

Chapter One

(just realized that Boiseuil and Poulenat at less than 3 miles from one another (I utterly missed how 'small' France is compared to Canada. I am arbitrarily moving Victor to Le Breuil, France, so we can keep Niel having to wait for a car to drive him to see his father)

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Niel looked out at the passing countryside. A lot of vineyards, fields, with trees in the distance, as well as clusters of houses. And that was in the first ten minutes of the drive. His driver, a badger who kept glancing at him in the rearview mirror, had said it would be a thirty-minute drive to Boiseuil. After leaving the greater Twin Cities area, it could be half an hour before encountering anything resembling a town.

He pulled his attention from the view and looked at his phone. Four messages from his dad, eight texts. He should check them. If not, he should at least send him a message letting him know he was okay. He turned the phone off. His dad hadn't told him about Jarod for eighteen fucking years. He could wait until he was back to find out how Niel was doing.

"So," the driver said, his accent thick. "Jacques said need sex to live." The grin made it plain what the man expected they'd be doing soon.

"How about you keep both hands on the wheel and watch where you're going instead of jerking off to something that isn't going to happen?"

The badger muttered in French, but he put his hand back on the wheel and stopped glancing at Neil in the rearview mirror.

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"What is this," Niel muttered to himself, watching the picturesque houses with whitewashed walls and exposed beams they slowly drove by, "a movie set?" it was exactly what he'd imagined a town in France would look like, build from the occasional foreign movie he'd watch in history class, or at home. There was a series of old films with Louis de Funès he'd been curious about after one of his

teachers had mentioned the comedian.

Wide roads with almost no vehicles other than bicycles and the occasional farm tractor. The cafes had open terraces with people drinking. The building had a sense of maintained age to them and the people looked happy, at peace.

It was all so surreal.

“We’re here,” the driver said as he stopped the car. “Numeros quarante-trois is the one over there.”

Niel was out of the car and headed for Forty-three Rue du Boucher. It was the two-story house with a whitewash that was more gray, and a few of the exposed beams looked to have been replaced recently.

He knocked on the door and realized he was nervous. What was he supposed to say? Hi, I’m your son, felt like too cold of an opening.

The door opened and instead of Jarod, a girl of maybe ten looked at him and asked a question in French.

Fuck, did they even speak English? “Is Jarod Irvine here?” he stammered out.

She rolled her eyes and went inside, yelling something. The one word he understood was American, although the pronunciation was definitely French. Not long after that, another raccoon came to the door, this one a guy in his mid-twenties at most. He was the twin of the picture his dad had shown him of Jarod.

The man looked Niel up and down and his expression became a mix of tired and annoyed. “What do you want?” There was no accent at all, and while the tone was mostly neutral, the words were definitely clipped.

Niel opened his mouth to lay into the man about never contacting him, but the girl was hanging back, watching attentively.

He swallowed his anger. “I’d like you to call that messaging service you gave my dad, your grandson, as a contact once in a while.”

The man mutters something to himself. Not English or French, or German, but the tone was angry.

“Jarod?” a woman asked, then appeared in the hallway, a girl no more than five next to her. She was holding onto her leg as if she was afraid someone would steal her mother away. The rest of what she said, Niel didn’t understand. Jarod escorted her back but left the door open, so Niel wasn’t surprised when he returned, putting on a jacket.

As soon as he closed the door, Jarod rounded on Niel. “I don’t know what you’ve been told, but if you’re here so I’ll fuck you, leave.”

“Where the fuck do you get off thinking that’s what I want?” Niel snapped. “Don’t you think I’d like to know who my father is?”

“Stewart is your father, not me.”

“Bullshit! It’s your DNA that’s running through my veins. If you didn’t want to have to deal with me, you should have stayed out of my family’s affairs.”

“I got involved because Stewart basically begged me for a child.”

“Well, congratulation, here I fucking am. And because of that, there are things I need to know, things that would have been fucking nice if you’d been around to teach me before this was dumped on

me.”

The raccoon rolled his eyes. “What you’re asking about isn’t sunshine and puppies. It’s not something you want to be involved in, the consequences are—”

“Oh, fuck off with consequences. They’ve already happened. So I’m going to get you to explain this whole fucking thing to me.”

“What are you talking about?” Jarod asked, seemingly surprised.

Now it was Niel’s turn to roll his eyes. “The need ‘sex to survive’ thing. What else did you think I was talking about?”

Jarod shook his head, started to reply, then looked around; Niel followed his gaze. Their shouting had attracted quite the crowd, and Jarod seemed embarrassed at that. He spoke to them in French, indicating Niel, and got chuckles out of them before they dispersed. If not for how red Jarod’s ears were, Niel might think he had been made the butt of a joke.

“We’re lucky neither of us mentioned magic,” Jarod said. “Although I had to explain the needs sex to live part as you never getting enough.” He sighed. “How about we take this somewhere we can have a modicum of privacy?”

Niel nodded and motioned to the badger who’d stayed by the car through all this that he and Jarod were heading off together.

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The Cafe was a few minutes’ walk from Jarod’s house, and he ordered something in French as soon as they entered to the buck behind the counter, then took Niel to a booth in the back of the room, away from the sunlight entering via the large bay window. The badger who entered after them sat at a table near the door. Niel was almost as annoyed at him as he was at Jarod.

He didn’t need a babysitter.

