to think. “So you just say that you like what I like?” His eyes moved at his hands.

Ryan came closer to him and grabbed his face with both hands. Their eyes met. “No. That is all true. And I had to read everyone’s resume, to get to know them. I didn’t want to invade your privacy or anything. That also helped me understand how honest you are, Micah. Do you know how many people lie in their resumes? I seriously doubt Dan in accounting learns Chinese in his spare time, for fun.”

Mike snickered. “Sometimes, I’m not sure he speaks English that well.”

“Yeah,” Ryan said with a small laugh. “The only language he likes must be numbers.”

He pulled Mike close in his arms, and it felt so good there. So, that was good. They had somethings in common, and Mike felt relieved. At least, for a while, he would be able to keep Ryan interested in him, and that was a good thing. He needed to buy every video game release from now on. First, he needed to find out what Ryan liked. Also, what kind of movies --

“I can tell your mind is working,” Ryan said as he massaged Mike’s back.

“What kind of games do you play?”

Ryan took a moment. “FPS, MOBA, MMORPG --”

“All the abbreviations?” Mike snickered. He liked that Ryan didn’t seem to be boxed in a single genre.

Ryan pouted. “I do know what they mean.”

Mike bit his lips. The temptation to laugh was too much. Could it be that Ryan wanted to seduce him by pretending he had the same interests? There was no need for that. He was already seduced.

“I will show you my collection,” Ryan said. “I can tell you don’t believe me.”

Mike shook his head. "It's not that I don't believe you. But you're a cool guy. No one would ever suspect you enjoy uncool stuff like that."

Ryan made a funny face. "Uncool how?"

Mike rolled his eyes. "Don't ask me to explain. You know what I mean."

He yelped when Ryan grabbed him and planted him with his back on the bed. "Do I have to prove myself? Pick your weapon."

Mike knew Ryan was talking about games, but there was one particular weapon in his lover's arsenal, which he liked a lot better. To make a point, he snuck one hand between them and caught Ryan's cock. It was hot, hard, and leaking.

"Hmm, should I get another condom?" Ryan purred into his ear.

Mike shivered. That was a good idea. His ass twitched in sympathy, apparently in love with the prospect already. He would have a hard time sitting tomorrow most probably, but it was all worth it. "I think you should," he breathed out the words.

Ryan rewarded his quick reply with a long kiss. It didn't take him long to get ready again, and this time, when he sank in Mike's body, it was much easier. Some discomfort was still there, since Mike hadn't had any sex in a while, or better said since Ryan had walked into his life.

This wasn't fucking, though, he realized as Ryan moved slowly while peppering his ear with kisses and sweet words. It was lovemaking, and even though Ryan hadn't confessed, Mike promised himself he wouldn't be anxious and all tied up in knots over it. He was wanted, and Ryan didn't hesitate to make it clear with each move of his body. Mike touched his lover's muscular back, mapping it with his hands while feeling so happy that his mind and soul wanted an out of body experience.

He was full in more ways than one, and even so, he wanted more. As Ryan skillfully brought them closer to a second fantastic climax that night, it was the only thought filling his mind to the brim. He wanted more.

"Do you like this, Micah?" Ryan asked, his voice a gentle whisper. "I'm head over heels here."

Mike gasped and squirmed as Ryan cupped one of his buttocks and increased the rhythm. Could it be that his cock didn't need anything else? There was a bit of friction between their bodies, but it wasn't enough. He whimpered, the pleasure caused by Ryan's cock moving in and out his ass a tad frustrating.

"Tell me what you want," Ryan said.

"My cock," Mike managed with difficulty.

Ryan adjusted his position and grabbed his cock. “Like this?”

“Yes,” Mike whispered. He reached for Ryan with both hands. They landed on the hairy chest, and he pulled with all his strength as the climax hit him. In Ryan’s hands, he was reduced to a horny guy with nothing but the needs of his cock on his mind.

Ryan cursed and praised and slammed against Mike, with one long groan. They embraced as their irregular breaths mingled.

“I’m sorry I pulled your hair,” Mike said apologetically.

Ryan laughed, a satiated soft laugh. “You took me by surprise, but I like it when you’re a bit forceful. It means that you must really like me.”

“Like you? I love you.” Mike bit his lips. There had to be some rule about things like that. He couldn’t go and say it all the time, as it could lose its value.

Ryan kissed his cheek but made no move to get away. “I don’t think I can get enough of hearing it. I can barely wait to say it properly, too.”

Hmm, what? Mike opened his mouth to ask what Ryan meant by that but reconsidered. If time was needed for Ryan to fall in love, then be it. Mike would do all he could to make sure that happened.

But if he couldn’t succeed?

Ryan knocked gently on his forehead. “You’re thinking again. What about?”

“Nothing,” Mike hurried to say.

“It’s not nothing, and I can tickle you until you give up and say it.”

Mike wasn’t great with tickling, in the sense that he was very ticklish. It wasn’t a good idea to incur Ryan’s wrath, under the circumstances. “Just that if you need time to feel the same, I’ll wait,” he sputtered.

Ryan appeared surprised. “I don’t really understand what you mean. Why would I need time?”

Mike felt his cheeks warming. It was embarrassing to talk about such things. “To, um, say ... the words. Because you feel them. Or you believe them. Or something.”

Ryan laughed. Mike covered his face with both hands. Now that was a bit cruel.

“That is not what I meant,” Ryan whispered in his ear. “I already feel the same about you. I just thought that I need to make it count, the first time I say the words to you. So that you would remember forever.”

Mike uncovered his face. He watched Ryan. From up close, he was even more irresistible. “Do you mean that,” he swallowed, “you do ...?”

Ryan winked at him. “You’re trying to trick me into saying it like this, without proper setting and everything. Don’t think I didn’t read you. So crafty.”

Crafty had never been a word to describe him. Ryan got it all wrong, and Mike wanted to clarify the situation. “I’m not tricking you. I swear,” he said with all the conviction he could muster.

“Hmm.” Ryan examined him with playful eyes. “That is what anyone trying to trick someone into confessing would say.”

Mike groaned. There was no winning with this guy, was it?

Ryan scooted closer and rested his lips against Mike’s ear. “But I’m easy to fool. I love you, Micah. And if you ever forget --”

Mike moved fast and caught Ryan by surprise, switching the roles and ending up on top. “I won’t.” He sealed his promise with a kiss.

They spent some time doing that, but Mike was pretty sure that a third time would be a stretch for him. He felt exhausted but happy, so he melted in Ryan’s arms.

“It looks like someone’s sleepy,” Ryan cooed. “Ready to hit the hay?”

“Totally,” Mike agreed.

Ryan still had the energy to drag him to the shower and then put him back in bed. Mike couldn’t have been happier. It was nice to have someone in charge like that. The only issue was that he might get used to it.

“Good night, Micah,” Ryan whispered as he pulled him into his strong arms.

“Good night, Ryan,” Mike replied, and then, just like that, he was out like a light.

The sound of an alarm clock woke him up. Mike was disoriented for a couple of seconds, and then it hit him, not only where he was, but where he was supposed to be. One look at the clock filled him with panic.

“Good morning,” Ryan said and caressed his shoulder.

“Ryan, how are we going to get to work?”

Ryan seemed half sleepy still. “By car. Just give me a minute.” He pulled Mike into his arms again, nuzzling the back of his neck.

“It’s already late, and I can’t ride with you,” Mike insisted. “What will people say?”

Ryan seemed suddenly very awake. “Good point. Do you mind being a little late for work, first time in your career?”

Mike knew the answer to that one. Damn, being secret lovers inevitably came with challenges.

Chapter Twenty-Three - A Little Help

Adrian hadn't slept a wink all night long, tormented by questions and what-if scenarios. He couldn't, wouldn't allow himself regrets, but that was easier said than done. There was one particular thing that came back to haunt him over and over. Edward had said that he had decided on Sunday to call it quits, and yet, the next day, he had hurried to meet Adrian, go out to dinner with him, and later to bed.

That didn't sound like someone who had made up his mind. It was irksome, and Adrian tossed and turned until he needed to get out of bed. He could always call Edward and ask for explanations, but he had a feeling his calls would be rejected.

Even if they hadn't, that still didn't mean that Edward would have the patience and inclination to listen to him. No, things like that needed to be clarified face to face. With that decision in mind, Adrian dressed for work. One last cursory look at himself in the mirror told him that anyone could read on his face what a shitty night he had had.

He pondered for a while. He grabbed his phone, and for long moments, his fingers hovered over the screen. Once in his life, he would have to swallow his pride. After all, all he needed was clarity, and that seemed to lack the most in his corner of the universe at the moment. With the risk of having Adrian Rossi's image completely compromised, he had to do it.

Jared danced around the kitchen, humming a tune he must have heard during the commercial break on the radio, and grabbing the ingredients he needed for making breakfast. Shane had come home late last night, so he hadn't even had the time to wonder why they needed to have another sleepover so soon after the other from Sunday night. Once Shane had kissed him and pushed him toward the bed, any such questions had drifted from his mind.

Even right now, Jared was in no mood to ask himself those pesky questions. Having such a close friend, a friend he had sex with, was not at all complicated. Actually, his life seemed to have become incredibly easier lately, or better said, from the moment he had met Shane. Everything was straightforward with the guy.

Now, there was a bit of a problem because Jared didn't know how Shane took his coffee. He stopped his dance and went directly to the bedroom, where he found Shane dressed up and, by the looks of things, ready for a new day.

"Do you need to go back to yours?" Jared asked, a bit disappointed. For some reason, he was looking forward to having breakfast with Shane. He might not be able to pull something like pigs in a blanket for the first meal of the day, but he took pride in being the master of all things omelet-related.

“I think I should,” Shane said and ran one hand over his face. “I need to shave.”

Jared liked Shane like that, but it felt like it wasn't his place to decide what Shane preferred. The short stubble became him. There was something rough about Shane that Jared liked; at the same time, he was sweet and charming, and that combination had to be Mother Nature's recipe for making Jared go all mushy over his friend with benefits.

“Ah, okay. Maybe you should bring your stuff,” Jared said as he walked out of the bedroom, with Shane following him. “Wait, I should have some spares for one time use or something,” he added and went directly to the bathroom. He was the guy ready for an apocalypse. Surely, extra shaving supplies had to be somewhere.

“Do you want me to bring my stuff and keep it here?” Shane caught him before he could reach the bathroom.

Jared realized how ridiculous that had to sound. They weren't living together or anything. “Well, not in particular,” he said, trying to get out of the situation without sounding like a moron.

Shane rubbed his nose against his playfully. Jared inhaled the smell of minty toothpaste when Shane pressed their lips together. Maybe the short stubble was a little bit of a problem, as Jared felt his mouth being slowly ravaged. Shane needed to sort his priorities; didn't he need to leave? It was unlikely, however, that Jared would protest. Since the last bone in his body was turned to putty by that kiss, there was no conviction of any kind to tell the other off.

Jared broke the kiss. His sanity was at risk, and he needed to set some things straight. “Yeah, you might have to shave,” he said, patting his lips.

“So you don't like me like this?”

It was a bit weird to be crowded in his own home and pushed against the wall. Also, it was arousing like hell.

Jared shook his head. There was just something about how Shane's skin smelled, even after showering, that made him light-headed, like walking in a dream, if he inhaled too much. “I think I like you plenty. My ass is my witness,” he said quickly. He tried to straighten up instead of molding his body after Shane's slow moves. His back was against the wall, and Shane made a cage with his arms, seemingly bent on holding Jared there.

Shane didn't appear to take the hint. “Oh, do you think it's wise to mention your ass so early in the morning?”

Jared let out a small, nervous laugh. “Why wouldn't it be? After all, it's part of my anatomy.”

“Yes, and you have beautiful anatomy. I recall everything about it in detail.”

Shane was such a teaser. Jared pressed against his chest, and he didn't need to do it hard to make the other move away. "I was thinking about making breakfast for two."

"Great. I'd love that."

"Didn't you want to go home so that you could shave or something?" Jared reminded him.

"I'm not a big fan of shaving. Breakfast with you, on the other hand --" Shane left the words hanging and wiggled his eyebrows suggestively.

Jared groaned. "Why do you have to be such a joker? Do you ever take a break?"

Shane appeared to ponder for a second. "I don't see why. And I think I just complimented you. I'd rather have breakfast with you than shave."

"Well, thanks for considering me above mundane tasks. I bet I can beat taking out the trash. Oh, right," Jared said, smacking his forehead, "I need to do that, too. I forgot yesterday."

"You go make breakfast. Let me take out the trash," Shane offered.

"Really? Okay, thanks, that's nice of you."

Jared couldn't believe Shane wasn't taken. Well, of course, he was new in town, and the ladyfolk didn't stand a chance given where Shane's preferences lay. Therefore, Jared was fortunate to have Shane all to himself, at least for a while. That said, he needed to take advantage of the situation, but not too much. Maybe letting him take out the garbage was not that great a move, but it was too late now to take it back.

He was back in the kitchen when he realized that he still hadn't found out how Shane liked his coffee. Well, he would ask when Shane was back.

It was undeniably nice to set the table for two. Jared wanted to sing and dance again, but he needed to keep his wits about him; he and Shane were nothing but friends, and that meant that it wasn't wise to fall into some romantic trap laid by no other but himself.

Shane was back as he placed the plates loaded with food on the table.

"I forgot to ask you about how you like your coffee," Jared said apologetically. "Or are you a tea person?"

"Coffee, black, is good enough for me," Shane replied as he took his place.

"Ah, so there's no room for sugar in your life?" Jared joked as he filled Shane's cup.

Shane surprised him by catching his hand and bringing it to his lips. He winked at Jared before placing a small kiss on his knuckles. "I think I have plenty of it."

Jared pulled away his hand. He used the kitchen towel in his hand to swat Shane's head playfully. "I'm not some missus you need to seduce first thing in the morning, joker."

"I kiss your ass to seduce you," Shane replied promptly.

And didn't he know it. Jared sighed.

"This was just a bit of gratitude," Shane added.

"Gratitude? What for?"

"All this," Shane gestured around. "For being such a perfect host. For letting me sleep in your bed. Frankly, I don't know where you picked it, but that thing is amazing."

Jared laughed. "Mike likes it, too."

Shane's amusement faded a little. "Did you and Mike ever --" He gestured with his hands to illustrate the meaning of the words left unsaid.

Jared placed one hand on his hip and shook his head, offering Shane a look of disapproval. "I think I told you I don't have the habit of sleeping with my friends. In the sense of having sex, of course."

Shane's smile was back in its face-splitting mode. "Just with me."

"Just with you," Jared agreed. "How do you like your omelet?"

Shane was already digging in with gusto. "It's awesome. But I'll cook breakfast tomorrow, okay?"

Oh, so they would have another sleepover? Jared was about to ask when his phone pinged with an incoming message. He frowned as he checked it.

"Something wrong?" Shane asked.

"It's just a message from Adrian. He wants to see us tonight. Something about trouble in love?" Jared said the last words hesitantly.

"Trouble in love?" Shane echoed his surprise.

"Yeah. Adrian never talks like that," Jared said with conviction. "Let me just fire a quick message at him."

"Go ahead. Ask him what's wrong," Shane encouraged him.

Jared typed in fast. Soon, he got a reply. "He says that he and Edward broke up, and he could use a bit of friendly advice."

Shane seemed as puzzled as Jared felt. “Weren’t they all lovey-dovey Sunday evening?”

Jared raised his shoulders and then let them fall in defeat. “Yeah. I thought that, too. All right, this is a serious type of emergency. When he’s unlucky in love, Adrian really takes it hard.”

Shane placed both hands on the table in front of him and had a determined look on his face. “Anything he needs, let him know that I’ll offer my full support. And my fists.”

Jared grimaced theatrically at that. “Let’s hope that whatever Adrian has in mind doesn’t include us getting physical. It would be bad taste.”

Shane puckered his lips like a naughty child. “Still, if he needs me for that, I’m ready.”

Jared rolled his eyes. “Are you and Adrian like peas in a pod or what? He likes to joke about that, too.”

Shane just shrugged. “Makes one feel he has something to do.”

“I suppose,” Jared agreed. “But Adrian, I think, will need lots of hugs. I don’t know yet what kind of advice we can give him --”

“I have a few ideas,” Shane said promptly.

“And why doesn’t that surprise me,” Jared muttered under his breath. As much as he wanted to deny it, he liked Shane for his can-do attitude. And Mike had turned out all right after taking advice from Shane. Maybe Adrian needed a bit of that no-nonsense approach Shane was starting to become famous for.

“I feel so bad for leaving you here,” Ryan said anxiously, as the car stopped.

“I’ll be fine, don’t worry,” Mike said quickly. He scanned their surroundings and then kissed Ryan quickly.

“It went out of my head that you would have to be at work earlier than me,” Ryan said with regret. He kissed Mike back.

Mike kissed him again. “I should have been the one to tell you that, and also set my alarm. It just went out of my head.” He placed one hand on the door, but Ryan stopped him with another kiss. “My Uber should be here in about two minutes.”

“You didn’t even have breakfast,” Ryan said.

“It’s all right. I’ll figure out something.”

“Please text me to tell me you’re okay as soon as you’re at work.”

Ryan worried too much. Mike needed to kiss him again and let him know that everything was all right. This time, Ryan didn't let go, and their kiss turned longer.

"Oh, damn, we need to stop," Mike complained.

"I know, I know." Ryan ran one hand through his hair. "I need to plan things a little better."

"See you tonight?" Mike asked as he opened the door on his side.

Ryan offered him a goofy smile. "To play video games?"

"I think that can wait," Mike replied with a confident smile.

Where all that confidence came from, he had no idea. He got out of the car quickly; if he risked another look at Ryan, the chances were that they would kiss again, and he had a feeling that it would be hard to stop.

Good thing his Uber was there. Mike hurried toward it, not without throwing one last look at Ryan and waving at him discreetly. Ryan sent him a wink and a small kiss.

Mike was on the backseat and just telling the driver where to take him when his phone let him know he had a message. "Trouble in love?" he mumbled the words. Who? Adrian?

Mike pretended to be all cool and collected as he entered the building and headed toward the server room. Usually, he was as good as invisible to most people, but, right now, he barely kept from shivering like a leaf. He couldn't risk one look up. His eyes set on the floor, he walked fast. It had to be his imagination, but he felt myriads of eyes on him, scanning him. If he had had a sign on his back spelling that he had slept with the boss the previous night, he wouldn't have been this nervous.

"Good morning, Mike," a voice interrupted his thoughts. "Running a little late?"

Mike looked up, feeling his feet turning to stone. It was just the janitor. All around him, the hallway was empty, as always. No one came down to the server room; Mike had played scenarios in his head involving a fire and him being left behind because no one knew about him. "Yeah," he admitted and let out a small nervous laugh. "Just, um --" He stopped, his mind completely empty.

"Playing video games all night?" the man asked with a small laugh. "My grandson is just like that. Scrawny thing, too. He forgets to eat once he sits in front of that machine."

Mike let out a sigh. "Yeah, that's totally me, too." It was easy to lie when it was the truth. It didn't matter that he had been kept late by something else, or better said, someone else. That reminded him that he needed to text Ryan and told him he had arrived safely. Murmuring

apologies, he hurried to the server room and closed the door behind him. For good measure, he checked it a few times, and only after that, he texted.

At work. Arrived safely. Mike stopped. Was it safe to add anything else? He hesitated. What if someone could peek over Ryan's shoulders, and a simple text was enough to launch a nuclear disaster? But it felt like he gave Ryan the cold shoulder by sending such a short message. *Thank you for everything.* There. It didn't give away anything, and at the same time, it let some of his feelings show.

His phone remained silent for only a minute or so.

Great. I miss you already.

Mike smiled as he read the message. *I know.*

Teasing me much?

What I meant is that I miss you, too.

This is better.

Mike couldn't keep in a grin if it killed him. He sat at the computer. What could he say to keep the texts going? Then he remembered that he needed to meet Adrian that evening. *How late can we see each other tonight?*

Why? Do you have other obligations? (smiley face).

It was a bit funny how Ryan chose to write 'smiley face' instead of sending an emoji like everyone else. *Actually, I have. My best friend is in some kind of romantic crisis.*

Jared? The long-haired cutie from that night?

Mike smiled. Everyone thought that about Jared. He was about to reply when another text followed.

I apologize. I shouldn't call your friend a cutie. You're the cutest.

Don't worry. Everyone thinks Jared is a cutie. But it's my other best friend who needs to see me tonight. Adrian. Mike pondered for a moment. *I'm really sorry about this. If you can't meet me tonight, it's okay.*

I can. Just send me a message when you're free. It doesn't matter how late it is.

Mike felt relieved. *I will.* His fingers hovered; what could be a good way to finish that conversation? He wasn't bold enough to send eggplants and other suggestive emojis.

This day already seems so long.

Of course, Ryan could think of something elegant and romantic, while Mike's head was full of eggplants.

You know what else is long?

Mike scratched his head. What could Ryan mean by that?

His phone pinged again. *An eggplant.*

Mike burst into laughter. So Ryan's head was also filled with suggestive emojis. He typed back. *My thought exactly.*

Is this sexting? I've never done it.

Me either. Mike was completely honest.

Unfortunately, I'll have to go to a meeting soon.

I also need to work. Mike hesitated just a second. *I can barely wait to kiss you again.*

Easy on the sexting, Micah. I might not be able to control myself. Who knows? I might even knock up our business partners.

Mike winced at the reminder of his small blunder right after he had confessed to Ryan in his office barely twenty-four hours ago. *Well, you're not allowed to do that,* he typed promptly.

Are you going to keep me in line?

I'll do my best.

All right. Then I'll behave. See you tonight.

Mike decided to reply with a kissing emoji this time.

Counting the hours ... In the meantime, I'll keep this kiss close to my heart.

Do that. Mike couldn't believe his audacity. But he wanted Ryan to do that. *I can't believe I'm so lucky to have you.*

Stop sexting with me already, Micah.

You're the one who keeps on sending romantic messages. I can't help it.

Then I should stop.

No, don't stop. I mean, until you have to leave.

I'd do this all day long. But my assistant is already eyeing me with annoyance from across the room. See you tonight, my love.

Mike's heart skipped one small beat at those words. Ryan was a busy man. He needed to be mindful of his time, and stop bothering him with texts throughout the day.

And it was going to be such a long one. Ryan was right.

"I hope you don't mind my bringing Shane along," Jared said apologetically, as soon as Adrian opened the door and held it for them.

Adrian shrugged. "You two are an item. I expected you would come together."

To illustrate that, Adrian shared a handshake and a hug with Shane.

Jared had a mind to protest at him and Shane being called an item, but Adrian looked absent-minded and upset, so there was no point in starting an argument about where things between him and Shane stood. He risked an apologetic look at Shane only to be met with a goofy grin. Of course, Shane would find it funny, and there was no surprise there.

The number one priority was a best friend with a broken heart. There was a tension in Adrian's shoulders as he moved throughout his apartment, gesturing for them to follow him.

"Your place is cool," Shane said, breaking the uncomfortable silence.

Jared preferred to allow other people to speak, and he wanted Adrian to start talking whenever it felt comfortable for him. Shane was a different type of person, and, right now, Jared was happy things stood like that. Adrian would need his friends, but the addition to their group couldn't hurt. Somewhat nervously, Jared reminded himself how well Shane had handled Mike's insecurities before. Not that Adrian had insecurities. A different approach was needed, but he would just have to make things work on the fly.

They took place around the table, except for Adrian. Jared quirked an eyebrow at the sight of the bottle of strong liquor and the glasses. It wasn't like Adrian to get smashed. He was the kind to think that his body was a temple, so he never overindulged.

Without asking them anything, Adrian filled their glasses. He gazed in the distance, and his lips moved slightly like there was an internal war going on beneath the surface. Jared knew that he had to ask sooner or later --

"What happened, man?" Shane asked, taking the glass offered by Adrian. "You two looked picture perfect two nights ago."

Great. The cowboy was ready for action. Jared couldn't be upset, though; tip-toeing around the subject wouldn't help Adrian.

Adrian clasped the back of the chair until his knuckles turned white. His lips set in a straight line. A loud knock announced them that Mike was there, too. With a small murmur of apology, Adrian went to get the door.

“Did I speak out of turn?” Shane whispered in Jared’s ear, taking him by surprise.

“You do your thing,” Jared said with a small wave of the hand. “Frankly, I’m glad you’re here. Adrian looks terrible. And it’s not like him to get drunk.” He gestured at the table.

Adrian came back with Mike.

“Hi, guys.” Mike kissed Jared on both cheeks and offered a solemn hand to Shane only to be pulled into a half hug over Jared’s head.

Mike looked really well; Jared examined him briefly. That confession must have done him a lot of good, but Jared had a feeling that he was missing something. He would ask later. His attention trained back on Adrian, who looked like a god of vengeance and doom, a dark expression etched on his face.

“He broke up with me,” Adrian started abruptly. “Right after I told him that I loved him.”

The air was suddenly sucked out of the room. Jared exchanged a quick look with Mike. His other best friend looked as dumbstruck as him.

“What a dick.” That was Shane, who, apparently, wasn’t aware of the magnitude of the moment. Had Adrian ever said those words to anyone? Jared wasn’t entirely sure he had, not even to Alexander, a long time ago.

“I know, right?” Adrian laughed humorlessly. He took a sip from his glass and slammed it on the table.

That startled Jared and Mike, but Shane appeared completely unfazed. “Is he a coward or an asshole?”

Jared inserted a small nervous chuckle. “Let’s not jump to conclusions and be judgmental. It could be that Edward had a reason --”

Mike tugged his elbow. “We should be on Adrian’s side, right?” he whispered, although everyone else in the room could hear them.

That left Jared with his mouth hanging open. That was true, but he had a feeling that trash-talking Edward wouldn’t help Adrian much.

“Yep. He had a reason. I mean he must have had one,” Adrian replied, and his frown deepened.

“All right,” Jared said, seeing how the other two people at the table remained silent. “What could it be? You’re the one who knows him, Adrian.”

“Beats me,” Adrian said and ran one hand through his hair in evident exasperation. “He told me we were done since Sunday, but then, on Monday, we had dinner and awesome sex.”

“So, it all went downhill once you told him ... that?” Jared swallowed thickly. If Adrian asked for help, it had to be because something mattered more than pride, and that said something. As astonishing as that sounded, Adrian had to be in love with Edward.

Adrian nodded. He paced the room for a few seconds while everyone else watched him like they were sitting in the stands at a tennis match. “I mean, everything was going so damned fine!” He exploded all of a sudden.

This time, Jared was prepared. Adrian needed a way to channel all his anger. But, as a friend, he needed to use his head and common sense. “Adrian, I think he loves you back,” he said calmly. “Sunday, when we were all together, I couldn’t stop thinking that you two looked amazing together.”

“Don’t lie to me, J.” Adrian threw him a loaded look. “I know you mean well --”

Jared put one hand up to stop him. “This isn’t about that. It’s just too shocking that he broke up with you after you confessed. From what you told me before, I thought I would meet a pretentious prick with a load of chips on his shoulders. But that wasn’t the person we met on Sunday. Right, guys?”

“I was surprised, too,” Mike confirmed. “And the way he turned his head and looked at you each time you said something ... I’m behind J on this.”

Adrian turned his attention to Shane. “What do you think?”

Jared couldn’t be hurt over having his and Mike’s opinions being overlooked. Adrian was a mess and probably felt insecure as hell --

“I just want to hear Shane, too,” Adrian said, looking at him as if he had just read his mind. “I heard you, guys. And I appreciate it.”

