
NO SECRETS
NO REGRETS 3
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
NORA PHOENIX

NO SECRETS

NO REGRETS
BOOK 3

NORA PHOENIX

No Secrets by Nora Phoenix

Copyright © 2024 Nora Phoenix

Cover Design: Vicki Brostenianc
Edited By: Tanja Ongkiehong
Proofread By: Abbie Nicole

All rights reserved. No part of this story may be used, reproduced, or transmitted in any form by any means without the written permission of the copyright holder, except in case of brief quotations and embodied within critical reviews and articles.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental. The use of any real company and/or product names is for literary effect only. All other trademarks and copyrights are the property of their respective owners.

This book contains sexually explicit material which is suitable only for mature readers.
www.noraphoenix.com

CONTENTS

Nora After Dark
A Quick Request…
Trigger Warnings

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15
Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18
Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26
Chapter 27
Chapter 28
Chapter 29

Epilogue

Signed Paperbacks and Swag
Books by Nora Phoenix
Audio Books by Nora Phoenix
Connect with Nora
More About Nora Phoenix

NORA AFTER DARK

More of what you love…more of what you crave…

Unlock the ultimate experience with **Nora After Dark**, an online platform offering exclusive access to a variety of extras from Nora Phoenix. **Nora After Dark** offers multiple tiers to cater to your unique desires, each with its own array of exciting benefits.

- **Unlock Early eBook Access:** Nora After Dark subscribers enjoy the thrill of accessing eBooks before anyone else.
- **Exclusive Nora Phoenix Swag:** Elevate your reading experience with limited-edition Nora Phoenix merchandise delivered right to your doorstep.
- **Delve into Bonus Stories:** Gain exclusive access to bonus stories and chapters that are reserved just for our subscribers. Immerse yourself in hidden tales, the perfect companion to your favorite books.
- **Early Works in Progress:** Be a part of the creative process! Nora After Dark grants you VIP access to works in progress, giving you a sneak peek at the magic happening behind the scenes.

- **Collect Signed Paperbacks:** For those who cherish the tangible, our premium tier includes beautifully signed paperback copies of Nora's works.

Visit Nora Phoenix at noraphoenix.com/nora-after-dark to subscribe and indulge in the Nora After Dark experience.

A QUICK REQUEST…

If you happen to spot any errors, like typos, missing punctuation, or (gasp!) factual errors, please feel free to email my assistant at pa@noraphoenix.com. She'll let me know about these. Please don't report them using the reporting feature on your Kindle, as this can have consequences for us authors when we don't respond quickly enough (and Amazon doesn't always let us know about them!).

NO SECRETS

Roman Dwyer was a successful district attorney…until he went after the wrong people. His reputation is in ruins, and worse, there's a price on his head.

Ashamed and scared for his life, he accepts his brother's offer to move in with him and his security team. But when Roman discovers the shenanigans happening in the house, he gets a lot more than he bargained for.

Like Caleb.

Roman can use the distraction and Caleb certainly delivers, but the last thing Roman needs is more complications. Besides, Caleb needs someone far more dominant than Roman…although Roman is discovering sides to himself he never knew.

Like how much he likes being in charge.
How he loves driving Caleb crazy.
The joy it brings him when Caleb obeys.

Crap, his life is about to become even more complicated, isn't it?

No Secrets *is a high heat MM romance and the third book in the high heat No Regrets series. It has a suspense plot without cliffhangers.*

TRIGGER WARNINGS

This book contains topics that may be triggering for some readers. These include gaslighting (not by a partner or loved one), kidnapping, and severe beating/torture. This book is also hella kinky and contains D/s dynamics, BDSM scenes with impact play, spanking, rough sex, and a guy with big “equipment.”

1

Roman Dwyer sat hunched over his desk, the only light emanating from the sleek, modern desk lamp that cast long shadows across the room. He had the best spot in the building, a corner office on the twelfth floor that offered a grand view of downtown Boston, including the Boston Common—the oldest public park in the United States—and the Charles River. On a clear day, he could see the *USS Constitution* in the harbor, the visitors checking out her decks looking like tiny black specks.

But the city lights offered little comfort this Friday night, and he rubbed his tired eyes. The clock on the wall ticked past midnight, a relentless reminder that the world outside continued to spin, even as his own seemed to teeter on the brink of collapse.

His mahogany desk, polished to a shine, sat like a linchpin, his battle station against the world's most nefarious. Papers were strewn across the surface, folders stacked haphazardly, Post-its with scribbled notes stuck to his curved monitor—all evidence of the case that had consumed his life for the last few months. Senator Whitman, the epitome of corruption and power, was now within reach.

As a district attorney, he was used to working long hours, but this latest case was the battle of his career—and maybe his life. Senator Douglas Whitman III, the senior senator for the great state of Massachusetts, had a pedigree that spanned two centuries. He was a prominent public figure

tolerated by his constituents, respected by his friends, and feared by his enemies. But the polished veneer hid something rotten underneath. After months of quietly gathering evidence, Roman was close to exposing the truth about the senator's backroom dealings.

Roman scanned the incriminating documents for the gazillionth time. Combined efforts of his office and the FBI had uncovered a lot of evidence against Whitman, but it wasn't enough. Yet. It was sufficient to get a grand jury to indict Whitman but not enough for the actual court case.

With anyone else, he would've felt confident taking it to court, but with Whitman, he needed more. The senator would fight with everything at his disposal, and the man had money, connections, and more power than any one man should ever have. This case had to be beyond watertight, the evidence so overwhelming a jury would declare a guilty verdict within an hour. The weight of the case pressed down on Roman like the Boston air before a nor'easter dumping ten inches of snow.

His stomach growled, a testament to the hours since his last meal. Half-empty cartons of sweet-and-sour chicken and rice stood on the edge of his desk, a reminder of the life he'd left behind in pursuit of justice. Once upon a time, back when he'd still been starting his career, he would've been home in time for dinner. His marriage was just another casualty on the list, alongside his sanity and any semblance of a normal life.

His phone buzzed, and Roman's heart skipped a beat. He picked it up with a hand that betrayed no tremor though his pulse hammered in his ears. The message was curt, the words slicing through him.

> Drop the case or face the consequences. Next time, we won't ask so nicely. We're done being patient.

No name, no traceable number—just another anonymous threat that felt like the hiss of a viper before it attacked. He screenshot the message with a practiced calm he didn't feel and leaned back in his chair, the leather creaking softly under his weight as fear slithered up his spine.

This wasn't the first time he'd gotten a message like this. They'd been coming for weeks now, each more pointed than the last and escalating in intensity. His home had been broken into, he was being followed, and online, the wildest stories were circulating about him—all fabrications.

Combined with some strange events, these incidents were slowly but surely getting to him.

As much as he wanted to tell himself he was fine and everything was fine, the truth was that he was far from fine. And this time, the message had made clear they were escalating. How much worse could his life get? He was afraid to find out.

The threats had to come from Whitman, though Roman had zero proof. But who else could it be? On any given day, his office handled many important cases, but none had ever been as big as the one against Whitman.

Exhaustion seeped into his bones. When was the last time he'd slept through the night? Two weeks ago? Maybe even longer? Between the long hours on the case and constantly watching his back, he was unraveling at the seams.

He swept an agitated hand over his face. He couldn't keep doing this alone. But who could he trust?

Should he go to the police? The thought surfaced again, as it had many times before, but he dismissed it. Whitman's influence ran too deep. The man had countless cops and politicians in his pocket, and Roman couldn't risk exposing his investigation to potentially corrupt officers.

He didn't want to leave town either. The idea of taking time off was unthinkable. Too many important cases needed him, none more so than Whitman's. He'd been building this case for a year, piece by painstaking piece, and he wouldn't let it crumble now.

Maybe he really was going crazy. Recent events certainly hinted at him losing his mind.

With a sigh, Roman shut down his computer and gathered his things with leaden limbs. He locked his office behind him and trudged to the parking garage underneath his building. The dimly lit space always put him on edge, with too many shadows and places for someone to hide. Roman's senses strained, alert to any out-of-place sound as he walked to his car. The fluorescent lights flickered overhead, casting an eerie glow on the concrete pillars. A prickle of unease tickled at the back of his neck, and he quickened his pace.

Safely inside his BMW with the doors locked, Roman rested his forehead against the steering wheel. He couldn't keep living like this. But the thought of backing down made bile rise in his throat. Whitman had been

able to get away with his corruption for far too long, and Roman was so close to taking him down.

The familiar streets of Boston passed by in a blur as he drove home, but tonight, they felt alien, hostile. It had been a cold winter, and snow banks lined the roads like silent sentinels, their white purity marred by the city's grime. It all looked so pretty—until you dug deeper under that pristine surface. Just like with Whitman.

The silence became too overwhelming. He needed to talk to someone. He needed someone to tell him he wasn't going insane.

Before he could second-guess himself, Roman told Siri to call Wander.

"What's wrong?" Wander, Roman's younger brother, said as he picked up.

"And a good evening to you too." Out of habit, Roman checked his watch. Oh shit, it was almost one in the morning. "Or I should say good night. Sorry, I didn't realize the time."

"Hence my question. You wouldn't call this late unless something was wrong, yeah? Does this have something to do with the personal problems you mentioned last week?"

Hearing his brother's calm voice released some of the tension in Roman's shoulders. He talked to his brother at least once a week, and perceptive as he was, Wander had picked up on something being off. Roman had told him he was having some personal issues, unsure what else to say. But maybe it was time to reveal more.

He rubbed the back of his neck, searching for the right words. "I'm involved in a complicated case, and I've been getting threats."

"What kind of threats?"

"Anonymous phone calls, text messages. You know the drill." He wasn't sharing the rest with Wander. Yet.

"What do they say?"

"They all boil down to 'drop the case or else.'"

Wander cursed softly. "And you know who's behind them?"

"I have a strong suspicion but no evidence."

"If you're correct in your hunch, how powerful an enemy are you facing?"

Leave it to Wander to immediately drill down to the core of the case. "The most powerful you can imagine."

“Get the fuck out of Boston,” Wander said without hesitation. “I told you last week you’re always welcome with us. Come up here and lie low for a while. I won’t let anyone get to you, Roman. We’ll keep you safe.”

The offer was tempting. Too tempting. Wander owned a private security firm called Dwyer Security, and his offer to keep Roman safe wasn’t an empty one. Still, Roman shook his head, even though Wander couldn’t see it. “I can’t just leave. I have too many open cases, and if I suddenly take off, it’ll look suspicious.”

Wander scoffed. “Your safety is more important than any of that. Besides, you’ll always have open cases. If you won’t do it for yourself, do it for me. Please.”

Roman wavered. He wanted nothing more than to crawl into bed and sleep for a week, safe in his brother’s protection. But the people of Boston were counting on him. “Wander, I—”

“Don’t make me come down there and drag your stubborn ass up here myself,” Wander growled. “You need rest, and you need security. So get your ass on the road. Now.”

A bone-deep exhaustion swept over Roman. He was out of arguments. “Okay.” The word was like an exhale of tension. “I’ll come.”

“Good.” The relief in Wander’s voice was palpable. “Drive safe. I’ll be waiting. I’ll text you the code for the gate.”

Roman ended the call. Doubt still gnawed at him, but the promise of refuge won out. If he could relax for a few days, catch up on sleep, maybe talk through some stuff with his brother—the details he could share anyway—maybe he’d feel better. He needed an energy boost to finish this marathon. A couple of days with Wander would do the job, right?

He swung by his apartment—cold and sterile since he didn’t spend much time there and hadn’t taken the time to decorate after his divorce—and grabbed a weekend bag with clothes and some personal items. He’d only be gone for a few days. After watering the spider plant his ex-wife, Yolanda, had given him, he got back into his car and started the three-hour drive west to where Wander lived, twenty minutes north of Albany.

Oh great, it had started snowing. Fat flakes swirled in his headlights as he left the city lights behind him and took the Mass Pike toward Albany. The drive seemed to take forever, his head as chaotic as the snowflakes spinning into whirlwinds under his wheels.

By the time he pulled up to the iron gate of the mansion Wander and his team were staying in—Roman was a little blurry on who owned it, but it sure as fuck wasn't his brother—he was strung as tight as a bow. With unsteady hands, he punched in the security code Wander had sent him. The gate swung open, and Roman drove inside, exhaling a breath he seemed to have been holding since Boston.

He parked his car in the driveway and climbed out with stiff legs. Wander stood in the doorway, backlit by the glow of the hallway. Roman nearly wept at the sight. Before he could say a word, Wander pulled him into a bone-crushing hug.

"You're safe now," Wander murmured. "I've got you."

Roman clung to him far longer than he should have, the fears and stress of the last weeks getting to him. Wander held him, solid and steady as a rock. Dawn was almost breaking, but Wander didn't look tired.

When Roman finally drew back, scrubbing a hand over his face, Wander gave him a small smile. "Come on. Let's get you settled. We'll talk tomorrow."

"You mean later today."

"Whatever. You need sleep. You look like shit."

Roman nodded, swaying with fatigue now that the adrenaline had worn off. Leave it to his brother to confront him with the truth. Wander had never been one for mincing words.

"Get some sleep," Wander said gently. "Things will look better in the morning."

Roman didn't argue. He followed Wander up the grand staircase to a guest room bigger than his living room. After another hug, Wander closed the door behind him, and Roman was alone. Too exhausted to undress, Roman kicked off his shoes, collapsed on the plush king bed, and pulled the thick duvet over him. He closed his eyes, comforted by the knowledge that his brother stood guard.

For the first time in weeks, Roman slept through the night.

2

He'd slept like the dead. Normally, Roman had a hard time sleeping in, no matter how much of an all-nighter he'd pulled, but this time, he didn't wake until noon. After a quick shower, he dressed in jeans and a Boston Bruins hoodie and headed downstairs, following the murmur of voices into a large dining room.

A group of men sat around a large rectangular table, chatting animatedly as they devoured the food in front of them. The veritable brunch spread rivaled that of a five-star hotel with freshly baked rolls, danishes, and croissants, plus scrambled eggs, bacon, smoked salmon with sour cream, capers, and onions, and a variety of jams and marmalades. His stomach rumbled.

"Good morning," he said, and every head turned his way.

"Morning, Ro." Wander got up. So did Burke, Wander's boyfriend, whom Roman had met a few times.

"Good to see you." Burke gave Roman a warm hug.

"You too."

"Roman, I'd like you to meet Jesse, who owns this place and is our gracious host. Jesse, this is my brother, Roman," Wander said.

A fortysomething lean man shook Roman's hand. "It's a pleasure to have you."

"Thank you, Jesse. I appreciate you putting me up."

“Please make yourself at home.” Jesse grinned as he shot a look over his shoulder at the others. “And avail yourself of all the house has to offer.”

“We sure do,” a broad-shouldered guy replied, chuckling.

Roman wasn’t entirely sure what they were referring to, but knowing his brother’s kinky proclivities, he could take a guess.

“And this is my team. That’s Ryan, our PI, and Alex, a security specialist. Then we have Jonah, Lowell, and Caleb, our cybersecurity specialist.”

He said the last with a pointed look at Roman, who had no trouble interpreting. Clearly, this was the man to talk to if Roman wanted to find out who was behind the threats.

“And then we have David.” Wander pointed at a slender young guy with gorgeous curls. “He’s Jesse’s sub-in-training.”

Right. So Jesse was a Dom, like Wander. Wait, now Roman remembered. Jesse owned a BDSM club and had been a client of Wander. Once his case was solved, he’d invited Wander and his team to move in with him in this massive mansion, which he’d inherited if Roman remembered correctly.

“Grab a seat,” Wander said, and Roman took the empty chair next to… Caleb?

“You’re Caleb, correct?” Roman checked.

“Yup, that’s me. Can I get you a coffee?”

“Yes, please. Thank you.”

Caleb went around the room and poured everyone a fresh cup. When he was done, Lowell slapped his ass. “Good job, subbie.”

Subbie? Oh, Caleb must be a sub as well. Wander’s whole team consisted of people with experience in the kink community because he often had clients who were active in that lifestyle. Roman didn’t know all the ins and outs of his brother’s sexual preferences, but he did know Wander had changed since meeting Burke. He’d become monogamous, something Roman hadn’t thought possible.

Caleb beamed at the casual compliment and sat next to Roman again. He was cute. Young, probably early twenties, but with a tight, lean body, shoulder-length chestnut hair, and tanned skin. Colorful tattoos decorated his arms, disappearing under the sleeves of his T-shirt. Did he have more tattoos? Probably. They looked good on him. His most striking feature was

his lips. Those full lips begged to be kissed and would look so pretty wrapped around…

Roman shifted in his seat. Jesus, not even an hour with his brother's team and he was already facing his old battle. Well, that was to be expected, right? He didn't have to hide his bisexuality here. His brother's team was one hundred percent discreet, or Wander would never have hired them. Maybe Roman could indulge a little? Because if he was interested, hypothetically speaking, Caleb would be exactly his type.

He sighed. No, he couldn't allow himself to be distracted, no matter how tempting it was to engage in the rough sex he loved so much. The last time had been, what, six years ago? Yeah, it had been the weekend his divorce had become final. He'd still been an assistant DA, not quite as high profile as he was now, and he'd booked himself a flight to Vegas. He'd spent the weekend fucking his way around town, scoring one guy after the other. Being able to hook up that easily, even with the little padding he'd acquired around his waist, had boosted his ego. And once the clothes had come off, they'd been more than a little impressed by his cock. Also a nice experience.

After that, he'd never allowed himself to so much as look at men again. He couldn't afford to. If his enemies found out, they could use it against him. The rumors circulating now were already damaging. They'd be a hundred times worse if word got out he was bi. No, as a DA, he couldn't make himself an easy target like that. No more men for him.