Niel opened his mouth, but the server placed sandwiches before him and Jarod, along with a large mug of something that was the color of hot chocolate but smelled of coffee. Niel ground his teeth when Jarod started eating instead of talking.

“Eat,” the raccoon said between bites.

“I’m not hungry,” Niel snapped.

“One, keep your voice down. If you draw attention to us, there’s nothing I can do about it. Two, eat so people won’t start asking questions. You have no idea how weird people get when they start noticing you don’t have to go to the shitter anymore.”

“Maybe you never had to deal with it, being the first and all that? But right now, if I eat anything, it’s going to come out explosively, so if anyone asks, just tell them I’m too pissed to eat. As for being noticed.” (and I swear, when I gave Niel the cone of silence, I didn’t think of this scene at all) Niel cut his finger and used the blood to trace the cone of silence *phrase*. Olavo had warned him against using blood, but Niel wasn’t reaching in his pants in a public place. “Now I can scream at you as much as I want and no one will hear.”

Jarod looked at the sigils and seemed to deflate slightly. “How did it happen?”

“How do you think?”

“I’m trying to understand this, Niel. Believe it or not, I have no idea what happened to you right now.”

Niel let out a breath and eyes the mug. Well, he’d drank broth without a problem and he

needed something. It turned out to be coffee, very hot and with far more milk than he preferred.

“There was a party; I had sex with a guy who happens to be from the Survivors.”

Jarod shook his head, then looked at the *phrase* in blood on the tabletop. “I didn’t know that could happen,” he stated, as if that absolved him of everything. “When did you find out?”

“Last weekend. My football coach—Jarod rolled his eyes—has this stupid tradition he gets the seniors to perform for No Nut November. I still managed to have sex until the away game where he cock-blocked me constantly. That left me tired and the next day I thought I’d caught something during the game. A stomach bug or something like that. I was too tired to have sex, and it got worse enough I had to be hospitalized the next day. The doctors were baffled by my results, and before you freak out, the local Society family took care of that. Dad put two and two together and knew just enough to insist I go home. Instead, he drove me to a friend of his. We had sex, and I felt better. When he showed me your picture, I was pretty sure you weren’t who I had sex with, but the party was pretty wild, so I went to the guys who organized it, they’re Society, and that’s when I found out about my friend and his connection to the Survivors.”

“Does your father know you’re here?”

“Oh, I don’t know, do you?”

“Does Stewart know you’re here?” Jarod corrected pointedly.

“Yes... actually, no. He thinks I’m in Argentina.”

“Why would he think you’re there?”

“There’s where my friend is from, and when he told his father what had happened, but Cuevas asked to see me.”

“Why?”

“I never got an answer on that. The Patriarch freaked out when he found out I’m your son. Did you even stick around to find out if you had a boy or a girl?” Niel demanded before Jarod could ask another question.

He shrugged. “Never had a boy before, didn’t expect this to be a first.”

“So you’d have hung around if you’d found out?”

“No. Stewart asked for a kid, I gave him one; my job was done.”

“So my dad just let you bang my mom?” Niel asked angrily.

Jarod chuckled. “It’s the twenty-first century, Niel, not the nineteenth. There is something called an artificial womb.”

“I thought you had to put it in to have a kid.” Somewhere in one of the memories the bat gave him, someone explained that to him.

“So does just about everyone.” Jarod smirked. “Won’t it be fun when they found out?” His amusement died. “On second thought, don’t tell them. I have no interest in having to disappear again.”

“Oh? Disappearing on me was enough?”

“It wasn’t about you, Niel. I didn’t leave you. I was never there. I wasn’t supposed to be part of your life. Stewart never said it, but I could see it on his face the entire time I was there. This fear that if I stayed it would strain his marriage.”

“Fine. That wasn’t about me. Okay. You weren’t kept apprised of what happened to me, so you didn’t care to get involved. I’m here now. So how about you get involved.”

“No. I don’t know what you want, Niel.”

“I want a father, to start with.”

“You have one,” Jarod said through gritted teeth.

“He lied to me!” Niel was up, hands on the table, in Jarod’s face. “For eighteen fucking years, he kept you a secret. What kind of father does that to his son?”

“One that understands I would do you any good, Niel. Sit down before people wonder why they can’t hear you.”

“You can’t send me away.” Niel crossed his arms over his chest.

“I’m pretty sure if I tell that badger over there to take you away, he will.”

“Damn it, there are things only you can tell me about.”

“Asked the Cuevas. They’ll know the stuff you have to know.”

“Don’t act like I don’t mean anything to you!”

“I’m not acting, Niel. I am not who you think I am.”

“You’re my father!”

Jarod ran a hand over his face. “Stewart is your father, not me.”

“Fine! He’d your grandson, which makes me your great-grandson, so don’t fucking act like we’re not family!” He was standing again, and he sat before Jarod told him to.

“Steward didn’t consider me family until he needed me for something.” He dipped his napkin in the mug’s bottom and use the liquid to wipe the blood off the table. “We are not family, Niel. Go make your own.”

Niel glowered at the older, young-looking raccoon, as he signaled for the check.

“Look, Niel. You have all of time to come to terms with me not being interested in being part of your life. Right now. Go home. I’m sure this is as much of a shock to your parents as it is to you. Go to your father and your mother so they know you’re okay.”

“My mom’s dead,” he replied, making the statement an accusation.

“I’m sorry. Niel. I’m sorry, but that is something else you’ll have to learn to get used to.”

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