Jared smiled. “It’s okay, Adrian.”

“Shane is awesome at giving advice,” Mike chimed in.

“So I heard,” Adrian said. “So, Shane, what do you think?”

Shane studied his glass for a while and scratched his head. “Jared and Mike saw what they saw and they’re right.”

That sounded a bit ominous. Jared felt his ears perking up. What could it be that Shane had noticed and they hadn’t?

“Dude’s head over heels,” Shane added.

What was with the moments of suspension? Jared felt his impatience growing. “But ... There’s a ‘but’, right?” he hurried Shane.

“He was nervous,” Shane replied in a deadpan voice. “He was tapping his foot.”

“Tapping his foot?” Adrian quirked an eyebrow. “Like he wanted to be out of there?”

“He also glanced at his watch a few times,” Shane added.

“I didn’t know I was ...” Jared swallowed the word ‘sleeping’ in the nick of time, “friends with Sherlock Holmes. So, you think Edward didn’t want to be there, with us?”

“I don’t think that. I think he was disoriented about liking being there. And he forgot all about being nervous the moment Adrian touched him or said something. It was like all his worries melted.”

Adrian was staring at Shane like he was from another planet. Jared was no less surprised.

“I think I remember seeing him do that, I mean, looking at his watch,” Mike intervened.

Adrian shook his head. “Well, that’s weird. How come I didn’t notice?”

Shane shrugged. “You were too happy to see that kind of stuff.”

“How come I didn’t notice?” Jared expressed his astonishment.

“You were too taken with Shane,” Mike said promptly.

Jared turned toward him, his eyes wide.

“Damn it.” Adrian slammed the wall, startling them. “What the hell is wrong with him?”

“You could call him and ask for an explanation,” Jared suggested.

Adrian shook his head. He wasn’t looking at either of them, too busy leading his internal war. “He won’t answer.”

“How can you know for sure?” Jared insisted.

“He’s all about control,” Adrian said. “It would be easy for him to reject my calls and shut me down completely.”

“So, let me get this straight,” Shane intervened. “He told you that you were supposed to be done, but he still came to meet you the next day?”

Adrian nodded.

“Hmm.” Shane leaned back in his chair and stretched his legs. Jared stared for a moment at their thighs touching. “This guy wants you, but there’s something else afoot.”

“Like what?” Adrian asked in an irritated voice.

Jared knew Adrian wasn’t annoyed by Shane. Still, he felt a bit of protectiveness pushing him into action. “Shane cannot know. You shouldn’t be upset with him.”

Shane placed one hand on Jared’s knee and squeezed it in an affectionate gesture. “It’s all right. There could be anything, Adrian. Maybe he’s stressed by something else, and the thought of getting in a relationship complicates his life. At least, that’s what he could be thinking.”

Adrian lowered his head in defeat. “He made it quite clear to me that we would be over the moment I started talking about feelings.”

“And?” Shane interjected. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“That maybe I knew this was coming and went for it anyway. What does that make me? Stupid?”

“No way,” Jared protested.

“You’re the smartest guy I know,” Mike added.

“It makes you a guy who knows what he wants,” Shane said.

Adrian perked up at that. He even smiled. “Thanks, guys. Still, what the hell does Edward want?”

“You’ll have to find out,” Shane offered right away.

“But Adrian thinks that Edward won’t take his calls,” Jared pointed out.

“Then he’ll have to meet him in person,” Shane replied.

Adrian nodded. “I was thinking the same thing. I’ll just go and confront him.”

“But not tonight,” Shane said, putting one hand up solemnly.

“Why not?” Adrian looked like he was about to fly out the door.

“Because,” Shane continued in a slightly preachy, but adorable, tone, “you want him to have a bit of time to realize what he’s done. Leave him alone a few days, and when he’s like a cat on hot-tin roof --”

“What’s that even supposed to mean?” Jared expressed his wonder.

Adrian didn’t seem fazed by Shane’s choice of words. “Go on, Shane. You can explain that to J later.”

Jared had a mind to protest to that, but Adrian had his whole attention trained on Shane now.

“What I mean is that if you go after him right now, he might just think he did the right thing. Let him have some doubts about it all. You know, let him get ripe and ready for a picking.”

Jared covered his face with both hands. Shane had a funny way with words, and this wasn’t the time to be funny. It was a serious situation, and Adrian needed serious advice. “And how would you know about this stuff, Sherlock?”

“My momma taught me all about men,” Shane replied good-naturedly. “I used to watch old movies with her.”

For some reason, Shane, as a kid watching romantic movies with his mother, struck a sensitive chord inside Jared. His advice came from the heart, and Jared couldn’t help but agree with him. “I think you should go with what Shane says, Adrian,” he said. “You don’t want to appear desperate. Let Edward think a little of his stupidity.”

“I second that,” Mike said solemnly.

Adrian sighed and finally took place at the table. “I had a feeling I could count on you, guys. I think it will be hard to wait, but I have a feeling I have to.”

Shane raised his glass. “To Adrian and may he be successful in winning over Edward.”

That sounded awfully formal, but again, Jared agreed. Adrian looked a bit calmer than before, so that was a win. Plus, he had a feeling that his initial plan of offering Adrian lots of hugs couldn’t have beaten the one laid out by Shane.

“Were you annoyed with me? Earlier?” Shane asked him directly.

“No.” Jared shook his head to make a point. “All right. Maybe I’m a little jealous. You find it so easy to come up with ideas. I envy you.”

They had left Adrian in a much better mood, and Jared felt good about it. Much of that was thanks to Shane and his straightforward manner of treating any problem. Jared stopped; they

were in the middle of the street, but he wouldn't wait until they got home to offer proper apologies for his behavior. Shane had noticed it and was in his rights to be upset about it, although nothing about how he acted betrayed such a thing.

He took Shane's hand. "I'm sorry, Shane. I really am. I might be a little possessive about my friends, which must be at least a bit weird. I'm the ... mother hen, as they say. Now my little chicks take advice from someone else, and I act jealous. And that's just dumb. So, I apologize for letting it show."

Shane examined him for a long moment. His hand was rough and warm, and Jared liked to run his fingers over it. "Mother hen? Does that make me the rooster?"

Jared pouted. "Of course, all you see is another opportunity to laugh at me."

He made a move to walk, but Shane embraced him from behind forcefully, almost making him stumble. "I'm not laughing at you, babe," he whispered in Jared's ear, making him shiver slightly. "All I want is to make you laugh."

Jared had to make an effort to find his voice. That was too romantic to let it go. "Shane, you know you're going to make someone very happy one day, don't you?"

"I know," Shane whispered again, caressing Jared's ear with his lips.

There was no trace of boasting in those words. That was Shane. A guy who knew exactly who he was and had no fear of showing it.

Mike had to correct at least a dozen typos as he texted Ryan, too excited with the prospect of having his boyfriend over. His head had been in the clouds all day long, and only their get together at Adrian's had grounded him a little. Silently, he apologized to his friends for feeling so happy; he had been so swept away with the way things had progressed between him and Ryan that he had totally forgotten to tell all about it to J and Adrian. There was plenty of time, and he wanted to surprise everyone by introducing Ryan as his boyfriend to the entire crew. He could bet that Shane would be the least surprised. Jared's boyfriend had a clarity for seeing things few people Mike knew had.

Ryan replied right away. *Let's try your place tonight.*

Mike pondered for a bit. *Won't Bran be lonely if you're not home?*

It's clear who's going to be the doting parent of us two.

Parent? Mike stared at the screen. It was possible that Ryan thought of Bran, but there was a hint at something else. Could it be that Ryan wanted ... a family? Like children? Mike wasn't sure his mind had ever taken him that far.

There was a possibility that he was misinterpreting things, and he was, after all, the one thinking of families, kids, and picket fences. Did Ryan have picket fences? He couldn't recall.

Was it possible to dream so far into the future? Where would they be five, ten years from now? Mike shook his head. He was getting ahead of himself, and also letting anxiety, his old friend, get the better of him. For now, Ryan had feelings for him. Feelings of love.

You know, the absence of a reply makes me a little nervous.

Mike jumped when his phone pinged. *Busy making the house presentable enough for guests. Sorry about that.*

It was a little white lie. Filling Ryan's head with his doubts and what-ifs didn't sound like a good idea. And he needed to tidy up a little anyway. During such moments, Mike was glad that his home was tiny.

Was the bed going to hold them both? Mike felt doubts creeping in. Maybe they could do it on the floor? But what reason could he invoke for such a silly thing? He could say that he had always wanted to try it.

And don't worry about Bran. He's a good kid. Also, I won't be gone all night.

Mike deflated. So Ryan wouldn't spend the night. That was good, in a way; his bed wouldn't have to succumb yet to the challenge of holding them both. Ah, he was just so dumb. He could have just told Ryan that it would be better to go over to his.

I thought that I should let you sleep some. You're still the same hard worker. I wouldn't want our relationship to become too taxing for you.

Ryan always thought of everything.

How long can you stay? Mike typed quickly. If their time was limited, he needed to plan. Did he have condoms? He began rummaging through all the drawers. Checked. What about lube? Ah, he had that, too. Good thing he had Jared as a friend who had taught him to be prepared for all eventualities. Now that an eventuality that required the presence of condoms and lube in the house was imminent, Mike was glad he was, indeed, prepared.

A couple of hours. I'm almost out the door. Do you want me to bring some food?

Mike pondered only a second. *No. I don't want to waste time eating.*

I appreciate the honesty. But I'll bring something for you to have for later or tomorrow morning. Is that okay?

Mike's heart melted a little more. *More than okay. You're a lifesaver.*

Just your boyfriend. It comes with the territory.

Mike sat on the sofa with a cushion under his arm. *You're the best boyfriend ever.*

I hope so. When it comes to my love life, I don't like competition.

Hurry. I can't wait to see you. Ah, don't hurry that much. Don't break the speed limit and stuff.

No worries. All I want is to get to you in one piece. After that, I don't care what happens to me.

Mike smiled. But why the hell they were texting instead of speaking on the phone? Maybe Ryan was already in traffic. But texting was more dangerous. Mike wasn't entirely sure, but common sense pointed in that direction.

Are you driving?

Not yet. Too busy texting my cute boyfriend.

Mike was sure he would never get tired of hearing that. Or reading that. *Okay. Let's stop texting. Not that it's not nice to text. I love it. But I want you here already.*

Stop tempting me to break the speed limit.

Don't break the speed limit.

Ay, ay, captain.

Mike grinned at the screen. Ryan, with his romantic and sometimes even goofy texts, was more than what he had imagined when Mike had been busy pining over him. He sighed in contentment. What else did he have to do to welcome his guest?

Oh, damn. Mike hurried toward the shower. Maybe Ryan wouldn't break the speed limit, but he would surely have the fastest shower in history.

Mike grabbed the bag with food from Ryan's arms, left it on the small table by the door, and grabbed his boyfriend's hand.

"Hey, hello to you, too," Ryan joked.

"No time. The clock's ticking," Mike replied.

He dragged Ryan to the bedroom and pushed him down on the floor next to the bed on the blankets he placed there so that they could go wild as much as they want without fear of breaking any furniture.

“Like this?” Ryan was amused by Mike’s sudden attack, and not in the least annoyed.

Mike let out a noncommittal grunt as he began to unbutton Ryan’s shirt. After taking a quick shower, he had agonized over how to go about their little rendezvous that he had ended up more worked up than he thought possible. Now, his body was aching for Ryan, and that desire that he had tried to keep in check for the last ten minutes spilled over.

He ran his fingers through Ryan’s chest hair, enjoying its coarseness.

“Wow, am I a sex object?”

Mike could tell Ryan was joking, by how his voice sounded, but he looked up to make sure. He blushed, suddenly mortified by his behavior. His hands withdrew, but Ryan caught them. “If I’m your sex object, then I don’t mind. And it’s nice to see you taking the reins.”

Mike grinned. He must have looked pretty goofy because Ryan began laughing. Before he had time to protest, Ryan pulled him into a kiss. Mike got busy taking them both out of their clothes, which proved a bit more complicated than he thought.

He straddled Ryan quickly and glued their chests together. It was so nice to feel the coarse hair on the other’s body against his bare skin; it was intimate in a way Mike had never thought of before. This wasn’t just lust. He wanted Ryan’s smell all over him until they became one.

All right, so it was about lust, too. Rough hands began to knead his buttocks in earnest, making it clear what would follow soon. Mike pushed himself up only so that he could grab a condom and lube. Faced with a hard cock, he wasted no more time. He held the rubber and the bottle in his hands awkwardly, took one deep breath and descended directly over the current object of his obsession with his mouth. He rested his elbows against Ryan’s thighs and began bobbing his head up and down.

A small laugh followed, and the supplies were seized from his hands. That was better. He could finally adjust his position so that he could take Ryan’s cock deeper and deeper. Like he had seen in movies, he tried to look up, hoping that he didn’t look weird with his mouth full. Ryan’s eyes were fire, deep and dark. Mike let his eyelids drop, taken over by a new wave of desire.

“Get your sexy ass down on my cock, Micah,” Ryan demanded in a breathless whisper. “I want to watch you fucking yourself on my cock.”

A thrill and a shiver coursed through his entire body. Mike wasn’t a fan of the on top position, overly conscious of his body, but if it were after him, no sex position would have been ideal. He

would have to deal with Ryan's burning eyes. Despite all his usual anxieties, he was pretty sure he would survive that trial by fire.

Mike helped Ryan put the condom on, and he got busy preparing himself. He gasped when he straddled his lover again, now the blunt head resting against his behind. Steady hands grabbed his hips to help him.

"You have no idea how beautiful you are right now," Ryan whispered.

Mike let out a small nervous laugh. Would he ever get used to compliments like that? Hopefully, yes. And, just as hopefully, he would like to hear them again and again.

He finished his descent on Ryan's cock with a small satisfied sigh. It was already fun. His body was getting used to the treatment, and Mike wanted more of it. Ryan continued to praise him, as he raised one hand to touch Mike's lips, enticing him to capture the thumb and suck it in.

"You're so naughty," Ryan teased him.

Mike began moving his hips. His handsome boyfriend would get it, just how naughty he could be. The tool inside his ass was hard and hot, a clear proof of Ryan's desire, and assurance that he wasn't half bad at riding.

"Yes, like this," Ryan encouraged him, while their bodies met over and over.

Mike let out a small cry when Ryan grabbed his cock and began rubbing it fast. The sudden image of shooting all over Ryan's chest and sexy abs caused his arousal to rise up a notch again. Mike knew nothing about riding in general, but his hips moved and moved, while his cock enjoyed being gripped by a strong hand. He was fucking himself into Ryan's cock at one end, and his lover's hand at the other, and it was a race against his thighs that were starting to burn. Luckily, his entire nervous system was flooded by happiness hormones, and the pain was a faint sensation.

In disbelief, he watched at his own cock erupting, spreading its seed in an impressive ark all over Ryan. His breath erratic, he could barely keep up any rhythm after that, so he wasn't surprised when Ryan maneuvered him to land on his back and began to pump his ass like a madman.

Mike could feel his ass twitching, still glad about that assault, but incapable of eliciting anything more than a few shivers and gasps from his tired self. Ryan kept up the infernal rhythm for only a couple of minutes, and soon, he pushed a few last times, his cock turning into pulsating steel in Mike's ass.

They stood embraced like that for a while, Ryan whispering sweet words into his ear, Mike caressing his hair and shoulders, too grateful for words.

"I'm so sorry that you have to go," Mike murmured.

“Are you going to kick me out already?” Ryan replied, his voice spent, but happy and amused.

“No, there’s still time,” Mike said. “Every minute you promised is mine.”

“We won’t be apart like this long. Will you move in with me once your two weeks are up?”

Mike remained stunned, lost for words.

“Ah, damn.” Ryan rested his forehead against Mike’s. “Too soon?”

Mike threw his arms over Ryan. “No.”

“It’s all right. I can deal with a bit of stepping back.”

“Ryan.” Mike knew that he needed to stop his boyfriend from rambling. “I’ll move in with you. I mean, what I am, crazy to say no? Of course, I would. Sorry about not replying immediately. When I’m happy, I turn speechless.” Ryan pulled back only so that they could look each other in the eyes. Mike offered a small smile. “Wait, were you nervous? About asking me?”

Ryan replied with a strained grin.

Mike could feel his eyes turning into saucers in his head. “No way,” he whispered. “What reason would you have for that? I mean, you’re handsome, and an awesome lover. How could I say no?”

Ryan shrugged and looked away. Mike remained silent for a moment and then burst into laughter.

Ryan frowned and bit his nose playfully.

“Ouch.” Mike tries to escape, but Ryan began to bite his cheek. “Are you a dog?”

“Why did you laugh? Did you laugh at me?” Ryan began to munch on his ear, which was pretty distracting.

“I’m supposed to be the nervous one!”

“Really?”

Mike managed to push Ryan away just a bit. “Really. I’m nervous and awkward, remember?”

“Hmm, right. Just my type.”

Ryan returned to his playful biting that turned into small kisses.

“Are you serious about this, Ryan? Moving together?” He didn’t like the waver in his voice, but there was no helping it.

“Do you want me to leave Bran alone every night?”

“No,” Mike protested. “I will come by your place.”

“Every night?”

“Yeah. I mean, if you’re not busy.”

“And what will you do? Run back here every morning?”

“I’d just take a cab or a Uber.”

“And spend a fortune on that,” Ryan said matter-of-factly.

“Right. Maybe I should get a car.”

“But I want to see you every day, too, not just every night,” Ryan said.

“Then I’ll come straight to you from work.”

“I see. So it will be like you live at my place.”

Mike stopped. He couldn’t argue with that kind of logic. “Soon, I’ll be jobless. It will be like I’m freeloading on you.”

“Hmm, I’m down with that,” Ryan purred into his ear. “Cute freeloaders are my thing.”

“But I’ll find a job,” Mike said with determination.

“I don’t doubt it.”

“And I’ll still have to make some Uber drivers rich.”

“I’ll drive you to work.”

“Ryan, you’re a busy man. You run a company and stuff.”

“I’ll find time for you. I won’t be that kind of busy hus-- I mean, boyfriend, who neglects his cute lover.”

Mike caressed Ryan’s face. Their eyes met. “You’re the best boyfriend, Ryan.”

And someday, the best husband. Oops, his mind was going places again. But it was hard to rein it in with Ryan’s hot body pressed against him, and his sexy voice filling his mind with dreams.

“Will you move in with me, Micah? Once we no longer have to keep it a secret?”

Mike nodded as solemnly as he could, given their position on the hard floor. “I will.”

Ryan kissed him deeply. “Can I ask one more thing?”

Mike nodded enthusiastically.

“Don’t kick me out before I make love to you once more.”

Like he could fathom a sacrilege like that. To make his response clear, Mike wrapped his legs around Ryan and pulled him close.

Chapter Twenty-Four – He Said ...

He rarely drove, and his car was used to catch dust in the parking lot, but he had to do it for this particular quest. Adrian stood, his mind a haze, his hands resting still on the wheel, a few yards away from Edward's house. He had rehearsed everything he wanted to say over and over, but his words became a mess the more he repeated them. Claspings the wheel tightly, he was about to get out of the car when the large gate to the mansion opened, and Edward's limousine passed through. By the looks of it, the owner of the house was on the backseat.

Without overthinking, Adrian ignited the engine. What was he supposed to do now? Follow him? It sounded stalkerish, but Adrian didn't care about nuances at this point. For the fourth night that week, he had caught almost no sleep. No matter how final Edward's words from their last meeting had sounded, he needed one last explanation and definitive answer. He could only hope that Edward would be honest and tell him the truth. All that talk with the boys had convinced him that it was the most important thing he had to try.

The limousine didn't hurry, whatever the destination was, and Adrian prayed silently that it wouldn't be some fancy club where only members could enter. To his relief, the car stopped in front of a restaurant, and Edward was helped out of the backseat by his driver, who ceremoniously held the door.

From one side, someone walked over to Edward, and Adrian froze. Even from that distance, it appeared that the newcomer was a young man, no, probably a teenager, dressed in an expensive suit. Little else could be said about his features. There seemed to be affection between Edward and him as they shook hands and kissed each other on the cheeks before walking inside together.

The wave of jealousy clouding his judgment for a moment took him completely by surprise. So, it hadn't taken Edward long to replace Adrian. Or, worse, he hadn't had to do that; that thought brought a pang to his chest that stopped his breathing for a moment. He was a complete moron. Adrian pursed his lips. Well, if that was the truth, at least, now, he knew where he stood.

He walked into the restaurant with a nonchalant gait that was nothing but an act. He approached the maître d' with a charming smile. "I'm with Mr. Hastings," he explained, after greeting the man.

The maître d' quirked a thin eyebrow and examined the log in front of him.

"If you could just point me to that table, that would be wonderful," Adrian said as he quickly scanned the floor. He noticed Edward and his companion at a table in a corner. "Ah, I see them. Thank you for your assistance."

The maître d' stood nonplussed for just one second, and then he hurried from behind his desk. "Mr. Hastings is down with just one other person. Would you please let me check with him, first, sir?" the man said politely, but firmly.

Adrian was already walking toward Edward. He could see him just fine, but he couldn't make of his companion anything else but the back of his head. The young man had blond hair, a bit on the rebellious side by how it was sticking everywhere, and Adrian thought, with petty satisfaction, that he didn't fit Edward's pretensions for a perfect presentation.

"Sir, sir?" The maître d' sounded alarmed now and sauntered after Adrian.

The ruckus didn't pass unnoticed, as a few people at the tables stopped their conversation to observe what was happening. Edward raised his eyes and met Adrian's. For a second, he appeared surprised, but then his face schooled itself into a neutral demeanor. He stood up from his chair and gestured for Adrian.

Was Edward secretly taking acting classes? No one could suspect what he was thinking. Adrian felt a small chill down his back; it could be that he had never really known Edward, and he was simply delusional in his misplaced affection.

"Mr. Hastings, is this gentleman with you?" the maître d' asked in a slightly annoyed tone.

"Yes. Apologies for not letting you know in advance. It simply slipped my mind."

The maître d' turned into a sycophant in an instant, murmuring apologies. "I will send another menu to your table right away."

"Thank you, Mr. Garmont," Edward said, inclining his head an inch. "Adrian, please have a seat."

It was fucking surreal. The plan wasn't to walk in and sit politely at the same table with Edward and his latest conquest, or whoever that young man was. Adrian pursed his lips hard, but Edward warned him with his eyes. He pulled the chair and sat, although his teeth were grinding at the moment.

Edward's companion was examining him with curious eyes. Adrian stole a glance at him. Fuck, he was young and pretty. His big blue eyes were like taken from a commercial, and Adrian had to keep himself from staring. He couldn't be older than eighteen, and even that was a bit of a stretch. Boy, Edward liked them young, he thought with spite.

"Well," Edward started, once the maître d' was out of earshot, "to what occasion do I owe the pleasure?"

"We still have things to talk about," Adrian said, staring down stubbornly. He was afraid he would feel tempted to strangle someone, preferably Edward, if he looked up.

"You could have called."

"And you could have turned down my calls."

They spoke in low voices, and Edward smiled a few times perfunctorily until the interest around them died down. Adrian wasn't that good an actor.

"All right. This is not the time, nor the place --" Edward started.

Adrian turned toward the teenager sitting at the table who took in everything with eyes big as saucers. "How about you go powder your nose or something, sugar?"

The blue eyes widened so much that it felt like they were bent on swallowing the young man's entire face. "Sugar?" He snickered and looked at Edward. "Who's this, Ed?"

"None of your business, plaything," Adrian said through his teeth.

"Plaything?" The youngster didn't appear offended, just surprised.

"Yeah," Adrian said, now too worked up. "Edward, I had no idea you like your lovers this young. Barely legal," he added, after throwing another condescending look in the direction of Edward's companion. "You could have told me this is how you roll."

Edward frowned. "Keep your voice down, Adrian. This is my cousin --"

Cousin?

"Is this Adrian?" The teenager was obviously excited. "O.M.G." He grabbed Adrian's arm and leaned over the table to have a good look at him. "He is so frigging sexy!"

"Christian, do I have to reprimand you, too?" Edward became a bit aggravated.

Christian's eyes moved between Edward and Adrian, and then he nodded thoughtfully. "You two have matching dark circles."

Adrian looked at Edward. His aristocratic face was drawn, and he appeared tired, which was unlike him. Tough day at work? What could make Edward, who always seemed sharp no matter the moment of the day, look like that? He was still elegant, his hair was still brushed to perfection, but his eyes were dull.

"Your cousin? This is your cousin?" Adrian asked.

"Edward is my fifth cousin, once removed," Christian explained, although the question hadn't been directed at him.

Adrian didn't know what to say for a moment. Some of his righteous anger was gone, and he needed to regroup his thoughts. Somewhat intrigued, he turned toward Christian. "How do you know about me?" he asked directly.

Christian seemed to have barely waited to be asked that. “Are you kidding me? Ed told me all about you! And boy, you do live up to expectations. How was the test?”

“The test?” Adrian wanted to turn toward Edward for confirmation, but he was too interested in what Christian had to say.

“Don’t tell me he didn’t introduce you to the family,” Christian said, emphasizing the last word.

“What is your cousin talking about?” Adrian asked Edward this time.

Christian was about to say something again.

“Christian Marshall The Third,” Edward said in a voice that brooked no contradiction.

That appeared to have all of the unruly youth’s attention. “You didn’t, right?” Christian asked in a subdued voice. “But why?”

Edward worked his jaw.

“That’s what I would like to know, too,” Adrian said.

“You’re here to reproach me something,” Edward replied instead. “Go ahead and do your best. But please, don’t make a scene. I’d like to come back here.”

Adrian drew one deep breath. “Are we doing this in front of your cousin?”

“When you walked in here, with murder in your eyes, you didn’t appear to care. Do your worst,” Edward said. He seemed upset, and Adrian was a tad disconcerted by that. The tables had somewhat turned, and he had no idea how or why.

“You still came.” Adrian drew one deep breath. “Even if you thought all was over between us, you still came and met me. Why?”

Edward shrugged. “It was a whim.”

Christian intervened. “What are you guys talking about? It’s over between you two? When did that happen?”

Adrian wanted Christian to keep on talking, but Edward stared down his cousin, muting him.

“I don’t buy it,” Adrian said incisively.

“I’m sorry, but I have nothing else to sell,” Edward replied in kind.

“How did you two split up?” Christian intervened.

Adrian knew that very moment that he was a man with nothing to lose. His eyes never leaving Edward, he gave Christian the answer he was waiting for. "I told Edward that I loved him, and he left."

"Wow," Christian whispered, aware of not talking too loud to attract attention. "So, you're a coward, after all, Ed?"

"My thought exactly," Adrian said, feeling vindicated a little by that confirmation.

"You two know nothing about me," Edward spat. "Now, if everything is clear --"

"Nothing's clear!" Adrian said the same thing as Christian almost at the same time.

"I will not tolerate the two of you making a scene here," Edward warned.

"Then you must tell me about this test Christian is talking about, and explain why you didn't think I should take it."

"I thought you were done playing."

"That's not it."

Christian intervened again, now in a conspiratorial voice. "Ed brings home to mom and dad only the potentials."

"Potentials?" Adrian began whispering, too. "For what?"

"For marriage, of course," Christian said in the most natural manner.

"Marriage?" Adrian couldn't believe his ears.

"That's it. I'm done with the two of you." Edward threw his napkin he had been playing with for the last minutes on the table and stood up. "I'll pretend to attend to certain needs in the hope that you, Adrian, won't be here when I get back."