During breakfast, he kept quiet, only answering when asked a direct question. Everyone seemed to realize he needed time to acclimatize because they left him alone. When they were done eating, Wander tapped him on the shoulder. "Come on, let's talk."

Roman grabbed a second cup of coffee and followed Wander to an old-fashioned library, a gorgeous room with plush leather couches and reading chairs, a massive stone fireplace, and floor-to-ceiling windows with thick, dark-blue velvet curtains pulled to the side. The heat from the crackling fireplace warded off the January chill and created a cozy, homey atmosphere despite the size of the room.

He glanced out the expansive windows at the gentle snowfall, the flakes swirling and dancing on the wind, dusting the sprawling property. Antique side tables invited you to put down your glass of whatever your beverage of

choice was. A man could lose time in this room, and Roman resisted the urge to inspect the books.

Wander grinned. “Wanna check out the collection?”

He’d always been perceptive. “Later.”

“Yeah.”

Roman sank into the well-used, comfortable couch, letting his weary body relax into the cushions. Despite having slept well, he still experienced a bone-deep tiredness. Probably not something that could be fixed with sleep alone.

Wander settled into the adjacent armchair, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. “How are you feeling after getting some rest?”

Roman rubbed his temples, exhaling slowly. “I’m doing a little better, but I’m still on edge. My mind won’t stop racing.”

Wander nodded, his piercing blue eyes filled with concern. “I want you to tell me everything that’s been going on. Start from the beginning.”

“I can’t tell you everything for legal reasons, but I’ll share what I can.”

“Fair enough.”

“I’ve been receiving anonymous phone calls, voicemails, and texts over the last few months. First, whoever was on the line stayed silent. Then, they left brief messages. ‘Stop your investigation.’ ‘Drop the case.’ All with a distorted voice. Lately, they added general threats. ‘Drop the case or else.’ ‘If you know what’s good for you, stop your investigation.’ Along those lines.”

“I’m gonna ask the obvious questions to get a clear picture, yeah?”

Roman waved his hand. “Ask away. I’ll tell you if I can’t answer.”

“Who knows about these messages?”

“My boss, who is the head DA, the attorney general of Massachusetts, and a handful of FBI agents who investigated.”

“Have they been able to trace them?”

“The FBI said they’re all coming from burner phones. They thought they had a lead on them, but that turned into a dead-end after all.”

“Hmm, okay. What else?”

“My apartment was broken into. The place was trashed, but nothing was taken, as far as I can tell. And I know I’m being followed.”

“Followed? You mean someone has surveillance on you?”

Roman nodded. “I’ve never seen their face clearly, but I’ve noticed someone watching me several times. And I received a letter in my mailbox with printed surveillance pics of me, which only confirmed what I already suspected.”

Wander whistled. “That’s a lot. And the message is consistent, a variation on ‘drop the case?’”

“Yes, but they never mention which case.”

“But you said you have a strong suspicion who’s behind this, yeah?”

“You know I’m always working on multiple cases at the same time, but for the last year, I’ve focused on one case in particular.”

Should he tell Wander? He wasn’t bound by legal reasons not to, and Wander wouldn’t tell anyone. Besides, Whitman already knew Roman was building a case against him.

“Senator Whitman.” Even mentioning the name felt like an exhale of tension.

Wander’s mouth set in a grim line. “Why am I not surprised? He’s always been a weasel.”

“Well, he’s a corrupt weasel, and I’m building a case against him in close cooperation with the FBI. We have evidence, enough for a grand jury, but we haven’t found the proverbial smoking gun yet that will seal the court case beyond any doubts.”

“And you suspect he’s behind the threats.”

Roman leaned forward. “The man has spent his entire life amassing wealth and power by building a corrupt empire. He’s not gonna go down without a fight. He would do anything to prevent his downfall.”

Wander scratched his beard. “Yeah, I can see that. It’s gonna be hard to prove it, though. No way would a man like him do the dirty work himself. He has people for that, guys who are probably several steps away from him and may not even know who they’re working for.”

“Exactly.”

“That’s the whole picture? Nothing else?”

He’d only told Wander about the threats, but something more was weighing on him. Strange occurrences he couldn’t explain. Incidents that made him question his sanity.

Perhaps sensing Roman’s unease, Wander said gently, “It’s me, Ro. You know you can tell me anything. I won’t judge.”

Roman met his brother's earnest gaze. If anyone would understand, it was Wander. "It's not your judgment that I fear. It's that you'll think I'm crazy."

"You're not crazy."

"You may want to hold off on that conclusion until you've heard my story. There have been some…bizarre incidents lately. Things that make me feel like I'm losing my mind."

"Like what?"

Roman sighed, dredging up the first inexplicable event. "It started a few weeks ago when my secretary quit out of nowhere. She claimed I had sent her inappropriate sexual messages."

Wander's eyebrows shot up. Roman held up a hand to stop any assumptions. "Betty was with me for five years, totally professional. You know me. I'd never fuck around at my job. I take it way too seriously for that. The accusation was insane, and I could prove I was in back-to-back meetings when the messages were sent. My phone records showed I hadn't called or texted her once that day."

"Any idea who could've sent them?"

"None. I alerted the FBI, and they checked my phone and laptop, but they found nothing. It must've been some software that spoofed my phone and made it look like the messages were coming from me. Modern technology, man. It's scary."

Wander pursed his lips. "What else?"

"This is going to sound crazy…" He hadn't told anyone about the laptop incident, not even the FBI. They'd think he was going mental for sure. "Four weeks ago, I opened my work laptop, and my files were a complete mess. All the folders I've meticulously created over the years were gone."

"You sure you didn't reorganize them yourself?"

"Positive. My laptop is encrypted and password-protected. I'm the only one who can access it. And you know how particular I am about my sorting system."

"You do like things just so," Wander said with a small smile.

"Exactly. I spent hours fixing it. It was maddening." Roman dragged a hand down his face.

Wander grew serious again. "Is there anything else?"

Roman exhaled sharply. He might as well air it all. “This is the thing that scared me most. I got in a car accident last week. Rear-ended someone at a traffic light.”

Wander’s eyes widened in alarm. “What? Are you hurt?”

“No, just minor damage to my BMW. But, Wander, I have zero memory of the accident happening. If the insurance company of the other driver hadn’t contacted me, I wouldn’t have known about it.”

“Jesus. But if your car was damaged, you must’ve been driving, right?”

“I guess so,” Roman said helplessly. “But I don’t remember any of it. According to the form I apparently filled out with the other driver, it happened around midnight. All I know is that I wasn’t feeling well the night before and woke up the next morning with the mother of all headaches, so I took some Advil, and that was it. Until the insurance company contacted me later that day. I must’ve sounded like a moron. I had no clue what they were talking about. The lady even asked if I had been under the influence, since it was clear I couldn’t remember.”

He dropped his head into his hands. Wander stood, crossed over to the couch, and gripped Roman’s shoulder firmly. “Ro, listen to me. We’re going to figure this all out, okay? We’ll get you checked out medically. Maybe do a brain scan to rule out anything neurological, yeah?”

Roman lifted his head. Thank fuck he’d reached out to Wander. Talking to him already felt like unburdening himself, like lancing a festering wound. At least he wasn’t facing everything alone anymore, whatever it was. “Yeah…that’s probably a good idea.”

Wander gave his shoulder a reassuring squeeze. “I promise you we won’t stop until we get answers. You’ll stay here as long as you need. My team will keep you safe, no matter what.”

For the first time in weeks, a spark of hope fluttered in Roman’s chest. “I know you’ve got my back. Couldn’t ask for a better brother.”

Wander smiled and pulled Roman into a bear hug. Roman returned it fiercely, the knots of anxiety unfurling bit by bit.

“We’re going to get to the bottom of this,” Wander said as he let go. “In the meantime, you’ll stay here where we can keep you safe. No one will get to you, I promise.”

Roman’s watch buzzed with an incoming message, and he read it. Anxiety blazed through him, spiking his pulse.

“What is it?”

Wordlessly, Roman held up his wrist so Wander could read the chilling words.

You can’t hide from us. We’re always watching.

Wander’s face hardened. When he looked back at Roman, his eyes blazed with brotherly protection. “I’m getting my team involved, and we’re going to find out if Whitman is behind this. If he is, we’re taking this bastard down.”

“Thank you.”

“For now, why don’t you try to relax? Check out the books, read a little, maybe take another nap… And I’ll see what I can do to help you release some of that stress.”

“Wander…” Roman knew exactly what his brother was referring to. Wander was one of the few people who knew about Roman’s bisexuality.

“No worries, Ro. I got you.”

3

Caleb's fingers flew across the keyboard, lines of code darting on the screen. He was in the zone, that magical place where his fingers carried out commands before he'd consciously formed them in his brain. It was almost meditation to him, a way to find rest and relaxation. Though not quite as much as with submitting, but that went without saying.

Speaking of which, it had been way too long since he'd done a scene. He didn't begrudge Wander and Ryan their newfound happiness with their respective boyfriends, but it sure as fuck meant fewer opportunities to submit, even outside of full scenes.

Wander had always been an excellent Dom, demanding but kind and with an almost eerie psychological insight. Ryan was very different. Rougher, which Caleb loved, but also without any affection. At least until he'd fallen hard for Alex. Now, the once untouchable Ryan Mason had developed a soft side, and every time a goofy grin appeared on the man's face when he looked at Alex, Caleb had to pinch himself to make sure he wasn't hallucinating. He hadn't seen that coming.

That left only two Doms in the house, Jesse and Lowell, and one switch, Jonah. He liked them all and was always eager to serve, though Jonah and he didn't have much sexual chemistry. He wasn't rough enough for Caleb, and that wasn't something you could force. Master Mark, a friend of Wander's who was also a Dom, was fun to play with. When meeting him,

Caleb had hoped for that proverbial spark between them, but alas. They had plenty of chemistry in their D/s play, but none personally.

He leaned back in his chair and pumped his hand above his head. There, done. He'd found the problem in the code and fixed it. Now, it should all run without issues.

"Hey, kid."

Caleb swiveled in his chair, tilting his head to meet his boss's gaze. "What's up, Sir?"

"You up for having sex tonight?" Wander's voice was low, a rumble of promise. "My brother could use some distraction. Weekend's here, and we're dead anyway."

Fuck, *yes*. The words nearly spilled from Caleb's lips as anticipation curled in his gut, but he kept it cool, always professional on the surface. "Sure thing, boss."

His heart hammered against his ribs, the familiar thrill of serving itching beneath his skin.

Wander's smirk was a silent understanding. "I figured you'd be up for it. A word of warning, though. My brother is not a Dom, yeah? So you can play with him, but don't expect him to dominate you. He's naturally dominant and aggressive, so you won't have any complaints, but he has no experience in the lifestyle."

"Got it."

Wander jerked his head toward the hallway. "Come on, then."

Caleb followed him, muscles coiled tight. He hadn't played with anyone outside the community for a long time, so he'd have to make sure he had the right expectations. This wouldn't be a scene, just sex. Then again, he hadn't had a good dicking in a long time either, so he was totally down with that. And Roman was hot. He had a different build from Wander, who was much more muscled, with a normal posture and some extra padding around the waist, but Roman exuded this air of class, smarts, and, yes, power and authority that was hard to fake. His eyes were like his brother's, that gorgeous deep brown. Nope, Caleb wouldn't mind serving Roman at all.

Wander knocked on the door of one of the guest rooms, and when a soft "Enter" came, walked in with Caleb on his heels. Roman was stretched out on the bed. He hastily put down his phone, a heavy frown marring his forehead. "What's up?"

“I have your relaxation right here.” Wander gestured at Caleb. “Caleb’s one of the best subs I’ve ever played with. Eager to serve and hungry for whatever you’re willing to dish out.”

“Wander, I can’t—”

“Yes, you can. And you want to. I saw how you looked at him this morning.”

Oh, Roman didn’t like being called out like that. His face tightened. “You know why I can’t.”

“This is a safe space, Ro. No one here talks, and they sure as fuck don’t judge. Hell, whatever you can do to sweet Caleb is child’s play compared to what the rest of us are up to.”

Roman slowly rose from the bed. “I don’t know if this is a good idea. No offense, Caleb. This has nothing to do with you.”

No, Caleb understood that much. Was it the submissive side of him that was the problem, the sex in general, or him being a man? It didn’t matter. He didn’t take it personally. “None taken.”

“It’s sex. Nothing more. I’m not asking you to Dom him. I’m giving you a present and a chance to blow off some steam.”

“You’re giving Caleb as a present? How is he yours to give? He’s your employee.”

Wander chuckled. “Because we do things a little differently around here. On the clock, I’m his boss. Off the clock, I can ask him if he wants to have sex or do a scene. Which, for the record, he did. He always has the choice to say no, and he knows that. Right, kid?”

Caleb nodded. “Yes, Sir.”

Roman dragged a hand over his face. “You’re not making this easy on me.”

“Do you want to say yes?”

“Of course I do!” Roman took a shaky breath. “Do you know how long it’s been since I’ve had sex? And let’s not even talk about sex with a man. Years, that’s how long. You know how careful I have to be in my job.”

Wander stepped up to his brother and put a hand on his shoulder. “Why do you think I offered Caleb? You need this, and I’m telling you to make use of the opportunity. Caleb loves it, I promise. He’s a little slut.”

“Jesus, Wander…” Roman let out a deep sigh. “Sometimes I can’t believe the shit coming out of your mouth.”

“It’s the truth,” Caleb piped up. He wasn’t gonna get between the two brothers, but he didn’t want Roman to think Wander was lying. “I love sex and being used. Sir.”

He added that last word as an afterthought, not entirely sure what he should call Roman.

“You don’t need to call me Sir. I’m not a Dom.”

Caleb shrugged. “It’s easier for me, since I’m used to it. I call everyone Sir when they’re not fellow subs.”

“Right. And you’re absolutely one hundred percent sure this is what you want?”

“Wander would never pressure me into something, Sir. He asks, and I can say yes or no. In this case, it was an easy yes.”

“I can’t believe I’m even having this conversation. It feels surreal.”

“Let go for a little while, Ro.” Wander’s voice was kind, soft, the affection for his brother obvious.

“Okay.” Roman let out another deep sigh. “Okay.”

“Good. You’re familiar with the concept of a safeword?”

Roman widened his eyes. “Yeah, but I’m not—”

“It’s for Caleb. He won’t say stop if you do something he doesn’t like because he’s been trained not to. But he will say ‘Red’ when he’s reached his limits, and I need to know you will respect that.”

“Of course.”

“Remember”—Wander turned to Caleb and pinned him with an intense stare—“I need to know you’ll call ‘Red’ if you have to. No exceptions.”

“Yes, Sir.” Caleb’s reply was automatic, drilled into him from countless encounters where trust was currency. Red meant stop. Always had, always would. Control was a gift he gave willingly but only on his terms.

“Good. Have fun.”

With that, Wander turned on his heels and left. The door clicked shut behind him, sealing the room in a hush of anticipation. Or was that just Caleb? No, Roman’s eyes showed it as well, hidden behind a layer of uncertainty as if he was a little lost in the enormity of the offer and unsure what to do next. That was probably true, considering his lack of experience with encounters like this.

The air was thick with the unsaid, with Roman crinkling his brow ever so slightly and a hint of fear in his eyes, not unlike the way Caleb felt

whenever he played for the first time with a Dom he didn’t know. Roman needed guidance in this world, where power was a gift given, not taken. For once, Caleb would have to make the first move, but it would still have to be a clear signal Roman was in charge and Caleb expected him to lead.

He kept eye contact as he stripped, dragging his hoodie over his head, then lowering his sweat pants and taking them off at the same time as his underwear. His socks came off last, and then he stood naked. Roman watched him with hungry eyes, a man starving for a meal after going hungry for too long.

Caleb’s body moved fluidly as he sank to his knees, the rough carpet against his skin a stark contrast to the softness of submission pouring from him like honey. This was his realm, his sanctuary. Kneeling felt like coming home, even with a man who wasn’t a Dom. He never felt more himself than when he was submitting.

Roman’s breath hitched, the only sound breaking through the quietude. “Fuck…” The word came out coarse, a rasp that betrayed his desire.

“Tell me what you want. How I can serve you.” Caleb lifted his gaze to Roman, something he ordinarily wouldn’t do, but everything was different about this encounter.

Roman reached out a trembling hand, a flutter of nerves as he grazed his fingers over Caleb’s jawline with a hesitant touch. Caleb remained still, offering his throat, his obedience. Whatever Roman wanted.

“You’re gorgeous…”

“Thank you, Sir.”

Roman’s shoulders lost some of their tension. “You make that word sound so sexy. Never knew it could be like that.”

Caleb’s heart drummed a relentless rhythm, the pulse sending shivers down his spine as Roman circled him. The air between them charged with electric potential, and Caleb could almost taste the tang of anticipation on his tongue.

“Are you truly okay with this?”

“Absolutely, Sir.” This was what he craved: to be used, to serve.

“Tell me what you want.”

“Want to please you.” Caleb’s words were jagged, hungry. “Want to do whatever you tell me to.”

“When Wander offers you to someone for sex, does that excite you?” Roman’s question was probing, as if he wanted to triple-check Caleb’s consent. Caleb might not need it, but he still respected the hell out of Roman for it.

“Yes, Sir. Very much so.”

“Good.” A ghost of a smile lifted Roman’s lips, and he relaxed even more.

Caleb waited, patient as stone, eyes fixed on the man before him.

“Would you…?” Roman swallowed. “Would you be willing to give me a blowjob?”