Adrian stared at Edward's retreating back and shook his head. He knew he had to hurry after him, but, once, he didn't want to make a scene, and two, he wanted to hear more explanations from Christian.

"Christian, you seem like a swell guy," Adrian started.

"You, too," Christian replied and smiled. "You thought I was Ed's boyfriend? Were you jealous?"

This one looked like he favored gossip as a type of entertainment. But he seemed like a reliable source of information, and Adrian could see past that, especially since Christian appeared to be an ally, too.

“Yes, madly jealous,” Adrian admitted. “Now, tell me, what’s this talk about marriage? Edward told me clearly that he doesn’t believe in such things.”

Nor in love.

“Well, that’s an act,” Christian explained. “His parents are so afraid he might end up with a gold digger that they are willing to go out of their ways to make sure that doesn’t happen.”

“How, exactly?” Adrian was more puzzled by the second.

“They promised they will disown Edward the moment he finds a guy to marry.”

“Wow. So what’s the test?”

Christian smiled, happy to gossip away. “Edward takes home the potential husband, and then his parents let the guy know that not only he won’t see a dime, but that Edward won’t see one from them, ever again, either.”

“And?” Adrian didn’t sense any of the earlier puzzlement going away.

“And,” Christian sighed, “they kind of got it right because all the guys bailed out the moment they heard that.”

“No shit.” Adrian was surprised. “So, why the hell didn’t I get put to the test?”

Christian shrugged. “Beats me. Of all the others, it looked like Edward liked you the most.”

“For real?” Adrian felt his head buzzing with possibilities.

Christian nodded with conviction. “He talked so much about you. Truth be told,” he lowered his voice and looked around, “I thought I could hear the wedding bells this time around.”

“So, you have no idea why I didn’t get put to this test?” Adrian asked, just to make it sure.

Christian shook his head slowly. “None. I mean, I had no idea you two broke up. And Ed tells me everything.”

Seeing what a gossip Christian was, Adrian doubted that, but he hoped he was wrong. “I must go after him and confront him. Do you have any idea where the bathroom is in this place?”

Christian pointed him in the right direction. “I’ll keep my fingers crossed for you.”

“Thanks, man. Great meeting you.”

“Same here.”

Adrian walked purposefully; he had another thing to make clear now.

The bathroom of a fancy restaurant was not the ideal backdrop for romantic conversation, but Adrian had a feeling whatever they had to share wouldn't be that. His anger returned as he walked in and saw Edward resting his hands against the edge of a sink the size of a small apartment, while the water ran.

"Not caring about saving the planet and all that?" Adrian opened with a joke.

Edward looked at him and turned off the tap. "I can see that you're not well trained, after all. I thought I was clear."

Adrian couldn't care an iota about whatever lies flew out of Edward's mouth right now. He walked toward him until he forced Edward to stand upright so that they could stare at one another. "You left me with your cousin, knowing fully well that he would tell me everything about that weird family test."

"And?" Edward looked up to a fight. He was no longer cool and collected, his usual self. And the dark circles under his eyes were proof that he was still human, after all.

"Why? Why didn't I get put through the wringer, like everyone else?"

"Why? Are you sure you don't know the answer already?"

"Enlighten me. I'm not that clever, as you said before."

Edward bore his eyes into Adrian's. "I suppose Christian explained that only men who I deem worthy of being introduced to the family are invited to meet my parents."

"So? I'm not worthy? Why? Because of my humble origins?" Adrian parodied the words.

"Not at all. That's not an issue. We two established from the get-go that we weren't involved with some happily-ever-after in the cards. I thought you and I were on the same page."

"You mean, you just tried to protect yourself. But if that were true, why would you approach me in the first place? After all, it appears that you are after a husband."

"Maybe I'm not always after that."

They were so close, Adrian could see tiny speckles of gold in Edward's eyes. He could kiss him, right there, stop him from talking nonsense, but that wouldn't be right. Some things had to be said.

"Bullshit," Adrian said, getting dangerously close.

Edward didn't waver. "Believe what you want. I played fair."

“Like hell you did. Tell me, Edward, what are you afraid of, hmm?”

“Afraid?”

“Let me tell you if you’re so hard-headed that you don’t want to admit. You’re afraid of commitment. You want to have your cake and eat it. You’re not sure that you could give up on your parents’ wealth for the sake of love.” Adrian was getting worked up with each word. Good thing the restaurant wasn’t packed, and so far, there had been no interruptions from other patrons. He got into Edward’s face to deliver the final blow. “You told me to be the man because you’re afraid to be one.” With that, he took a step back. “I think I got my answer.”

“You got nothing. You talked and talked.” Edward had blanched during Adrian’s speech, to the point that now he looked alarmingly pale. “You have no idea what I’m afraid of.”

“Oh, really? Then why don’t you illuminate me, Your Majesty?”

Edward seemed to hesitate for a moment.

“Spit it out,” Adrian said abruptly. “I’ve already lost all my sleeping hours this week because of you.”

That appeared to surprise Edward, which was strange, seeing that Christian had pointed out loud that they both had matching dark circles. Could it be that Edward doubted his feelings? After Adrian had practically bitten a big fat bullet to say those cheesy words that, as lame as they were, told the truth and nothing but?

“I’m afraid,” Edward said slowly, punctuating every word, “that you’re like everyone else.”

Adrian remained dumbfounded for a moment, although he had suspected as much during their little conversation. “Pardon my French, Your Majesty, but are you fucking stupid?”

“Insulting me won’t get you anywhere. It is my right to maintain an illusion if that’s what it takes.”

Adrian moved and took Edward’s hand. It was cold and clammy. “Put me through that frigging test.”

“It’s not a test. Christian is talking nonsense. My family is looking out for me.”

“Which I can and am willing to do. Even better than them,” Adrian said, fully aware of the aggressiveness in his voice.

Edward appeared as if his determination succumbed under Adrian’s assault. But then, he shook his head. “I liked you, Adrian. Allow me to have that. And you talk like someone who has never been truly tempted. I apologize, but I will not let you go through it.”

“You must be kidding me,” Adrian said under his breath. “I want you. Isn’t it enough?”

Edward pulled his hand free and let out a coarse laugh. “You’re not the kind to marry. What are you even talking about?”

“I’d marry you,” Adrian said with nonchalance.

Edward sighed, and some of his usual control returned. “I don’t need you to mess up my life just so that you can prove a point. This is goodbye, Adrian, for real. Please leave me alone.”

Adrian wanted to argue some more, but someone came in. Edward warned him with his eyes. Well, he got some answers, and a new idea was taking root in his mind. He hurried out without saying another word to Edward.

Christian waved at him, the moment he saw him. “How did it go?” he asked excitedly.

“If I give you my number, will you call me?” Adrian interrupted him.

Christian nodded and stole a look behind Adrian. For his plan to be flawless, he didn’t need Edward to catch a whiff of what he was planning. He placed one card on the table, and Christian grabbed it swiftly. At least, there was someone in that family Adrian sensed he would like very much.

Without another word or look behind, he was out. When he had said that he would win the game for Edward, he had told the truth.

Some of what Edward had said about having his Sundays filled with obligations made sense now, Adrian thought after his conversation with Christian. The kid was fun, and Adrian had ended up spending a couple of hours talking to him on the phone. His plan had been received with a lot of enthusiasm, and Adrian felt comforted by the thought that he had an ally behind the enemy lines. Jared and Mike both had called to check on him, both careful about his feelings, but Adrian no longer felt like moping, and his best friends didn’t need to worry.

He felt guilty for being tight-lipped with them about his plan, but this time, when he invited everyone over, it had to be to announce his victory. Also, something else. A grin curled his lips as he thought about how shocked they would all be once he told them the big news.

But he shouldn’t celebrate before climbing in the ring. There were many things to put in order, such as spending a small fortune on a new suit. After all, he needed to make an excellent first impression on his future in-laws.

“I’m close,” Adrian said after greeting the person on the other end.

“Wait for me. I’ll come get you,” Christian whispered in an urgent tone.

Adrian parked at a fair distance from the estate. The Hastings were even bigger shots than he had imagined, so there was no way he would be allowed to pull in the driveway just like that. The surprise element was essential and having Christian working as an inside agent was part of the plan.

He had to wait for almost ten minutes, during which he nervously checked himself in the rearview mirror. Usually, he was proud of his looks, but now he was anxious like a kid on his first day in a new school. This wasn’t his crowd; as charming as he could be, he doubted the people he would meet soon could be that easy to sway.

Christian emerged from behind the high gates, hands in his pockets, his hair as rebellious as the first time they met. He was grinning ear to ear, and it looked like he was happy for something to happen since the Sunday affairs at the Hastings, as he had told Adrian, were self-harm-inducing boring.

He knocked playfully on the car window, and Adrian lowered it so that they could speak.

“Everything all right?” He tried to rein in the anxiety he felt.

Christian offered him a huge smile. “Now would be a good moment to introduce yourself to the family. They are having dessert, and about half of them are already dozing off.” He yawned, pressing a hand over his mouth in an exaggerated gesture.

“How am I going to pass through those gates? I noticed that there is someone manning them. Did Edward’s folks never heard of automated systems?”

“Don’t worry about that. I sent the porter on a fool’s errand, and we have enough time to squeeze you in. But leave the car here; you might need it as a getaway vehicle.”

“Now you’re making me feel a bit uneasy. Will Edward’s dad hunt me down with a rifle from the Second World War or something?”

Christian shrugged, but it looked like he could enjoy that kind of event. “Let’s go. If we meet anyone on the way, I’ll just say you’re a friend of mine.”

“I thought you said this day-long lunches are for family only.”

“Yes, but no one can say rules can’t be bent.”

“Christian, I feel like I need to ask you. Are you sure? Once we’re inside, you could pretend you don’t know me.”

Christian offered a smirk in return. “And risk having you thrown out before getting a chance to light up the seat of their pants? No way. I’m your ride-or-die.” He stretched his arm, hand made into a fist.

Adrian climbed out of the car and pushed his fist into Christian’s, determined not to leave him hanging.

There was so much pride in Christian’s eyes and admiration that Adrian felt a bit embarrassed.

“That was my first brofist,” Christian announced.

Adrian could understand why the kid liked to gossip. It looked like there weren’t many ways for him to have fun. That would change. Once he and Edward --

He shook his head. The war was far from over. He was heading toward the battlefield right now, with nothing on his side by absurd bravery and a deep desire burning hot for a man called Edward Hastings.

The family estate was far more impressive than Edward’s mansion, but Adrian didn’t waste any time to observe the grandeur of the place. What he wanted more than everything was to extract Edward from it and make him his.

Christian became stiffer as they walked inside. A few members of the personnel greeted them in passing, but no one asked about Adrian’s presence. However, a few curious looks landed on him, and Adrian couldn’t stop thinking that the people hired there appeared ready to look down on him if they knew that he didn’t belong there. He played a few snarky remarks in his mind and followed Christian to a large impressive door that supposedly led to the dining room.

“Ready?” Christian whispered.

“I was born ready,” Adrian said with a smirk.

Christian encouraged him with a smile. They stepped inside, and, for a couple of moments, Adrian froze as he took in the opulence of the place. There was even a crystal chandelier hanging from the ceiling, above the long table, at which around twenty people or so sat. Classical music played softly in the background, and the murmured conversation stopped when he entered. Pairs and pairs of curious eyes glued to him.

“Good afternoon,” Adrian said politely. “My name is Adrian Rossi, and I’m here to talk to Mr. Charles Hastings on an important matter.”

The silence continued.

“What is this nonsense?” Someone spoke from the head of the table, at the far end from Adrian.

Suddenly, the murmurs were back, echoing the words of the head of the family.

“Adrian’s with me, uncle Charles,” Christian intervened. “You’ll want to listen to what he has to say.”

Charles stood up, and Adrian had the chance for a good look at him. A man in his sixties, he carried himself like true royalty. His white hair was cut short, without any military rigor, and he appeared to be in perfect shape for his age. Everyone else at the table seemed to be suddenly small, despite him not being a particularly tall man. “And why didn’t Mr. Rossi choose to approach me on a workday?”

Adrian scanned the room, looking for Edward. He sat somewhere in the middle, between two old relatives. His face was white as a sheet, and Adrian pondered briefly over whether he wasn’t about to commit a severe mistake. No, he didn’t have time to second-guess himself. It wasn’t like he was outing Edward to the family. All he wanted was a word with the head of the family. It was needed to prove to Edward that he had meant everything and that he was willing to go the extra mile to prove it.

“This isn’t about business, uncle Charles,” Christian said. “It’s about the family.”

Charles appeared to frown slightly, although, from that distance, Adrian couldn’t read his face well. “I suppose this is unconventional, but please, let’s step into my office, Mr. Rossi.”

Christian nudged Adrian to move, as it seemed that he needed to go behind the row of chairs to follow Charles through a side door. Edward stood up and began walking behind them at a fast pace. “What on earth do you think you’re doing?” he hissed.

Adrian didn’t bother to reply. He walked out of the room with both Christian and Edward in tow. Charles already waited for him in front of another door. “Edward,” he said in an emotionless voice. “What is this about?”

“It concerns me, father,” Edward replied.

A small sign of recognition appeared on Charles’s face. “I see. Let’s get this over with, then. You can go back and entertain our guests, Edward. You, too, Christian. This is between Mr. Rossi and I. And my checkbook,” he added under his breath.

Adrian set his jaw hard. Christian didn’t know the details of the so-called test, but he had a hunch that it wasn’t necessarily about disowning Edward. Whatever Charles hinted at made much more sense. As much as Edward liked to think that his parents had come to terms with his choice of partners, Adrian sensed that it couldn’t be completely true.

He followed Charles into the room, the head of the house called his office. It was as magnificent as the rest of the property Adrian had seen so far, but, again, he didn’t plan on gawking and acting like an uncultured monkey.

He stood, waiting to be told to sit down. Charles was already at his desk, scribbling something in what, indeed, looked like a checkbook. "Don't bother with that, Mr. Hastings."

"Hmm?" Charles looked like he couldn't be bothered to listen.

"I'm not here for your money."

"Adrian," Edward called from behind. "Please, don't make a scene."

"Edward, I thought I told you something," Charles said in the same grave voice from before. "Christian, this is not something you should witness."

It was so strange for all three of them to stand, close to the door, while Charles sat at his desk. The balance of power was evident. Too bad Adrian didn't care for such things.

"I wouldn't miss it for the world," Christian said.

Adrian could tell the kid was grinning without looking at him.

"Close the door," Charles ordered shortly. He continued to scribble down in his checkbook. "Here you go, Mr. Rossi," he said and stretched out his hand. "I think you will find the pay acceptable."

Adrian made no move to take the check. "As I said, Mr. Hastings, I'm not here to take your money. I have plenty of my own."

"Really?" Charles quirked an eyebrow. "And what do you do for a living?"

"I work in advertising. I'm the Advertising Sales Director at the company I'm working for. And I'm just twenty-six years old. In a couple of years' time, I hope to get my own company on its feet."

"A working man," Charles said with a small smile. "If it's not a check you want, perhaps you would be interested in some recommendations. A few accounts would offer you a nice start, I suppose."

"No," Adrian said. "I'm not here to network, sir."

Charles let the check fall on the table. He shifted in his chair and stared at Adrian with new eyes. "What are you here for?"

Edward reached for him and caught his elbow. "Adrian, whatever you think you're doing, stop. And you, Christian --"

"Just to make it clear," Charles began, "is Mr. Rossi one of your male lovers, Edward?"

There was no disdain in how the words were said; they were just cold and measured.

Adrian shook off Edward's touch. He was still plenty angry with him. "Yes, as a matter of fact, I am Edward's boyfriend," he replied.

"Boyfriend." Charles frowned for a second, then his features smoothed out in a neutral expression. "If you please, Mr. Rossi, name your price. As you can see, I have allowed enough already. Our guests are waiting."

Adrian looked one second at Edward. It was all he needed to strengthen his resolve. He was pissed as hell, but he knew, without the shadow of a doubt, why he was there. He turned toward Charles. "I don't have a price, sir. What I want is your son's hand in marriage." Adrian felt a bit stupid saying the words as if they played in a historical drama, and any moment now, the twenty-first century would come bursting through the door.

His words fell like bricks in the silence of the room.

"Adrian, have you lost your mind?" Edward was the first to explode.

"It's all right where it's supposed to be. You shut up now, while I discuss with your father about this important matter."

Charles's eyes grew wide. Adrian could swear he could hear Edward grinding his teeth. Well, he deserved to be put in place after assuming that easily that Adrian would be a sellout.

"This is so touching," Christian intervened. "I need to document this for all eternity."

"Christian, put away that phone or I'll have you swallow it," Charles boomed, taking everyone by surprise. "Get out now. You're too young to hear what I'm about to say."

Christian mumbled something, but he opened the door. "I can be your getaway driver," he whispered to Adrian before leaving the room.

Well, at least the 'ride' part was true in the 'ride-or-die' comment Christian had made earlier. But Adrian couldn't blame him. It looked like Charles Hastings wasn't someone who could be ignored when giving a direct order. Too bad, he couldn't order Adrian around.

"What is this absurdity?" Charles started, as soon as Christian was gone. His eyes moved from Adrian to Edward and back at him.

"I don't care if you choose to disown Edward," Adrian said fearlessly. "All I want is him."

Charles blinked a couple of times. "I thought the foolish idea of marrying a man had long fled your mind, Edward." He turned his attention to his son.

"Adrian doesn't speak for me, father."

"Then what is he doing here?" An unpleasant sneer appeared on the older Mr. Hastings's face.

“I’m here exactly for the reason I presented you,” Adrian said stubbornly. If Edward was a coward, he wasn’t. “I want to marry your son.”

“He doesn’t wish to marry you,” Charles pointed out. “It appears that you’re overstaying your welcome, young man.” He appeared relaxed now.

Adrian didn’t plan on letting the matter go. “He does. He’s just afraid to go against you.”

Charles smirked in satisfaction. “Like any son who truly respects his parents.”

“How many relationships have you ruined for Edward, Mr. Hastings?” Adrian asked.

The question appeared to catch Charles off guard. “Edward has no business marrying a man. I don’t care if other people think such travesty has a place in the world.”

Adrian could feel the tension in his jaw growing. Yet, he kept on a pleasant demeanor. “How about you allow Edward to speak for himself?”

“Nobody keeps him from speaking. He just doesn’t have anything to say.”

Adrian turned to face Edward. He was pale and barely kept it in. He hated to do anything to hurt him right now, but Adrian needed to know. “Don’t you have anything to say, Edward? Is it true what your father says, that he has never ruined anything for you? How many of your lovers did he corrupt with money?”

Edward was paper-white now. Adrian bore his eyes into his. No matter how painful it was, a moment of truth was needed.

Edward didn’t look away from him. “Three... No, four.”

The words were barely uttered. Adrian turned with a triumphant expression on his face toward Charles. “See? Your son does have something to say, after all.”

Charles frowned. “I am already tired of this nonsense. Why did you have to take such a stubborn one to bed this time, Edward?”

Adrian had a few ideas about the reasons, but he wouldn’t scandalize his future father-in-law by opening his mouth on the topic.

“Fine. I’ll go on a limb here and assume that you know how to play your cards, Mr. Rossi.” Charles began writing another check.

“Don’t bother, Mr. Hastings,” Adrian said.

“I will show you, Edward, for the umpteenth time, what these men are made of,” Charles said, pretending to be deaf to Adrian’s words. “Here, Mr. Rossi. It’s enough to open three companies,

not one.” Adrian didn’t move. Charles waved the check as if he could lure Adrian with it. “Take one look at it. You might think that I’m trying to fool you, but I’m not. It’s good to cash in right now. Take it.”

Adrian was starting to get bored with Charles’s display. He took the check, looked at it, recited the amount out loud, and then put it back in front of Charles. “Sorry, still not interested. Edward is the one I want. Just agree and let’s part amiably. I promise you won’t have to see me, ever again.”

Charles’s face smoothed again. He began talking, offering Adrian obscene promises, all the while his eyes glinting. Adrian tuned it all out and started yawning. He put a hand to his mouth. “Is this how you lost the others?” he asked Edward, who stood there with a pained expression on his face.

Adrian had never seen him so messed up. That needed correction.

At his question, Edward just nodded meekly.

Adrian turned toward Charles, who didn’t appear to be capable of stopping talking bullshit. “Well, you’re not going to lose me,” he said to Edward, his eyes never leaving Charles. “I don’t care about any of this stuff.”

Charles seemed to finally relent. “I see. Your stubbornness is absurd. But all of this doesn’t matter since Edward doesn’t plan on marrying you, anyway. I think we’re done here, Mr. Rossi. I suppose you don’t want to walk out of here, escorted like some petty criminal.”

“I’ll be out of your hair in a moment,” Adrian promised. “There’s one last thing I have to do.”

Edward’s mouth went slack when Adrian went down on one knee and offered the small square box that had been in his pocket for the entire day. “Edward Hastings, I’m going to ask you in this stupid cheesy manner, only this time. Will you ditch your fancy life, and come live with me? I promise we won’t end eating only ramen or other non-nutritious meals.”

“What are you asking, idiot?” Edward mumbled, but his eyes were soft like Adrian had never seen them.

“Will you marry me, asshole?” Adrian replied in kind. “This is what I’m asking. And hurry, because this position sucks balls and not in a fun way.”

Charles gasped in what had to be outrage. Probably no one ever talked like that under that roof. Well, there were first times for everything, including Adrian Rossi going on one knee and saying corny stuff.

“Edward, please tell your acquaintance that my patience is running thin.”

“I won’t get up until I hear an answer,” Adrian said. “Yes or no, Edward. What will it be?”

“Just tell him ‘no’ already and end this tasteless display,” Charles said in disgust.

“Yes,” Edward said.

“Then hurry,” Charles said. “You don’t have to confirm everything I’m telling you. Just go ahead and --”

Adrian grinned. “Sorry, sir, but your son just replied to my question.”

Edward was still white as a sheet, but he took the box from Adrian’s hand.

“Edward!” Charles was, apparently, flabbergasted and overwhelmed by the course of events. “You can’t be serious.”

Edward threw one look at Adrian, who stood up, wincing. “I’m afraid I am, dad.”

“Edward, stop this nonsense right now!”

“Let’s go, Edward.” Adrian grabbed his boyfriend’s hand and pulled him toward the door. “We have the getaway car waiting for us.”

“Edward, get back here this instant!”

Adrian didn’t wait to hear more of that. He rushed through the door, hand in hand with Edward.

“Will anyone stop us?” He broke into a sprint, forcing Edward to keep up. “Which way can we get out of here faster?”

Edward took the lead, and Adrian was the one to follow. Apparently, there was a shortcut, and soon they were out of the house.

“Where is your car?” Edward asked, his voice tensed.

“Parked outside,” Adrian replied.

The porter tried to stop them. “Mr. Edward, please --”

“Sorry, man, we can’t stay and chat,” Adrian dodged him, and Edward just murmured something as he followed his example.

A happy honk let him know that his ride-or-die was behind the wheel, as promised. Something was wrong with that picture, but Adrian didn’t have the time to stop and think. Adrian and Edward climbed quickly in the backseat.

“Pedal to the metal, partner,” Adrian said.

“What did he say?” Christian asked.

“He said ‘yes’!” Adrian replied victoriously.

Christian shouted from the top of his lungs as he kicked the engine into gear.

“Oh, damn, are you guys insane?” Edward protested. “No one’s really coming --”

“Oh, shut up already.” Adrian pressed his lips against Edward’s mouth. He had missed that.

Edward struggled against him, much to his annoyance. One would have thought that once he had said ‘yes’, Edward would be less of a pain in the butt.

Adrian tried to kiss him again. Edward kept him away. “Christian doesn’t have a license!”

“What?! Christian!” Adrian sobered up instantly. “Stop the car immediately!” Another realization hit him. “And how the hell did you get the keys?”

“I picked your pocket,” Christian replied, completely unfazed and pleased with himself.

“Where did you get this cousin of yours?” Adrian turned toward Edward. “Juvie?”

Edward just shrugged.

“Stop the car, Christian,” Adrian commanded in the more commanding voice he could muster.

“Just one more minute,” Christian begged. “And I know how to drive.”

“Now, Christian, or you’re not my partner anymore.”

That appeared to convince Christian to stop the car. He groaned and put his head on the wheel.

“And I was looking forward to be chased by the police.”

“Where has the kid lived until now?” Adrian asked. “Chased by the police means being caught by the police, Christian.”

Christian moved from the driver’s seat, making room for him to climb behind the wheel.

“That could be fun, too.”

Adrian shook his head and smiled. Another smile met his eyes in the rearview mirror.

Chapter Twenty-Five - A Practical Romantic

“Join us upstairs?” Adrian offered Christian, but the blond head shook, and a smile as big as the sun followed.

“I just got out of that boring affair, so I don’t plan on hanging out with two old men,” Christian replied.

Adrian smirked. He knew that Edward’s cousin wanted to give them space to work things out. “What are you going to do?”

Christian shrugged. “Maybe go to a bar, start a fight, cool things like that.”

“Christian,” Edward said gravely.

The young man waved. “No worries. It’s just my first free Sunday in forever. I’m going to spend it wisely.”

Adrian had serious doubts about the truth value of that statement. “Well, if you get into any trouble, just give me a call.”

“All right, cousin in law,” Christian said with a smirk. “You two have fun.” He winked exaggeratedly, earning a grin from Adrian and a roll of the eyes from Edward.

Christian waved them goodbye as he sauntered off like a kid who had just heard that the school was out permanently.

“Will he be fine?” he asked Edward.

“He’s the smartest young man I know,” was the reply. “He knows better than get into trouble.” Somehow, Edward didn’t sound completely convinced, but maybe that was the thing with that family. They didn’t allow their young ones to spread their wings and fly.

Adrian had every intention to change that, at least in regards to one particular representative of the illustrious Hastings tribe. He grabbed Edward’s hand and dragged him toward the building entrance.

“Hey,” Edward said in a stern voice, but this time Adrian wouldn’t have it. “Hey, Adrian, slow down,” he added.

“No way. Do you have the slightest idea what you put me through this week?”

Edward fell silent. At least, he could see the errors of his ways. Or so, Adrian hoped.

A young mother with a child no older than five joined them in the elevator. The kid stared for a while until Adrian began making faces at him. The boy snickered and hid his face into his mother's flounce dress.

The woman and child got out on their floor, leaving them alone. Adrian pressed the button and waited impassively for the elevator to move. He still held Edward's hand in his, and he could only hope that the slight tremor he experienced was lost on the other. The adrenaline from earlier had rushed through his system, and now there was room for something else.

Edward followed obediently as they got out on the top floor, and into Adrian's bachelor pad. The door was barely closed when they reached for each other, like drowning men at a rope thrown in their direction by a benevolent hand. Their lips crashed, and for a while, nothing but the fumbling on their clothes being partly taken off, partially ripped from their bodies, could be heard.

Adrian was the first to stop. That was his show, and he intended to run it like he should. He pushed Edward away, although he was sure the hunger he felt was a match for what he could read in the other's eyes. "You," he pointed at his lover, "you stay right there."

The harshness of his words took Edward slightly by surprise, but the light that flashed in the forest eyes burned and turned into a subdued flame. They got each other. They both knew what that was all about.

Adrian went into the bedroom and came back with the object Edward had so quickly discarded the last time he had been here. He gestured, a simple flick of the wrist, and Edward knelt in front of him, head bent in supplication. It was all right like this for a while.

He tugged at the leash and took Edward to a chair. There were no protests as he pushed his lover to sit, and then tied his hands behind using his own tie.