His voice barely broke through the thick air, asking for permission rather than commanding, but Caleb took it as a promising first step. “Yes, Sir. I’d love that.”

Would he have loved to be fucked? Absolutely. But he also understood where Roman was coming from. Besides, the man would be here for a little while, wouldn’t he? So whatever they did today could function as an appetizer.

Roman exhaled a quiet gust of relief. Caleb’s gaze never wavered, locked on Roman’s face, where uncertainty yielded to something fiercer, hungrier.

“Go ahead,” Roman said, the command firmer now but still cloaked in polite veneer.

Caleb didn’t need to be told twice. He surged forward, and his hands found Roman’s belt buckle, fingers deft and sure. Metal clinked and fabric whispered as Caleb eased the zipper down, his movements eager and smooth.

Oh fuck. His mouth watered at the sight of Roman’s cock, rock hard and trying to escape the confinements of the tight, black boxer briefs Roman was wearing. The head peeked from under the waistband, eager to be freed.

He was big. Thick and long. Jesus, he had to find a way to get that man to fuck him because he wanted that cock inside him. It would wreck his ass in the best way possible. Caleb’s gut coiled in anticipation.

He leaned in and pressed his nose against Roman’s cock, breathing in the musky smell, the unmistakable scent of arousal. He nudged it with his nose, then kissed it like a first welcome from his mouth. Clasping his hands

behind his back, he carefully drew the waistband between his teeth and pulled down.

He'd once had a Dom, back when he'd still been training as a sub, who had forbidden Caleb to use his hands for the entire scene, teaching Caleb how much he could do with his mouth. It had been an educational and highly rewarding session.

The heat from Roman's body was a beacon, drawing Caleb closer. He managed to pull Roman's boxer briefs down far enough to free his cock and balls, and as soon as they were out, he rubbed his lips against Roman's shaft. The velvety smooth cock was a work of art, and that was saying something. Caleb had seen his fair share of cocks, and this one was extraordinary.

Caleb paused, his open mouth inches from the head.

"Please," Roman murmured, a thread of urgency woven into the single word.

He wouldn't tease him too much, not this first time. The man looked like he needed the release desperately, and Caleb wouldn't deny him. So he obeyed and closed his lips around Roman's cockhead. He suckled him, not wanting to miss out on that first savoring moment, the taste raw and real on his tongue. He wetted his lips and took another lick as if enjoying a lollipop.

With his right hand wrapped around the base—and Jesus, Joseph, and Mary, that had to be one of the thickest cocks he'd ever had his hands on—he pumped and took as much as possible into his mouth. No way would he be able to take everything, but he'd damn well try.

As Caleb set a rhythm, his hands and mouth working together seamlessly, a concert ensued—the catch of breath, the soft sighs of pleasure, the low groans vibrating from Roman's chest. Each sound was a symphony, music that spurred Caleb on to take Roman apart piece by piece. Roman's hand found its way into Caleb's hair, a hesitant touch that grew bolder with each motion, grounding him, anchoring him in the moment.

Others might use the word slut in a derogatory sense, but he took pride in it. He fucking loved sex, loved pleasuring someone else, loved the taste, the smells, the sounds, all the sensations flooding his body. He loved every fucking moment of it.

He worked him with precision, a craftsman with his art. He used his mouth, his tongue, his throat, every skill honed from years of submission to bring Roman to the edge and hold him there. Roman's grip tightened, a silent plea etched into the pressure of his fingers.

"Shit, Caleb…" Roman gasped, the words torn from him, raw and ragged.

Caleb didn't let up but built that pleasure relentlessly without sending Roman over the edge. He was completely tuned in to him, reading his every signal, holding back when needed, and speeding up when Roman had caught his breath.

Roman rose on his toes, his muscles tensing, and sank back down as Caleb eased his tempo, his hands like clamps on Caleb's head. He rode the waves Caleb created for him, sailing higher and higher. To Caleb, his pleasure was a gift, one he treasured deep inside the submissive core of his being, the part where he cared about nothing but pleasing his Master.

"Caleb, please… Please…"

This time, Caleb let the tide swell until it broke, and Roman spilled into him, hot and shuddering as he let out a deep groan. Caleb swallowed eagerly, gently cradling Roman's balls to milk every last drop out of him. He drew back slowly, giving Roman space to breathe, to come back down. Roman panted, sweat glistening on his brow, a testament to the intensity of their encounter.

Caleb stayed on his knees, his gaze searching Roman's face for any sign of regret or discomfort. But all he found was a dazed sort of wonder, a dreamy expression that told him without words he had done well, had pleased Roman. As always, it lit him up inside.

"Fuck." Roman exhaled, a shudder rolling through him as he met Caleb's gaze. His eyes were soft, vulnerable even, a look that spoke volumes. Words were unnecessary when the air hummed with what they'd shared.

Caleb felt it too, the satisfaction curling in his belly, warm and comforting. He'd been used, yes, but willingly, eagerly, and even though he hadn't come, his pleasure was just as profound. It was more than physical. The tension within him eased, a loosening of the chains that got so tight when he didn't play for a while.

"Thank you," Roman said finally and took a step back.

Caleb let him go, reached up, and tucked Roman back in, then zipped his pants and fastened his buckle. “It was my pleasure, Sir.”

He rose to his feet fluidly. Roman gestured at Caleb’s hard cock. “You didn’t come.”

“I don’t need to, Sir. This was for you.”

“Oh.”

“Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“No, this was…” Roman blew out a breath. “Spectacular.”

Caleb beamed. “Anytime, Sir. I’m at your disposal.”

4

The next day, Caleb followed Wander and Roman into the conference room and sat at the large wooden table. The other team members filed in, not hiding their looks of curiosity. Roman was a district attorney in Boston. Were whatever problems he was facing related to his work?

Wander stood at the head of the table, his expression grim. “We have a new case involving my brother, Roman.”

Roman gave a tense smile and nod of acknowledgment.

“Roman’s life is in danger.” Wander’s statement was blunt, the weight behind it heavy enough to silence the room. “That’s why he’s here. We need to figure out who’s threatening him and how to stop them.”

Roman held up a hand. “Now wait a minute. I wouldn’t go that far…”

Wander silenced him with a look. “You can downplay it all you want, but we both know how serious this is. Someone is targeting you. Let’s start from the beginning and bring the team up to speed.”

Caleb sat up straight. Someone was threatening a DA? Why wasn’t that a case for the FBI? But Caleb knew better than to ask questions before he had all the information.

A muscle ticked in Roman’s jaw. “Fine,” he said, his voice low. “But I can’t share every detail of my cases at work because of the ethical boundaries I have to maintain.”

“Understood. We’ll work with what you can give us.”

Roman clasped his hands on the table. The air in the conference room felt heavy, thick with anticipation and something darker—fear, maybe? “In the past few months, I’ve received threatening messages. All anonymous, of course. Voicemails from an unknown, disguised number with a distorted voice. Texts and live calls. All very vague but menacing. The message is ‘drop the case or else.’”

So it was work-related. But did Roman know what case? Again, not something Caleb was gonna ask at this point.

“Letters too. Photos. Someone’s tailing me, but I already sensed that before I received that first picture. Then my apartment was broken into, everything torn apart, but nothing seemed to be taken.”

Roman’s voice was clipped and professional despite the shadows in his eyes.

“Could you determine a point of entry?” Ryan asked.

“No. The door was still locked, windows all intact. I have no clue how they got in and out.”

“And I assume you don’t have a security system?”

“I do, but it was off-line during the break-in. Very convenient.”

Also very professional. Not the work of casual burglars.

Roman rubbed the back of his neck. “And there’s been an online smear campaign against me. Weird social media posts with fabricated pictures that accuse me of being a pedophile, of paying women for sex, of being bribed to drop certain cases. One ran a completely made-up interview with my ex-wife, Yolanda. Those have been hard to deal with, to be honest. They’re attacking my character and integrity.”

When Roman finished, silence fell again, a pregnant pause. Wander leaned forward, elbows on the table, a storm brewing in his steady gaze. “There’s more,” he said tersely.

Roman shot him a glare that could slice steel. “Wander…”

“Come on.” Wander’s tone brooked no argument. “If we’re doing this, we’re not holding back.”

“Fine.” Roman relented with a scowl. “But I’m warning you, it’s gonna make me sound like I’m losing my mind.”

Caleb’s gut twisted. Losing his mind? What the hell was going on?

“Two weeks ago,” Roman said, voice sharp with bitterness, “my secretary quit. Accused me of sending her inappropriate messages.”

He fisted his hands, knuckles white, and tightened his jaw, the lines around his mouth deepening. Caleb might've just met the man, but no way would he send messages like that. It didn't vibe at all with his professional demeanor and the ethics he'd displayed so far. Would a man who was that concerned about consent do that? Caleb didn't buy it.

"Did she have proof?" Ryan's question cut through the tension, direct and unyielding.

"I was in back-to-back meetings when she said the messages were sent. I have witnesses and security footage. Hell, my phone records don't lie."

"Someone spoofed your phone," Caleb said. "Made it look like the messages were coming from you."

"Someone also gained access to my laptop. Files were moved around overnight, turning my whole filing system upside down, but nothing was deleted. My laptop is encrypted and password-protected, so I have no idea how anyone got in."

Caleb leaned forward. This was getting intriguing. "Was your laptop ever out of your possession? At a repair shop or anything?"

"No, never."

"Do you use public Wi-Fi?"

People underestimated the risk of using unsecured networks and the many ways in which those could be exploited by someone with the right tools and enough malice.

"Not with that laptop. My personal one when I have to, but never for work-related stuff. Not on my phone either."

Caleb nodded, considering the implications. Whoever was behind this had serious skills.

"Tell 'em about the crash," Wander said.

There was still more? Holy shit.

"A few weeks ago, I went to bed feeling unwell and woke up in the morning super groggy and with a massive headache. Later that day, my insurance company called. They were handling the claim from the person I'd hit. I had no clue what they were referring to, and they sent me a copy of an accident report I apparently filled out after rear-ending another driver. My car did have minor damage, and the report is in my handwriting and has my insurance details and signature, but I have no recollection of driving that night."

“What the actual fuck?” Ryan said, and that summed it up perfectly. What the actual fuck, indeed. How was that even possible? Now Caleb understood why Roman had feared they’d question his sanity.

The team members stayed silent, each processing the gravity of what they were up against. Roman’s career, his reputation, his very sense of self—they were all being targeted with a precision that left Caleb’s skin crawling.

“Someone’s playing games,” Wander said, eyes hard as flint. “Games with the intent to destroy Roman.”

“Who has that kind of reach?” Jonah’s question hung in the air, heavy as lead. “Because this is some high-level mindfuckery.”

“My work…” Roman said slowly, weighing his words carefully. “I’ve been building a case against Senator Whitman. Corruption charges.”

“Whitman?” Caleb felt as if he’d been sucker-punched. The Massachusetts senator was a big name. Hell, he was rumored to run for president in the next election.

“Can’t give details,” Roman said. “Ethics and all that.”

“Ethics don’t mean squat to someone trying to kill you,” Ryan spat out.

“Or frame you,” Caleb said quietly. In his mind, the pieces slotted together, forming a picture that was both terrifying and enraging.

Wander silenced the room with a look. “Can you give us the gist and scope of the investigation?”

“We’re talking kickbacks on local, county, and state level, maybe even federal. Substantial amounts of money. Plus, money laundering, blackmail, and that’s just scratching the surface. By the time I’m done, Whitman will spend the rest of his life in prison.”

Ryan shook his head. “No wonder you’re in hot water. That is one powerful mofo we’re dealing with. How many people know about you investigating him?”

“More than I’m comfortable with, unfortunately.” Roman let out a heavy sigh. “It’s been an extensive case, over a year in the making. I’ve been working closely with the FBI, and they have talked to countless witnesses, so I’m sure word got around. Plus, I’ve had to loop in staff and experts in and out of my office. I have no proof that Whitman’s behind it, but it seems likely, given the timing. His is the biggest case I’ve worked on for the last year.”

“Have you involved law enforcement?” Lowell asked.

“I talked to the FBI about the threatening messages and the surveillance. They were unable to find out who was behind it. And yes, they’re well aware of the Whitman case, as I’m working closely with them on this.”

“But not about the rest?” Ryan asked.

Roman spread his hands helplessly. “I have no proof of any of it. How do I prove my laptop was messed with? Nothing was deleted. And if I tell them about the car crash, they’ll think I’m mad.”

He did have a point, which was probably why whoever was targeting him had employed these tactics. They made Roman question himself, which was a powerful weapon.

“Plus,” Roman added, “Whitman has connections everywhere, including within the police. I don’t know who I can trust.”

“Feels like someone’s trying to break you,” Caleb observed, his voice grim.

“Well, they’re not gonna succeed. Not while we’re on the job, yeah?” Wander said. “So let’s get to work. We need to be careful. I know it’s easy to point fingers at Whitman, but we can’t tunnel-vision on him.” He surveyed the room. “Here’s what I propose. Ryan and Alex, I want you to compile a detailed timeline of every threat and concerning incident Roman has experienced. Look for any patterns or inconsistencies, any clues. Roman, make sure to give them all the information you have. Every detail, no matter how insignificant it might seem, could give us a clue.”

“On it,” Ryan said.

“Lowell and Jonah, I need you to do a security review of this house and Roman’s apartment in Boston. Identify any weak spots and install additional surveillance measures.”

The men nodded, jotting down notes.

Wander addressed Caleb. “Caleb, can you look into the messages Roman’s secretary received? See if you can trace their origin. And see what you can find out about that file incident.”

“On it.” Caleb’s fingers were itching to do something to help Roman.

“My top priority is keeping you safe while we get to the bottom of this.” Wander turned back to Roman. “You’ll stay with us until the threat has been definitively neutralized. We’ll maintain round-the-clock protection.”

Roman nodded, relief evident on his face. “Thank you, all. I appreciate your help more than you know. But please be vigilant. If Whitman is behind this, you’re all at risk now too.”

A solemn silence fell over the room as the weight of his words sank in. Considering the trouble Roman was dealing with, that was not an empty statement.

“Wouldn’t be a regular day if someone didn’t have it out for us.” Ryan shrugged. “We’d better keep our saddles oiled and our guns greased, as my momma would say.”

Caleb snorted. “What the fuck does that even mean?”

Ryan quirked an eyebrow, and that simple gesture was enough to wipe the smile off Caleb’s face. “You saying my momma is talking nonsense?”

“No, Sir. I was merely asking what it meant.”

“Get off the poor kid’s ass, Ry.” Alex bumped his boyfriend’s shoulder. “None of us speak Texan. I have no clue what that means either.”

“That we should be prepared and stay vigilant,” Ryan said as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. It so wasn’t, but Caleb wasn’t dumb enough to point that out.

“Enough chitchat.” Wander rose from his chair. “Let’s get to work and solve this case.”

Damn straight.

5

Glass and chrome glinted under a bright blue sky as Roman studied the contours of the sleek building before him. The modernity of the doctor's office felt incongruous compared to the turmoil churning in his gut. He was a man accustomed to control, to dissecting courtrooms with a sharp tongue and biting wit, not to this gnawing vulnerability.

"Ready?" Wander's voice cut through the fog of Roman's apprehension, grounding him.

"Let's get this over with," Roman muttered, adjusting the cuffs of his well-tailored Hugo Boss suit—his choice of armor for today's battle. A little over the top for a doctor's visit, but he always felt better when he was dressed to the nines. Clothes might not make the man, but they sure as hell could provide an extra boost of confidence.

They stepped into the waiting room, a space that screamed sterile efficiency with its minimalist furniture and muted tones. Other patients occupied the uncomfortable-looking chrome chairs. An elderly couple, moms with young kids, a middle-aged man sitting by himself—each person wrapped in their own cocoon of worry, their silent battles echoing his own. No one was at the neurologist's office for fun. That much was certain.

He checked in with the receptionist, then obediently sat where she told them to wait. Jesse's money and connections had gotten Roman a quick appointment at what promised to be a one-stop neurological clinic that

could do all diagnostics in one day, but that didn't mean he was spared from waiting. Not that he was complaining about that mild inconvenience. Wander and he sat silently, and Roman had never been more grateful to have his brother by his side.

The door swooshed open, and a woman swept in—their gatekeeper to answers—commanding the room, her white coat as assertive as her stance. She looked every bit the matriarch of medicine, her eyes sharp, missing nothing.

"Mr. Dwyer?"

He jolted and got up. Showtime. He could only hope she'd take him seriously. "I'm Dr. Snyder."

He took her outstretched hand. "Roman Dwyer. This is my brother, Wander."

"Pleasure to meet you."

They followed her down a brightly lit hallway with endless doors, most of them closed.

"Right in here." She stopped by an open door. Her examination room was spacious, with a desk on one end and an examination table on the other.

She gestured at two chairs opposite her desk. "Please take a seat. Now, what brings you in today?"

After a glance at Wander for support, Roman launched into the tale they had prepared. He couldn't tell her the truth on the off chance she'd recognize his name, but he did want to stay as close to the real problems as possible. So he altered some details and told her a story of memory issues and being unable to recall doing certain things.

She listened intently, taking notes on her laptop. "Do you drink, Mr. Dwyer?"

"A glass of whiskey on occasion, but not daily and certainly not excessively."

"Smoke?"

"Never."

"Any other complaints?"

"Trouble sleeping, migraines from time to time."

She frowned. "How often would you say you have a migraine?"

"Maybe once every two weeks or so?"

"How debilitating are they? Do you take anything for it?"

“They’re annoying, but they don’t prevent me from working. And so far, ibuprofen and naproxen have worked.”

“Speaking of work, what line of work are you in?”