Edward's eyes were burning, but not with defiance, but with a new power that could only be named desire. He repeatedly bit his bottom lip, in an unconscious expression of his repressed want, and his cheeks were a bit flushed. Adrian ran one hand through the wavy chestnut hair, messing it, and then leaned in and pressed a hard kiss on the wet, bitten lips.

They had done a poor job of undressing one another. Edward still had both the shirt and suit jacket on, although they were both open in front, most of the buttons had flown, most probably, in all corners of the room. Adrian grabbed the undershirt and ripped it open, too, allowing smooth skin to show. Edward didn't protest one bit and even helped as much as he could in his position to have his pants and underwear pushed down and dropped around his ankles.

For a while, Adrian moved around Edward, in full circles, as his lover tried to follow him with his eyes.

“You know, this is getting a bit unnerving,” Edward said in a hoarse voice.

“As it should,” was the prompt reply.

“Oh, I see. You want to punish me.”

“You have a mouth on you, after what you did. I would keep it shut if I were you. Or do you want me to gag you?” The last words were of a soft whisper, and Adrian stooped to reach Edward’s ears with his lips. The small shudder that crossed the sexy man tied to a chair in his living room was enough for an answer. “Should I gag you anyway?”

“Do as you please.” While the words were meant to be snappy, the voice used to utter them was anything but.

“Of course. As *I* please,” Adrian emphasized the pronoun. So far, Edward’s behavior was more than satisfactory. And since he had anticipated that asserting dominance over that stubborn man required the right tools for the job, he was more than ready.

He went to the bedroom again, and this time, when he came back, he observed with increased contentment the way Edward’s eyes grew wide, and his mouth went slack.

“You can’t be serious.” A tiny bit of revolt speckled the beautiful greens. And that was fine, too.

“I told you. As serious as --”

“A heart attack,” Edward said tersely.

“Be a good boy and receive your well-deserved punishment.”

Edward nodded and said nothing, even opening his mouth obediently when Adrian fixed the black silicone bit in his mouth and the bridle over his head. Still, the green eyes spoke of rightful indignation at the treatment, so Adrian smiled and then brought the riding crop over Edward’s exposed chest.

His move was sudden, so a natural jerk was the reaction. It couldn’t have hurt; that was an instrument demanding attention, and it wasn’t about painful punishment.

Adrian straightened up and observed the crop in his hand. “I have no idea where you and horses stand, but I imagine you must have taken riding lessons, seeing how you were born with a silver spoon in your mouth. That’s why I believe this is the right way to make myself well understood, once and for all.”

He moved the head of the crop slowly over Edward’s nipples, all perked up and thirsty for attention. Adrian let his eyes drop lower and smirked when he noticed the weeping cock, stiff and swollen. Edward’s body had always been honest, regardless of what its owner had chosen to let fly out of his mouth. Well, that was taken care of, for now.

Adrian flicked the crop over the taut abdomen, earning a small, wary jolt each time the leather tip connected with the skin. He took delight in teasing the inside of Edward's thighs until he reached the final bastion. Placing tiny slaps over the tight sack, Adrian focused on the small jerky moves of the overstimulated cock. Its head was bigger now, which made him wince for a moment. But a declaration of love disguised as one of war had to be memorable for both parties.

He moved backward until he was sure that Edward could see him without angling his head painfully. And then, he started to strip, slowly, his eyes never leaving the man in front of him. An elegant eyebrow arched, and Adrian grinned, waiting for the realization of what would follow to finally dawn on Edward.

"This is for your audacity to think that there is something in this world I'm not willing to give you." Adrian straddled Edward's lap, aligning the hard weeping cock with his asshole, which he had had the inspiration to lube well in one of his trips to the bedroom.

He could read in Edward's eyes everything he was thirsting for. Not only astonishment, but dark desire, and desperation, too. The latter was because of the bit Edward was biting on hard now. Maybe he had things to say, and Adrian would hear him, but that would have to come later.

It was a good thing to have determination, he thought wryly as his ass opposed the blunt head pushing at its gates. *It might not be what you want, buddy, but it's what I need to prove myself to his asshole boyfriend of mine.*

Oh, it looked like the lube really helped. Still, Adrian struggled a little and didn't dare to meet Edward's eyes until he was thoroughly impaled to the sheath. Only then, he allowed himself a smirk. Damn, that thing kind of hurt. He drew one deep breath and willed his ass to stop fighting this; it didn't have a choice in the matter.

Now, there was a bit of playful challenge in Edward's eyes. They measured Adrian, and then, the eyelids dropped. The muffled sound coming from behind the silicone bit was enough for encouragement.

"And now, I ride," Adrian said in one go, as he pushed himself up and then let his body drop hard on Edward's lap.

Damn, he must have tied his lover's legs, as well. He was thrashing like a wild horse that didn't want to accept his fate. Adrian had a hard time, at first, to find a rhythm, especially with that hard thing pulsing inside his ass. Now, he only had admiration for Edward, and not only him, but all the bottoms of the world for putting up with that kind of ordeal.

It wasn't all bad, though. As the master in this situation, he needed to enforce a rhythm, even if that meant that he had to use his whole strength to do it. Adrian grabbed Edward's hips between his thighs as he could in that position, and then he started to ride for real. Maybe that was the thrill of riding a wild horse.

The beast under him finally seemed subdued. Adrian was sure Edward still wanted to thrash some more, but there was a real danger of them ending both on the floor if they tipped over the chair.

Fortunately for both of them, the furniture held, and with the rhythm, Adrian found something else. He was pretty sure Edward's cock had grown in size at least a few times, he felt so full. But that sensation of fullness, plus the shot of pleasure that took him by surprise when it first hit him, was enough to confirm that he was doing the right thing.

He placed both hands behind Edward's head and grabbed his hair. That was a position of power, and he needed to make sure he was well understood. He slammed down, over and over, enjoying how Edward's eyes became loose, unbound, in sheer abandonment, and then dark with growing arousal.

Edward Hastings, the accomplished doctor, the one with a family whose pedigree chart must be descending back to a time of kings, for sure, the arrogant lover responsible for making Adrian lose his head, that man was now completely at his mercy.

There was no other way out but complete surrender. Adrian looked down at his cock, in disbelief. As focused as he had been on milking Edward's cock, he had failed to register completely what that was doing to himself, as well. The tip of his member was oozing, and, to his complete surprise, heat and pleasure burst from the deep core of his body, all over Edward's chest.

His body still moved, and the wonder in Edward's eyes, as well as a short buck of the hips, followed by another and another, let him know that his mission was accomplished.

He didn't remove himself from that position, keeping Edward inside him, wishing for them to meld into one being. But he rested his forehead against Edward's sweaty head and breathed deeply.

It took him minutes to reach behind his lover's head and remove the bridle and the bit. Still, Edward was silent, and Adrian watched him, waiting.

"Now you can talk," he said in a voice he wanted to sound domineering and in control but came out as a hoarse whisper. He must have shouted earlier; funny thing, he couldn't quite remember everything he had done.

"Untie me."

"No. I won't let you run."

"Do you really think I would run? After this?" Edward expressed his disbelief. He licked his lips a few times.

Adrian could only think of kissing him. That had been a clear downside of the little horsey play he had staged; he hadn't thought of how he wouldn't be able to kiss Edward at leisure. "I don't know. I don't think I know you that well."

"And yet, you went out on one knee and proposed to me in front of my father," Edward said with a small smile.

Adrian shrugged. "What was I to do? Losing you wasn't an option."

Edward's face softened. The desire from earlier was replaced by something else. "Untie me, Adrian."

"Why?" At this point, it was better to remain suspicious.

"Because I want to hug you and tell you that I love you."

Adrian grinned. Well, that was a good reason. "You're not going to bolt the moment you're free, right?"

Edward rolled his eyes. "I have my cock in your ass. Such a maneuver would require skills I don't think I possess."

"Okay, then." Adrian plastered his body against Edward and reached back to untie his hands.

He was barely done when Edward wrapped both arms around him and dragged him into a maddening kiss. Gone was the guy who had teased him over not being able to kiss properly at the club that fateful night. Instead, there was someone new, someone Adrian might not have known that well until now, but surely wanted to get to know better.

They kissed until almost out of breath. Only then, Edward let him go. "I love you, Adrian." His hands moved over Adrian's back, taking in each muscle. "I've been in love with you for a while now."

"So, will you marry me?"

"I already said 'yes', didn't I?"

"A guy has to check."

"I see. Then hurry and put that ring on my finger."

So he had to move and let Edward's cock slide from his ass. Adrian was giddy like a kid when he rummaged through Edward's pockets for the ring. Triumphant, he held it high and then took his boyfriend's hand. "Do I have to say something? Like 'I solemnly swear'--"

Edward roared, a sound so free unleashed from his chest, and Adrian's eyes grew wide. Well, the prissy Edward Hastings with a ton of chips on his shoulder had definitely given him a boner. No, a ton of boners. This guy gave him more than that. He put the ring on Edward's finger. "Look, it fits."

"Definitely," Edward teased.

Adrian yelped when one firm hand grabbed one of his butt cheeks. "I did my homework."

Edward grinned. "I noticed. You're a pretty hot bottom." The double entendre wasn't lost on either of them.

"Don't let it get to your head. This was only because I thought it had to be done so that I didn't lose you. I guess I secured that." He took Edward's hand and placed a small kiss on the ringed finger.

"And I thought you did it because you're a true romantic at heart and wanted to win me over with a grand gesture."

Adrian rubbed his behind and grimaced theatrically. "It was grand all right. But I'm a practical romantic. Your ass is mine, completely. The other way around? Well, we will see."

"More romantic words have never been spoken," Edward replied, his lips twisting, not searching, like always, a cutting edge to words, but a smile. He hugged Adrian again and rubbed his head against his chest. "You know, what you did today, it was pretty wild. No one has ever done anything like that for me."

"Oh, the poor rich boy," Adrian teased, but he began to caress his lover's hair. "From this moment onward, you're taken, so that should be off your list."

"Do you really mean it? About marriage?" Edward's voice was muffled and appeared to come from somewhere far away.

"I can't believe I bought into your act. You know, I'm still a little salty over that. Couldn't you say that you were in love with me?"

"And witness that smug smirk of yours?"

"What smug smirk?"

"Yours," came the dry reply.

"Why would I have smirked?"

"Obviously because that could only mean that you won. I wanted to save myself the heartache. And I meant what I told you before. I went for a playboy like you because I wanted to have fun

for a change, with no strings attached. I thought I even managed to make it quite clear the first time we met.”

“So, are you trying to tell me that you usually chose your potential husbands based on a totally different criteria? But Brown --”

“Please, don’t bring up that boorish man. He had noticed once my interest in his preferred sexual practices and thought he could turn me into one of his toys.”

“I hope you looked at him with that disdainful and haughty look of yours with which you typically grace the entire world around you.”

“What haughty look?” The vague irritation wasn’t lost on Adrian. Things like that made him smirk.

“Yours,” he replied in kind. “But stop deflecting and tell me how your other potentials were.”

“Let’s say that I might have picked them using the wrong criteria.”

Adrian pulled at Edward’s hair until their eyes met. “Elaborate, Your Majesty.”

“Oh, please, stop with that. I’m marrying a commoner.”

Now, look who wore a smug smirk on his handsome face. Adrian wiped it with a rough kiss. “Elaborate,” he ordered.

“Well, seeing how you don’t mind us sitting here, with cum drying on ourselves, instead of taking a shower, here is the story.”

Adrian shifted and felt Edward’s cum pouring freely from his ass. Now that was a sensation he could get used to. Still, he didn’t move. Before anything else, he wanted to hear about Edward’s life before him, even if it could only be the abridged version at the moment.

Edward took one deep breath. “The day I came out to my parents, I promised them that it wasn’t just a phase, and that I planned on being a responsible person. That, of course, including finding the right man to marry. Although I could tell they weren’t happy, they couldn’t say I was into some alternative lifestyle just for the fun of it. And it wasn’t just a promise. I believed in it, too.”

“And still believe, I hope. I’m not taking that ring back.”

Edward looked at him crossly. “You know, you’re pretty heavy as you sit like this in my lap. Now, be quiet and listen to the answer you so wanted to hear.” Adrian encouraged him to continue with a short nod. “Therefore, I focused my attention on men I could bring home to mom and dad, men I thought they would appreciate and like.”

“Blue-blooded,” Adrian said. “But wait, how come they gave up so quickly on you if they already had money?”

“Rich families can be quite complicated, Adrian,” Edward replied. “Trust fund babies may still feel like there’s something out there they cannot afford.”

Adrian shook his head. “All right. Let’s skip that. Tell me about those men. Wait, was that guy, William, from the party, one of them?”

Edward shook his head. “I never returned William’s advances. It would have been cruel on my part.”

“What about the plaything he was talking about? That Raphael dude?”

“Ralph,” Edward said with a tiny bit of exasperation. “He was one of the reasons why I decided to change tack and aim lower.”

“Geez, thanks,” Adrian said, pretending he was offended.

“I would explain everything in detail if only you managed to listen for two seconds.”

“Sure, sure, Your Majesty, continue.”

“Stop it with the --”

“You’ll be my heart’s king always,” Adrian said simply.

That earned him a surprised look from Edward. But then, the look became affectionate. “I’ll take it, then. Getting back to the men I thought I would be able to marry, now. I selected them from the appropriate circles and brought them home.”

“And did your dad flex on them with his checkbook?”

“Not as overtly as he did today. Depending on the status of the man in question, he adapted his strategies. It is his deep conviction that all people wish for things they do not have, and made it a task to find out what those were. It surprised me that my father would part even with much-beloved properties only to get rid of the men I was dating.”

“He seemed so practiced when he wrote me that check today.”

Edward sighed. “I might be a little at fault here. As I went through a rebellious phase --”

“Oh, did you have one of those? What did you do? Placed your elbows on the table at dinner?”

A reprimand was expected, but instead, Edward just chuckled. “Thanks for the idea. I might do that the next time I want to prove my father that I’m a grownup and I can do as I please.”

Adrian had a few ideas on how to make Edward grow a pair in front of his family's patriarch, but he made a mental note to deliver them another time.

Edward continued. "I decided to throw my dad off-balance by bringing home – let's say – less suitable suitors."

"Like what? The pool boy? The gardener?"

Edward smirked. "The gardener at my family's estate is eighty years old. As for pool boys, they are none. My family uses a company to outsource such services. I've never seen their personnel around. They are that kind of low key."

"That's good to know. So no gardeners and pool boys in your past. What kind, then?"

"Strippers," Edward said. "Oh, apologies. Exotic dancers."

Adrian snickered. "Oh, damn, and didn't daddy have a heart attack?"

"He's not a man easy to shake. It only took him less of a bother to pay them off. And I didn't dwell on that for long. After all, I didn't plan on marrying them anyway. It was just a farce to annoy my father."

"Just how many men have you had sex with?" Adrian asked, a little pang of jealousy nudging him to say stupid things.

"Fewer than what you must have had in a single night," Edward said wryly.

"Touché," Adrian admitted. "So how did I come up in the picture?"

"Quite easily. I cruised the clubs, fed up with trying to find someone to share my life with, and asked, on a whim, about the sexiest and easiest to approach men. I thought I would be entitled to a bit of fun before becoming all cynical and convinced that love doesn't exist in my part of the universe, anyway. When I got to your club, I was about to give up on that plan, too. For some unfathomable reason, none of the playboys I had been introduced to, until that moment, appealed to me."

"It's not unfathomable," Adrian said promptly.

"What makes you say that?" Edward observed him with interest.

"You were searching for me," Adrian replied, aware of his cocky attitude.

Edward smiled. "That must have been it."

"You were so annoying I wanted to give it to you hard so that you'd never forget me."

"I guess that worked. I was slightly annoyed with you, too --"

“Slightly?”

“All right, more than slightly. You were so full of yourself that I immediately wanted to take you down a peg or two. And I found myself wanting to get to know you better. Of course, I had to play my cards right, to provoke you, so that you wouldn’t forget me, either.”

“It worked,” Adrian admitted. “But, later, as we grew close --”

“I got caught up in my own game, unfortunately. I had done a good job at convincing myself that I shouldn’t go down that road again. And with a playboy, on top of it all. I guess I was afraid that it would be so easy for you to make a fool out of me.”

Adrian nodded. He remembered how he had used to be, and Edward wasn’t completely to blame. “Still,” he said, “when I told you that I loved you, you could have dropped the act.”

“You scared me with that,” Edward replied, taking him by surprise.

“Why? You couldn’t believe me?” Adrian felt hurt for real, this time.

Edward shook his head. “No. As I told you before, I didn’t want to witness you, of all people, being tempted by my father and his money. I realized, that very moment, that something like that would hurt me in ways I hadn’t been hurt before. So it was easier to cut you loose.”

“Man, good thing I’m stubborn and you have a badass cousin.”

Edward sighed, and it sounded like relief. “Yes. Good thing.”

Adrian caught Edward’s face in his hands and locked eyes with him. “Listen to me closely. From this moment on, you’re with me. No one else matters.”

“So we’re really having a wedding?”

“Yes, we will.”

“That’s a bit crazy.”

“Well, you’re not getting any younger.”

Edward gasped, making a show of how mock-affronted he felt. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Adrian laughed. “It means only that I can barely wait to tell my folks back home that we’re going to have a doctor in the family. My mom will go nuts.”

“Ah, so you do marry me for my status.”

“No, I’m marrying you for your gorgeous ass, but I hope you don’t expect me to scandalize my mother.”

“So your parents have no idea of your adventurous past?”

“They do. Dad called me Casanova once.”

Edward laughed softly. “I would like to meet your parents.”

“That can be arranged. But first, I have plans with you.” Adrian kissed Edward. “Don’t think I’ll let you off the hook.”

“Hmm, that sounds nice. What do you have in mind?”

“I’d lock you up in here and have my way with you until I’m no longer mad at you, but seeing how I need to up the ante and provide for my royal soon to be husband, I can’t miss work.”

Edward exhaled in relief. “Good. I can’t miss work, either.”

“But you still have to make it up to me.” Adrian wagged a finger.

A solemn nod was the answer. “Can we take a shower now. I think I drooled all over myself and I must look like a mess right now.”

Adrian snickered. There was no way in hell for Edward to look like a mess. He was just saying. But he got off his boyfriend’s lap and offered him a hand. From now on, that would be their home until Adrian figured out something better for them as newlyweds. But he couldn’t think of that right now, as there were other priorities, first a shower, and then, a call to his best friends to tell them the news.

“What? For real?” Jared stood up, reconsidered, and sat back down, the phone glued to his ear.

Shane was in the door, with nothing but a towel wrapped around his waist, and way too distracting. How many sleepovers had they had last week? Shane hadn’t actually slept one night outside Jared’s bed, but no one was complaining. This wasn’t even a sleepover; it was a Sunday over or whatever. And after Shane said something about Sunday sex being just the best thing they could have, their staying in bed had turned into a marathon. Jared could still feel the marks of Shane’s fingers on his hips. So much fantastic fucking was bound to get to his head. He had no idea how he would be able to turn to normal after having such an accomplished friend with benefits in his bed.

Right now, there was no time to consider the multiple benefits associated with being friends with Shane, since Adrian had thought of dropping the bombs of all bombs on him. “Adrian, is this a prank call? I’ll strangle you if it is.”

“What is it, babe?” Shane sauntered to the bed and decided to straddle Jared, while his towel fell from his perfect body.

Jared risked another look. It was a bit strange and funny how giddy he felt each time he looked at Shane's hairy chest. He was naked, too, as he had hurried out of the shower upon hearing his phone ringing incessantly. Only an emergency had the right to sound like that, and, well, while that didn't qualify as an emergency, it surely was something.

"Adrian," Jared cleared his voice as he inched the phone away from his mouth, "is getting married."

"What?" Shane's eyes grew wide, and a face splitting grin lit them up. "Give me the phone."

Jared was still too much in shock to even consider resisting. He could hear Adrian exchanging smooches with someone on the other end, so his friend wasn't paying attention anymore. No, not someone. Adrian had somehow managed to turn his breakup from Edward into an engagement to the man. Whatever he had, if he sold it, Adrian would make a fortune, because not everyone could pull that kind of stunt.

"Hey, man, I guess congratulations are in order," Shane said, the moment he took the phone. "When's the happy event? Great, I guess that leaves us plenty of time to prepare. I already know what gift I'll get for you two, lovebirds. Yeah, I'm thinking of that."

Something in how Shane looked at him made Jared feel fidgety for no reason. It was like he knew a secret and didn't care to share.

"Of course. That's exactly what I'm thinking every day."

Thinking every day? About what? What kind of gifts to buy for newlyweds? That was weird. Jared tried to adjust his position so that he could be close enough to hear what Shane and Adrian were talking about, but he couldn't move. Even more, Shane pressed one hand against his chest to keep him down.

Now that was a bit unnerving.

"Here," Shane said and handed him back the phone. "Adrian wants to talk to you some more."

"What did Shane say to you?" Jared asked directly. "He's looking at me like the proverbial cat in front of the can of tuna."

"Hey, did the surprise of hearing how I'm going to get married wear off already?"

"No, consider me in complete and utter shock. But, of course, I'm glad for you," Jared pedaled back, realizing that he acted like a self-centered person, and not a friend right now. "How long until the wedding? It appears that Shane was completely unshocked and already asked you that."

"Not for a few months at least. My mom will never forgive me if we don't organize a proper wedding. And I thought to give you time to unshock yourself, too, J."

“Smartass,” Jared retorted. “Of us all, you’re the first to take this step? I feel rightfully cheated and a bit pissed at you.”

Adrian chuckled, and muffled sounds of kissing could be heard. “What can I tell you, J? I couldn’t let this one get away.”

“Good thing you didn’t. I’m so happy for you, I have no words. For Edward, too. And it’s good that we’ll still have plenty of time to prepare before the wedding. I’ll have to get you two a gift that you’ll always remember. Also, I know for a fact that your mom will love to have my help with all the organizing stuff. Ah, I need to think of what to wear, too. How swanky are we talking about? What about Edward’s family? How many guests will you have?”

“J, breathe.” Adrian laughed again. “Are you getting the jitters already? It’s not even your wedding.”

Jared relaxed. Shane was already caressing his chest and playing with his nipples. There was a hard thing touching his lower belly, and he didn’t have to look to learn what it was. Up again? He quirked an eyebrow and was met by warm eyes filled with mischief. So, the Sunday marathon was far from over, apparently. “You’re right,” he replied to Adrian.

“Listen, I gotta call Mike, too. You two boys have fun, okay?”

There was no doubt that they would have fun. Jared realized too late that he had missed his chance to insist on what Adrian and Jared had talked about earlier. Shane kissed him as soon as he put the phone down.

“Hey there.”

Their bodies were already in synch, and Jared could feel a small, now familiar, flutter of nervous wings inside his stomach. “Hey,” he replied, trying to smile and appear unfazed.

“Do you come here often?”

Oh, so they were playing that game.

“Where did you get that pick up line? Last century?”

“Hmm, I like me a sassy one,” Shane purred against his lips and snatched another kiss.

“A what? A sausage?” Jared teased.

“That, too. A sassy sausage is all I want.” To send the message across, Shane pushed himself down until his mouth blew hot air over Jared’s already heated cock.

Despite coming already so many times today, Jared let out a small moan. He grabbed the headboard rail with both hands and got ready for another round. How was it possible for someone to get so good at this? Each time with Shane felt like there was something new.

Like having a naughty tongue trying to make love completely with his glans. After having fun so many times, Jared had expected the novelty factor to wane a little, but that wasn't happening. On the contrary, it seemed that Shane learned things on the fly. In comparison, Jared was starting to feel like a complete amateur.

Deep and again, his cock felt engulfed in heat, only to be released gradually and with that maddening teasing tongue that almost left him no room to breathe. Jared was only vaguely aware of his shouts and crazy moans as Shane worked his cock like his life depended on doing a good job.

When he came, his eyes rolled in his head. All right, it had to be the last time because there had to be no drop left in him.

“How was it, babe?” Shane sneaked by his side and kissed his sweaty forehead.

Babe. Jared wouldn't have thought, in a thousand years, that he would take to being called that, as he usually thought it a bit cheesy, and something only people on fake reality shows used to address their equally fake love interests. But in Shane's mouth ... well, everything was better in Shane's mouth.

“Will you let me?” Shane whispered into his ear, raising goosebumps everywhere. “It's the last time, I promise.”

“Last time this hour?” Jared teased but turned on one side.

A kiss of appreciation was planted on the side of his neck. “Just tell me if I'm too much to handle.”

Although he felt rightfully exhausted, Jared reached back and slapped Shane's thigh. “Giddy-up, cowboy.”

Shane laughed, a low, sexy sound coming out of him, and Jared laughed with him. The sound of ripped foil made him shift into a convenient position to allow Shane to prepare him.

“We must be spending a small fortune on those,” he joked. “The rubber industry should be thankful.”

“I'd be happy to do it without,” Shane said.

Oh. Jared fell silent. He didn't feel ready for that, not that Shane wasn't honest and awesome, and of course, he didn't see people on the side like –

“Someday,” Shane added, bringing the train of his thoughts to a halt. “I don’t mind waiting.”

Jared wanted to say something, to find a proper excuse, but Shane turned his head and kissed him as his cock buried inside. After that, it was hard to think.

“Mike!” Ryan called for him from the other side of the yard. “It’s Adrian on the phone. He says it’s important.”

Mike stood up, breathing hard. “Come on, boy. Let’s get inside.”

Bran barked, and when Mike crouched, he hurried into his arms and licked his face. After Ryan had ushered them out of the house to prepare something to eat, they had had the entire backyard to themselves. And plenty of toys, which in the end had been forgotten, in favor of Bran chasing Mike all over the yard until he had caught him.

There were small grass clippings in his hair and all over his clothes, and Mike tried to brush them off as he walked toward the house. Bran followed him gladly. They had hit it off from the start, and ever since the weekend had started, they had spent a lot of time together. Ryan had even teased him that he must like him because of the dog, after all.

Mike stopped in front of the back kitchen door and stared at the lamentable state of his clothes. Ryan looked at him with a broad grin on his face. “Aren’t you going to come in?”

“I think I should rather stay here until I get all of this out of my clothes.”

Ryan took his hand and pulled him inside. “Your phone is there.” He placed a short kiss on his temple and turned to his duties.

Mike grabbed the phone from the table and sat gingerly on a high chair. Whatever food Ryan was making, it smelled heavenly. His stomach growled. Bran had noticed he was busy, so now he had a bone to pick with his true master. Ryan was scolding him in a quiet, loving voice.

“Hey, Adrian.”

The phone slipped from his hand and hit the table with a thud. Ryan turned to him, his entire face in a state of alarm. “What’s wrong?”

Mike cursed his clumsiness silently and reached for the phone again. “Sorry, Adrian. Can you repeat that?”

Ryan still looked at him, and Mike smiled. “Nothing’s wrong. Actually, it’s pretty amazing. Adrian asked Edward to marry him, and Edward said ‘yes’.”

The anxiety turned into a good-natured smile. “Send him my congratulations and tell him that I can barely wait to meet everyone properly.”

Mike bit his lips to keep from smiling ear to ear. “Adrian, Ryan can barely wait to meet you. And Edward, too.”

“We could have a big party here. We have a lot of space,” Ryan proposed.

“Yes, Ryan says that his place is big enough for a party,” Mike continued his conversation with Adrian.

“Our place,” Ryan corrected him, a finger in the air.

Mike blushed. He looked down and then back at Ryan.

“I’m waiting,” Ryan mouthed.

“Our place is big enough,” Mike whispered into the phone. “No, no one’s sleeping. I just felt like whispering.”