“I’m a criminal attorney.” Another small deviation from the truth, but close enough.

“How would you rate your stress levels?”

He couldn’t help but chuckle. “Excessive? Not sure what scale to use.”

She gave him a smile back. “Excessive paints a picture.”

She continued questioning for another few minutes about his daily habits, whether he exercised, ate healthily, had any other complaints or issues, and then she zoomed in on his memory issues, asking for specific details.

When she was done, she leaned back in her chair. “I can see why these symptoms would concern you, Mr. Dwyer. Do you have any family history of neurological disorders?”

“Not as far as I know.”

“I’m going to be honest with you, Mr. Dwyer. This doesn’t sound like a neurological problem but more a psychological one. Your symptoms do not match any classic neurological disorder, and I can’t detect a pattern that would fit even more unusual ones. But I’d still like to do an MRI to rule anything out.”

“I’d appreciate that.”

“The scan itself takes about thirty minutes, but I want to do one with contrast, which means the radiologist will administer a contrast solution through IV, which will take a while to set up.”

“We came prepared to spend several hours here.”

“Good. I’ll bring you to the MRI waiting room, and someone will be with you shortly to explain the procedure in more detail and go over all the steps with you.”

The next hour passed in a blur. There were papers to be signed and instructions to go over. He was led to a different room and asked to change into a hospital gown. The IV was hooked up and the contrast solution administered, and then he had to wait until that had taken effect. Finally, he was brought into the room with the MRI machine, which was a massive monster.

The technician put a head coil around his head, immobilizing him to the examination bed. She carefully put in earplugs and double-checked his position. Classical music—he'd been able to give his preferences—streamed through the earplugs, and he took a deep breath as the bed slid into the MRI machine. He'd been told it would make a racket at first, so he focused on Bach's *Mass in B Minor* and tried to forget about everything else.

The machine hummed to life, a low growl that quickly crescendoed into a steady drone. Roman's heart pounded against his ribcage, thumping an erratic rhythm that mocked the calm he feigned, but after some deep breathing in and out, it slowed.

Thirty minutes was a long time when you had to lie completely still inside a machine. Thank fuck, he wasn't in the least bit claustrophobic. When it was finally done, he dressed again and returned to the waiting room, where Dr. Snyder would come get him once she had the results.

The moment he stepped through the door, Wander met his gaze. A silent conversation passed between them—nervous energy, questioning looks. They didn't need words, not really. Together, they sat in a hushed purgatory of glossy magazines and muted news on the TV. Roman's leg bounced a staccato rhythm that betrayed his composure.

"Mr. Dwyer?"

It had seemed like an eternity before Dr. Snyder called his name again. Wander and Roman rose to their feet and followed the neurologist, the click of Roman's polished shoes against the sterile floor echoing his pounding heart.

"Take a seat," the doctor said as she flicked on the monitor. The screen flickered to life, revealing images of Roman's brain, a digital landscape of shadows and light that meant nothing to him.

She tapped the screen with a blunt fingernail. "Your scan is completely normal."

Five words, simple and direct, but a wave of relief coursed through him so intensely that Roman wavered for a moment.

"No abnormalities were detected that explain your issues, which suggests, as I expected, that they are not neurological in their cause. I suspect the high stress levels in your job are getting to you, Mr. Dwyer, and I urge you to make significant lifestyle changes."

“Changes,” Roman repeated.

“Healthy diet, regular exercise.” As if prescribing a regimen could turn the downward spiral Roman’s life was in ever since he’d taken on the case against Whitman. “A reduction of hours, if possible, and sufficient sleep. They may sound like medical clichés, like a Band-Aid for a much bigger problem, but those changes combined can make a world of difference.”

As simple as her directives were, they felt like an unattainable luxury. His existence was defined by the relentless tick of the clock and the endless pursuit of justice. Caseloads, depositions, trials—all demanding his attention, all feeding the beast of stress that gnawed at his sanity, even before the threats and strange events had begun.

No, the bizarre occurrences might not have been his imagination, but that didn’t mean he shouldn’t take her words to heart. He was in the fight of his life—the fight for his life—and this was a marathon, not a sprint. If he didn’t take care of himself, the alternative was a slow unraveling, strands of self-preservation fraying until nothing remained.

“Thank you, Dr. Snyder. I promise I will take your advice to heart.”

They left the clinic and walked to Wander’s car. As Wander drove back, they were both silent. Thank god his brother allowed him time to decompress and process his thoughts.

“I’m not crazy, then,” he finally said.

“I never thought you were.”

No, he hadn’t. From the moment Roman told him, Wander had been convinced someone played mind tricks on him, a deliberately cruel attempt to make Roman question his sanity.

“It’s all connected, then. The threats, the break-in, the stuff with my secretary, the car accident, everything.”

“Did you honestly doubt that?”

“You have no idea what it’s like to get a call from your insurance company about a car accident you have no memory of being in. I thought I was losing my mind.”

Wander shot a look sideways, face carved from stone, eyes hard. “It’s classic gaslighting. A mind game, designed to twist your reality, make you question your sanity.”

Roman’s gut clenched. He knew the term, had thrown it around in courtrooms, but to be a victim of it? That was something else. Fear coiled

tighter in his chest.

“Do you know where the term gaslighting originates?” Wander asked.

Roman shook his head.

“It’s from an old black-and-white movie from the forties called *Gas Light*. It’s about a husband who dims and brightens their gas-powered lighting but denies doing it to his wife, so she thinks she’s imagining things and going insane. He wants her to think that so he can steal her money. But the whole concept is someone fucking with your mind to make you and others question your sanity and believe you’re imagining things.”

“Goal accomplished.”

“But now we know the truth, yeah? There’s nothing wrong with your head other than that you’re a stubborn SOB who should’ve come to me about this months ago. What the fuck, Ro? Why didn’t you tell me?”

Apparently, Wander had saved his anger for when he knew Roman was medically cleared. How thoughtful and so typical Wander. “I thought I could handle it.”

“Even if you did, it doesn’t mean you should have to face this alone. And let me tell you. If shit had gone south and you’d ended up dead, I would’ve been seriously pissed off with you for not allowing me to protect you. This is what I do, Ro. This is literally my job.”

His professional pride was hurt along with his brotherly. Roman could understand that, and he respected Wander for it. “Sorry. I should have told you sooner.”

“Yeah, and thanks for acknowledging that.”

“We good?”

Wander reached out and squeezed Roman’s thigh, his touch grounding, solid. “Always. I got your back.”

“Thank you.”

A last squeeze and Wander let go. “Let’s focus on finding these bastards and putting an end to their games.” His voice was a blade, sharp and sure.

“Where do we start?”

“My team is already on it. I need you to take the rest of the day to relax. Catch up on sleep, maybe go another round with Caleb, and then we’ll start fresh in the morning.”

Another round with Caleb. Wander said it so easily. For him, it probably was. He’d never made a secret of his sexual identity and his preferences.

He’d been a Dom his whole life and had never felt embarrassed about it. How Roman envied him for that. In all fairness, Wander didn’t have a job where it was a liability like Roman did, but still.

“I don’t know if I can. With Caleb, I mean.”

“What’s the problem? And I don’t mean to sound flippant. I’m serious. What are you worried about?”

Wasn’t that the million-dollar question? “Is ‘everything’ too dramatic?”

Wander snorted. “A little.”

“I don’t even know where to begin, but maybe the biggest concern is that I’ll get used to it again, that once I allow myself to indulge in this, in the kind of sex I love, I won’t be able to stop wanting it. And I can’t, Wander. I can’t. My job doesn’t afford me the luxury of engaging in these pleasures.”

Wander was quiet for a while as he navigated the roads with ease. “I get that. I don’t like it, but I understand it’s an inevitable consequence of the career you chose.”

“It is. No offense, but I even have to be careful about associating with you. It’s not hard to find out what you do and what your lifestyle involves, and that could come back to bite me in the ass.”

Wander’s face tightened. “That’s because people are close-minded dicks who don’t have a fucking clue about the beauty of BDSM and kink. They think we’re all perverts.”

“Unfortunately, yes. As much as I would love to change that, I can’t. This is the reality of my life, my job, and I’ll have to adjust.”

“For now.”

For now? What did that mean? No, Roman wasn’t going to ask. It wouldn’t lead anywhere. “I appreciate the offer of using Caleb’s services again, but I’ll need to think about it.”

“I respect that. Just keep in mind that what happens in Jesse’s house stays in Jesse’s house. No one needs to know.”

Roman didn’t doubt that, but that wasn’t his primary concern. *He* would know. Worse, he would feel what it was like to be with another man again, to let that part of himself free, and once he did, would he be able to put it back? If he came out of that proverbial closet, even if only for a few days, would he ever be able to shove himself back in?

He highly doubted it.

6

One day, he wanted to own a house with a library like this. Before moving into Jesse's mansion, Caleb hadn't known rooms like this existed outside of movies. Endless rows of bookcases, filled to the brim, thick velvet curtains that kept the cold out, and an honest-to-god fireplace. Didn't that add, like, big-time to your home insurance? Not that Jesse would be worried about that. Money was clearly not an issue for him.

Caleb grazed the spines of the books with his fingertips. How many books did Jesse have in this room? A thousand? Two? Had to be closer to two, judging by how full the cases were. Caleb had never been a big reader. Growing up, he'd been constantly told to get away from his computer and read a book, but he was sure tempted now.

But more than anything, he loved the atmosphere in this room. So cozy and inviting. The scent of old books mingled with the smoke from the fire, and the lemon fragrance Jesse's staff used to clean wafted from the couches. He wanted to cuddle on the cushions and spend a whole day here.

But he had a job to do. While Ryan and Alex settled on the sofa across from Roman, Caleb took the spot next to Roman, who was tapping his fingers on the armrest, his expression anything but warm. Not that Caleb could blame him.

"Let's talk about the threats." Ryan sounded gentler than Caleb had thought possible. Either Alex was rubbing off on him, or the PI realized

how hard this was for Roman. “I’m assuming you kept track?”

“Yeah.” With a resigned sigh, Roman flipped open his laptop, the soft glow casting an otherworldly sheen over his features. He navigated to a file labeled “Harassment Log” and angled the screen so the others could see. “Every text, every call. Timestamped and documented.”

Caleb leaned in and scanned the digital trail of malice. The messages weren’t random. They were targeted strikes, each a calculated move to shake Roman’s foundations. Five months of this shit, cutting deeper each time. The pattern was unmistakable.

“Escalating,” Ryan muttered, his angular jaw set in a hard line. “Whoever this is, they’re ramping up the frequency and the intensity.”

“Worrisome,” Alex agreed. “Could be because they’re seeing no results.”

Roman nodded. “If Whitman is behind it, he must be getting anxious by now that I’m not giving up on the case. We’re only weeks away from an indictment.”

“And they made it personal when they started gaslighting you,” Ryan said. “Those messages to your secretary, the car accident, all that was meant to make you question yourself…and make others doubt your sanity.”

“It almost worked too.” Roman sighed. “If Wander hadn’t ordered me to get my ass down here—his words—I’m not sure if I would’ve had the courage to tell him about what was going on. I was starting to think I was going mad.”

No wonder. The car accident especially had to have messed with his head.

“So for five months, you’ve been dodging these punches,” Ryan said. “Anything else happen in that time? Any other cases that might have hit a nerve?”

Roman’s eyes, usually so guarded, flickered with the strain of recollection. “Yes, there’s one other big case I’ve been working on. A sexual harassment case. High-ranking officer in the BPD and multiple credible victims. But his brother is with Internal Affairs, so they sent it our way.”

Shit. A cop? If their perp wore a badge, he’d be harder to get to. Cops tended to close ranks, refusing to rat each other out.

Ryan scratched his chin. “Whitman or the cop. Either way, it’s someone with a grudge and access to power.”

“What about the surveillance pic they sent you?” Alex asked. “You still have that?”

Roman pulled it up on his laptop. The quality was high, which meant it was taken from relatively close with a good camera, not a phone.

“Do you recognize the location?” Caleb asked.

“Beacon Street. I often pass it to grab lunch.”

Ryan leaned back. “I’ll pull some strings, see if I can get my hands on the security cam footage from the area. Whoever took this was brazen enough to do it in public.”

“They should be easy to spot,” Caleb said. “This pic was not taken with a phone. The quality is too good despite the distance.”

“Noted.” Ryan scribbled something in his little notebook. “Let’s talk about the social media stuff. Did you keep track of that?”

“I have screenshots of everything. A lot was posted from throwaway accounts that no longer exist,” Roman said.

He opened a few screenshots, and Caleb pressed his lips into a thin line.

Local DA Drunk Out on the Town.

DA Covers Up Drunk Driving Accident.

DA Involved in Cheating Scandal.

And they were from Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, each one twisting the knife deeper into Roman’s reputation.

“The LinkedIn ones hit the hardest,” Roman said. “That’s my professional network, and those people take accusations like this seriously. I’ve had to do some damage control.”

“Which means they know where to hurt you most. Personal is one thing, but trying to dismantle your career? That’s another level of hate,” Alex said.

“I don’t know if I’d call it hate,” Ryan said. “I see it more as a calculated attempt at discrediting Roman so that if the case went to court, there would be a trail of rumors and allegations they might be able to use.”

Roman widened his eyes. “I hadn’t looked at it like that.”

“It’s hard when you’re in the middle of it. Outsiders have a different view,” Ryan said kindly.

“If you’ll allow me access to your social media, I’ll see what I can find out about who’s behind these,” Caleb said. “It’s clearly a coordinated, well-targeted effort.”

Roman waved his hand. “I’m happy to give you full access. I barely use my Facebook account anyway.”

“Let’s talk about that accident,” Ryan said. “To me, that’s the most puzzling one. How certain are you that you weren’t driving that night? Not that I don’t believe you, but I wanna know what level of certainty we’re talking about here.”

“One hundred percent.”

“Good to know. Where did the accident take place?”

“A couple of blocks from my house, on Parker Street, just off Route 9. I can send you the accident report and a copy of the form I supposedly filled out.”

Ryan jotted something down again.

Alex leaned forward. “Does the handwriting look like yours?”

Roman made a so-so gesture with his right hand. “It could pass for mine, but the signature’s a little off.”

So they’d done enough research to know his handwriting. Creepy.

“Where were you earlier that night?” Ryan asked.

Roman stiffened, his jaw hardening, his voice clipped as he recounted the night’s events. “I had dinner at Gianni’s, an Italian restaurant not far from my office. My usual fare of seafood pasta. One glass of red. Nothing outlandish.”

“You go there often?”

“At least once a week, usually on Friday evenings. They make great pasta.”

“Can you remember anything being different that night?”

“I wasn’t feeling well after dinner and went to bed early. I woke up with the mother of all migraines and felt groggy and off. I took some painkillers, waited half an hour for them to kick in, and headed to work.”

“Could someone have drugged you?” Ryan asked, eyes sharp and analytical.

“Possibly.” A flicker of distress crossed Roman’s features. “You’re thinking they could’ve slipped something into my food or drink at Gianni’s?”

If someone had gotten to Roman’s food or drink… It meant they were close, intimate with his routines. A shiver ran down Caleb’s spine as the realization hit him with the force of a punch.

“Perhaps.” Ryan tapped his pen on his notebook. “If you eat there regularly and often on Friday night, as you said, it would’ve been easy for them to set something up. Can you remember if you went to the restroom at any point? Or left your table unattended for another reason?”

Roman frowned. “I got a call from a local number, but it was a bad connection, so I stepped outside for a moment. The call was disconnected, and since I was having dinner, I figured I’d call back later.”

“Did you?”

“No. Forgot all about it until now.”

“Can you check your call log for that night? See if you can find the number?”

“Sure.” Roman flipped through his phone, scrolling back to the correct date. “It must’ve been this one ‘cause that was right about the time I would’ve been at Gianni’s.” He rattled off the number, and Alex wrote it down.

“It probably won’t lead anywhere, but just in case the FBI gets access to the phone records. They may be able to determine where the call was made from,” Ryan said.

“You drive a BMW, right?” Caleb asked.

“Yeah, an X1. I’ve only had it for a few months.”

“BMWs have a pretty sophisticated on-board computer.” Caleb tapped his finger against his chin. “I wonder if I’d be able to get any information about the route that night. Mind if I give it a try?”

“You can hack into my BMW?” Roman’s eyes were big.

Caleb grinned. “I wouldn’t call it hacking. It’s not hard when you know where to look and how to access it.”

“It’s all hacking to me, but knock yourself out.”

“Meanwhile, I’ll see if I can find any streetcars or businesses with security cameras in that area. Maybe one of the cameras caught something,” Alex said.

“Speaking of the FBI,” Caleb said. “Do you know what evidence they collected? Did they request metadata and network logs from your cell phone provider for the stuff you supposedly sent your secretary, for example?”

Roman dragged a hand over his face. “I don’t know, to be honest. I’m not in the business of questioning the FBI about their methods, so when they told me they couldn’t find out who did it, I took that as the gospel truth. In hindsight, I should’ve been a little more insistent.”

Caleb instinctively reached out, unable to stand the distress in Roman’s voice, and patted the man’s knee. “You didn’t have reason to suspect they weren’t honest with you.”

“Maybe, but I should’ve been more careful. I knew Whitman had a long reach.”

Ryan cocked his head. “Are we thinking he may have bribed FBI agents?”

Roman gave a helpless shrug. “I don’t know, but I can’t rule it out. It’s hard for me to stay objective after all this. I feel I’m only a few steps away from full-blown paranoia.”

Alex raised one eyebrow at Caleb. Oh shit, he still had his hand on Roman’s knee. He hadn’t even realized it until Alex’s curious stare. Caleb ignored the heat creeping up his cheeks as he quickly withdrew his hand. Funny how he had no issue being fucked in public, yet this made him feel self-conscious for some stupid reason. Why was that? He had nothing to be embarrassed about.