It was hard to keep himself in check, under Ryan’s intense stare. Their place? Like in the place that belonged to them both? That wasn’t fair. Mike had to contribute with something. He needed to think of that carefully. Right now, he was listening to Adrian’s happy banter on the other end with his better half. He raised his eyes and met Ryan’s briefly. What he read in them was enough to fill three romance books with happy endings.

“So, was this sudden or is it just my impression?” Ryan asked him after he bid goodbye to Adrian.

“Sudden is not even the right word. I don’t think there’s a right word for Adrian springing something like this on us.” He squirmed a little. Ryan’s gaze was making him feel hot. “I mean, we all heard him when he told us he was in love with Edward, but this is still ... well, sudden.”

“Why?” Ryan asked.

“Because Adrian used to be a bit of a playboy. Wait, that’s not right, he used to be a playboy a lot. So we thought he might take a while to get used to the idea of having a single partner forever. Also, people don’t usually jump from saying ‘I love you’ to marriage just like that, right?” He completed that with a small nervous laugh.

Ryan was still looking at him like he was dinner. “I don’t see why there should be that much of a gap between the two.”

Mike’s heart grew small, small, small. “You don’t?” His voice was funny again.

Ryan didn’t have to reply to that. Mike held his breath.

“I think I need to see about our dinner,” Ryan said and returned to his task at hand with a small, secretive smile on his face.

Mike exhaled. What was that all about?

Chapter Twenty-Six – My Heart Was Set On You

Jared held the phone and listened to it ringing while it appeared that the person on the other end had better things to do than pick up. Shane was usually prompt when Jared called, so it struck him as a bit odd that he had to wait after calling a few times now. With a shrug, he placed the phone on the table and continued his work.

He was lost in his new project when the phone finally rang. It wasn't like he was waiting for Shane to call since they were just friends, and there were no particular outstanding obligations between them. Therefore, Jared stopped for a second and a breath to answer.

“Hey, Shane,” he said, trying to sound as nonchalant as possible.

“Hi, Jared.”

Jared, not babe. Of course, what did he expect? They were nothing but friends, and this sudden bout of paranoia should have made him feel ashamed.

“I was just wondering what you would like to eat tonight.”

“Something came up.” Shane was curt and tense as he spoke. “Rain check?”

“Sure,” Jared replied brightly. “Tomorrow then?”

“I'll give you a call.”

There was a short moment, and no one said a thing. Jared shook off the small unpleasant feeling trying to creep in. “Of course. Take care. Bye.” He cut the conversation without waiting for a reply and then felt like an ass for it. But he couldn't take it back, and Shane seemed busy anyway. With all the time he chose to spend at Jared's house, it was a wonder he managed to keep his bar up and running.

It had to be work-related. Jared balanced a pencil on his knuckles and then scratched the crown of his head with it. He wasn't jealous; no, it wasn't possible to be jealous of a friend. He and Shane had cleared things up from the very start, and now –

And now, he was curious as hell about what Shane was doing. If he were busy at the bar, he could just say so. If needed, Jared would offer a helping hand. But, as things stood, it felt as if his help wasn't needed, and his presence wasn't wanted.

To say that it didn't feel a bit like a pang of something painful would have been a lie. Jared focused on his work again. His imagination was running away with him; and Shane was a good guy, and if he finally found someone else – which would be a real feat seeing how he spent almost all his free moments with Jared – he would just say it like it was.

For a moment, Jared stopped and pondered. He was always the guy who waited for things to happen to him. If Shane had someone in his life, he had to come clean. And this time, Jared wouldn't wait while fretting over doing what was right. This time, he would check on his friend and see if there was some contender on the line.

Contender? What was he thinking? Jared shook his head. He would drop by Shane's bar later, and if he weren't there, he would check his place, too. After all, they had spent a hell of a lot of time at Jared's and seldom at Shane's.

With that decision in mind, he returned to his work, this time decided to finish the project and send the first draft to his customer.

The bar was the same he knew, with the morose bartender at his station, and the men watching sports while drinking beer. Jared liked the place, nonetheless. Of course, since he was on a mission to find out if Shane had gotten himself a boyfriend, it was a bit funny that all he could do right now was to recall a particular moment in time that had involved two guys and a bottle of tequila. He nodded at the bartender and asked about Shane. The man measured him up and down.

"I don't know if you remember me --" Jared tried to reason with the man and make him recall that he had been there before in the boss's company.

"I know who you are," the bartender said. "You're Mr. McKay's beau."

Beau? Jared felt his lips twisting, but said nothing. And Mr. McKay? Yeah, that was Shane's name, but it was strange to hear it like that. It looked as if the morose man held his boss in high esteem. He tapped his fingers against the polished wood. "Okay," he said. "Do you happen to know where he is right now?"

The bartender just moved his head slowly in a vague direction. "He must be upstairs, with his guest. His brother's visiting."

Brother. Jared stood there and blinked a few times. Could it be the guy who had taken those beautiful pictures of horses that Shane had on the walls? From their conversations about families, he had surmised Shane only had one brother, so that mysterious guest had to be him.

Now his curiosity was increased ten folds. Could it be that Shane didn't want his brother to know anything about who he liked to hang out with? But why? Now that Jared thought a little more about their short conversation, he could tell Shane had been a bit upset.

There were many reasons why that could be. Shane always became tight-lipped whenever Jared asked about whether he wanted to visit his family in the countryside, so it had to be a sensitive subject.

But if Shane was alone with his brother now, maybe he needed support just in case his family had shunned him or something like that. Jared's mind was racing with scenarios. What if something had happened back home? But that was all the more reason for him to offer Shane his complete support. They weren't just fooling around; they were friends. And that meant that he had to see Shane and see him now.

"Thanks for the info," Jared said to the bartender and walked out of the bar, partially filled with dread.

He knocked a few times until Shane finally came to the door. Jared could tell he was surprised to see him there. With one look, Jared wanted to communicate and tell him that he wouldn't out him by accident or anything stupid like that. He was there as a friend. "You sounded worried over the phone. I was in the neighborhood and thought about dropping by to check on you," he said.

Shane stood there, frozen, and his face was conflicted.

Jared leaned forward and whispered. "The bartender told me your brother is here. Don't worry, I won't say a thing about you know what." He suggestively pointed with his chin to send the point across. Then he remembered the other cause of his worries. "Is your family all right?"

"Everyone's fine," Shane replied, somewhat mechanically.

Jared exhaled. "Great. You scared me. Won't you introduce me to your brother since I'm here?" He dropped his voice again. "And I'm no one else but a friend."

Although reluctantly, Shane moved away from the door to allow him inside. For a moment, Jared felt stupid. But as soon as he noticed that he was imposing, he would bid them goodbye and be on his way. Now, the curiosity was even bigger.

He knew his way around, even if he hadn't been there in a while. In the living room, slouching on the sofa was a man a tad older than Shane. He was attractive in a rough way, although not as handsome as his brother, and he was wearing the kind of outfit Shane had worn when they had first met. He had a heavier body frame, and a potbelly was bordered south by a thick belt with a large buckle. Jared could see him at home in the saddle of a horse and overlooking a herd of cattle.

The guest's eyes crinkled at the corners when Jared walked in. The resemblance was there, only that this man's eyes and hair were lighter in color, and his tan was stronger.

"Hi," Jared said, now a lot more nervous than when he had gotten there. "I'm one of Shane's friends. Jared," he added and offered his hand.

The man stood up and pushed back his hat as if he was embarrassed for a reason. “Coleman,” he said as he shook Jared’s hand. His skin was like worn leather. “You’re a friend, you say?”

Jared nodded and smiled. “Shane told me you took these pictures. I think they’re amazing. And I’m a photographer. I should know.” He forced a small chuckle, but Coleman smiled, too, and he told himself he should be more at ease. “Is it the first time you’re visiting Shane here?”

Coleman nodded. “I was sent to check on my little brother.” His manner of speaking had the same twang as Shane.

Jared didn’t miss the brief look between the two brothers. Maybe it wasn’t his place to be there. To begin with, he had no idea what he was doing there. Later, he would have to offer Shane proper apologies. “I think that’s awesome, to have an older brother. I wish I did. Well, I was just in passing and thought of saying ‘hello’. I should leave you guys to catch up.”

“But you just got here. Shane was making coffee. If he didn’t forget all about hospitality, he would invite you to stay himself.”

Another short exchange between the two brothers unnerved Jared further. All right, so from the get-go, his idea of checking up on Shane had been utterly stupid. First of all, he didn’t have to question his friend. Second of all, he had no right. And third of all –

“Shane was just telling me about you.” Coleman’s words interrupted his mental verbalization.

“He was?” Jared sat on the sofa, next to Coleman, and stared at him, dumbfounded. What could Shane be talking about with his brother, while he was the main topic?

“You go see about that coffee, Shane,” Coleman said, but his eyes didn’t leave Jared.

Jared didn’t know where to put his hands while he was examined like that. Shane appeared to hesitate for a moment but disappeared into the kitchen.

The second he was out of earshot, Coleman leaned forward. “What do you mean one of Shane’s friends? How many does he have?”

Jared chuckled nervously under that curious stare. “I don’t know exactly. He is very likeable, your brother. I suppose he has many friends. I mean, for sure, he has many other friends besides me.”

Coleman pushed back his hat and then forward again. It appeared as if something was puzzling him. “And you’re okay with that?”

“Okay with what? With him having other friends? Yes.”

“Funny thing,” Coleman commented, and he said that not in the sense that he found it humorous, but weird.

Jared had no idea what to make of it all. “Shane is an awesome guy. I mean, we hit it off right from the start. I had no idea I would like having a cowboy type as my friend.”

A surprised look from Coleman made him feel like he had said the wrong thing.

“Not that there’s something wrong with that,” Jared hurried to add. “I mean, we just don’t get many cowboys around here.”

Coleman examined him closely. “You’re a pretty one.”

Jared gulped. Talking about funny things, that was a funny thing to say.

“And Shane says you’re the only one.”

Jared lost his voice for a second. The only one? Oh, no, they couldn’t be talking about friends! Were they talking about friends with benefits? His cheeks were suddenly on fire. What was Shane thinking, telling his brother he was friends with benefits with some guy? So, he was out to his family, and everyone knew of his habits even?

“You seem like a decent fellow,” Coleman continued, apparently unaware of the torrent of contradictory feelings Jared was experiencing right now. “Don’t you go being all right with those others. God knows he didn’t get that from either mom or pop.”

“Get what?” Jared asked, more and more puzzled.

“To be in like Flynn like that.”

Had he walked in another universe when he had gone through Shane’s front door? What the hell was that supposed to mean? “Um, sorry, Coleman, but what do you mean?”

“You know,” Coleman said with a hand wave. “From green to hound. One trip to the city and he forgot all about how our momma raised him. And to tell me, his brother, you were his first and only.”

First what?! Jared’s brain was a fish out of the water. Clearly, Coleman couldn’t mean Shane’s first friend because that was ridiculous. And if he talked about how Jared had been the first to top Shane –

No, no, his ears and brain must have gotten something wrong. Would Shane tell his brother, all so nonchalantly, that he had gotten his cherry popped by a dude?

On top of it all, Coleman was getting worked up, now his face all red, while he adjusted his position as if he couldn’t breathe properly. Jared felt awful and placed one hand on his arm. “I’m afraid it’s all a big misunderstanding.”

“What misunderstanding?” Coleman asked. “What did he do to fool you?”

Jared exhaled. “Shane didn’t fool me. We’re friends. And there’s nothing wrong with that.” He felt stupid the moment the words left his mouth.

Shane appeared with a tray and coffee. Coleman threw him a murderous look and kept silent until the steaming cups were safe on the table.

“This boy here tells me you’re a philanderer,” he declared loudly.

Jared was dumbstruck. Shane appeared to be the same.

“When have I said that?” he expressed his amazement at Coleman’s logic.

Coleman pointed a finger at Shane, ignoring Jared. “Wait till momma hears about this. When you told us you go to the city because you don’t like girls but them pretty boys now and have to find one of your own, we said nothing. Pop said, let him go, he’ll see how them slick city boys are, but mom said, he’ll find him, if he’s there, he’ll find him. And you said that you wouldn’t come back without him. You’ve always been the apple of her eye. You’ll go and tell her yourself how you came here to chase ... pants,” Coleman added after a short pause, “instead of making her proud.”

Jared stared at the two brothers in utter shock. His eyes traveled from Coleman to Shane, only to observe his dear friend red as a beet. “Coleman, your brother isn’t chasing pants,” he protested. “As far as I know, he’s only been with me.”

Coleman stared at him. “Then what about the other boys? The other friends?”

Jared ran both hands over his face. What the hell had he done? “I’m Shane’s only friend of that kind,” he said slowly, afraid of making shrapnel fly again with the wrong words.

The hard slap on his knee made him yelp. “Why didn’t you say so? So, Shane, when you’re bringing Jared home to momma?”

Well, that was the million-dollar question. Jared stared at Shane in disbelief, and he was just as red as before. But the answer to that would have to come another time. “Coleman, it’s been a real pleasure to meet you,” he said and stood up cautiously as if there was a minefield waiting for him from that point to the door. “Now I should really get going and let you guys talk. Shane misses his family,” he added politely. “Just for the record, Shane is a swell guy, and he’s not a philanderer. And not in like Flynn, either,” he said for good measure.

He couldn’t breathe properly. Where his mind had been a draught, now was a torrent. His heart didn’t sit well, either, and it was so full it could burst. For reasons he couldn’t quite explain, he needed out and fast. He couldn’t see himself letting the words fly in front of Shane’s brother like that.

On his way out, he stopped and clumsily kissed Shane on the cheek. “Call me, okay? We need to talk. Or just drop by my place. I’ll be home.”

Everyone had been aware of it but him, he couldn’t stop thinking as Shane saw him to the door without another word.

He had no idea the seconds could pass so slowly. Now, doubts came to run around his mind in circles once more. Maybe it would have been better if he had chosen to stay and hear Coleman through. But Shane had been clearly embarrassed, and perhaps he didn’t want to say anything in front of his brother either.

So Jared waited. He lay in bed for a while, but then he moved back to the room he used as an office to work on something. In the end, he decided against it. Apparently, he no longer knew how to crop a picture. He stood by the window and looked at the people below. How lucky they were to be so calm and know exactly where they stood in life.

Uncertainty overcame him, then left him. One moment, he felt indescribably happy, the other, he felt a new type of despair. What if all was, as he had said it with his own mouth, a big misunderstanding? What if Shane wasn’t interested in him like that? But why would he have said all those things to his brother?

Damn, he had so many questions, and Shane wasn’t there. Jared began pacing the room. He should have been clear and said when he was expecting Shane. Now he was stuck inside, looking at the damn stubborn clock on his phone that seemed to have frozen in time, like in some sci-fi tragedy.

He was caught up in his thoughts, so he missed someone using a key and coming through the front door. To make things simple, he had given Shane a key not long ago. So, he yelped and turned to punch in the face the intruder when someone touched his shoulder.

Shane dodged right in time. “Oh, damn, is this how you really feel about me, babe?”

Jared threw him a withering look. “What are you doing, sneaking up on me like that? And stop calling me ‘babe’. It’s tacky.”

Shane’s smile faltered. “I’m sorry about today. Meeting my brother like that --”

Jared grabbed him by the shoulders. “—really opened my eyes,” he added the right words. “Shane, are you --” Great, now he couldn’t find the proper thing to say. “Are you interested in me, as a boyfriend?”

Shane looked away, and Jared felt the doubts returning in full force. His hands slid away from Shane’s shoulders, but they were caught midair, and then he was pulled into a tight embrace.

“I’m in love with you,” Shane whispered in his hair. “From the first moment I set my eyes on you.”

“Are you kidding me?” Jared mumbled.

“I’m sorry that you had to learn about it like that. I needed more time to convince you. I know. It’s just my brother’s big mouth --”

Jared started laughing. It had to be because of all the nervous jitters, but just realizing how stupid he had been was way too funny. Shane loosened the embrace only so that he could look at him, now completely puzzled.

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry,” Jared said through hiccups of laughter. “God, all this time, we’ve been boyfriends, right? I mean, you were with me and I was with you --” He stopped, needing to breathe.

“Ha, ha, very funny,” Shane said, and he clearly didn’t appear amused. “Don’t tell me I had to stage all that charade with being friends with benefits while you laughed behind my back.”

Jared gestured in denial since he couldn’t yet find his voice. “Oh, damn, I was so stupid, Shane. I mean, of course, you first came to me and asked to be boyfriends and I said ‘no’ because, apparently, it’s tough to get your own head out of your ass ... What I mean is ... Can you forgive me?” he finally managed to ask.

Shane’s eyes filled with fondness. “You’re a bit dumb but cute.”

Typically, he would have felt rightfully outraged, but in his ears, it was just too funny. “And seriously, your first? I mean, I know that I popped your cherry, but how much of a first does your brother think I was?”

Shane didn’t say a thing, and Jared finally stopped laughing.

“Are you kidding me? Are we talking about that kind of first? Shane, tell me you’re not serious.”

“I’m serious. You’re the first guy I’ve ever been with.”

Jared fell silent. “You ... met me and just like that, you thought I was ... the one?” He couldn’t believe his own ears, but it was the only logical thing to believe at that point.

Shane nodded.

“For real?” Jared caressed Shane’s cheeks. “You thought that?”

“I felt it,” Shane replied.

Jared blinked a few times. That was just fantastic; now, he felt like crying. “And you say I’m dumb,” he said fondly. “You’re lucky then because I can assure you other guys wouldn’t have been as nice to you as I’ve been,” he joked as he tried to straighten up the frown on Shane’s forehead with the tips of his fingers.

Shane caught his hands. “Now that you had your laugh, what am I going to tell mom?”

The look in his eyes was so intense that Jared felt a small tremble. “You’re a good son. You tell her what you think you should tell her.”

“That I found the one? That he’s no slick city boy?”

Jared moved close and buried his head in the crook of Shane’s shoulder. “You tell her that. But before, tell me.”

Shane kissed the crown of his head. “Will you marry me, Jared?”

Jared looked up in shock. “For real? I thought you were just going to tell me that you love me.”

“I’m not going home to momma with half-assed answers like that. I better be prepared when we go see her, with the ring and all. And they will surely want to hear us all how we promise to love each other for life.”

“Oh, god,” Jared mumbled as he pressed his head against Shane’s chest. “What did I get myself into?”

“It’s easy, city boy. You just say ‘yes’ and I’ll handle the rest.”

“Just like that, huh?”

“Just like that.”

“You’re forgetting something,” Jared said.

“What?” Shane asked, a tiny bit alarmed.

When their eyes met this time, Jared’s mind was clear like a pond in fair weather. “I love you, Shane. And I’ll marry you.”

Shane kissed him so deeply that he stopped breathing. But it wasn’t like anyone needed to breathe, anyway, right?

“There’s no need for that,” Jared said as he took the condom from Shane’s hand. “You’ve never been with anyone, and I got tested again after that awful thing with --”

“What’s his name,” Shane completed his phrase. “Poof, you forgot it, right?”

Jared chuckled. “All right, I forgot his name. But what’s more important is this. No rubber,” he said and threw the condom over his shoulder without caring to see where it landed. He wrapped his arms around Shane. “Why didn’t you tell me your brother was visiting? Oh, damn, what are we doing? You left him alone?”

“He has things to do until tonight,” Shane replied. “And I didn’t tell you because I was afraid something like that would happen.”

“Something like what? Us finding we love each other?” Jared teased.

“It could go other ways,” Shane said solemnly. “My trap was in place, but I didn’t know if I caught anything.”

“Ah, so you were ensnaring me,” Jared said, pretending to be surprised by Shane’s craftiness. “What were you afraid of?”

“That my brother would run his mouth and ruin everything. Which he did.”

“Except he didn’t ruin anything,” Jared pointed out. “And you were supposed to wrangle some city boy and bring him home to momma?” He used Shane’s drawling accent on purpose. “I must say that I didn’t expect a country bumpkin like you to be so sly.”

Shane shrugged, and his usual confidence came back. “Well, if you wanna catch a monkey, you gotta climb the tree.”

Jared began laughing. “I’m a monkey, now? And I thought you were laying traps.”

“Anything I gotta do, I do,” Shane said solemnly. “You didn’t want to hear about us being boyfriends, and I had to do something. I just didn’t know how long it would take for you to realize that you love me.”

“So much confidence,” Jared commented and shook his head in wonder. “But it appears that there’s nothing like jealousy to make one realize what he truly wants.”

“Jealousy? Who were you jealous of?” Shane appeared puzzled.

“You were brief on the phone, and I immediately thought you were with someone else, which, looking back, was obviously and completely irrational, but right away, I felt the need to see you. I was relieved when I heard you were with your brother, but then worried again since I thought something must have happened to your family. And then I was a bit upset because you didn’t care to confide in me if that was the case,” Jared babbled until Shane kissed him softly.

That was the kind of kiss that could melt the polar cap. He stole one more when Shane let him be. “Is it really true? And I was your only one? I mean, ever?”

Shane looked embarrassed for a moment. "I've been with girls. Many years ago. But it felt like something was not quite right."

"I can settle for being your only man, though," Jared whispered. "That's more than enough for me. But still, you must have been in the city for some time when we met."

"Several months, give or take," Shane admitted.

"And no one caught your eye, all that time?"

Shane shook his head, his eyes never leaving Jared.

"And after you met me, and you saw how dumb I was for not wanting you ... weren't you tempted by other guys? You know, smarter than me? Prettier?" he added after a short moment of hesitation.

Shane shrugged. "No. My heart was set on you."

Jared pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to keep the temptation to let the waterworks flow at bay.

"Did I say something wrong?" Shane asked and caressed his shoulders.

Jared shook his head. "No. You say all the right words. But that's not it. You really mean it, and whatever you want, I can only say 'yes'."

"Babe, you've already said 'yes' to what matters," Shane teased him and pulled him close.

"You mean that after we're married, I can do anything?" Jared asked. Married. It sounded so strange, yet so cool. "Let myself go, not wash the dishes --"

Shane grabbed his chin and looked into his eyes. "You? Not wash the dishes? Sometimes I still have a few bites left when you grab the plates."

Jared gasped. "I don't do that."

Shane seemed to have fun on his account. "And let yourself go? I had no idea what a beauty regimen was before I met you. And I've been with girls as I told you."

"Are you trying to say that I'm shallow?" Jared pretended he was upset.

"I'm just saying that pretty comes with a price, and I don't mind it."

"Of course since it's me paying it, working my ass at the gym and all that."

"I'll give you plenty of workout at home so that you don't have to do that."

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah. I’ve thought of everything. You’ll stay on top Mondays, Thursdays, and Saturdays --”

Jared burst into laughter again, incapable of keeping the act up. “I can’t believe you proposed and I said ‘yes’. It has to be Adrian’s fault. If he’s ready for the big step, how could I stay behind? But are you really, really sure, Shane?”

“Never been surer of anything else. I’m not the kind of guy to chase --”

“Pants,” Jared added promptly and snickered. “Your brother is something. But I’m glad you’re not a philanderer.” He pushed one finger against Shane’s chest. “You really played me, mister.”

“Took some effort, you know,” Shane said. “Now you should reward me for all that.”

“For your fooling me?”

“Hey, there was no way of getting at you otherwise.”

“What did Adrian tell you on the phone when he called to announce his engagement to Edward?”

“Ah, that’s a secret.”

“C’mon, Shane. Don’t you know what the secret of a successful marriage is? It’s having no secrets.”

Shane sighed as if the truth had to be pulled out of him with pincers. “He asked me when I intended to pop the question.”

Jared’s eyes grew wide, although that was something he suspected already. “Adrian knew!”

“Yeah. He gave me the speech, too.”

“Don’t tell me ... Mike, too?”

Shane nodded. “Yeah.”

“So I was the only fool, after all?”

“It kind of looks like it, babe, not gonna lie.”

Jared covered his face and laughed again. He would strangle Adrian and Mike later, but for now, there were more pressing matters. Shane hiked him up in his arms, seemingly without breaking a sweat, and placed him on the bed.

“Is it really better without the rubber?”

“I’m not sure,” Jared replied. “I guess more important is who you’re with.”

Shane offered him a lopsided grin as he stripped. Jared let his eyes travel over his soon-to-be husband's gorgeous body. Now that was something to look forward to, and he could only imagine everyone's surprise when they announced their decision. He snickered as Shane covered him with his body, enjoying the skin on skin sensation.

They were kissing, and while they had done that plenty of times before, it still felt new. It had the taste of familiar, too, as they knew each other now, but Jared knew they were closer than ever. Shane liked kissing, and he was only happy to oblige, although the feeling of losing control was growing the most during the foreplay, which before had felt unnerving.

There was no trace of that now. Their tongues danced around each other like skillful contestants, teasing, and giving back. Shane pushed his knees up, and Jared exhaled when he felt his boyfriend's naked cock brushing against the patch of skin under his balls.

"We still need that, though," Shane murmured and moved away only so that he could get Jared ready for him.

The mood for long foreplays was gone, so Jared pulled Shane close to him, helping him enter, even if a bit too quickly.

"Babe," Shane whispered, "this is like a million times better!"

Jared laughed and pulled playfully at Shane's ears with both hands. "C'mon, it's not that different."

"But it is! It feels so damned good! It must be because you said 'yes'."

A little more ear-pulling was in order. "C'mon now, don't keep me waiting. I didn't peg you for the type to stop and admire the scenery."

"Your ass is something," Shane said with wonder in his voice.

"Yeah, you've met it already. Now move," Jared teased, although he enjoyed spending time like that, with Shane buried deep inside his body. That was probably what it meant when people said they felt whole. He snickered at the thought.

"I'm moving now, no need to laugh at me," Shane protested. "It's just feels good with you, without anything between us."

"Especially misunderstandings," Jared said. "And my own stupid stubbornness, I guess."

"Don't you worry your pretty head about that," Shane teased as he moved and made Jared gasp in surprised pleasure. "It didn't matter how much it took to win you over."

Jared found himself speechless to that, so instead of struggling to find the right words, he kissed his handsome cowboy lover and pulled him close, wrapping his legs around him. Shane had no

trouble finding the right rhythm, and soon, they were making the bed rock, like many times before.

Only this time, it was different, and it was different in the most fantastic way possible.

“Is your curiosity sated already?” Jared looked over his shoulder. He was spent, and there was nothing but honey in his veins, but Shane needed to grab a shower, and so did he. In about an hour, they were supposed to meet Coleman for dinner.

“How come you don’t mind it?” Shane played with the cum in his ass a bit more.

“Are you forgetting about how I’m fucking you, too?”

“Yeah, but you didn’t come in me yet.”

“Obviously, because this is the first time we’ve done it without a condom, and I didn’t get the chance.”

“There’s a bit of me inside you,” Shane said as he placed small kisses on Jared’s buttocks. “And then there will be a bit of you inside me.”

Jared shivered as Shane’s lips moved to the small of his back and then along the spine. “Don’t worry,” he whispered. “We’ll do it again and again until your fascination wanes.”

“I don’t think I’ll ever be less fascinated with you,” was the reply as Shane’s head appeared on Jared’s shoulder.

“You know you’re spoiling me with these words.”

“I don’t care. I’ll spoil you as much as I can, in any way I can.”

“Cowboy promise?”

“Sure. Whatever you want, babe.”

Jared allowed a moment of silence to bask in the pleasant sensation of happiness. “How are your folks, Shane?”

“A bit hard, but their hearts are bigger. They might scare you at first.”