“I think that’s also a result of the gaslighting,” Ryan said. “Which proves how effective that shit is.”

“Is there a way to get an idea of what the FBI has done to investigate?” Alex asked.

“I’m sure it wouldn’t raise suspicion if I called the special agent in charge and asked him about it. It’s about time for an update anyway, so I’ll throw that in as an offhand question.”

“Sounds good,” Ryan said. “And I’d be happy to be in the room to suggest questions to ask him if you prefer.”

“Thanks for the offer, but I’m worried about the confidentiality of the case.”

Ryan held up his hands. “And I respect that. Your call.”

“Let me think about that, okay?”

This made what Caleb was about to ask even more complicated. He took a deep breath. “If we aren’t one hundred percent sure the FBI actually did a thorough investigation of either the text messages to your secretary or the incident with the changed folders on your computer, that means we’ll have to do it ourselves. Which means I’ll need access to your laptop and phone.”

“The kid’s an absolute wizard with technology,” Ryan said, and Caleb’s insides lit up at that unexpected praise. “If someone messed with your systems, he’ll trace it.”

“I won’t look at any case files without asking your permission,” Caleb promised.

Roman’s eyes, pools of brown uncertainty, flickered over Caleb’s face. With a slow exhale, he nodded. “Okay. I trust you.”

“Thank you. I won’t betray that trust, I swear.”

Roman slid his laptop toward Caleb and handed him his phone and the keys to his car. “Find whatever you can.” The words felt heavy, like he was passing off pieces of his guarded life into Caleb’s hands.

“I’ll dig as long and deep as needed to find something.” Caleb pocketed the keys, the weight of responsibility settling on his shoulders. He was about to delve into the depths of Roman’s life, both digital and literal.

“We’re on it,” Ryan assured Roman, his voice gravelly with promise. “No stone unturned, Roman. We’ll figure out who’s messing with you.”

Roman nodded, a stiff tilt of his chin that didn’t quite mask the worry etching deeper lines around his eyes. He was a fortress of a man, but even fortresses have their weak spots. “Thanks.”

The word sounded like it had to claw its way out.

Ryan let out a long sigh. “I think that’s all for now. If we have any more questions, we’ll come find you. For now, my advice is to trust no one other than our team. Until we know who’s targeting you, we have no clue who could be involved. Wouldn’t be the first time someone with power had dirty LEOs in his pocket.”

A shiver trickled down Caleb’s spine. Dirty FBI agents? This case was much more involved than he’d initially thought.

“You guys better be careful as you investigate this,” Roman said. “And that includes you.”

He gave Caleb a pointed look, the concern in his voice undercut with a note of command. Caleb's balls tightened in response. "Yes, Sir."

"You don't need to call me Sir."

"What if I want to?"

"Jesus, the pheromones in here would make a monk horny." Ryan stood. "Let's go, baby boy. I doubt Mr. District Attorney here would appreciate me fucking you in public."

With a hearty slap on Alex's ass, he walked out, Alex following him like an obedient puppy.

Roman rose from the couch, the subtle play of muscles beneath the fabric of his shirt hinting at a strength that went beyond the courtroom. Caleb swallowed hard.

The air between them felt charged, crackling with the unspoken. Roman's gaze flickered over Caleb, a dark sweep that left a trail of heat in its wake. He was acutely aware of Roman's proximity, his pulse ticking up a notch. Why was he so attracted to this man? What was it about Roman that drew Caleb in?

He wanted to reach out to him, to bridge the gap and take the first step, but this wasn't just about comfort. It was about control, and in that silent dance, Caleb was the one who yielded. Roman had to make a move now. Would he want to use Caleb again? Maybe take some of that frustration out on his ass? Caleb would *so* volunteer for that.

The silence stretched and stretched. Finally, Caleb sighed. "If it's okay with you, I'll take a look at your car and see what data I can pull from it."

"Thank you."

"My pleasure. If I don't see you again tonight, sleep well."

"Good night, Caleb," Roman murmured, but the words felt like anything but a dismissal. They were a question, a challenge, lingering long after Roman had walked away, leaving Caleb on a cliffhanger of desire that promised no easy resolution. What could he do to make Roman want him again?

7

Roman rounded the hallway corner, then stopped and leaned against the wall for support. Walking away from Caleb had been so hard. He'd wanted nothing more than to use him again, to order him to his knees and shove his cock into that hot, willing mouth. Jesus, the visual alone was enough to make his cock hard as iron. When had he turned into this horny monster?

It had to be because he hadn't been with a man for so long. As much as he loved sex with women, fucking a man offered a different thrill. He could go harder, rougher, let go of himself without fearing he'd break his partner. Not that he considered women fragile, but physically, they were often much more vulnerable. That was also part of their attraction. He loved that female softness and delicateness.

But Caleb was a man in every sense, and god, the way he'd sucked Roman off… The boy had skills. Serious skills. And Roman had seen the want in Caleb's eyes. All he'd had to do was tell him, and Caleb would've been on his knees for him again, ready to take whatever Roman dished out.

It wasn't that Roman didn't want to take Caleb up on that offer. He *craved* Caleb. The thought alone was enough to make his balls clench in anticipation. But he couldn't—shouldn't. One taste and he'd be hooked, needing more, wanting…everything. Wasn't his current predicament evidence of that? One taste of Caleb and he already needed him again. His

job, his reputation, he'd be putting it all on the line for a few stolen moments of pleasure.

He shouldn't.

He couldn't.

But when soft footsteps approached him, he spun around.

"Roman?" Caleb sounded worried. "You okay?"

"Yes. No. I mean…" Roman trailed off, unable to articulate the war waging inside him.

Caleb quirked an eyebrow. "You don't sound very convincing."

"I'm fine. Just…" Instead of attempting to explain, he veered the conversation onto safer ground. "Tell me about your work. How'd you get into cybersecurity?"

If Caleb thought it strange that Roman had walked out of the room and then started this conversation in the middle of the hallway, he was kind enough not to point out the absurdity. He leaned back against the wall.

"I started young." A half-smile played on his lips. "My dad showed me how his computer worked when I was six or so, and I was fascinated, so my parents signed me up for a summer coding camp. The other kids were much older, but I took to it like the proverbial fish to water. Social skills were not my forte, but code was my language. I learned various programming languages, such as Java, Python, HTML, and CSS, you name it. In middle school, I managed to hack into my school's grading system and change a bully's grades into failing ones. They never figured out it was me. Biggest thrill of my life."

Roman chuckled. "I bet."

"But my dad was getting a little worried about me, so he gave me a stern lecture about using my powers for good. He made a whole superhero reference and all. And it hit home. I wanted to use my skills to protect, not to attack, to change the world for good and not make it worse."

"Change the world, huh?" Roman admired the confidence rolling off Caleb.

"Sure as hell tried." Caleb's chuckle was low, a rumble that sent a shiver down Roman's spine. "I got my bachelor's, then my master's. Worked corporate, government contracts… Now I'm with Wander, and I love it. Best job I could ever hope for."

Roman had no trouble imagining why. “The side benefits must appeal to you too.”

“I sure as fuck have never had a job where my boss was also my Dom.”

“Wander fucked you?” Funny, but the thought didn’t bother Roman as much as he’d expected it to.

“Until he met Burke, yeah. He’s a…” Caleb laughed. “Forgot for a moment he’s your brother, so I’ll spare you the details.”

“I appreciate your restraint. He’s a good Dom, I take it.”

“The best I’ve ever played with. He can read you like a book, and it’s scary, intimidating, and hot at the same time.”

“You never developed feelings for him?”

Caleb shrugged. “A baby crush, maybe. Hard not to when you play with someone that intensely. But I was never jealous of Burke. Those two are perfect for each other.”

“Even if you lost your Dom?”

“He wasn’t the only Dom I played with. I still had Ryan, Lowell, and Jesse, plus Master Mark, a friend of Jesse’s.”

“And Jonah? He’s a switch, right? That means he plays both sides, or however you word that?”

“He does, but his dominant side is too soft for me. I prefer a stricter, rougher Dom, so we don’t have good chemistry.”

Interesting. Roman hadn’t realized Doms came in levels, but it made sense. “But now Ryan is off the market too.”

“He is. And I’m happy as a clam because he and Alex are a match made in heaven, but I do miss him. No offense, but that man can fuck like a beast.”

Roman readjusted himself, his cock painfully hard. “That’s what you prefer?”

His voice had gotten hoarse, gravelly.

“I love it. The rougher, the better. I don’t care if I can barely sit for a few days. It’s the best feeling in the world and centers me like nothing else.”

Roman swallowed. “How did you discover you were submissive?”

“In my second year of college, I was still a virgin and tired of it. So I went to a gay club and found an older guy, figuring he’d have the experience to make it good for me. Boy, did he ever. When he fucked me, I

came so hard that I nearly passed out. We hooked up a few more times, and then he asked me if I wanted to experiment with him with some light D/s play. I had no clue what that was, but I trusted him, so I agreed. Boyd and I were together for a year as he developed his skills as a Dom and I found out I was deeply submissive."

"Why'd you break up?"

Sadness filled Caleb's voice. "He got a job offer in Atlanta, and I had gotten accepted for my master's degree, so I wasn't going anywhere. Boyd chose the job over me."

"He hurt you with that," Roman said.

"Childish to feel that way, I suppose. I mean, I was twenty-one, and he was thirty-nine, so I hardly could've expected him to take me seriously, but yeah, I was heartbroken. I thought we had something special."

Roman couldn't resist and cupped Caleb's cheek. "Just because he made that choice doesn't mean he didn't care about you. Maybe he was concerned about your age, about you being in too deep too fast."

"Maybe, but that should've been my choice, yes? He had no right to make that call for me."

"He could've done it to protect you."

"If he did, he failed miserably because that was an absolute low point. I was in love with him, you know?"

Roman's hands itched to pull Caleb close and hug him. This man before him, brimming with life and so damn open about who he was, was everything he wanted. That honesty, that intensity, was magnetic. And it scared the hell out of Roman because he wanted to dive in headfirst. Consequences be damned.

"How old are you now?"

"Twenty-seven."

Still so young in comparison. "I'm forty-nine."

"I know."

"That doesn't bother you?"

"Why should it? I like older men. Always have. Not sure you noticed, but your brother, Jesse, Ryan, and Lowell are all around your age. Master Mark is a little younger but around forty, I think. None of them are my age."

"Hmm."

The silence stretched, and Roman balled his fists to keep himself from touching Caleb again.

“Tell me about the law,” Caleb said, his gaze direct, piercing. “What got you into that?”

The law. A safe topic. Roman wasn’t sure if he was disappointed or relieved. “Wander and I grew up in a working-class community with its fair share of problems, but my parents always stressed the importance of hard work and honesty. But I kept seeing people get screwed over by the system, and it infuriated me. That’s where that passion for justice developed, I think. I got my degree in psychology first, then decided on law school. I got into Harvard and, after that, never left Boston.”

“Must be tough being the good guy in a city like that.”

“Good guy?” Roman huffed out a bitter laugh. “Sometimes it’s hard to tell the difference. If you fight long enough in the gutter, you start to look like the trash you’re up against.”

“Still, you do it. You could’ve chosen to be a criminal attorney or even a public defender, but you opted to fight to take that trash out. There’s gotta be a fire inside you that fuels that.”

“Fire burns out eventually.” Jesus, where had that dark, depressing comment come from? It scared him almost as much as the hollowness in his tone. “I think it’s more a case of stubbornness, but the result is the same. I don’t back down.”

“Ever get lonely?” The question slipped from Caleb like silk, wrapping around Roman’s chest and squeezing tight.

“Lonely?” Roman whispered. He felt himself unraveling, the thread of control slipping. “Yeah.”

“You were married, right?”

“I was. Divorced now.” Roman’s lips twisted around the words, a badge of failure. “Yolanda said I was married to the job more than to her, and she was right. I was never home, and when I was, my mind was still working. When my predecessor was murdered and I was tapped for a promotion, I took the job without consulting her. She was right to walk away, as much as it pains me to admit. I was a selfish bastard. Probably still am.”

Caleb reached out his hand, stopped, then settled it on Roman’s hand, an anchor in a churning sea. “Must’ve been rough.”

“Rough doesn’t cover it.” Roman’s voice cracked like dry leather. “It gutted me and made me feel like an utter failure, even though, by then, I wasn’t in love with her anymore. It still made me question everything. Who I was, what I wanted, and above all, if I was willing to pay the price for what I wanted…”

“And what do you want?”

Roman’s heart clenched, desire and fear warring within him. “I don’t know anymore.”

“Maybe you need someone to help you figure it out.”

“Maybe.” The word lingered between them, heavy with unspoken desires and the darkness they both craved. “But I’m still not sure if I’m willing to pay the price for what I want.”

“Life’s short. Take risks. Live a little.”

“Risks can destroy everything you’ve built.”

“Or they can give you everything you never knew you needed.”

Roman’s heart hammered. He let the truth in Caleb’s words sink in. The risk, the thrill… It was tempting, too tempting. But he was a man of control, of carefully constructed boundaries. Wasn’t he?

“What do you get from it, from submitting?” he asked.

“Submission is a gift.” Caleb’s eyes searched Roman’s, blue depths filled with a silent plea. “To give yourself over fully to another. To trust them to take you apart and put you back together. Stronger. It’s not just kink for me. It’s about trust, surrender…finding someone who understands power and control.”

Roman’s pulse kicked up a notch. The air felt charged, thick with Caleb’s admission. A desire, dark and potent, bubbled inside him. Power. Control. Words that resonated with him on a level he hadn’t anticipated. “Sounds like a heavy responsibility for the Dom.”

“Only if they don’t crave it. Some do. They live for it. The responsibility, the control…” Caleb’s voice dropped to a whisper as if revealing secrets meant only for Roman’s ears.

The weight of Caleb’s gaze was like a physical touch, stirring something primal within Roman. He fought the surge of authority that clashed with his professional decorum, with the Roman Dwyer the world saw. But here, in this room, those barriers seemed far less significant.

Roman leaned closer, the pull irresistible. “And you? What do you live for, Caleb?”

“Someone to guide me. Use me. Someone unafraid of what they can do to me.” Caleb’s breath was warm against Roman’s cheek, a dare wrapped in vulnerability.

Something snapped within Roman. His hand lifted almost of its own accord, fingers grazing Caleb’s jawline. That touch seared him, a confirmation of the power exchange Caleb offered so willingly.

“Unafraid.” He tested the shape of the word, the concept, his heart hammering in a mix of excitement and fear. But he couldn’t deny the rush, the intoxicating blend of risk and arousal.

“Roman?” Caleb’s voice was soft, but it carried the weight of all that stood between them.

“Shit.” Roman exhaled.

“Take control,” Caleb said in a whisper with the impact of a gunshot.

“Dammit, Caleb…” Roman’s resolve crumbled. He curled his fingers around Caleb’s wrist, the steady thrum of his heartbeat pulsing beneath the skin. “I don’t know where this will lead.”

“Doesn’t matter.” Caleb leaned into the touch. “Right now, it’s just us.”

“Us.” The word was a revelation, a commitment Roman never expected to make again. Yet here he was, poised on the edge of something that could either save or destroy him. With a sharp inhale, he let the last of his resistance fall away and stepped into the role Caleb so openly craved for him to fill.

“Kneel,” he commanded.

Without hesitation, Caleb obeyed, descending like a supplicant before an altar. He knelt in the middle of the hallway, unafraid and unashamed, the epitome of submission that sent a surge of power through Roman’s core.

“Look at me.” The words were a growl torn from Roman’s throat.

Caleb lifted his gaze. Those blue eyes held a spark of eagerness, a silent plea for what only Roman could grant. And grant, he would. He couldn’t deny Caleb any longer. Or himself.

With rough hands, he freed himself. “Open your mouth.”

Caleb complied and parted his lips, breath quickening. It was more than lust. It was trust, surrender, and something far more dangerous, something Roman didn’t want to think about too much.

He sank into Caleb’s mouth, and as Caleb closed his lips around him, he moaned with relief. Fuck, he needed this. They both did. Maybe the latter realization was what had sent him over the edge, the deep knowing of how much Caleb craved this.

After a few careful thrusts, he pushed in deeper, forcing himself to the back of Caleb’s throat. Tears welled up in the boy’s eyes, but he didn’t move, sitting completely still as he allowed Roman to use him, abuse him even.

Caleb looked up through his lashes. His blue eyes had darkened to stormy seas, heavy with desire, signaling not only acquiescence but hunger for the intensity Roman provided. There was no falter in his movements, no hesitation in his breath—only the purest form of submission offered willingly.

“Good, so good for me,” Roman said. The praise spilled from him in a litany as old as time itself. Caleb’s eyes, cloudy as they were, lit up like a beacon, a clear sign of the joy he took from serving.

“Fuck, I needed this.” Roman moaned as Caleb’s throat closed around him again. “Needed this so much. Need you.”

He babbled, his mind shutting off in a way that would scare him if it didn’t feel so amazing. Everything else faded, leaving only Caleb and him. He pulled back, allowing Caleb to suck in a few raspy breaths, then shoved his cock back into that eager hot mouth, that slick, tight throat.

Roman’s hand found its way into the chestnut tangle of Caleb’s hair, a firm grip that asserted more than control. It claimed possession. The shift was subtle, the air thicker with something unspoken, a silent dare for Caleb to accept or reject this new level of roughness.

But Caleb embraced it, and his body went slack as he allowed Roman to move him, use him, fill him until he was gasping for air. Sheer power surged through Roman’s veins. He was controlling Caleb’s air supply, the very oxygen he breathed. How had he never realized what a thrill that gave? He wrapped his left hand around Caleb’s throat as he pushed the boy’s head forward with his right hand, pinning him on Roman’s cock. Fucking perfection. Absolute filthy perfection.

Caleb’s tongue was both weapon and benediction as he worked, seeking Roman’s pleasure with the focus of one well versed in the art of giving. The sensation built—a crescendo of heat and need that coiled tight in Roman’s

belly. He grappled with control, maintaining the threadbare restraint that kept him from tumbling into the abyss of desire.

“Like that, yes…” Roman’s voice fractured on a gasp as Caleb sucked him deeper. This was domination in its purest form: command and obedience in an effortless dance they acted out together. As the pressure mounted, Roman’s world narrowed to the here and now, to the man on his knees and the intoxicating rush of authority that came with every command obeyed. He set the rules, and Caleb followed, eager and willing.

Jesus, he was almost high with the beauty of it. He was pushing boundaries, exploring depths of dominance he hadn’t known existed within himself. Each bob of Caleb’s head, each muffled moan from Roman, each grunt of dominance and sigh of submission carved away at his composed facade and revealed the man beneath, the one who craved this power. What did it mean, this rush from steering Caleb’s actions, from seeing him respond with such fervor?

He lost track of time as he surrendered to the need inside him, to the seductive hum of power coursing through his veins. He commanded, and Caleb obeyed. Caleb offered, and Roman took. And when Caleb sent him right to the edge, Roman let go, spilling into his mouth as his moans echoed through the empty hallway.

Caleb suckled him until he was spent and clean, then let Roman’s cock slip from between his lips. He remained kneeling, his head bowed. He was so goddamn stunning.

Roman tilted his chin up, and Caleb eased back, his breaths coming in short bursts, lips swollen. His clouded gaze held a question, a silent inquiry that Roman wasn’t sure he was ready to answer.

He pulled Caleb to his feet and, on impulse, pressed a kiss on those throbbing lips. “Thank you. That was…perfect.”

“You’re welcome. Sir.”

Sir. There was that word again. How was it possible to crave and hate a word at the same time?

He straightened his spine, forcing the world back into focus, trying to fit himself back into the skin of the man who wielded power in courtrooms, not in the intimacy of what felt like an illicit tryst in a dimly lit hallway. “I have to go.”

“I understand, Sir.”

“I don’t mean to be…” He gestured vaguely.

“It’s okay, Sir.”

It wasn’t, but Roman didn’t have the will to continue. He tucked himself away and took a step back. “I’ll see you tomorrow?”

Caleb exhaled slowly. “You will. And thank you.” Each word was saturated with sincerity. “For everything.”

What was Roman supposed to say to that? The same “You’re welcome” as Caleb? It sounded cliché and hopelessly inadequate. He opted for honesty instead. “I loved every second.”

“So did I.” Caleb shifted his weight from one foot to the other, the eagerness in his stance palpable. “I’m here, Sir. For whatever you need.” The promise hung between them, tethered to the unspoken hope that there would be a next time.

Roman swallowed, the taste of control bittersweet on his tongue. “I can’t promise there’ll be another time.”

The statement came out forced, pushed past lips unwilling to spill that truth. It wasn’t Caleb’s willingness that unsettled him, beguiling as it was, but the hunger in himself to take everything Caleb was offering and then more.

“I know. But I’ll be there anyway.”

With a final nod, Caleb turned and walked away, his steps measured and deliberate. He looked back, a silent vow etched into his gaze, then slipped around the corner, leaving Roman alone in the silent hallway that suddenly felt cold and empty.

It couldn’t go anywhere. That was the truth he clung to, even as his heart rebelled, longing to chase the freedom he’d found in those moments of passion and power. Roman Dwyer, the man who always had an answer, who argued for a living, was at a loss. And as he stood there, enveloped in shadow and solitude, he allowed himself to savor the special moment he’d shared with Caleb, the moment that had uncovered a part of himself he hadn’t known existed.

He’d tasted the sweet nectar of dominance, and the flavor lingered on his tongue, refusing to go away.

8

Caleb had always been good at compartmentalizing, keeping part of himself hidden while focusing on something else. That trait came in handy now. As much as he wanted to dwell on what had transpired between Roman and him the previous evening, he couldn't. First, it wouldn't solve anything because the ball was and always would be in Roman's court. But more importantly, Caleb had a job to do. And right now, that mattered more than anything else.

Roman's laptop had quickly surrendered to him, revealing its secrets, and with every layer Caleb peeled back, his confusion grew. He'd expected a high level of security and hadn't been surprised to find CrowdStrike Falcon installed, a top-of-the-line endpoint security platform. Not only did it employ the most sophisticated antivirus solution available, but it also used AI to analyze the behavioral patterns of its users and, based on that, detect anomalies.

So why the hell hadn't it done its job and kept the attackers out of Roman's laptop? The platform was known to be virtually unbeatable to anyone other than those with insider knowledge of the system they were attacking, and even then, it would be a massive challenge. That meant the threat against Roman had come from within his network, or they were dealing with a first-class hacker. Caleb's money was on the first.

He unlinked the laptop from the network it was attached to and dug into the settings for CrowdStrike. Surely, the system had picked up on abnormal logins, so why hadn't it alerted the cyber security officer? Caleb checked all the settings one by one, his fingers dancing across the keyboard, the rapid clicks echoing in his small workspace.

He frowned. That was weird. That setting should be… He checked again. It was off. The platform had been installed and analyzing for threats, but it hadn't been allowed to actually block the attacks. Kinda like an alarm system that detected a burglar but wasn't allowed to sound the alarm. All notifications were turned off as well, so Roman wouldn't have gotten a notification for it. But surely, the system administrator had, right?

Caleb checked the notification settings, and his jaw dropped. What the fuck? They were off! Why in the world would anyone ever turn those off? Wasn't the whole point that you were alerted to attacks as they happened? They'd been flying blind here, the system detecting but not alerting. They'd left the proverbial door wide open.

Wait. The platform had detected and analyzed, hadn't it? Even if it hadn't been given permission to warn, it would still have the logs. Caleb rubbed his hands and dug in. When had the incident taken place again? He consulted his notes. Okay, he'd start on that day and work his way back, see if he could spot anything unusual.

CrowdStrike, helpful as it was, offered him an analysis of Roman's user habits. His usual activity was between eight a.m. and ten p.m. Jesus, the man made long days. No wonder he looked exhausted, but that was beside the point.

Caleb had no trouble finding the moment the files had been changed. Whoever had done it had logged in from the office building and rearranged everything within a timespan of ten minutes. They'd deleted folders, created new ones, dragged and dropped hundreds of files. No wonder Roman had been upset about it. His whole system had been thoroughly destroyed.

What was curious was that it looked like he'd done it himself. No one else had logged in except him, using his username and the IP address from the office. IP addresses could be faked with a first-class VPN connection if you knew what you were doing, which these people obviously did. But they had to have known Roman wouldn't log in himself, so where had he been during that time? He made a quick note of the exact time.

The hours faded as Caleb worked his way through the logs, which stated when Roman had logged in, what files he had opened, what websites he'd looked at—nothing naughty there, which Caleb had expected from a professional like Roman—and any changes to the system he'd made.

Nothing jumped out, and Caleb was getting a little frustrated when he noticed something unusual. A login at three a.m., two weeks before the file incident. According to the IP address, it was from within Roman's office building. Would Roman really have been at work in the middle of the night? If he'd been unable to sleep, why hadn't he logged in from home? No, this didn't make sense. Whoever had logged on had used a VPN again and had opened at least thirty files within ten minutes—also unusual. From what Caleb had learned, Roman was focused, usually working on a few files for much longer. And all the files were in the same main folder neatly labeled *Whitman*.

Caleb noted the date and time stamp, then continued looking. He found another similar incident two weeks before that and then two weeks before that, and the truth hit him. They'd been checking on Roman's progress in the case. His laptop had been compromised for months. Maybe for the whole five months the same people had been threatening him.

No fucking way would the network administrator have missed that, let alone the cybersecurity specialist who had installed CrowdStrike. Which meant… Oh, Roman was gonna be so upset when he found out. Caleb's stomach clenched. He hated delivering bad news, and this was the worst.

With a deep sigh, he got up and walked over to Wander, who was doing his own investigation into Roman's case. "Boss, I've found a problem. A big one."

Fifteen minutes later, the whole team was gathered in the meeting room. The air felt tight and dry, but maybe that was because another snowstorm was brewing. Roman sat at the head of the table, tapping his fingers in a nervous rhythm, a tic Caleb was starting to recognize. Although his tailored suit did little to mask the concern etched into Roman's features, Caleb loved that even here, the man dressed to the nines, like putting on armor every day.

"Caleb, the floor is yours."

Caleb sat up straight. "I've finished going over Roman's laptop. Someone has been systematically opening and reading the files related to

the Whitman investigation, and whoever's behind this has had full access to his entire laptop for a long time. We're talking months."

A collective exhale, a chorus of curses muttered under breaths—the responses varied, but the underlying shock was shared. Roman stopped his rhythmic tapping, his brown eyes locking on Caleb with an intensity that demanded answers.

"They didn't just sneak through the back door once. They've basically been squatting inside the walls the whole time, keeping an eye on what Roman did. They had a key-logging program installed, so they have his passwords and could see everything he was doing."

There was power in knowledge, in tracing the invisible threads that connected actions and consequences. Caleb thrived in the digital realm, where control was measured in access and codes. But standing there, delivering a blow that stripped away the illusion of security, he wished for the simplicity of a physical fight. At least then, you saw the hit coming.

Roman stiffened, the realization settling in. "How the hell did my guy not catch this?" His voice was a jagged edge, disbelief and accusation twisting his words.

"Your cyber security officer," he said, his tone measured, "is inept at best, but I suspect he was bought. In fact, he probably planted the spyware since it's pretty sophisticated stuff, not the level of your run-of-the-mill hacker. Every second you spent building your case was another second they had to plot their countermeasures. They knew exactly what you were doing every step of the way."

Roman's face paled. The implications were clear as day. In his line of work, betrayal wasn't just a stab in the back. It was a noose around the neck. And Caleb had just pointed out the executioner might be standing in their ranks.

The man's sturdy frame seemed to shrink under the weight of treachery, and a flush of red climbed up his neck. "Fuck!" Roman raked a hand through his short dark hair, the movement agitated, desperate. "How did I not see it? How?"

"You had no reason to suspect your team, yeah?" Wander's voice cut through the thickening air. His presence was commanding despite his casual attire of cargo pants and a long-sleeve shirt, a stark difference from

Roman's polished suit. "No one thinks his own people are capable of betrayal. This cybersecurity person, you know them?"

Roman nodded curtly. "Joe Egan. He's been with the office for a year, I think? Once the case started getting serious, I talked to him about increased cyber security. He promised he was on top of it, and he…" He muttered a curse. "Goddammit, he exchanged my phone for an encrypted one, or so he said."

"I haven't had a chance to look at it yet, but my guess is your phone has been compromised as well," Caleb said.

Roman buried his face in his hands, and a heavy silence filled the room. Roman's vulnerability was raw, exposed like an open wound, and Caleb's throat tightened with empathy and frustration. He wanted nothing more than to be there for Roman, but all he could do now was stay professional and do his job.

Wander waited until his brother looked up again, then spoke. "Everyone outside this team, even those you've known for years, are suspects now. You don't trust anyone but us. Because if you do, you may end up dead. We're not fucking around anymore."

Roman clenched his jaw, the muscles ticking as if grappling with Wander's words, fighting against a truth he never wanted to accept. But acceptance was not optional. It was mandatory. The look in Roman's eyes shifted from shock to something harder, more resolved. Wander was right. This wasn't just about betrayal. It was about survival.

"Got it," Roman grunted, his response carrying the bitterness of a promise never to let down his guard again.

"You up for some questions?" Caleb asked.

"Hit me."

"Did the FBI investigate the incident where your files had been messed up?"

"No. Joe said he checked the logs and couldn't find anything, so I didn't bother talking to the FBI. I did call the agent on the case yesterday, and he had no updates for me. A lot of BS about not getting anywhere in his investigation, which seems to confirm he's not really trying. I can't believe I didn't see it sooner. Him or Joe Egan. What a fool I was to take their word for it."

“You gonna stop blaming yourself anytime soon?” Wander asked. “Because you’re no help as long as you focus on hitting yourself over the head for something you couldn’t have known. Learn from it, do better in the future, and move on. If we want to beat these guys, we need you on your A-game.”

Damn, Wander wasn’t holding back. But maybe that was exactly what Roman needed. The bitterness that had plagued him earlier dissipated and resolve filled his expression. “You’re right. What else, Caleb?”

“Let me explain in basic terms what I’ve found so you know what we’re dealing with here. The DA’s office, as part of the Massachusetts Department of Justice, has a pretty state-of-the-art SIEM, which stands for Security Information and Event Management. It means they’re proactive in detecting security threats, including cybersecurity, and use a wide range of systems to analyze, detect, and report. One of those systems was installed on your laptop but not authorized to actually send a warning. The logs are all there if you know where to look, but the system was never able to send you a warning that you had been compromised. That’s not a setting you can engage by accident. That’s a deliberate choice. Outsiders have been able to remotely log in using your network credentials and a VPN to mimic your office. Everything on your laptop is now compromised, including your password management software, which I saw you use.”

“Fuck!” Roman leaned back in his chair.

“Not to pile on with the bad news, but that explains something we discovered,” Lowell said.

“Bring it,” Roman said with a resigned sigh. “Might as well get all the bad news over with.”

“Your apartment’s security system was disabled remotely before the break-in, as in completely turned off. The cameras, motion detectors, everything was off-line, but it never sent you an alert. And right after, it was all reactivated again. Like they were never there.”

“Of course.” Roman massaged his temples. “They got the password right from LastPass, my password manager.”

“That would be my guess based on what Caleb discovered, yes. Which explains why it was so easy.”

“That’s also how they accessed your BMW,” Jonah said. “It has a remote starting option, right? And one of those credit card-like remote

keys?”

Roman nodded.

“With the password to your BMW app, they could’ve easily gained access that way.”

“Shit,” Caleb muttered under his breath. His mind raced, scrambling to piece the fragments together into a picture he could understand. “Access, yes, but not easily. Even with the password, hacking into a car is not child’s play. Whoever did this, they’re not amateur hour. This is someone who knows their way around an IT system. They used advanced VPN connections that are untraceable, even for me.”

“Meaning?” Roman asked.

“Meaning we’re dealing with a pro. A fucking ghost. The one good bit of news is this. Judging by the files they opened, I’m confident Whitman is behind this. No other files were even looked at.”

Roman’s eyes lit up. “You’re right. That is good news. At least we know who’s behind it.”

“That will also make things easier for us,” Ryan said. “We can concentrate our efforts, and it confirms what my preliminary investigation into Captain Harmon, your sexual harassment case manager, already revealed. He’s your garden-variety asshole with a rap sheet of complaints as long as my arm, but he’s small fry. Not enough connections to pull off what’s been happening to Roman.”

“Did you get access to any security camera footage from the area where the car accident happened?” Wander asked.

“Yeah, but not the accident itself. And on the footage, we can’t see who’s driving. It’s too dark.”

“The BMW’s on-board computer shows the route they drove,” Caleb said. “From Roman’s apartment, they circled around his neighborhood a few times, maybe waiting for the right opportunity. The accident was so minor, the car didn’t even register it, but right after the time noted on the accident report, it was returned to Roman’s apartment.”

“So, how do we proceed?” Wander asked. “What’s our next step?”

“First,” Caleb said, his voice hard as steel, “we triple-check our cyber security. I’ll issue everyone new phones, and no one uses anything but those outside these walls.” He braced his elbows against the cool surface of the

table, staring hard at the others one by one. “And if I catch you using your tablet or laptop on public Wi-Fi, I’ll fucking kick your ass.”

Wander snorted. “Duly noted, with bonus points for the fierce delivery, kid. I’m impressed.”

“What do we do about my laptop?” Roman asked. “Do I stop using it?”

Caleb steepled his fingers. “I fear that if we close the system now and keep them out, they’ll know their game is up…and may escalate things even further. As long as they know where your investigation stands, they’ll feel relatively safe because they’re not expecting surprises.”

“You’re saying you don’t want to give them a heads-up that we’re on to them,” Roman said slowly.

“Exactly. For now, continue to use your laptop, but don’t add anything sensitive to what’s already there. No need to delete anything since they already have it anyway. Too late for that now. And you may wanna consider some strategic false updates to the Whitman case to keep them happy, maybe even drop some hints you can’t get the case built the way you want.”

Roman’s gaze searched Caleb’s face for the certainty he needed to cling to in this chaos. “And then?”

“Then”—Caleb pushed back from the table, the chair scraping loudly over the floor, and stood—“we go ghost hunting.”

9

Betrayal.

The word kept buzzing around in Roman's head. He'd been betrayed. And by someone he'd trusted, someone who'd had full access to everything Roman knew and did. How could he have been that blind and naïve? It hadn't even occurred to him that he had a mole in his office.

Well, that wasn't true. The thought had crossed his mind, but he'd looked at legal staff and assistants. The cybersecurity guy hadn't been on his radar, which, in hindsight, was unbelievably stupid. After what had happened, he should've been at the top of the list. But that was easy to say now that he had all the facts.

It only confirmed his decision to stay with Wander longer. He'd already informed his boss—the Massachusetts attorney general—that he'd be working remotely for a while, citing health reasons, and had let his coworkers and staff know as well. The lack of surprise in their responses proved they were losing confidence in him anyway.