“Coleman is cool. I genuinely thought you didn’t say anything to your family about being gay. I guess I just presumed that without even asking you.”

“It wasn’t easy. But they love me, so they wouldn’t stay in the way of my happiness. My mom wants nothing else for us, boys, and she told us. That we should never give up on searching for happiness. That’s why she was sure that I’d find my man once I got here.”

“I’m glad I am that man. It was by chance that Mike and I went to that place where I saw you dancing the first time. Also, I’m really lucky you were single.”

“I don’t think it’s luck. You looked at me while I danced, and I felt your eyes on me.”

“Hmm, my laser gaze. I have to warn you, it was a pretty objectifying gaze. I thought you were so sexy.”

“Of course I’m sexy. But I sensed right away that you were looking at me differently. The only thing I had to do was to find a way to talk to you.”

“So you made me spill my drink on me.”

“It had worked before,” Shane said with a low drawl.

“With girls?”

“With girls,” Shane admitted. “I had to have my practice somewhere, right?”

“And none of those girls threw a glass of beer in your face?”

“What can I say? I don’t pretend it’s a foolproof method. Sometimes it works. It worked this time, so all for the best, right?”

Jared laughed freely. “I was so pissed. Mike tried to tell me you were into me, but my head wasn’t in the right place.”

“Mine was,” Shane bragged.

“Sure thing, virgin boy,” Jared teased in turn. “By the way, you were an awesome lover from the start. I feel bad about the girls you left behind. They must have loved you.”

“They got over me,” Shane promised. “And I frankly didn’t know what was about it all that didn’t make me, you know, how they say, feel butterflies in the stomach and all that. But I felt it with you, right from the start. I was surprised that you wanted me so fast.”

“I just wanted to wash away the bad taste in my mouth about that thing --”

“With that guy whose name we won’t speak,” Shane said quickly.

Jared tried to turn his head to look at him. “Are you jealous, Shane? There’s no need.”

“I’m jealous of all the guys you’ve ever been with.”

“Should I be jealous of all the girls you’ve been with?”

Shane seemed to ponder over that. “What’s fair is fair.”

Jared struggled to turn and embrace his lover. “Of our group, I was the one who wanted a relationship and happy-ever-afters the most. Mike was too shy to admit it, I think, and Adrian was just licking old wounds, but I was out and proud about wanting a boyfriend. It’s funny how I got him after I gave up, while Mike and Adrian fell in love. Life’s a bit strange, isn’t it?”

“But it’s beautiful,” Shane said.

Jared nodded. “It will be some time until we’ll take our vows and everything, but let me tell you something. I love you completely. I was blind, but now my eyes are wide open and I’ll never close them again. So from here on out, you’re the one and only.”

Shane offered a smile. “Happy to hear you talking like that. I love you, too, baby.”

“And I’m still not over your not telling me that you hadn’t been with a guy when we first got together.”

“I wanted to.” A naughty grin flew briefly on Shane’s lips. “But then I got scared that you might not want a virgin --”

Jared laughed and placed one hand over his boyfriend’s mouth. “One as sexy as you? And you were just gay-virgin. Actually, I thought you were pretty sure of yourself.”

“It was an act to get you in my bed,” Shane said after pushing away Jared’s hand and kissing it. “I had a plan to court you for a while.”

“But I jumped you.”

“I guess that solved it, yes.”

“Shane, you were a pretty awesome lover from the start. How come, though?”

“My mom taught me to be a good guy, no matter what.”

“Still, I’m pretty sure she didn’t teach you anything about having sex with a guy.”

That earned him a wholehearted laugh from Shane. “No. For that, I looked at movies and read books and stuff.”

“You looked at porn to learn about it?”

Shane pretended to be offended. “No, at documentaries about sex.”

“You’re pulling my leg.” Jared narrowed his eyes.

Shane kept a straight face but only for a couple of moments. Then he burst into laughter. “No, I looked at porn. And jacked off loads.”

“Hmm,” Jared purred. “So you wasted your jizz over a lot of them pretty gay porn stars, hmm?”

Shane looked guilty as charged. “But reality was much better. When you grabbed my cock and put your mouth on me, I was in heaven. Of course I didn’t tell you I didn’t have any experience with guys.”

The phone ringed, interrupting their banter.

“It’s my brother,” Shane said. “I guess he’ll have to wait for us for a bit. I’ll blame it all on you.”

Jared took one pillow and smacked Shane’s head with it just as he answered the phone.

“How long are you staying?” Jared asked as the dessert was placed in front of them.

“I’m leaving tomorrow,” Coleman replied. “But you two should saddle up quickly, ‘cause the moment I tell momma Shane found himself a boy, that house will be up like fireworks on the Fourth of July.”

“You should tell her not to bother. I can tell by now that I’ll be impressed by the rest of your family. And I didn’t want her to tire herself over me.”

“You tell that to Mrs. McKay. She’ll tell you that if parents don’t fret over their children and their better halves, who should they fret over?”

“Prepare to go on a diet, Jared. Before and after,” Shane intervened. “No matter how we look, she’ll claim that we’re thin as sticks and try to stuff our faces. She’s a great cook, too.”

Jared stared at the mini cake in front of him with a sigh. “All right. Seeing how you learned from her, she must be the absolute cooking goddess. Maybe I’ll start dieting tomorrow.”

Shane pinched his side, making him yelp. “I don’t think you need to worry. You’re skin and bones anyway.”

Jared rolled his eyes. “I remember quite well you didn’t complain earlier while you --” He stopped right in time and blushed. All right, so Coleman was okay with his little brother bringing home a guy, but that didn’t mean that they could talk nonsense like that over dinner.

“You two are something,” Coleman said with a smirk. “I remember when me and my Charlene --”

“Coleman, no,” Shane said.

“What? It’s not like you two don’t know what sex is, right?” Coleman replied, completely nonchalant. “This is all I’m telling you. Get enough of it before kids. After that, you better get good at quickies.”

In the meantime, Jared had learned that he would become the uncle of two naughty devils in the shape of girl twins, aged six. He wanted to strangle Shane for keeping so many things from him.

“Kids?” He found himself asking.

“Yeah,” Coleman said like it was the most natural thing to talk about. “You’ll have some, right?”

Jared threw a desperate look in Shane’s direction, but it appeared that his soon-to-be husband was engrossed in his dessert and didn’t care about offering any reply to his brother’s question. “I suppose,” he said and kicked Shane’s shin surreptitiously under the table, “it’s one of the many things we have to talk about.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven – Can You Tell Me A Secret?

“So, your brother is laying it pretty thick. Kids, huh?” Jared tried to sound casual.

“Yeah,” Shane admitted but added nothing.

Jared continued to walk, without saying another word. They had left Coleman at Shane’s place, and now Shane was just walking him home. “I would have no idea what to do with a kid.” He exhaled, happy to have said at least that.

“Sure you would,” Shane said with conviction.

Jared stopped. It was late in the evening, and only a few people were still out. The velvety warmth of the first days of fall was all around them, and the time was perfect for confessions. “How can you be so sure?”

Shane hooked one arm over his shoulders and began walking, making him move, too. “You’re an awesome guy, Jared. You take care of one million little things every day that I don’t how you do it. You’d be a great dad.”

For a few moments, Jared chose silence. “I would?”

Shane pulled him close. “Yeah, you totally would.”

It was great that one of them had such great confidence. “What about you?”

“I’d be a great dad, too,” Shane said matter-of-factly.

“No, what I meant to say is: have you thought about it? Before?”

“Not in particular. But I grew up in a happy family, so I guess it comes with the territory.” Shane was the one to stop now. He faced Jared and searched his eyes. “Is this too much for you? Nothing’s pressuring us anyway. Don’t mind Coleman --”

“I want to know what you think,” Jared said directly. “What you really think.”

Shane’s face became solemn, the fine lines at the corners of his eyes deeper. “It’s you I want to make happy. We’ll see about other things later.” He must have read something in Jared’s face because he sighed. “I knew Coleman would ruin something, even if not everything, with his big mouth. That’s why I wanted to wait some more.”

Jared smiled and kissed him quickly. “I’m so lucky you weren’t already taken when we met.”

Shane thanked him for the kiss with a hug. “What’s that supposed to mean?” Some of the usual teasing returned to his voice.

“Ah, nothing. But you know what, Shane? I want to make you happy, too.”

Details could wait. And even though Jared hadn't thought before of children and whatnot, he couldn't see what would stop them from having a big happy family. He began walking fast, Shane barely keeping up with him.

"Babe, where's the fire?" Shane drawled.

"I would say something pretty vulgar, but people might overhear us. We don't have much time."

"For what?"

"For a little practice according to Coleman's recommendation," Jared replied.

"Recommendation? About ... ah, I see."

Great. Now it was hard for him to keep up with Shane and his long legs.

"Coffee?"

Adrian blinked away the last bit of sleep hanging from his eyelids and nodded.

Edward offered him a cup and drank from his while leaning against the kitchen counter. He looked good enough to eat, and Adrian didn't mind skipping breakfast and opt for a more exciting alternative.

A small warning from a cocked eyebrow made him take a seat and sip his coffee. It was interesting how fast they had come to understand each other only from glances. Edward was a professional through and through, and he didn't indulge in playing before going to work. Otherwise, as soon as he was free of any duties, he didn't mind jumping Adrian at any moment of the day.

Also, he made great coffee. He had expected Edward to be a little less accustomed with tending for himself, but he was soon chastised and warned that his soon to be husband wasn't helpless.

"You want to tell me something," Adrian said, noticing the silence stretching between them.

"We've been summoned," Edward said in a somewhat clipped manner. That could only mean that he wasn't happy with whatever that summoning meant.

"By your father?"

Edward nodded.

"I'll be with you. There's nothing for you to worry about. Also, I secured you as my future husband. He won't be able to do anything about that."

“That’s, actually, the least of my problems. He won’t do anything, indeed, because he agreed.”

“Wow,” Adrian expressed his surprise. “I thought he would be the kind to hire hitmen to make sure the Hastings line remains pure.”

Edward offered him a crooked smile. “No, the issue is not with him opposing in any way.”

“Then what’s the problem? There is one, right?”

“It’s about the wedding.”

They had been living together for a couple of weeks now, and Adrian had announced his parents over the phone that an impending wedding had to be arranged. While the date wasn’t yet set in stone, his mother was up in arms about what had to be done.

Therefore, when the unspoken words finally reached his brain, his face fell. “They want to organize it? Is that the issue?”

Edward nodded and sighed. “I am yet to meet your mother, but I have a feeling she won’t take it well.”

“You can bet,” Adrian said with a grimace. “She’s planning something grandiose as we speak. If I tell her ‘no’, she might strangle me. And cry. I don’t know the exact order. Ever since I told her I’m marrying a doctor --”

“Good thing you didn’t tell her about my family,” Edward added. “And it should be something for us to take care of, right?”

“Well, yeah, but good luck with telling that to my mom. And, apparently, to your dad, too.”

“What are we going to do?”

Adrian scratched his head. “Um, talking about being between a rock and a hard place. When are we supposed to go meet your folks?”

“Dad wants us over as soon as possible. It is a bit unusual for him to drop formalities, but it might be that he just wants to talk to us, face to face, minus all the relatives.”

“Will your mom be present? To think that I didn’t meet her although I was there.”

“She must be behind all this,” Edward replied after he pondered for a bit. “She might make most people think she’s invisible, but only she knows how to bring dad around.”

“How come she didn’t intervene when the other guys courted you?”

Edward chuckled and shook his head in mirth. “I believe her words were something like: ‘Dear, if they don’t have the guts to stand up to your father, they don’t deserve the Hastings name’.”

“Wow, your mom is savage,” Adrian said with a snicker. “I wonder what she thinks of me.”

“Oh, don’t worry. You’ll have your chance to find out. Once she gets you alone in the room with her, she’ll tell you what she thinks of you.”

“Now I’m getting worried. I thought your dad was the only challenge I had to overcome.”

Edward laughed, seemingly a bit smug over seeing Adrian fret over the upcoming meeting with the Hastings family.

“Ha, ha, funny. I’ll have to call my mom and make her promise that she’ll scare you, too. And that might be a bit difficult since she’s already smitten although she hasn’t met you yet.” Adrian’s eyes narrowed as some of Edward had said finally caught up with him. “The Hastings name? Are you trying to tell me that I’m going to take your name?”

Edward shrugged, but his smile said everything. He was having fun. “Adrian, you chose to marry into royalty,” he declared in a funny voice. “It’s only natural that you get to enjoy the perks.”

“What perks? Changing my name to Hastings?” All right, so that thought was a bit unnerving.

Edward gave him an odd look. Yet, his lips were twisting, fighting a smile, and Adrian knew he had been played. “Once you take the name,” Edward said in a willingly formal manner, “all doors will be open to you. My father wouldn’t allow anyone to take our name in vain, and you’ll be one of ours.”

“You’re laughing at me,” Adrian concluded. He cocked his head and examined Edward head to toes. Okay, so if he were to be pressed hard enough, he would give in. The alternative didn’t exist.

“A little. It’s a bit entertaining to throw you off once in a while. Exciting even.”

“Exciting, huh?” Adrian moved slowly toward Edward. He caught him in a tight embrace and crushed his lips with his. Naughty boys, regardless of age and station in the world, needed to be taught a lesson once in a while.

Edward was breathless by the time they broke the kiss. The look in his eyes was dreamy, and Adrian knew what it meant. Without bothering with formalities, he pushed Edward to his knees and took out his cock, ready for action. He enjoyed slapping that gorgeous mouth with it, as well as the heat growing in the deep pools of green staring at him and never breaking contact.

“Suck it,” he said thickly and licked his lips as a reaction to seeing Edward engulf his cock in one fell swoop into his mouth like it was the best dessert in the universe.

Edward’s fingers were steel as they dug into his thighs, but Adrian didn’t complain. Morning blowjobs; if he were to think about his life before Edward, those hadn’t been on the menu much.

His beautiful and kinky lover could run his mouth about perks all he wanted; Adrian had a different way of counting.

Still, the work ethics didn't leave Edward even now. He was efficient on purpose, but there was no one to complain about that. Adrian placed both hands on the kitchen counter and pressed down as if the piece of furniture had suddenly become sentient and wanted to float toward the ceiling. It took all his willpower not to thrust his hips forward and maybe make Edward hit the counter with the back of his head.

A hand left his thigh to grab his balls, and he was done for. His cock throbbed, and Edward went deep in one go, keeping him there and giving him what he wanted.

He was shaking slightly when Edward released him from his mouth. His breathing was hard, but he was on cloud nine already. The tongue gently cleaning his cock made him shudder a few more times in the aftermath.

"I think you'll love being called Mr. Hastings," Edward whispered against his lips when he got to his feet.

Adrian's eyes snapped open. "Are you sure, Mr. Rossi?"

Edward's greens flashed. Ah, Adrian knew what that was.

"I take thee to be my lawfully wedded --"

Edward rolled his eyes and slapped his cheek playfully. "Save it for the wedding."

"Which is a matter of parents and much grief for us in the future, the way I see it now."

"I'll find a way to make it work," Edward promised. "Of course, in the meantime, I will have to convince you to obediently receive my name."

Adrian smirked. "Funny how you think you can make claims with a mouth full of my cum."

The smirk was returned. "Funny you think you're in charge. My mouth full of your cum just proves you wrong."

Adrian caught Edward by the waist and kissed him again. He relished in tasting himself from his lover's mouth. There was something raw and wild he wanted to experience again and again.

Edward pushed him away and grabbed his shirt. Their eyes met. "I need to get to work."

"What if I don't want to let you go?" Adrian tightened his hold.

"And leave my patients waiting?"

“Fair enough. Just one more kiss, then.” Edward obliged, and Adrian placed a possessive hand on his ass. “Now shoo, Mr. Rossi.”

“Of course, Mr. Hastings. No rest for the wicked.”

They would play at this for a long time, the way Adrian saw it. But he had both time and patience, and he would win, as usual.

“What do you think?” Ryan threw a critical look at the table arrangement.

“They’re not that kind of fancy guys,” Mike protested. Ryan had wanted to know what each of his friends drank and liked as favorite food, and Mike had even had to call and ask about Edward’s and Shane’s preferences. “They would eat and drink everything.”

“But Adrian’s boyfriend is sophisticated, you told me.”

“Yeah, but I don’t think he would scoff at beer and chips,” Mike retorted. “I did nothing all day,” he complained. “You just took care of everything.”

“But I enjoy doing it,” Ryan replied and grabbed Mike by the shoulders, squeezing out some of the tension accumulated in them. “You spend too much time at the computer.”

“Are you going to be the nagging wife?” Mike wondered. “Not that you have something of a wife in you or anything,” he hurried to ask.

Everything was amazing. Ryan made love to him every night, and there was nothing Mike could complain about. There was always food, he played with Bran, and he was already negotiating his next employment with a new tech startup that didn’t pay a lot, but had great perspectives.

But Ryan did everything, and Mike felt a little like ... like a guest. Plus, he hadn’t yet gathered the courage to tell Ryan about his fantasy of topping him for a change. That could be a game-breaker, he feared, so breaching the subject had been postponed indefinitely for now.

“I wear the apron,” Ryan whispered in his ear, making goosebumps rise on every inch of his skin. “What else do I need to do to prove I’m the wife in this house?”

Mike had a reply to that, but it was way too vulgar to be said out loud. Ryan embraced him from behind. “I won’t spare anything to make a good impression on your friends.”

“They will be impressed,” Mike replied, and he really meant it. One look at that table, and he knew it to be true.

“I only have one question for you, Ryan,” Adrian said, “are you spoiling our Mike here with great food like this every day?”

“I’m trying,” Ryan confirmed.

“How come you don’t ever gain weight?” Adrian asked Mike directly.

Mike touched his belly, happy that his movement couldn’t be noticed. Actually, that was starting to show, but Ryan seemed happy with him getting a little bit of meat on his bones. When he looked in the mirror, he had to admit that he no longer looked like his usual scrawny self. But that didn’t mean he would indulge in dessert every day. However, Ryan made some amazing desserts. Maybe he could skip a course to indulge in them, anyway.

“Don’t tease him, Adrian,” Jared smacked his friend’s arm. “Mike, you’re great just the way you are.”

“That’s exactly what I keep telling him, too,” Ryan said.

Mike grinned, feeling goofy over being so loved. Ryan’s idea to throw a little get-together hadn’t been bad at all. Adrian and Edward looked great together, their eyes all shiny. As for Jared and Shane, they ... actually looked pretty much just like that.

“Do you guys have something to tell us?” Mike asked, looking at Jared, and then at Shane.

There was a small exchange between them, and then they both broke into a smile. Mike grinned. So, after all, Jared had finally managed to see Shane for what he was, aka his boyfriend. That was great to know.

“We do,” Jared said after throwing another loving look at his partner. “Well, I guess we can always blame Adrian --”

“Blame me? Why?”

“For giving us the marriage bug,” Jared said promptly.

Mike’s eyes grew wide. Adrian began laughing. “You’re marrying your friend with benefits?”

Jared made a sour face. “I know all about your talking behind my back and having fun. You are both,” he pointed the finger at Mike, then Adrian, “in trouble.”

“I’m shaking,” Adrian said with a shrug.

“I’m sure,” Jared said as he squared his pretty eyes on him. “But I’ll think of something. Maybe I’ll bring a stripper to jump out of the cake at your wedding.”

Adrian guffawed and slapped his thighs. "I bet Mr. Hastings Sr. will have something close to a heart attack. Please, J, have mercy on my future father-in-law."

"I can assure you that my father is worldly enough to have seen a stripper before," Edward said as he looked at his boyfriend with tenderness in his eyes.

"J is planning revenge. Aren't we going to stop him?" Adrian replied.

"Guys, guys," Mike intervened, "aren't we straying from the main topic here? Jared, Shane, are you guys going to marry? For real?"

Jared scratched his head and offered a small embarrassed smile. "We realized that we love each other and --"

"Well, it's pretty much a shotgun wedding," Shane intervened. "We were found by my family, so," he added with a raise of his shoulders.

Jared shook his head, laughed, and then found a way to nudge his boyfriend in the ribs if the grimace on Shane's face was any indication.

"Congratulations are in order, then," Ryan said and raised the glass. "Are you thinking about coordinating your weddings?"

There were exchanges between Jared and Adrian, and then between them and their soon to be husbands.

Adrian was the first to speak. "Damn, that's actually brilliant! I mean, your dad, Edward, won't be able to call the shots as much as he wants, right, if we organize a double wedding!"

"That doesn't sound so bad, and I agree," Edward confirmed. "Plus, since we're bringing all our friends together, anyway, it should be double the fun."

Mike looked at his friends, listened to their happy chatter, and then risked a look in Ryan's direction. Unlike him, Ryan didn't look at the group; instead, he looked at him, and there was something hard to read in his dark eyes.

"Were you surprised?" Ryan asked later that night while they were getting ready for bed.

Which meant that here came the moment Mike waited with trepidation every evening. Without fail, Ryan had offered him all his love, regardless of how early he needed to get up in the morning the next day. It was routine, but one Mike liked to the moon and back.

"By Shane and Jared's decision? A bit, yeah," he admitted. "I mean, days ago, Jared didn't want to hear about having Shane as his boyfriend."

“Although they were having sex.”

“Yes, it was kind of a friends with benefits thing. I mean, Jared thought that. Shane didn’t. He actually wanted to convince Jared they were good together. It looks like he succeeded.”

“Are you a bit jealous?” Ryan came behind him, and Mike inhaled, enjoying his lover’s smell. They were both naked already, so they could feel each other’s body heat.

“Jealous?” Mike felt confused. His heart was already beating faster, as much in anticipation of what would follow, like the rest of his body. “Of Jared?”

“Of everyone.” Ryan blew hot air over his ear. “They’re getting married.”

“No, I’m not jealous.” Mike closed his eyes and relished the sensation of having Ryan’s hard body mold to his. A certain hard thing was already poking at his back.

“Is it okay if I admit that I am?” Ryan said.

Mike fought hard to open his eyes and turn to face his lover. “Are you jealous? Why?”

Ryan shrugged. “I’m a bit of a coward. All right, I’m afraid.”

Mike blinked a few times. “Of what?”

“I’m taking you too fast. I do notice that you still feel a bit estranged here, and I know that I must do more so that you feel completely at home.”

“I do feel at home.”

Ryan sat on the bed. He linked his fingers, letting his hands balance between his legs. Mike fought hard the temptation to grab his hands and tell him not to be afraid. But he had a feeling that whatever would follow was important enough to require no interruptions. “Feel free to laugh at me, but I’m a bit smitten, Mike. What am I saying? I’m completely smitten. And I’m not sure if I’m doing enough or too much.”

Mike knelt in front of him and took his hands. “You’re doing everything here. I’m not sure I deserve so much attention. Sometimes I’m afraid you might get exhausted and then tired of me. Even annoyed.”

Ryan threw him a surprised look. He shook his head. “I would never think that.”

“Yeah, I guess not because you’re generous like that. But, every day, you come home from work and you start cooking my favorites. You take me shopping and to visit places, and at night, you,” he swallowed once, “make love to me. And in the morning, you’re up again. I don’t want you to feel so ... pressured.”

Ryan laughed and shook his head. For a moment, his eyes traveled down, but then rested on Mike's face. "I guess I want to make sure you'll stay."

"You have no reason to believe against that," Mike protested. "I'm happy here. Damn, didn't I say it? I mean, I must have said it --"

"You did. You're an amazing person, Mike. You're thankful and generous, and you love me back. But you don't ask for anything, and maybe it's my fault that I'm trying to meet all your desires before they even have time to form in your head."

Mike looked down. He was still the same quiet mouse deep inside, which meant that he didn't speak his mind most times.

"So, I would like to know, what do you want, Mike? Can you tell me a secret? One thing you want, but you don't want to ask because, I don't know, you have reasons not to?"

Mike took a deep breath. "Is it important?"

"Yes," Ryan replied. The look in his eyes was intense and left no room for second-guessing.

Mike looked away. Was it truly all right to talk about his desire? Just the thought of having Ryan and his exquisite body surrender to him was enough to make him spend himself right there. A soft touch on his cheek made him look back at Ryan.

"There is something, isn't it?" The question was soft like a feather.

For a moment, Mike closed his eyes. "There is."

"So, tell me," Ryan cooed and brought their lips together in a gentle kiss. "I hope it's not something like your wanting another man in the bedroom." The statement was a joke but sounded like only half of one.

"No," Mike said and hoped that he sounded terrified enough to make Ryan believe him without any other questions. "Me and threesomes ... a total 'no'."

Ryan chuckled and caressed his lips. "I'll take your word for it. Then what is it?"

"I want --" Mike started with all the strong will he could muster.

"Yes?" Ryan allowed his hands to wander and caress Mike's chest, teasing his nipples in passing, on their way down.

Mike hissed when Ryan grabbed his cock. Maybe it was the right moment to let his other head do the thinking. "I want to ... top you," he added the last two words fast, hoping that he didn't sound too eager.

Ryan laughed and brought one hand to caress Mike's bottom lip. "Top me, huh?"

"Are you in shock? I mean, surprised? Me topping you --"

"Sounds like a plan."

Mike fell silent and then examined his boyfriend curiously. "You're not surprised."

"Not in shock, either."

"But how? I mean, you've only topped and I thought --"

"Hmm," Ryan purred and began playing with Mike's cock for real. "You thought I would tell you 'no'? I don't believe I'm a particularly astute observer, but when it comes to you, I might be. I noticed how you look at my ass when you think I'm not watching."

Mike blushed and covered his face. Ryan took his hands away.

"So you knew?" Mike mumbled.

"It was only a suspicion, and I wanted to know for sure. After all, I didn't want to pressure you in a role you didn't think of taking. But, feel free to blame me for teasing you on purpose, you know, letting you have a good view of my ass as often as possible."

"Oh gawd," Mike complained. "I'm a walking boner for days, and I thought I was insane. I mean, you make love to me every night, and I'm not complaining, but lately I felt like it wasn't enough. So you've been teasing me?"

"Forgive me." Ryan gave him another quick kiss. "Better, take it on my ass."

There was something naughty in the dark eyes, and Mike bit his lips. "Take it on your ass? Like ... fuck you?" He didn't mean to make it sound like that, but by how Ryan's breath hitched for a moment, that was the right approach.

"Fuck me," Ryan replied.

Mike was suddenly at a loss. He had imagined this moment in many different ways, but now his mind was blank. What on earth was he thinking? Now he would make a complete fool of himself.

Again, Ryan took his hand. "Want a good view of my ass again? Just in case you need a bit of inspiration." A knowing smirk accompanied his words.

Mike now felt a bit like he wanted, indeed, to have his payback. "Then show me."

Ryan leaned back on the bed, allowing him to admire his beautiful muscular body, stretched like a cat, and turned on his belly as if he were a stripper teasing his audience. He pushed himself back on all fours and presented a perfect ass. “How is this for showing you?”

“Will do,” Mike replied and let out a small nervous laugh. Was he playing this as he should? He grabbed Ryan’s ass with both hands and stared at the small hole between them as he pushed the buttocks apart. “Is this mine?”

“Of course it is,” Ryan replied matter-of-factly. “It’s okay, Mike,” he added in a gentler tone. “I know you’ll be an awesome top.”

There was no moment to waste. Mike grabbed all he needed and stood behind Ryan. For a while, he caressed the round butt cheeks, kissing and biting them from time to time. He knew he wanted to be inside his lover and go crazy, but first, there was a new hunger growing inside him that he needed to stave off.

He buried his tongue inside Ryan’s ass and received a manly moan in turn. Ryan was good at rimming, and Mike wanted to prove himself just the same. He ate his lover’s ass, shamelessly, wishing to show his desire in any way he could.

“I’m going in,” he whispered when his cock twitched so painfully that ignoring it was no longer an option.

“At last,” Ryan replied, but his voice was a bit shaky and hoarse from his earlier shouts and gasps of pleasure.

Mike snickered. So, it wasn’t that hard to turn his beautiful boyfriend into a quivering mess if he wanted to. That left room for experimentation, but it would have to come another time. For now, he needed to keep his wits about him. Having that nice ass all at his disposal was like the best gift ever, and he had every intention to enjoy it.

He gasped and felt his eyes rolling in his head with pleasure when his cock was gripped by tight heat. Oh, no, he needed to focus, or this would be over too soon. “Will you let me again?” he asked in a timid voice.

“What? Top me?” Ryan’s voice was labored now. Indeed, his hole didn’t appear as if it got that kind of action on the regular. “As many times as you want.”

Well, that was a comforting thought. Still, on his first time with Ryan that way, he had to make a good impression. With one deep breath, he found the power to push a little more. Damn, it was fantastic, how the warmth and tightness of Ryan’s body made him feel. His fingers trembled as he steadied himself by grabbing his boyfriend’s hips. Slowly, he began moving and found his rhythm right away.

He didn't go too fast, not from the start, since he didn't think he would make it far like that. Ryan wasn't helping, his whispered encouragements too much already.

"Is it any good for you?" Mike asked.

"I'm hard like never," Ryan replied. "Just feel my cock."

Mike snuck one hand under Ryan's body and sighed in satisfaction when he took hold of a hard leaking member. He teased the head with his thumb, enjoying the feel of so much precum that Ryan's words from earlier sounded completely true.

"Oh, damn, don't be a teaser, Micah." Ryan's voice always dropped low and sexy when speaking his name. That meant that had to be serious, so there was no point in postponing any of that.

He began moving his hips again; only this time, he could feel the effect of his thrusts right in his partner's cock that pulsed and twitched in his hand. It was fantastic to be able to move like that, in a tide of growing pleasure.

"You're the best top, Micah," Ryan encouraged him breathlessly. "Give it to me like this."

His body moved now as if it didn't need a brain at the command center. It knew what it wanted, and Mike let it lead, as he closed his eyes. To be like that with someone that was more than just a fantasy come true. It didn't matter that he wasn't as sophisticated as others, or as handsome as them. Right now, he was together with this man, and no one else, and he was the luckiest guy alive.

Ryan cursed as he bucked his hips back, withdrew, and slammed back against Mike's body. He came, and Mike felt it. That was a simple trigger for his own reaction. He had been teetering on edge for a while now, and nothing could take that victory from him now.

"Ryan, I love you so much," he whispered as his body stilled, and his mind registered the explosion of fulfilled desire only to go blank for a second after.

He was barely on his back, exhausted but ecstatic when Ryan draped his body with his. "Oh, Micah, that was really amazing." He peppered Mike's face with kisses. "Have you been with others like this?"

"Not like this," Mike said the truth. "There were others, only a few, but never like this."

Ryan chuckled and pressed their lips together. "Then I'm glad. You know you're going to top a lot from now on, don't you?"

"For real? I'm afraid I cannot feel my legs."

Ryan laughed. “Well, that comes with the territory. Now you’ll have a strong motivation to be in shape.”

“Are you teasing me because I’m getting fat? It’s your cooking at fault.”

Another snicker followed. “Yeah, it was all part of my plan. No, I’m just kidding. I’m happy that you’re enjoying your time here so much.” A pause followed. “And I hope you’re going to make it permanent. What do you say?”

Mike looked at Ryan. The laughter was gone, so the question needed a proper answer. He wasn’t always well aware of what went around him, but now it all made sense, Ryan’s jealousy over the others getting married. The question was there, but Mike felt that an opening was left, and it only depended on him if he wanted to take it or not. “Do you want to become my husband, Ryan?”

The dark eyes flashed with unhidden joy. “I’ll be delighted. I didn’t expect you to pop the question.”

“I knew you were about one second from asking it yourself, so I thought I’d be faster.”

A knowing grin was the response. “Well, that takes a load off my chest.”

“Don’t tell me you were afraid to ask me or something. I mean, not that it’s not okay to be afraid of stuff --”

“A little, yes. You weren’t jealous at all of your friends getting hitched?” Ryan searched his face.

Mike exhaled. “No. I know you love me. And as strange as that may be, it looks like I’m the one who has to put you at ease. Therefore, I’m asking the question.”

He had done it. He had just gone for it, and it had all worked out okay. But it felt nice to pretend he was cool for a change. For sure, Ryan saw straight through his act, which meant that he was just indulging him right now, but it still felt nice.

“I’m happy to say ‘yes’,” Ryan said and kissed him. “Wait till I tell everyone.”

“Everyone?”

“The family, of course.”

Mike had met some of Ryan’s best friends, but not the family. His blood chilled, and his smug smile disappeared. How were they going to look at him?

“Let’s take a shower together, husband,” Ryan said and took his hand. “This surely has a nice ring to it.”

Yeah, it did. But right now, Mike had a serious issue on his hands. How would Ryan's relatives look at him?

Ryan was not only skilled at throwing dinner parties, but he also appeared to love doing that. After stealing one delicious canapé from the ones deemed unfit for the dinner table, Mike had to ask, "Have you ever thought about going into catering or something like that?"

He was rewarded with a quick kiss on his cheek and a small slap over the wrist. "Don't eat so much or you'll have no appetite later."

That was sure since the moment Mike met the family, he wouldn't be able to swallow another bite. Actually, his cleaning off the plates with the rejected foods was part of a strategy. "How are they like?"

Ryan took one moment to think, and then he shrugged. "Just like everyone else, I guess."

Besides Ryan's parents, a couple of aunts and an assortment of cousins were expected for dinner. Mike's mom had been happy to hear the news over the phone, and she told them that she would visit the following week, but the Armstrong family apparently required a formal announcement.

Of course, they were well off, rich probably, and that was why things were as they were.

"I don't remember if you told me, but is your uncle going to be here? Like in, my old boss from before you."

Ryan laughed and patted his cheek. "Would you be embarrassed? He's on a cruise, so he couldn't come. Don't worry; he told me you had always been an exemplary employee."

"It's good to have recommendations," Mike agreed.

"Yeah, I mean you being the perfect employee was a major selling point for me."

"Stop teasing me," Mike protested.

"I'm not. I'm just saying that your work ethics proved to me that I'm dealing with a hard worker. You know, someone who always gets the job done." The last words came with a small wink.

Mike looked down, red in the face. Last night, he had kept Ryan awake for an entire hour more only so that he could identify all the points on his boyfriend's body that made him hot. He had ended up with the list of ticklish spots, but that was a win, too, if he thought about it.

Ryan squeezed his shoulder. "My family will love you. And if they don't, the thing is, you're not marrying them. You're marrying me. So there's nothing for you to be afraid of, or anxious about, okay?"

A nod was the most he could muster for the moment. Ryan tousled his hair and kissed him on the forehead. “You’ll be fine.”

“So, Mike, you are currently ... unemployed?” Mrs. Armstrong asked. Ryan’s mom was a woman in her late fifties with perfectly coiffed hair and looking at least fifteen years younger.

Her slow and calculated hesitation wasn’t lost on Mike. After all, their son had just announced them that he intended to get married, so any curious inquiries were normal.

“I will start working next month, at a local startup. They’re new in town, and the pay is not that impressive, but I believe they have a vision,” he replied.

He was babbling and overly conscious of it, too, but couldn’t stop. His palms were clammy, and Mrs. Armstrong’s pursed lips were enough to drive the fear of all deities into his bones. Ryan was caught up in a conversation with a guy sitting to his right, so he wasn’t aware of the little briefing Mike was taken through by his mother.

“A vision,” Mrs. Armstrong repeated after him, weighing the word on her tongue.

She and her husband were right across the table from him, so Mike could see well that they weren’t incredibly happy with him. Or maybe it was just his imagination. Ryan reached for him while still talking to the other guest, but lost no time to grab him by the shoulders and give him an encouraging squeeze.

“What do you think of my future husband?” Ryan directed the question to his parents.

A short glance between Mrs. and Mr. Armstrong followed.

“He’s an interesting young man,” Mrs. Armstrong said, but only from the tip of her lips.

Mike made himself small in his chair. Ryan kissed his temple and whispered in his ear, “Told you. They already love you.”

Well, that was a way of seeing things; Mike just wasn’t sure he shared the same opinion but kept quiet for the time being.

The dinner hadn’t been that bad, after all, so Mike felt relieved. Ryan’s parents were a bit distant and asked him many questions, but he had done his best to answer truthfully. Of course, all the while, he had had to fight the sensation that some invisible sword would cut his head off if he answered wrong.

Some of the guests had chosen to mingle in the large living room, but a few were on the deck facing the backyard, and Mike was on a mission to ask them if they cared for another drink. Although not completely official, it had been a fabulous engagement party.

He was about to walk through the door leading to the deck when he heard a now familiar voice.

“I do not intend to stand in the way of his happiness.” That was Ryan’s mother talking, so Mike stopped to listen, although he knew well eavesdropping was a rude thing to do.

“He appeared to have made up his mind. It’s all said and done, at this point.” That was Ryan’s father replying, and his tone was reserved and seemingly neutral. Also, maybe it was just Mike’s imagination, but he seemed a tad annoyed with the conversation.

“I will insist that they sign a prenup.”

“Of course. A man in Ryan’s position needs to protect his interests.” From annoyed, Mr. Armstrong’s voice had progressed to bored.

“You need to tell him.”

“Why me? I don’t really care.”

“Well, you should. He’s your only son.”

“And a goddamn adult who knows better than the two of us whether he wants to start his marriage by practically telling his better half that he suspects him of trying to take him to the cleaners once they’re officially husband and ... well, husband.”

“It’s obviously not about that,” Mrs. Armstrong protested. “In our world --”

“It’s common, I know. But Ryan looks happy.” Mr. Armstrong’s voice softened. “And I believe Mike to be a good guy. He doesn’t seem the kind to be interested in material possessions.”

“Ha! How could you know that? We barely met him.”

“But Ryan knows him.”

“The boy used to be his employee. You know Ryan’s history with such ... people.”

“I like to think that my son knows better this time around. If you want to tell Ryan about the prenup, I won’t keep you. But I will not suggest, for one moment, that his future husband is a gold digger.”

Mike took little steps back until he was sure he was out of earshot. Then, he ran up the stairs and hid in the bedroom. On a conscious level, he couldn’t tell why he had done that, but it felt like the only thing he could do.

Of course, Ryan had had troubles with men before. And here he was, unemployed, awkward, and entirely out of the water in Ryan's world. It was only natural for Mrs. Armstrong to suspect him of being a gold digger.

What was he going to do? They were moving too fast, indeed. They weren't letting their parents get to know them, and that appeared to open a nasty can of worms.

He wasn't marrying Ryan for his money, but how could he prove it? He lived here, in Ryan's house, eating his food, not paying anything, without doing much except play with the dog! Anyone from outside could tell he was kept.

He sat on the floor and buried his face into his palms. They needed to have a talk, or they would be miserable. Allowing Ryan to go against his parents ... wait, what if he didn't want to do that? What if Ryan asked for a prenup?

Mike stopped his train of thought for a moment. Would he feel insulted? The logical part of the brain told him 'no'; the irrational one said 'yes'. With the latter also came a bit of revolt. He hadn't chased a rich guy to make him marry him or anything.

It was just Ryan's fault for being rich. And now, Mike's head hurt, and he didn't really want to get married just as much.

Chapter Twenty-Eight – Families

“There you were.” Ryan walked into the room and took in Mike with a somewhat perplexed face. “I was starting to think you’ve run out on me or something.”

Mike threw his lover one tragic look. At least, he suspected it to be tragic because that was how he felt inside. Ryan’s face fell, and there was that, too. “What’s wrong? Does your stomach hurt? You ate too much --”

“Ryan,” Mike said. “I ... thought about it.”

“About what? Would you come closer? It is a bit unnerving to talk to you while you’re hiding in a corner.”

Although it took a feat of willpower to do so, Mike stood up and walked toward Ryan. He took his hand and looked down. “Maybe,” he let out an exhale, “we are moving too fast.”

“What do you mean?” Ryan seemed rightfully confused.

“Maybe we should take some time to get to know each other better.”

There was a short moment of silence. “Did anyone say something to you?” Ryan’s voice was tense.

Of course, he would be upset, but Mike needed time to prove he wasn’t a gold digger. Still, he felt as if telling Ryan about his eavesdropping wouldn’t earn him points. He had no interest in having Ryan choose between him and his parents; wait, was that what he really thought that it would happen?

“Just tell me who and what told you.” Ryan took him by the shoulders. “And look at me. I know you’re hiding something.”

“I’m not hiding anything.” Mike tried to look at Ryan, but his eyes glided off, incapable of focusing.

“Don’t you recall what I told you before everyone came? You’re marrying me, not them.”

It looked like fooling Ryan wouldn’t work that easily. But what was he to do? Just go ahead and blame Ryan’s parents for suspecting him of having malicious intents? Ryan had only known him for several months, but he had known his parents for a lifetime. It was easy to see who he would believe.

“I know, I know, it’s just that ... it’s a bit too much. And moving here so fast ...” he trailed off, swallowing the words threatening to pour out of his mouth.

Ryan's hands fell from his shoulders. "Oh, damn, I was in such a hurry, but I guess you're right." His voice was tense, still. "If you want to go back to your place, please do. I don't want to be that kind of overbearing boyfriend who never allows the guy he loves to have a life."

Mike risked one look at Ryan. His face was dark, his eyebrows furrowed, and the corners of his lips pulled downward. Great, now he had managed to make Ryan feel like he had done something wrong. He reached for him and touched his arm. "I ... you're awesome, Ryan."

A hurt look was the reply.

"You took me in while I didn't have a job --"

Ryan scoffed. "Are you serious? It's this about freeloading again? I thought we were clear on that. You know what? Let's do this." He took out his phone and fiddled with it. "This month's expenses. Care to pay for half?"

Mike took Ryan's phone and looked through the bills. Well, it was a bit uncomfortable to think that more than half of his negotiated paycheck would have to cover his share. "Sure. I have some savings." He munched his bottom lip.

Ryan sighed and let out an exasperated groan. "I don't want you to use your savings. I'm well off, and I believe I can afford keeping the person I love happy and without having to worry about paying bills. Especially since I plan to marry that person. Wait, are we still on for that?" His voice was now alarmed.

Mike stood frozen under Ryan's hurt stare. "Maybe a bit later?"

Ryan sat on the bed and covered his face. "Micah, please, be honest. What is going on? All right, so you need to feel like a man --"

"I am a man."

"That's not what I'm saying. Since when is the difference of income between us an issue?"

"It's not," Mike protested, but feebly. "It's not an issue."

"Sure it is if you want to leave only because you think you cannot afford to live with me here. I know," he added, his tone suddenly bright. "I'll move in with you. I'll have to ask someone to take care of Bran --"

"What? Are you leaving him behind?"

"Micah, with all due respect, your apartment is not a good choice for a dog like him."

"But still!"

“You don’t want us to leave him behind? What choice do I have?”

“I don’t want you to move in with me!” Mike realized too late what he was saying.

Ryan’s face fell, and he appeared to be in complete shock. “You don’t? I don’t get it ... do you want us to break up?” His voice was only a whisper now.

Mike wanted to slap himself silly. “No, I don’t want that! It’s just that ... I’m not a gold digger!”

“A what?!” Consternation was too little a word to describe what Ryan wanted to send across with those words.

“You know, the kind of person who marries up and stuff,” Mike mumbled. And he had just let the cat out of the bag because, apparently, he didn’t know when and how to keep his mouth shut.

“I know what the term means. What I don’t know is how could you have come up with such an idea about yourself. Now I’m surer than ever that someone else put that in your head. If you love me, if you trust me, tell me who that was.”

Mike shifted his weight from one foot to another. “I kind of overheard something.”

“Overheard?”

“I eavesdropped, okay?” Mike raised his voice, but that was his anxiety, not his anger.

“All right.” Ryan put his hands up in a peaceful offer. “It’s not a problem. Just tell me who you heard and what they said.”

Mike felt his palms getting sweaty. “It was your ... mom. Talking to your dad.” The truth was the only way out, even if it meant to hurt Ryan and make him lose his faith in him.

“Oh, damn.” Ryan’s frustrated whisper said it all.

“I’d probably think the same if I were in her shoes,” Mike added quickly.

Ryan pursed his lips and turned toward the door.

“Hey, wait... Ryan!” Mike hurried after him.

It was some kind of self-preservation guiding him, but he managed to reach the door in time and place himself between it and his upset boyfriend.

“I have to talk to them.”

“No, you don’t. They’ll hate me.”

“They have no right to insult you.”

“They didn’t. They couldn’t know I was eavesdropping.”

“And? Does that mean they can just throw that around?”

Mike had no idea how he could argue with that.

“Please, Micah, move out of the way.”

He put his hands on Ryan’s chest. “No way. You’re upset. And I’m to blame.”

“But I don’t want them thinking such things about you.”

“They don’t know me,” Mike argued. “I mean, all they know is that you suddenly decided to get married. And here I am, this stranger who might be after their son’s wealth.”

“But you’re not.” Ryan softened a bit. “It’s what I want to tell them.”

“They’ll be upset. After all, they’re looking out for you. I love you, Ryan, but I don’t want them to think that about me. I mean, they see a guy who’s freeloading --”

“That again,” Ryan moaned. “What’s the point of having money if I can’t spoil the guy I love?”

Something irked Mike a little. Ryan had to be wealthy, but so far, Mike hadn’t noticed anything extravagant, beyond the means of a young head of a company doing well, without being a household name, though. “Just how much are you worth?”

“Excuse me?” Ryan quirked an affronted eyebrow.

“Just tell me,” Mike replied and steeled himself for the answer. A nice house and comfortable living couldn’t be enough for Ryan’s parents to think of him as a gold digger. He wasn’t from some third world country, not to have seen that type of wealth before.

Ryan furrowed his brow and then leaned in and whispered something in Mike’s ear.

“Heir?” Mike’s eyes grew wide. Ryan continued. Shares, legacy, and a whole bunch of words that made his head spin followed. “Fuck me,” he moaned, “I am a gold digger!”

“Shut up,” Ryan protested. “I know you’re not.”

Mike began shaking his head like taken by a seizure. “I think I’ll sign ten prenups if you put them in front of me.”

“Prenups? Ah, I guess you heard that from them. No need.”

“Yes need,” Mike shot back. “I thought they were afraid I would ask for half of this nice house, which I wouldn’t, anyway, but this is serious stuff! I had no idea you were so loaded!”

Ryan scratched his head. “I needed the right moment to tell you about it all. It just didn’t come up.”

Mike covered his face. “Oh, gawd, no wonder they thought I was digging for your money! Now it makes sense. All right, so prenupe it is.”

Ryan looked at him with a wounded expression in his eyes. “Are you thinking of ever leaving me?”

“Of course not,” Mike protested. “But it’s your family’s money, and I want nothing to do with it. I only want you.”

Ryan relaxed. “Fair enough.” He embraced Mike and held him close.

“Will be anything about Bran’s custody in that prenupe?” Mike asked.

Ryan broke their embrace and stared at him, as puzzled as before. “Bran’s custody? Are you planning to take my dog with you now?”

Mike knew when someone was pulling his leg. Ryan’s lips twisted in a grin. “Our dog,” he said in the most natural voice he could muster without breaking into a laugh.

“Of course. Our dog. But no, if you want me, and you want Bran, you’ll never going to leave us.”

“I won’t,” Mike said solemnly. “But you can tell your parents that I’ll sign whatever prenupe they want.”

Ryan had a strange smile on his face. “Don’t worry. I’ll talk to them about everything.”

Adrian took his time to examine the grounds, now that he was no longer in a hurry, like before. “Your family lives like freaking royalty,” he told Edward.

They held hands and didn’t let go while they got out of the car.

“Don’t let them impress you,” Edward said. “It’s nothing but bricks and mortar.”

“And marble. Some gold, I think?” Adrian offered his boyfriend a crooked smile.

Edward waved. “You know what I mean. I hope you’re not having second thoughts, now that you can observe my family’s display of wealth with a cool head.”

“Second thoughts? Never. And I’m a man who takes pride in having succeeded on his own. Well, with my parents’ help who put me through school, of course, but still, you know what I mean.”

“I do.” Edward pulled him close and shared a sneaky kiss.

“Now, let’s convince your hard-headed dad that my mom will have a beef with him if he tries to rule this party.”

Edward moved and whispered in his ear. “Here’s the twist. Convince my mom and the rest will follow.”

“Good advice.” Adrian offered Edward a thumbs up. “Let’s get going. They’re not the type of people who could be happy waiting.”

“Of course. I can at least be punctual when I tell them that I plan on snatching you again, for real.”

A satisfied grin was the instant answer from his soon to be husband.

They were taken to a large beautiful room that could be called a living room, but Adrian didn’t dare to do that. He was happy to see Edward growing quickly accustomed to living in his bachelor pad, after having a life of luxury like that.

Both Edward’s parents stood up from a velvet sofa to greet them. Mrs. Hastings was, to Adrian’s surprise, not at all as he had imagined her. He hadn’t noticed her at that dinner table, the last time he visited the estate. It could be that she hadn’t been present. As busy as he had been then, he had a feeling he would have remembered her.

She was a petite brunette with a curvy figure that couldn’t be entirely hidden by the conservative suit she wore. The look in her green eyes was warm as they set on him, and Adrian knew immediately who Edward had inherited his beauty from. The coolness was, obviously, from his father.

“So this is the famous Adrian,” she spoke first, and her mouth stretched into a bright smile. “I wasn’t expecting someone looking like a model.”

“Mother,” Edward said smoothly, but the warning was there.

“I heard from your father that you two eloped from under his very eyes. Did the wedding happen already?”

Adrian smiled, too. “No, ma’am. We thought of including the families in all the formalities.”

“A wise decision,” Mr. Hastings said in a somewhat vexed tone. “We don’t appreciate scandal in this family.”

“Well, dear,” Mrs. Hastings placed a hand on her husband’s arm, “Edward is hardly an ingenue, seduced by some blackguard.” She threw Adrian a wink as she said that, but then her face was schooled into something unreadable as she turned her whole attention on Mr. Hastings.

“Still, even in this day and age, people like us should maintain a touch of decorum,” Mr. Hastings argued. “For that, we need to make it clear about how and where the wedding will take place.”

“No need for that,” Adrian said. “My mom’s already on it. She wants the best for us.”

“But can she afford it?” Edward’s father interjected in a cutting tone.

“Darling,” Mrs. Hastings intervened once more, “if we’re still on the topic of decorum, let’s not mention money at this point.”

Adrian quirked an eyebrow. Another pointed look from Edward’s mom convinced him to remain silent for the moment.

Mr. Hastings adjusted his cuffs and pursed his lips. He gestured for everyone to sit, and a maid in a stiff apron wheeled in a cart with coffee and pastries. As she moved around, placing the items on the table, everyone kept silent.

Adrian exchanged one quick look with Edward. A lazy drop of the eyelids convinced him that he could afford to relax. There was nothing he needed to be afraid of; funny how many things they could communicate with each other without words.

The maid was gone, and Edward’s father began talking again. “We cannot afford not to be involved with the wedding.”

“You are invited,” Adrian said. “I mean, as soon as we start sending out invitations, you’re obviously on top of the list.”

A small moment of silence followed. “We are well-known in this city, and it wouldn’t do for our son to get married without the proper attention to details.” The ambiguous words left enough room for a not at all ambiguous hidden sense.

Their wedding would become a very formal affair with the best families in the city invited. But that was not what Adrian, and, as he knew well, Edward wanted.

“We’re thinking of a party with friends, nothing as upscale as you might be used to,” he said promptly. “Also, it would be a double wedding --”

“Triple,” Edward interrupted him. “Mike and Ryan just send us a message.”

“Where was I?” Adrian asked.

“You turned off your phone on our way here,” Edward whispered in his ear.

Adrian nodded. “Well, it’s a triple wedding.”

“A triple wedding?!” Mr. Hastings didn’t hide his consternation. “What is this? Some reality show with fifty fake couples swearing eternal love to each other?”

“No, it’s just that my friends and I happened to find our partners somewhat at the same time.”

“Are you hearing these children?” Mr. Hastings turned toward his wife.

“Crystal clear, dear. Then we will just have to adjust the list of attendees and find the perfect venue for a triple wedding.” She didn’t appear one ounce fazed by the news.

“But what will everyone think?”

“They will hear from third parties that we opted for a low-key affair,” Mrs. Hastings replied promptly. “But we will take care of all the expenses,” she added, her eyes set on Adrian.

“My mom won’t be happy,” he said right away.

“Then you’ll have to introduce me to her. Mothers don’t scare me,” she added with a small smile.

Edward touched Adrian’s hand lightly. “They should get to know each other before the wedding, don’t you think?”

He nodded. That was true, and he had an inkling that his mom would be easily seduced by the strong-willed but charming lady sitting across from him.

“There’s also the matter of the family name. I hope you already told your future husband about that,” Mr. Hastings addressed his son.

“Yes, of course I told him. But I’m afraid Adrian is set on giving me his name.”

Adrian almost took pity in Edward’s father. He looked stunned.

“The Hastings line will not stop here,” he boomed.

“And it won’t,” Edward hurried to appease his father. “We will both be called Rossi-Hastings, but the children will carry on the Hastings name. How does that sound for a compromise?”

Adrian grinned. After a lot of to and fro on the subject that had ended plenty of times in bed, they had come to that conclusion. While he didn’t care for children right away, he could live with his offspring carrying on the name of royalty.

“It sounds marvelous,” Mrs. Hastings said and clapped her hands once. “Now, let’s drink our coffee and talk about details.”

“I can see why he likes you,” Mrs. Hastings said, as soon as they were left alone. Edward’s father had decided that he had certain things to share with his son.

“Thank you. I suppose that was a compliment.”

Mrs. Hastings laughed and set her green eyes on him. “It was. I have to admit that Edward’s previous conquests were a tad lacking.”

“In what aspect?”

“Power of will. You see, my husband is a hard man, and the responsibilities regarding the family ended up on his shoulders at a young age. I hope you won’t take his abrasive manner to heart.”

Adrian waved. “I don’t. And just so you know, I will take good care of my husband. I’ll start my own company and --”

“You don’t have to convince me, dear. Trust me when I tell you that you two, and your children, when they’ll come into your lives, won’t lack anything.”

“But I earn enough --”

“Dear, did that little rascal Christian tell you that Charles would disown Edward?”

“Yes, he did,” Adrian opted for honesty, hoping that he wasn’t putting Christian in the wrong spot.

“Charles only said that once, in anger, and he didn’t mean it. After all, it was in conjecture with Edward wanting to follow a somewhat lackluster career compared to the men in this family. Not with his preferences regarding love partners.”

“I see,” Adrian replied, not knowing what to make of that.

“Right now, Charles tells Edward what you two will receive after the wedding. I’m afraid you’ll have to up your administrative skills. Nothing is spared, and Edward will inherit everything when the moment comes.”

“We’ll do that,” Adrian promised.

“You,” she pointed at him. “Edward is, I’m afraid, a bit of an airhead.”

That wasn’t exactly a term he would use to describe his future husband.

“He’s not an airhead,” he said.

“Trust me, dear, when it comes to matters of handling such things, he wants to be anywhere but near them. You’ll see. After all, I believe there is a cost to marrying a romantic coming from a wealthy family.”