"Why don't you go out for a walk, yeah?"

Roman spun around to his brother. "Outside?"

"I do believe it is customary for a walk to take place outside, yes."

Wiseass. "It's snowing."

“It stopped over an hour ago, and we didn’t get that much to begin with.”

“I don’t have snow boots.”

“Borrow mine. We’re the same shoe size.”

Roman crossed his arms. “Why do you want me to take a walk so badly?”

“Because you’ve been pacing and hovering the entire morning, and you’re driving my team and Jesse’s staff crazy. Nobody is getting any work done with you looking over their shoulders, so I need you to go outside for a bit.” Wander put a gentle hand on his arm. “It’ll do you good, Ro. Clear your head, get some exercise in.”

Heat crept up Roman’s cheeks. Had he really been that bad? The way Wander’s team members were studiously looking at their desks right now, avoiding his gaze, spoke volumes. “Sorry.”

“I understand. Trust me, I do. But this isn’t helping anyone.”

Roman took a deep breath. “You’re right. Let me get changed, and I’ll head outside.”

“Good. Caleb will go with you.”

“Caleb? Why?” His brother didn’t think Roman was horny or foolish enough to have sex in the snow, did he?

“Because you’re not going anywhere without someone shadowing you, and he’s your bodyguard for the day. That’s not up for debate.” Wander held up his hand when Roman wanted to protest.

Roman blew out a breath, surrendering to the inevitable. “Okay.”

“He’ll be waiting for you at the front door.”

He was. When Roman came back down, dressed in fleece-lined sweat pants, a warm winter jacket, thick gloves, and a beanie, Caleb stood at the front door. When he spotted Roman, his eyes lit up. At least he wasn’t upset about having to babysit him. Roman couldn’t deny it was a boost to his ego that Caleb genuinely seemed happy to spend time with him.

“Wander’s boots.” Caleb handed him a pair of sturdy snow boots.

“You know where we can go?” Roman asked while he put them on.

“There’s a trail along the river that I’m hoping we can use. Not sure if it’s been cleared of snow after last week’s snowstorm, but we’ll find out.” Caleb casually checked his handgun and tucked it into the pocket of his ski jacket. Like Roman, he wore a beanie, though he didn’t have gloves on.

Roman swallowed. Of course Caleb would have a gun. Kinda hard to protect someone without being armed, yet it drove home that Roman was in real danger. So far, the threats had been theoretical, but this confirmed that it might not stay that way. He pushed that thought to the back of his mind. If he went down that road, he wouldn't be able to function.

He followed Caleb outside, where a gray sky packed with clouds awaited them. Caleb looked up. "We may get more snow, but we'll see. We won't venture too far from the house anyway."

They crossed the lawn toward the river, which was frozen over, the ice irregularly shaped with cracks and bumps everywhere and covered with snow. Not the kind of picture-perfect mirror one could skate on with ease. "I used to love skating," he said.

"Yeah? What kind? Hockey?"

Roman snorted. "Do I look like the kind who would play hockey? Nah, far too violent for me. I played lacrosse in high school, but I also loved speed skating. I even flirted with the idea of going pro. My coach said I had a talent for it."

"Why didn't you?"

"I didn't have the ideal build for it, and it would mean full dedication to speed skating at the expense of everything else. I didn't want to lose out on life, you know? Never regretted it."

"I never was one for team sports. Track and field was more my thing and, later on, martial arts. My mom signed me up for karate because I was getting bullied, and she wanted me to be able to defend myself."

"Bullied? Why?"

Caleb shrugged. "I was a total geek, and I was gay. Those were two strikes against me."

"Did you ever have to fight a bully?"

"I did. Tommy Luciano, the captain of the football team. He thought it would be funny to cram my bony ass into a locker, but he ended up with a black eye and a busted knee. I beat the shit out of him, fueled by pure fury and adrenaline. His coach was livid because he was out for the rest of the season due to his knee."

Roman whistled. "You must've hit him good, then. They didn't blame you?"

“Oh, Tommy tried to spin it so I’d be the bad guy, but security cameras had captured the whole incident, and they proved he attacked me unprovoked. After that, nobody ever bothered me again.”

As he was talking, Caleb kept looking around, scanning the environment. He clearly took his job seriously.

“Are you expecting trouble?” Roman asked.

“Not expecting it. Counting on it. That way, they can never catch us unprepared. Your brother’s motto.”

Sounded like Wander, all right. “He’s good at what he does.”

“The best. He has a stellar reputation. Getting hired by him was the best day of my life.”

“That was becoming a DA for me.” He winced. “I probably shouldn’t say it like that because my predecessor got killed, which is why there was a vacancy.”

“The mob burned down his house, right?”

Roman nodded. Of course Caleb would know. The case had been on the national news. “He was going after the Fitzpatrick family. They retaliated.”

“That didn’t scare you?”

“I was terrified, but I felt I didn’t have a choice. We had a key witness willing to testify against them despite being brutally attacked and tortured by them, so how could I back down? I owed it to him and every other victim of the Fitzpatricks to take over.”

“It was courageous.”

“I don’t exactly feel courageous right now.”

“How do you feel?”

Jesus, where did he even begin? “Hurt, scared, betrayed… Betrayed the most. It’s hard to process that someone I worked with has been plotting against me the whole time. It feels like getting stabbed in the back.”

“I’ve never been in that situation, but I can imagine. You weren’t friends with this Joe, right?”

“No, but we’ve had the occasional friendly conversation. He’s a big sports fan, and we’d discuss the Patriots game or how the Bruins had played. Every one of those conversations is now replaying through my head as I’m searching for clues I missed.”

Caleb bumped his shoulder. “And as Dr. Phil would say, ‘How’s that working for ya?’ The man is annoying as fuck, but that’s a great question he

keeps asking."

"It is." Roman sighed. "And the answer is that it's not productive at all, of course, but that doesn't stop me from doing it. If you have any suggestions on how not to do that, I'm all ears."

Caleb held up his hands. "Don't look at me for that. I'm not good at understanding people. Massive geek, remember? When your brother hired me, he instructed me to work on my social and psychological skills. They're not my strong points."

"I wouldn't have guessed, especially after what happened… You know. The second time…"

Caleb grinned. "You mean the second blowjob? You can say the word, you know? Blowjob. Nothing to be embarrassed about."

Why was he blushing again? So damn annoying. "I know, but it feels awkward."

"It shouldn't. It's sex. That's it."

"That's a casual attitude I can't afford to have."

Caleb's expression softened. "I understand it's easier for me to say that, but I also want to state you shouldn't feel embarrassed around me. What we did was consensual. I wanted it."

"Can I ask you something?" Roman stopped walking and turned to face Caleb fully. "About us—I mean, what we've been doing."

"Of course." A flicker of surprise crossed Caleb's features, but he kept his expression open.

"Are you…getting what you need from it? From me? I don't want it to be all about my pleasure. You deserve more than that. And I couldn't help but feel bad afterward because you didn't get to come. Again."

"You never gave me permission." Caleb said it as if it was the most logical thing in the world.

"I wasn't aware I had to. I mean, in hindsight, yes, but in the moment, I didn't realize you wouldn't come without me saying you could."

Caleb shrugged. "Orgasm denial isn't gonna kill me. I've been denied for weeks. Trust me, this was nothing."

He meant it. Something else Caleb could be completely casual about while Roman's insides were all pretzeled. "I envy your experience in this. Not with orgasm denial in particular, but the whole dynamic of D/s play.

That’s what I meant when I said that you certainly show a lot of psychological insight.”

“That’s different. That’s something that comes completely naturally to me. I don’t have to think when I’m in a scene because my Dom does the thinking for me. All I need to do is obey and submit. There’s freedom in that.”

“Provided you can trust your Dom.”

Caleb shook his head. “I would never fully surrender to someone I don’t know well enough to be one hundred percent certain I can trust them. In that case, it’s only a partial submission. My body, yes, but my mind would still be very much present, analyzing to ensure my safety.”

Weird, but that was a relief for Roman to hear. “That sounds smart.”

“If you’re worried about me playing with you as an inexperienced Dom, you shouldn’t be. I’d never let you cross my boundaries or allow you to ignore my hard limits. Which, for the record, we should talk about if we continue to play.”

Play? “You gave me a blowjob. Is that playing?”

“In itself, no, but we both know you did more than that.”

“I’m not a Dom.”

“You’re not a *trained* Dom,” Caleb corrected him.

“You’re saying I’m a Dom?”

“That’s a question you should answer yourself.”

Roman blew out a long breath. He couldn’t, not with Caleb watching him. So he set off again, his thoughts spinning. Was he a Dom? That made it sound like an identity, like something he *was* rather than something he did.

He was dominant in character, that he’d never deny. He always had been, just like his brother. A natural leader, his high school counselor had called him. And he hated working under someone else, especially if his boss was incompetent. Been there, done that, hated every fucking minute of it. Sure, he still had a boss, but one who gave him free rein.

But dominant and Dominant weren’t the same thing, were they? “I’m not entirely sure what the difference is between being dominant as a characteristic and being a Dom.”

“I’d say the difference is the joy a Dom gets out of D/s play and out of someone submitting to them.”

Joy. Not how Roman would've described how he'd felt with Caleb. It had been more a rush of power, an intense awareness of the moment, of the beauty of Caleb's submission.

Wait.

Weren't joy and beauty the same thing in this case? Awe, joy, beauty, they were so closely related. So what did that mean? If he had found joy in what they'd shared, did that mean he…? He groaned. "I can't wrap my head around this right now. Too much on my plate."

"I'm not asking you to have all the answers. I don't need them."

"You don't?"

"Not to sound desperate, but I'll take whatever you can give me. I like serving you."

I like serving you. Could it be that simple for Caleb? Roman envied him for the casualness of that statement, of that feeling. He was probably overthinking shit, as he was prone to do, and seeing problems and complications where there were none. "You don't need assurances about what I want? Or, I don't know, about the future?"

"I really don't. Also, I know what you want. You want to let go. You need to not worry about anything for a few minutes…and I can help you with that."

Maybe it could be that simple. "Do I need Wander's permission or anything?"

"Nope. He's not my Dom anymore, nor does he own me, but more importantly, he gave me to you as a present, so he damn well knew what the potential consequences could be. He can't object now."

Roman was rapidly running out of arguments, let alone excuses. "I give up. You win."

Caleb threw his head back and laughed. "I win? I didn't realize this was a competition. And what are we competing for exactly?"

Crap. That was not how he'd meant it at all. "I didn't—

"I'm messing with you." Caleb bumped his shoulder again. "I knew what you meant, and it's all good. We'll call it a win-win, how's that?"

"I win relaxation, and you win…?"

"You."

Funny, he'd never been someone's prize…and it felt damn good.

10

Caleb rapped his knuckles against the dark mahogany door of Roman's room, the sharp taps echoing slightly in the dimly lit hallway. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, his black training pants whispering with the movement. Tension coiled in his gut—the charged anticipation of a scene mixed with a solid dose of worry that Roman had changed his mind.

Caleb wouldn't blame him. The man had a lot on his plate, and discovering this new side of himself had to be confusing under the best circumstances. His brother had been a Dom for twenty years, so Roman had to wonder why he'd never realized his own dominant tendencies. But maybe he'd never put himself in a position where he tried experimenting with that. Just like he'd stayed away from men for the most part—to protect himself. That would make total sense.

"Come in." Roman's voice carried through the door, a thread of weariness woven into the two words.

Caleb pushed the door open and stepped inside. The room was cast in shadows, only a single lamp on the nightstand breaking the gloom. Roman sat on the edge of the bed, dressed in his suit pants and a white undershirt, looking tired. Stress etched deep lines into his face as if he'd somehow grown older that day.

"Hey," Caleb said.

“Hey.”

“You said to stop by your room later, so here I am.”

“Here you are.”

Not the most enthusiastic welcome, but maybe that was too much to expect, given Roman’s mental state.

Caleb closed the distance between them and sat beside Roman on the bed. “You still up for some fun together?”

“You mean me using you.”

Caleb ignored the sharpness of that statement. “Use me, dominate me, fuck me, whatever.”

Now Roman looked up, his dark eyes brooding. “You truly don’t have a preference?”

“Of course I do, but that doesn’t mean I’m putting pressure on you.”

Roman sat up a little straighter, and some of his tiredness faded while a sparkle glimmered in his eyes. “Which I appreciate. So tell me. If you could choose, what would you have me do right now? If you knew I would say yes.”

The air was thick with unsaid words, heavy with a tension that begged to be unraveled. Caleb swallowed. “A spanking.”

“A spanking? That’s not what I expected.”

“You thought I’d have you whip me or something?”

“Whip? Jesus, no. More like… I don’t know. Something more serious.”

“Oh, I take spankings very seriously. When done right, they’re incredibly rewarding and erotic. And they’re intimate and perfect for beginners. It’s really hard to fuck up a spanking.”

Roman chuckled. “You’ve given this some thought.”

“You’re new to this. Of course I would name something I think you’d be good at.”

“You think I’d be good at spanking you?”

Caleb deliberately lowered his voice. “I think you’d excel at it. Sir.”

Roman cleared his throat. “Oh, you’re good at this. Very persuasive. Especially the way you just called me Sir.”

“You liked that?”

“I think we both know I did…which is why you did it.”

“Maybe, but I also meant it. I don’t call just anyone Sir.”

“That I believe.”

Caleb shifted on the edge of Roman's bed, the tension between them thick enough to slice through. He trailed his hand down his torso as if he were caressing himself. "Impact play, a firm hand on my ass, me at the mercy of my Dom… It makes my blood sing."

The words rang out, unapologetic and raw. Caleb watched Roman process them with that analytical mind of his. "It's more than pain. It's sensation, control, release. I don't need promises, Roman. Just…your hand, my skin, our connection."

Roman's breath hitched, and his throat bobbed with his swallow. The room seemed to shrink, the world outside disappearing as they got locked into their own universe.

"You really want me to spank you?" Roman asked, his voice rough like gravel.

"Does that idea appeal to you, Sir?"

He knew he wasn't playing fair. He'd already seen the evidence of Roman's arousal, but he had zero regrets.

"You know it does, you sneaky tease. A more skeptical man than me would call it manipulation. You're playing with fire."

He should've known Roman would see through him. He didn't sound angry, though. "I don't mind getting burned a little, Sir. And if you wanted to punish me for, you know, being a tease, I wouldn't object to that either."

"Tell me the rules."

"Green means go, yellow is slow down, red you stop immediately. You can fuck me, hit me, abuse my mouth, anything. I like it rough, and I don't mind bruises and marks but don't draw blood. And considering you're new, no breath play other than with a blowjob, where I'm in a position to stop you. Too risky for now."

He could've mentioned his aversion to golden showers and scat play, but that would only scare Roman off. If he had no experience, those wouldn't be the first things on his mind anyway.

"Okay. Um, condoms?"

Was he serious about fucking Caleb? Oh yes, please let it be so. "Only if you need to. I'm negative and on PrEP."

"I haven't had sex in…" Roman sighed. "Too long. And I was negative on my last test."

"Then bare is fine."

“And I control your orgasm?”

“I won’t come without permission, Sir.”

“I don’t know why I find that so incredibly hot, but I do.”

“So, are we playing?” He held his breath as he waited for Roman’s reply.

“I shouldn’t. I can think of a million reasons why I shouldn’t, but I can’t resist right now. You were right. I do need to let go, to unleash some of this anger inside me, these negative emotions. Just… How will I know when I go too far?”

“You’ll know when I say yellow or red. And I will, Sir. You have my word on that.”

Caleb’s pulse quickened, excitement thrumming through him. The prospect of surrendering to Roman’s tentative grip on control, of guiding him into this dark, carnal dance, was intoxicating.

“All right, then. I’m in.”

The energy in the room shifted into an electric charge that raised the hairs on Caleb’s arms. Roman squared his shoulders, a storm brewing in the depths of his brown eyes.

“Strip,” Roman said without any of his previous doubts.

The single word was a touchstone for Caleb, a command that resonated deep within him, and a shiver rolled down his spine. He complied without hesitation, peeling off his simple T-shirt while Roman followed the motion with his gaze. He kicked off his sneakers and shed his workout pants and underwear, leaving him bare and vulnerable under Roman’s scrutiny.

“Good.” Roman’s tone held approval but also something else. A rough edge that spoke of burgeoning dominance.

Caleb stood still, waiting, every nerve ending alight with the promise of what was to come.

Roman rose, his pants tenting with his erection. “Turn around. Hands against the wall. Present yourself to me.”

Obediently, Caleb turned and leaned forward with his palms flat against the cool wallpaper. The position left his ass exposed, raised for Roman’s inspection—and whatever else he decided to bestow on him.

“Fuck, you’re beautiful like this,” Roman growled, the sound primal and possessive. “Your ass is a work of art. So perfectly round and firm.”

As Roman stepped closer, Caleb closed his eyes, intensely aware of his presence, and his entire body grew taut with anticipation.

Slap!

Roman's hand landed on Caleb's flesh with a resounding smack, the sting blooming across his skin in a delicious wave of heat. Caleb gasped as the sensation ricocheted through him—pain intertwined with pleasure.

"Like that?" Roman asked in a gravelly whisper laden with arousal.

"God, yes." Caleb breathed out, pushing back against Roman's next blow. "Please, Sir. More."

Any other Dom would've punished him for begging, but Roman didn't. Maybe it didn't even occur to him. Then again, he hadn't told Caleb not to speak, so was he technically disobeying?

Another slap, harder this time, struck the same spot, the impact reverberating deep into Caleb's muscles. His knees trembled, but he held his position, craving the controlled brutality Roman delivered. He relished the burn that spread like wildfire, the sharp contrast between the warmth of his punished skin and the chill of the air.