“Romantic? I mean, I know him now, and he’s that, too, but before, I thought he was cold like a fish.”

Mrs. Hastings laughed. “He takes that from his father. But don’t be fooled by their coolness. Edward is like Charles, including the fact that he falls in love deeply. When he took me as his bride, his family was not happy at all. Fortunately, he didn’t care. You see, I wasn’t from a family deemed worthy of their pretensions. But, like you, I proved myself worthy, and I know you will, too. Now, tell me about your mother. I can barely wait to meet her, and your father, as well. They must be very handsome people.”

Adrian fell into pace with the conversation without a problem. His mom wouldn’t be the only one to like Edward’s mother very much. The great news was that he was liked back just as much.

Jared gripped the wheel and looked straight ahead.

“Are you nervous, babe?” Shane placed one hand on his knee and squeezed.

“I’m just about to meet your family. Of course I’m nervous.”

“You’re cute when you’re nervous.”

“That’s not helping much, I’m afraid. What will your mom and dad think of me?”

“They’ll think the world of you. I’m bringing home a husband, as promised. They trust me.”

Jared exhaled. They were getting closer to their destination, and after the road trip they had decided to take, he still felt just as strung as when they had left home.

“Easy for you, then. I’m a stranger.”

“Not for long. I’m sure Coleman has already told them about you. And he likes you.”

“That’s a little encouraging,” Jared admitted. During Shane’s brother’s short stay, they had gotten along just fine.

“Let the window down and breathe this air,” Shane said.

Jared did that, and, indeed, the fresh air made him smile in an instant. The fields stretched to both sides, and they were close to Shane’s family’s ranch now. The smell of hay tickled his nostrils, and he sneezed.

“Bless you,” Shane said and placed a hand on the back of his neck.

“This is so different from where we live now,” Jared noticed. “Are you sure you’re not going to get nostalgic?”

For a moment, Shane's eyes became unfocused. "Maybe a little. But we'll come here to visit every year. Who knows? Maybe I'll even manage to make a cowboy out of you."

"Right," Jared said dryly. "Me on a horse. Nope, that's not going to happen."

"You just say that."

It looked like Shane had already had his mind set on teaching Jared how to ride. Well, it looked like the list of challenges wasn't getting any smaller.

Shane got out to open the gates, and Jared moved in the car. He waited for Shane to get back in, but it looked like the cavalry was already there. Coleman rode to them on a horse the color of midnight.

"Your brother is something. Can I take pictures?" he asked as he got out of the car, too.

Shane shrugged. "You're gonna have to ask Coleman about that." And the sexy twang was back.

Jared smiled and waved. "Hey, Coleman!"

His future brother in law stopped the horse inches from them and dismounted. He shook Jared's hand energetically. "I'll be damned. He really fooled you, after all."

"I guess." Jared worked his fingers. Coleman had a firm grip. He wondered briefly if the entire family would give him mild hand sprains. "But that happened some time ago, so right now, I'm going with the flow."

"Everyone's dying to see you. Now follow me."

Jared looked at Shane.

"I guess that the time for nervous jitters is up," his future husband said with a shrug.

"I guess," he said with a sigh, but he felt like smiling again.

As rustic as the ranch looked on the outside, the interior surprised Jared with its modern yet comfortable furniture and open space arrangement of the living room. He didn't have time to dwell on examining the interior. As soon as they were inside, what struck him was the noise. The entire family was up and about in an instant, busy greeting them. Jared was first embraced and kissed on both cheeks by a blond woman in her early sixties with a megawatt smile.

"Welcome home, sugar," she said in the same attractive drawl and embraced him again. "Coleman told us you were a pretty one. John, what do you think?" She grabbed his hand and

pushed him toward a man wearing a string tie and what looked like clothes he would only wear on Sundays by the slight discomfort he appeared to be feeling. “Isn’t he a pretty one?”

The same vigorous handshake shook Jared’s arm from its rotator cuff. That had to be Shane’s dad, and he thought right away that his future husband was just a younger version of the man in front of him. “He sure is, Ellie, he sure is,” he replied with the same broad smile.

Shane put a hand on his shoulder. “These are mom and pop if you didn’t guess already.”

Jared just nodded. His face was already stretched in a smile the same size as everyone in the family wore.

“These are Hanna and Dana,” Shane said, introducing two girls in pigtails who were examining him from the sides of their mother.

“And I’m Charlene,” the twins’ mother said and offered her hand. “Don’t let yourself fooled by these two. The moment they get to know you, they’ll be all over you.”

“We were only waiting for you to start eating. Let’s get to the dining room,” Ellie urged everyone, but without letting go of Jared for one second. “You two will sit by my side,” she decided.

The commotion didn’t die down as they sat at the table. Charlene hurried to help Ellie bring food to the table, and it took only minutes for Jared’s plate to be filled to the brim with all kinds of delicious appetizers.

“You two are so skinny,” Ellie commented as she continued to fill everyone’s plates. “You’re not eating right, are you?”

He had been warned by Shane beforehand, but he still didn’t know what to say to that.

“They’re city boys,” John said. “They must care about their figure and that.”

Ellie waved like she couldn’t believe such people existed. “All the more reason for them to eat well.”

Jared threw Shane a desperate look. If that were a three-course meal, he was doomed. The chances were that he couldn’t live through the first.

He must have grown another stomach on their road trip because he somehow managed to get to dessert without too much of a problem. “Mrs. McKay, you’re a wonderful cook,” he told his future mother-in-law.

By how Ellie smiled at him, his compliment was well-received. “Call me Ellie.”

“I hope it’s not a family secret and you can tell me how come your potato salad tastes so amazing.”

“It is a family secret, but you’re soon to be family, so I guess I can tell you. When are we going to meet your parents?”

“Before the wedding, that’s for sure.”

“About the wedding, Shane tells us that you two and other two couples will celebrate together?”

“Yes. I know it’s sort of a crazy idea, but we couldn’t decide an order, so we ended up agreeing that we should all have our wedding day together. Two of the grooms are my childhood friends, and we’ve always been joined at the hip. Our parents weren’t even a bit surprised when we told them.”

“Are we going to the city and buy fancy dresses?” one of the twins asked. “How come your hair is so pretty?” she addressed the direct question at Jared.

“I’ll take care of that,” Shane promised. “I’m going to buy you all dresses and everything. And Jared’s hair is so pretty because he uses three kinds of shampoos.”

The girl’s eyes grew wide. “Three?”

Jared kicked Shane in the shoulder. “Why do you have to make me look so shallow? And I’m not using all three at the same time.”

The little girl didn’t seem interested in his protests. She turned toward her mom. “Can I have three shampoos, like Jared?”

“But you’re already pretty,” Jared intervened. “You don’t have to work hard, like me.”

The girl’s eyes grew wide, and then, she grinned.

“Jared complimented you. Say ‘thank you’, Dana.” Her mother nudged her.

“Thank you, Jared,” Dana said with a sweet smile.

“What kind of fancy are we talking about?” Ellie asked.

“Full-on fancy,” Shane replied. “We’re going to have royalty at the table.”

“Royalty?” Charlene asked.

“My friend Adrian marries into a family that comes from old money. Apparently, his mother-in-law doesn’t want any of us to struggle with the preparations. Adrian told us that what she says it’s low-key is pretty much luxury for everyone else in the world.”

“Damn,” John intervened, “what are we, country folks, gonna do there? We’ll stick out like sore thumbs.”

“Don’t worry about that,” Jared hurried to say. “We’ll have a pretty diverse list of attendees. While Adrian’s husband is wealthy, all three of us, I’m talking about Mike, Adrian, and I, come from normal families. If Mrs. Hastings wants to take care of everything, we cannot stand in her way, but Adrian told me that she’s a grounded, reasonable person. I promise you no one will feel out of place.”

“What’s a triple wedding?” Hanna asked.

“Shane will marry Jared,” Ellie began, “Adrian will marry Edward, and Mike will marry --” she searched for Jared’s help with her eyes.

“Ryan,” he offered promptly. “So there will be three weddings at the same time.”

Hanna appeared to ponder over something. “Will there be three cakes, too?”

“Yeah, why not?” Shane replied.

“Pretty ones, like on TV?”

Charlene caressed her daughter’s hair. “She watches the cooking channel for some reason.”

“Prettier than those on TV,” Shane promised.

“So what’s our role if we don’t even have to buy our clothes?” Coleman asked.

“Just to bring yourself and have loads of fun,” Jared replied.

Ellie seemed to be a little unhappy over that. “We hoped we could have a wedding party here.”

Shane exchanged one look with Jared. “We already thought of asking you if you would host one, just for us and Jared’s family.”

Ellie’s face lit up. “We will. And I’m going to make an even fancier cake.”

Jared exhaled. That was the best course of action so that everyone would be happy. As friends, they were glad to have their weddings together, but now, they needed to think of their families, too, families much more numerous than before.

“What do you think? Maybe tomorrow, I’ll let you ride by yourself.” Shane was holding him in front, and they were both on the back of a large mare that didn’t seem to mind the extra load.

Jared looked over the expanse stretching in front of them. “I can see why you grew up the way you did. It’s so much freedom here.” He took another mouthful of free air. “It’s a given that we will come back, again and again.”

Shane hugged him with one arm. “I’m glad you like it here. And you see? There was no reason for you to be so nervous. Everyone loves you.”

“That’s quite the family you have here, Shane. My folks will love it here, when they come.”

“And they’ll be welcome, as often as they care to visit. Now, since you saw you had no reason to be nervous about meeting my folks, let’s talk about another thing you have no reason to be nervous about.”

“What do you mean?” Jared reached back and turned his head to steal a kiss from Shane.

His future husband indulged him for a moment. “I know you’re trying to get away, but tomorrow, you’ll ride by yourself. Misty here knows you already. You’ll be fine riding her.”

Jared sighed. “You really want to see me ride.”

“Yeah. I’ll even take a picture.”

“What do you know about taking pictures?” he teased.

“I don’t. But Coleman does, and I already roped him in.”

“Ah, so I’m going to make a complete fool of myself in front of your entire family.”

“Hey, if you want to be one of the McKays, you better know how to mount a horse.”

“Since it’s for such a noble cause, I guess there’s no other way for me than to agree.”

“Glad I talked some sense into you.”

Jared was about to protest to that, but Shane kissed him, and he forgot all about it. Everything important was around him, and nothing else mattered.

Ryan placed a kiss on his shoulder and then turned him so that they could face each other. Mike caressed his jawline slowly. “You know, you didn’t have to ask your mother to apologize. I feel bad for her.”

“Don’t. She’s a hard-ass, and trust me when I’m saying that she doesn’t mind being called that. And you were so cute, trying to say that you would sign as many prenups as needed since you didn’t know I was that rich. In the end, it all looked like a race between people trying to apologize more than the other.”

“She really cares about you.”

“I know. And dad thought I did the right thing, just for the record.”

“It’s true that he didn’t seem so fond of the idea when I ... eavesdropped,” Mike said after a moment of hesitation. “And I’ll sign any prenup your family comes with, anyway.”

“Yeah, in the weirdest way, my plan of having my mom apologize to you for judging you without knowing who you really are, backfired spectacularly. You’ll sign whatever you want since it looks like there is no way for me to go against you. Also, my mom was more than satisfied with the outcome. I’d say that she was pleased that her apologies weren’t for naught.”

“I’m sorry if I put you in a bad position. It wasn’t my intention. I didn’t really have time to talk to you in detail, but are you okay with Adrian’s mother-in-law planning our triple wedding? You seemed fine with it, but --”

Ryan stopped him with a short kiss. “Of course I’m fine with it. Also, my parents already planned another wedding party so it looks like we’ll celebrate twice. I wouldn’t have taken your pleasure of getting married along with your best friends. Just the fact that it’s a bit unusual is enough to put a smile on my face, I’m telling you. Plus, it gave my mother a pretty good incentive to try to compensate for what she said. After all, the Hastings family is a name she knows well. She will try to outdo whatever they have in mind, so prepare to be spoiled.”

Mike closed his eyes, then opened them, and closed them again. “I can’t believe this is really happening. Sometimes, I wake up in the morning and, for one second, I don’t know where I am, and I’m wondering if I’m not still dreaming. But it’s real, right? We’re doing this.”

Ryan nodded. “Yes, we are. We totally are. And boy, am I glad. I had no idea things would turn out so well for me when I came here to follow in my uncle’s footsteps. For sure, it didn’t cross my mind that I would land myself a husband. You’re not the only one feeling like walking in a dream.”

Mike opened just one eye. “In my case, it’s more like floating. It’s pretty awesome, to be honest. You even have a dog!”

“I’m glad that I live up to your fantasy,” Ryan said and winked. “And I’m not talking about the dog.”

Mike groaned and covered his eyes. “For how long are you going to tease me? I knew I shouldn’t have told you just every little detail about my fantasy from a while ago.”

“Hey, I might not be exactly a bear, but just you wait until I put on a couple more extra pounds --
”

Mike placed one hand over Ryan's mouth. "No, you're perfect this way. Don't get fat or anything."

Ryan moved his head away so that he could get rid of Mike's hand. "Now look who's teasing me. Are you going to put it in the prenup that I'm not supposed to gain weight?"

"Can I do that?"

"Such a teaser," Ryan replied and shut him up for good with another kiss.

"Your mom is really something. She convinced all the other moms that she should be in charge. I wouldn't go against her in court even if someone paid me millions. I guess she's pretty scary when she wants. But charming. In a scary way."

Edward laughed and swatted his shoulder playfully. He placed a plate of food in front of him.

Adrian looked at the food. "You're cooking again."

"Why not?" Edward sat across from him and grabbed his fork.

"We could always go to restaurants, or order in ... and even I can cook."

Edward waved. "No. That's my job. I decided."

"Is it because you don't want other things to be your job?" Adrian asked and examined his future husband through his eyelashes. So, Edward's mom had been right, after all. The administrative duties would fall on his shoulders.

"Nonsense," Edward said. "Cooking is something I enjoy."

"And taking care of the vast estate that will come to you after the wedding isn't," Adrian said matter-of-factly, fighting a smile.

"To us. It will come to us," Edward said promptly and appeared focused on his food.

Adrian grinned and leaned over the table. "Sweetheart, you can confide in me. If you don't like taking care of the wealth your parents --"

"It's not that I don't like it," Edward interrupted him. "I loathe it."

The frankness of that phrase took Adrian by surprise. "Now you're scaring me. Is it that complicated?"

"You'll have plenty of people to help you. Accountants, lawyers. I just find it so boring that I'm glad I won't be bothered with it."

“Ah, so that was why you weren’t particularly concerned about your father disowning you.”

Edward shrugged. “Even if he said that, I knew, deep down, that he wouldn’t allow a stranger to be in charge.”

“But I’m a stranger,” Adrian pointed out.

“Not anymore, Mr. Rossi-Hastings. I mean, not for long.”

Edward grabbed his glass of wine and raised it. “To you never getting bored looking after our shared wealth. After all, we will have to take care of it for our children.”

Adrian raised his glass, too. “I’ll do my best, Mr. Rossi-Hastings. And wait until my mother hears that her grandchildren will be born with silver spoons in their mouths. She’ll talk about it for weeks with all the relatives.”

“I am happy if she’s happy,” Edward said politely.

They clinked their glasses and then started laughing at the same time.

“I hope we won’t get one of those long tables and sit at opposite ends.”

“Where have you seen such a table in our home?”

“Ah, we’re moving to your mansion, then?”

“Of course. Your oven burns a little the food.”

“That’s a good reason, I guess.”

Adrian was happy to live with Edward anywhere he wanted. What mattered was that they were happy. They were all happy, and that included his best friends. He couldn’t have imagined a better happy-end for the three of them, in his wildest dreams.

Epilogue

“So, you’re the only one not marrying into billions.”

Jared turned quickly to face his husband. “Where is that coming from?”

Shane gave him a crooked grin. “My folks are all in stunned silence. Adrian surely meant it when he said his mother-in-law has some pretty strange ideas about what it means to have a low-key affair.”

Jared pulled him into a hug and a kiss. “I’m looking right at your folks, and sure thing, they moved on from their stunned silence. I’m glad to see them enjoying themselves. Even the twins seem to be having fun.”

“Ah, they’re quick to find their way around. Although pop’s loose tongue might be because of the whiskey your father keeps pouring.”

“They look like they hit it off well. Our mothers, too. Now, tell me what was that about my not marrying into billions, hmm?”

“Well,” Shane caressed his shoulders and then dropped his hands to Jared’s waist, “I can’t help but see that both Edward and Ryan are from some pretty damned rich families.”

“Yeah, they are, and how is that relevant in any way?”

Shane cocked his head. “Maybe you could marry a rich dude, too.”

Jared smiled and got close enough to have their noses rub together. “Oh, are you feeling competitive?”

“More like unfit.” Shane liked to joke a lot, but it was a husband’s duty to make sure his partner didn’t have any such doubts.

“Darling, babe, husband,” Jared said slowly, “I frankly think you’re the most fit of everyone present tonight. I mean, you have legs so long that I wonder how the bed doesn’t seem too short, and such nice muscles.” To make a point, he touched Shane’s abdomen through his shirt, earning a small surprised sound in return. “I have no idea how Edward and Ryan fare in bed since we’re all gentlemen here, but, again, it is my honest belief that you would be on top.”

Shane grinned. “C’mon, babe, you know I let you top, too. I’m not like that.”

Jared placed a small kiss on his lips. “Shane, if I wanted money, I wouldn’t be here. Plus, you are richer than me, anyway. You have the bar and an awesome family.”

“You have an awesome family, too.”

“Not as numerous as yours,” Jared pointed out. “Numerically wise, you beat me.”

“I’m not competing with you,” Shane protested.

“Ha! So you are competing. But haven’t Adrian and Mike told you already about how little interested I am about material things? All right, maybe not shampoos --”

“I’ll buy you as many as you want.”

“See? You are perfectly capable of providing for me. Plus, I have my freelancing career. If we ever run into any trouble of the financial kind, we’ll be fine. I may be, how my friends say, the artistic type, which literally means walking around with my head in the clouds, but I have some savings. Have your ancestral worries been put at ease, now? We’re not going to go hungry now that we’re married.”

Shane made a serious face. “Then is it a good moment to tell you that the bar is going bankrupt?”

Jared stopped and looked at his husband. Shane no longer seemed to be joking. “No, it’s not a good moment since it’s our wedding, and you should have said it sooner. Why didn’t you tell me?”

The suffering in Shane’s eyes was real. “Yeah, and the ranch ...” He sighed.

Now Jared was growing alarmed. He stole a quick look at the table where his parents were having the time of their lives with Shane’s family. “What about the ranch?” he whispered.

“Will be gone, come fall,” Shane replied.

Consternation was too little a word to describe what Jared was feeling. “What will your parents do?”

Shane’s shoulders slumped in defeat. “They’re thinking of coming to live with me. With us.”

“My apartment is kind of cramped, but we’ll find a bigger place,” Jared said quickly. Shane’s parents didn’t look at all like people on the verge of losing their livelihood. His eyes narrowed, and he punched Shane one time quickly in the stomach.

Shane doubled over theatrically. “Is this the domestic violence I should expect from now on?”

“Shut up. You deserve it. You really fooled me there for a moment.”

Shane began laughing. “You should’ve seen your face, babe. So funny.”

“Yeah, right, because I had to think up ways of accommodating two more families in my impossibly small apartment.”

“Yeah, it is small,” Shane said and shook his head like an old lady disagreeing with the price of mackerel. “Tiny.”

“Well, you didn’t seem to care so much while living there.”

“But it is very, very small.”

Jared stared at Shane, and his mind gears began turning. “Where are you going with this?”

A face splitting grin was the answer. Shane pulled from his pocket a key chain and dangled some keys in front of him. “When we come back from our honeymoon, we’ll move into our new home.”

Jared punched Shane once more in the shoulder. “Did you go house shopping without me?”

“Ouch. Babe, stop going to the gym or you’ll wreck me. My parents gifted it to us.”

“Oh. Then we should go and thank them.”

“Good idea. I think you gave me bruises,” Shane complained.

“Don’t be such a baby. You’ll be fine.”

“Will you kiss me all over to make it better?”

Jared wrapped his hand around Shane’s arm. “Of course I will.”

Mike listened intently to Mrs. Armstrong’s recount of a strange adventure that involved a stray cat, an accountant, and an old neighbor. He hadn’t quite yet decided if he understood exactly how the stray cat had come to play a role in the story, but Ryan’s mother had a knack for making everything sound like it was extremely important. The problem was that he focused so much that he somehow failed to understand the plot.

“I will steal my husband for a moment,” Ryan announced.

Mike fought hard not to let his mother-in-law see his relief at being saved.

He joined Ryan on the dancefloor. As he wrapped his arms around his neck, he whispered, “Thank you.”

“My mom thinks you’re a great listener. I heard her saying that you never interrupt, and you always have this look on your face like you understand everything.”

“Ugh, I’m afraid I don’t understand anything, and I’m just pretending that I do.”

“Don’t worry; nobody really gets her stories.”

“Seriously? Not even you? Or your dad?”

“We do get a few things here and there, but she’s a bit quirky.”

“Hmm, I think I’m quirky, too. That means that I should understand her.”

“Maybe you do since she’s so keen on thinking that you’re completely on the same wavelength.”

“Did she say that?”

“Ever since that little confrontation --”

“Which I didn’t want --”

“Ever since there, she’s been infatuated with you. In her book, that’s a lot.”

Mike pondered for a while. “Is the stray cat a red herring?”

Ryan pulled back so they could look each other in the eyes. “Is that from the story with the accountant and the neighbor?”

“Yeah, that one.”

“I really have no idea, Mike. She’s my mom, but sometimes only she knows what she’s talking about. And that’s a face she doesn’t show to anyone except family.”

“So, I’m special?” Mike asked.

Ryan pulled him close as they glided on the dancefloor. “You totally are, Micah, you totally are.”

“Now I’m sure the cat is a red herring,” he said with conviction.

“And I’m sure you must be the only one to get my mom completely,” Ryan replied and finally shut him up with a kiss.

“You must be really proud. The reception is a great success.”

Edward’s mother hooked her hand around his arm. “You know very well that it’s only a rehearsal. Wait till the reception Charles wants to throw for you.”

“Should I be worried?” Adrian asked.

“I put in a few good words. He will lose that stiffness, trust me. I already told him that your business acumen is truly outstanding. Since it comes from me, he has to believe it.”

“Then I’m glad that I have you on my side,” Adrian replied.

“You’re the man my son decided to marry. I trust him, and I’m not just throwing words around, Adrian. Even if I was surprised to see someone as good looking as you involved so deeply in whatever concerns financial matters, let’s say that my surprise was a pleasant one. Edward really hit the jackpot with you.”

“I hope this isn’t just you flattering me, right?”

“No, it’s not. Charles is happy to learn that his son-in-law is dependable. He was worried about Edward’s lack of interest in anything regarding the family wealth. Now you took a burden from his shoulders.”

“Will I become as stiff as my father-in-law once I start to get really involved in these matters?”

Edward’s mother laughed. “Only the future will tell. For now, I think you’ll do fine. And it is up to Edward to keep your life interesting and entertainment, as your husband.”

“There you are.” Edward kept Adrian’s mom company, and they appeared to get along just as well as he and his mother-in-law were. “I think it’s time for us to join the others for a final toast.”

Their mothers didn’t mind being left behind, as they engaged right away in animated conversation. Adrian was happy to see his mother so happy with her new relatives. Since he had sprung on his folks the news of him getting married, he was beyond satisfied with how well they took everything.

“My father is over the moon with how reliable you are,” Edward said.

“That’s exactly what your mother told me,” Adrian replied and offered his husband his arm. “I still have plenty of things to learn.”

“And I have complete confidence in your abilities to conquer any challenge,” Edward said with conviction.

“I wonder,” Adrian said with a hint of a smile, “if anyone realizes that I’m marrying into a life of hardship.”

Edward laughed and leaned in to place a quick kiss on his cheek. “Yes, I’m the lucky one, and nobody suspects a thing. Let it be our little secret. And if you ever find these things too much, we can just leave lawyers and whoever else is needed to handle everything.”

“I wouldn’t do that. It’s our family, and I will watch over our best interests, always.”

“Damn. Have you spent a lot of time lately in my father’s company? You start to sound like him.”

“Who knows? I might end up to live up to the Hastings’ famous cold as a fish attitude.”

“No way,” Edward protested. “And if you ever do, I’ll take care of you. In fact, I will do that, as soon as we live for our honeymoon.”

“Which should happen in ... what ... half an hour?”

“First, let’s listen to my father’s speech.”

Mike and Ryan were chasing each other and Bran on the beach, while Jared and Shane were sipping from two straws stuck inside the same tall glass filled with an exotic drink.

“I know your mom wanted to take care of the wedding, but you surprised us with this shared honeymoon,” Jared said.

Edward shrugged. “This was actually my idea. Adrian spent so little time with you the last few months, so I thought of surprising everyone with this trip.”

“Well, it’s awesome,” Jared said. “Mike was incredibly happy that you allowed them to bring their dog along.”

“How could I have said ‘no’? I like dogs a lot.”

“I vouch for that,” Adrian intervened. “If Mike and Ryan ever have troubles training Bran, I’m telling you, this guy here is the best doggy whisperer in the land.”

Mike and Ryan fell exhausted by their side, directly on the sand. “We don’t have troubles training Bran. He has, with us. There’s no way we can keep up with him,” Mike moaned.

“You’re just out of shape,” Adrian said with a grin. “You need the workout, Mike, admit it.”

“It’s true,” Mike admitted. “Hey, Edward, is this island yours?”

“Yeah, I was wondering the same,” Shane jumped into the conversation after finishing his drink and licking the last drop from Jared’s lips.

“Guys, that’s not a nice thing to ask,” Jared said.

“It’s all right,” Edward replied. “It’s not. We just rented the place since it’s small enough to accommodate us without imposing on other tourists.”

“But you could own one, right?” Mike asked.

“I don’t think it would be a viable option,” Adrian said.

Edward hooked one arm over his husband's shoulders. "He knows better."

Jared took a look at his friends and their husbands, and suddenly, an idea came to him. "Guys, did you know that Shane and I are moving to a new neighborhood? There are a bunch of awesome properties there."

Adrian exchanged a look with Edward. Mike did the same with Ryan.

"Are you guys thinking what I'm thinking?" Jared asked, more and more excited. "We could all live there if you guys want." Some of his enthusiasm vanished. "Although Edward and Adrian need to live at that large estate, right? And Ryan, you already have that house ... Ah, maybe it wasn't such a great idea, after all."

"What are you talking about?" That was Edward. "It's actually excellent."

Adrian laughed. "My husband is not that crazy about living like the Hastings," he explained. "I guess he only needed a push."

Edward turned toward him. "Adrian, do you think we can?"

"Of course. I'd like to live in the same neighborhood with the guys."

Mike took Ryan's hand. "What do you say, Ryan?" He didn't dare to make puppy eyes at his husband, but it was almost natural for him to do that when he wanted to ask something. Apparently, he was a natural.

"We will definitely look at them. You guys are so close friends that I know you would miss one another."

"And now, you, our husbands," Jared said and hugged Shane, "are our friends, too."

"We could do everything together," Mike said, "like before. Okay, so maybe not everything, but a lot, right?"

"Sure thing," Adrian confirmed. "Come on, guys, let's take it all here." He extended his hand, and Edward placed his on top. The others followed quickly. "For friendship?"

"For friendship!" They all shouted at the same time.

THE END