"Count them for me." Roman landed a third hit so hard stars exploded behind Caleb's closed eyelids.

"One." The number was torn from his throat amid a moan.

"Good boy," Roman praised and administered another spank, even more forceful than the last.

"Two." Caleb's whole being was focused on the searing pain and the man wielding it. The endorphin rush was intoxicating, a high that made his head spin. "More." He didn't care that he was pleading. He was desperate to feel the full extent of Roman's strength, to be molded and marked by his newfound dominance.

"Greedy, aren't you?" Roman's voice was thick with lust as he obliged, delivering rapid-fire smacks that painted Caleb's rear, which had to be all shades of crimson right now.

"Three, four, five."

Caleb's mind emptied, all thoughts banished except the overwhelming need to submit, to offer himself up to the man who commanded his body with such fierce certainty.

"Six."

His world narrowed to the blistering heat emanating from his ass and the relentless hand that both punished and pleasured. Roman slapped, strike after strike, blow after blow, and Caleb counted. His words became grunts, then mere breaths. Nothing else existed but pain and pleasure, this tantalizing torture that was exquisite and excruciating at the same time.

He wanted him to stop and never to stop. He wanted more but also less. He wanted everything, even when he had nothing to give but his obedience, his submission.

Roman rested his palm on the heated skin, fingers splayed wide. Caleb felt the other man's heavy breathing, sensed the weight of his gaze. When Roman spoke, his words were dark honey, dripping with dirty promises. "You were right. I love spanking you."

Caleb struggled to find words. "Perfect, Sir. It's perfect."

"Stay still. I mean it. Do not move a muscle."

Even though Caleb's knees buckled, he remained standing, resting his head against his arms. His mind drifted off until cold fingers jolted him back to the present.

"Spread your legs and push that ass back."

Slick fingers pressed against his hole with far less care and tenderness than he would've expected. Roman had found his inner Dom. A shiver tore through Caleb's body.

"Jesus, your ass is on fire. You're like a radiator, so hot. Gonna sear my cock."

The lube was cold against Caleb's skin but heated quickly, and Roman didn't go easy on him. Two fingers became three, then four.

Roman freed himself but kept his clothes on—one of the hottest things on the planet, even to Caleb's half-present mind. "Kneel on the bed."

Caleb obeyed instantly. Roman's strong fingers dug into his hips, pulling him back onto hands and knees, and the blunt head of his slick cock pushed against Caleb. He breathed out, invited him in.

The first thrust was careful, almost tentative, but Caleb groaned his approval, encouraging Roman to abandon any shred of restraint. With a growl, Roman gripped Caleb's hips tighter and plunged deeper.

"Fuck, you feel incredible," Roman grunted, picking up his pace, only to halt seconds later. "You good?"

Caleb loved that Roman had checked. "Green, Sir. Very, very green."

“Thank fuck.”

Roman slammed back into him, and Caleb howled with the sting of the intrusion. Each rough thrust rocked Caleb, the slap of skin on skin echoing in the room, a carnal symphony. The throbbing from the spanking mingled with the stretch and fill of Roman’s relentless drive, sending sparks of pleasure-pain coursing through him.

“Jesus, your ass is…” Roman panted. “The heat is amazing. You’re so hot, so tight. Can’t hold back.”

He didn’t need to, but Caleb couldn’t answer. His thoughts splintered, coherent words lost to the wave of sensations crashing over him. Roman’s fingers bruised his skin with fierce possessiveness, and every time Caleb slid forward, Roman yanked him back as if he were a rag doll.

“Need to fuck you,” Roman mumbled, almost as if he was talking to himself. “Can’t resist anymore. Need to claim you. Fuck, you’re so perfect.”

His movements became frenzied, every angle calculated to hit spots inside Caleb that unraveled him further. His cock leaked, twitched, but he clenched his teeth and fought back his orgasm. He wouldn’t disobey his Dom the first time they played together. No fucking way. So he rose above it, retreating to that elusive state where his body almost separated from his mind like he could see himself from above, taking the perfect abuse. He was aware only of the demanding grip on his flesh, the exquisite friction, and the fierce man behind him who dominated him so effortlessly as if he’d done it a thousand times before.

“Caleb,” Roman grunted. “Fuck, I need to…”

He sped up, his pounding relentless now as he chased his release. Caleb’s teeth chattered, all his muscles taut as he took what Roman was dishing out. He wanted to please him, wanted to…

Roman cried out, and his body convulsed against Caleb’s as he emptied himself inside Caleb, hot ropes of cum filling him. He wanted to cry with the perfection of it. Wait, he *was* crying, thick, silent tears of gratitude. His cock was straining, his balls so tight they were painful, and his entire body was on fire, but he’d never been happier. He’d flown so high and free. He’d served his Dom, and he’d served him well.

Roman lingered above Caleb for a moment, his breaths ragged and uneven, then pulled out, leaving a trail of wetness. He sat on the bed next to

Caleb, shaking as he reached for Caleb's ass. He traced a thumb over the red marks blooming on Caleb's skin, evidence of Roman's unleashed desire.

"Christ, Caleb…" Roman's voice faltered, heavy with something like regret. "I'm sorry. That was… I didn't mean to be so rough."

Caleb dropped on his belly, his muscles stiff and unyielding from the exertion and elation. He propped himself up on an elbow and looked over his shoulder at Roman. Sweat cooled on his skin, but the warmth from Roman's concern was unexpected, almost misplaced. His blue eyes met Roman's troubled brown ones, and he sent him a smile that originated deep inside him.

"It was perfect, Sir. Absolutely perfect."

A careful smile played on Roman's lips. "Yeah? You sure?" Then he startled. "Shit, I forgot to… Turn around. On your back."

How sweet was that? He only now realized he'd forgotten to give Caleb permission to come. "Sir, I don't need—

"Are you disobeying me?"

Oh, holy shit, that was so hot. That tone! So cocky and commanding. "No, Sir."

Caleb scrambled onto his back, wincing as his tender ass rubbed against the bedding. His cock had flagged a little, but Roman's heated gaze quickly fixed that problem. "I can't suck you off 'cause I've never done it, and I'm not about to ruin this perfect experience with my ineptitude."

"That's okay—"

"I don't recall asking for your opinion. I was telling you, not requiring your approval."

Oh my god, he was perfect. If it didn't mean disobeying Roman again, Caleb would kneel at his feet for being so wonderfully forceful and dominant, hitting all those submissive pleasure buttons deep inside Caleb. "Yes, Sir."

"You just stay still and let me do my thing, okay? It may take me a while, but I'm confident I can get you to climax for me."

Seriously, all it would take was a command. Not that Caleb was going to tell him that. Nope, what his Dom didn't know, he couldn't punish Caleb for.

Roman positioned himself, studying Caleb with almost analytical curiosity. He mumbled something that sounded a lot like, “How hard can it be?”

He folded his fingers around Caleb’s cock. Caleb gasped, instinctively bucking into Roman’s hand. Roman tightened his grip in response, then made a corkscrew movement upward. Caleb saw stars and let out an uninhibited moan. Thank fuck he didn’t have to hold back in this house. Every day, sounds of sex came from various rooms and hallways. In fact, he was proud people heard him. That they witnessed him serving his Dom so well.

Roman’s movements were a little awkward, and his coordination was a tad off at times, but that didn’t diminish Caleb’s pleasure. He approached the edge quickly but held back, clenching his teeth. “Sir…”

Would Roman make him wait longer? Oh, Caleb would obey, no doubt about it, but he hoped with all his heart he wouldn’t have to.

“Come for me,” Roman commanded, his voice a blade that cut through Caleb’s iron control of himself. He let go, and heat exploded inside him, waves of pleasure that crested and broke over him in shuddering gasps as his cock jerked in Roman’s hand, spilling its load. Caleb emptied himself, body and mind, and sagged onto the bed like an empty balloon.

“Hold me. Please, Sir. I need to be held.”

He’d forgotten to discuss aftercare, but luckily, Roman seemed to sense what Caleb needed. He stretched onto his back, pulled Caleb into his arms, grabbed the comforter, and folded it around them.

Caleb closed his eyes and exhaled, mentally checking in with himself. His ass was still on fire, his muscles burned like a mother, and he’d have several finger-shaped bruises on his hips, but that was the extent of the damage. Oh, and his hole stung as well, but in the best way and would keep him grounded for at least two days. Something to look forward to.

“That was intense,” Roman said softly.

“It was.”

“Good intense?”

“Very good, Sir.”

“I wasn’t too rough?”

What could he do to dispel Roman of that notion? “I’m not made from glass. You can’t break me. I’ve got safewords, and I’m not shy about using

them.”

“Yeah, but what if I don’t hear them? I was not myself, you know. Never felt like this before.”

“I don’t think you’d ever not hear me safeword.”

“But what if I didn’t? How would you prevent me from hurting you?”

The man needed a demonstration? That could be arranged. With a swift, fluid motion perfected from countless hours on the mat, Caleb slipped his arms and legs around Roman and held him in a headlock, just tight enough for Roman to feel the strength he possessed without actually cutting off air.

“That’s how. Don’t mistake submissiveness for weakness.”

He released Roman as quickly as he’d secured him. Roman’s expression shifted from surprise to a dawning realization, a mix of respect and, perhaps, a thrill at being momentarily overpowered by someone he’d just dominated so thoroughly.

“All right.” A reluctant grin tugged at the corners of Roman’s mouth, the residual tension bleeding away. “Point taken.”

Caleb settled beside Roman so their bodies were still close in the charged air between them. The gritty reality of what they’d shared didn’t come with promises and definitely not with guarantees, but it was raw and real, and for Caleb, that was enough. For now.

11

He'd never thought of sex as a stress reliever, but Roman couldn't deny he felt a thousand times better than he had the day before his… What was he supposed to call it, what he'd shared with Caleb? A scene? But had it been one when Roman had been flying by the seat of his pants? To him, a scene indicated something more planned, something with a defined purpose, perhaps.

Then again, they'd had a clear goal in mind: a spanking and sex, with stress relief and relaxation as the ultimate prize. They'd even discussed it beforehand and everything, so maybe it did count as a scene? Jesus, leave it to him to overthink everything, including the label for what they'd done.

Maybe he should try to stop defining everything and learn to go with the flow a bit more like Wander did. Yeah, fat chance of that happening. He could aspire to be more relaxed, but that wasn't ever going to happen. He'd been born a control freak, and he'd die one too.

But for now, he could make himself think of what they'd done as a scene, since that certainly seemed to fit, and revel in the fact that it had helped him release a lot of his emotions. And that was surprising. He'd always tried the standard advice like meditating, taking a hot bath, going to the gym. Hell, he'd even tried running at some point, but that had only made him more miserable. None of that had ever worked as well. Interesting.

Wander’s team had gathered again for the next round of updates on the case, and while Roman feared what was coming and mentally braced himself for more disappointments, his stress level was nowhere near what it had been the day before. Progress. Thanks to Caleb.

“Let’s get started, yeah?” Wander said. Roman leaned in, just like the team members, their faces focused, their attention homed in on his brother. The air was thick with tension, a palpable determination to protect him at all costs, and gratitude filled his heart. These men hadn’t known him, but they had his back.

“Roman, can you share with us how your investigation into Whitman started?” Wander asked.

Even a few days prior, Roman would’ve hesitated out of concern for remaining professional and not spilling the secrets of his job. But now that he knew how far Whitman had gone to come after him, he discarded those restrictions. He was fighting for his safety, maybe even for his life, and none of those considerations mattered anymore. Plus, unlike a criminal attorney, he didn’t have attorney-client privilege and could legally speak freely about what he had discovered. It was more a matter of whether it was wise from a legal strategy standpoint than whether it would violate the law.

“It started with a hunch.” Roman scratched the uncharacteristic stubble shadowing his jawline. He hadn’t felt like shaving that morning. “Whitman’s name popped up too often in whispers in the courthouse hallways, hushed talk between politicians in the bars and restaurants where power brokers drink away their scruples.”

His thoughts raced back to the first thread he’d pulled—a case that should’ve been straightforward but had reeked of meddling. “I was still an assistant DA, involved in a minor case of a construction company violating safety regulations. The defendant was making a phone call in the bathroom, and I accidentally walked in on him. I’m not sure who he was talking to, but he said the senator had him by the balls and forced him to confess. He said Whitman had promised to take care of him if he took the fall for this one, but that if he didn’t, he’d never get another job in Massachusetts again.”

“Blackmail,” Ryan spat out.

“Exactly.” Roman nodded sharply. “And it wasn’t mere talk or unsubstantiated rumors. We went through the financials of the construction company and found a trail leading to Whitman’s office. The guy had paid

him to get the contract for building a new prison, but I couldn't prove it. So we dug a little deeper. Whitman got kickbacks from everyone and their mother in exchange for sweet state contracts, blocking or supporting certain state or federal laws, subsidies for certain industries, you name it. Money was flowing into his various shell companies like a goddamn river."

"Got an example?" Ryan asked.

"Take the Harborfront redevelopment—millions in taxpayer dollars." Roman slapped the table for emphasis. "The contract was supposed to go to the lowest bidder. But guess who landed the deal? A firm paying into a Whitman-controlled slush fund. The real low bidder got threats instead, the kind of serious warnings that made him pack up his business and leave town altogether."

"Son of a bitch," Wander said, his brows tightly furrowed.

"Every move he makes, someone gets screwed while he comes out smelling like roses. And when people push back, they get hit with compromising photos or allegations of misconduct. Careers are ruined at the flick of Whitman's wrist. That's why it took forever to build this case. No one was willing to talk. They all feared his retribution, and with reason."

The familiar burn of anger coiled tight in his gut. This was personal, not just because of the threat to his safety but because Whitman's corruption was a rot eating at the city Roman loved.

"We've done a little digging too over the last few days." Ryan rose from his chair and held up Whitman's senatorial picture—all teeth as he posed next to an American flag. Even the sight of him set Roman on edge. "And so far, what we've uncovered confirms he's as dirty as they come. His ambition is ruthless, cutthroat. He's a puppet master, controlling a myriad of strings, half of which we probably can't even see."

"Oh, I'm certain of it," Roman said. "I've been working on this case for six months, and I'm confident I haven't uncovered half of what he's involved in."

"What have you found out about Isabella Coldrick, Whitman's lawyer?" Ryan asked.

Roman let out a long sigh. "Yeah, I've had my eye on her as well. She's as smart and ambitious as her client, and she knows the law inside and out. My gut says she's involved or maybe even the linchpin."

"You think she's orchestrating all this?" Alex asked.

“I can’t be sure without hard evidence, but if I were him, I’d hide behind a lawyer. Attorney-client privilege is a brick wall that’s all but impossible to scale.”

“What do we know about her?” Wander asked.

Ryan clicked the projector remote, and a picture of Coldrick appeared on the wall. She was beautiful by any standard, with shoulder-length raven-black hair, a sharp aquiline nose, and subtle makeup, displaying an air of refined elegance. Everything about her radiated class and money.

“She grew up in a struggling, working-class family but managed to do well in school and get a full ride to Boston College, then to Princeton to study law. That opened doors with Boston’s leading legal firms, and after her graduation, she started working for Tate, Taylor, and Tripper.”

“Colloquially known as Triple T,” Roman said with an eye roll. “They’re one of the biggest firms in Boston. The most expensive too.”

“She’s now forty-four, single, never married,” Ryan said, “and she owns her own firm, Coldrick Law. Parents are deceased, but she has two younger sisters she’s close with.”

“I suspect they may be the only two people in the world she gives a damn about,” Roman muttered. “Though maybe she actually likes Whitman. I don’t know.”

“She liked him well enough to have an affair with him when she was twenty-five,” Ryan said.

What? That was news to Roman. “How did you find that out?”

“As private investigators, we can ask questions and use methods unavailable to you or the Feds. I was curious about their relationship and discovered they met when she worked for Triple T, which had Whitman as a client. They started an affair soon after that. We talked to a former legal secretary for Triple T, who confirmed it.”

An affair. That was an interesting bit of information that changed things. So Coldrick wasn’t merely loyal because Whitman was her client or because he paid her bills. They had a personal connection. “Are they still sleeping together?”

Ryan shrugged. “My guess is from time to time, but not consistently. He has a varied collection of mistresses, one-night stands, and paid sex workers he cycles through.”

“That does explain why she’s proven to be such a tough nut to crack. She won’t crack, not unless we find a way to make her,” Roman said. “She’s his shield, and they both know how to exploit that.”

“A man like Whitman is too smart to get his hands dirty, so everything would have to run through her, since she’s protected by attorney-client privilege,” Lowell said, scratching his scruff. “So focus on her and keep digging into her background. If she’s the linchpin, as you suspect, you should be able to find who she’s using to do the actual work. Because, no offense, but she doesn’t look like the type to do menial work herself. I don’t see her sending threats through text messages.”

He was right. “The FBI has been looking into her, but again, it’s complicated for us. We’re bound by strict legal guidelines.”

Ryan grinned. “We’re not. Well, to a certain degree, we are, but not like you.”

Wander leaned forward, his fingers interlaced on the table. “We need eyes inside Whitman’s circle. Someone who can bypass Coldrick and get us what we need.”

“Agreed,” Ryan said. “We’ve got to play this smarter, not harder. Coldrick’s a fortress, but every fortress has a crack.”

“Perhaps there’s a way to exploit her professional network,” Alex mused, tapping a pen against his lips. “Get someone on our side close enough to overhear something incriminating.”

“Or we could try to flip one of Whitman’s own,” Ryan suggested. “In my experience, men who instill fear rather than loyalty have more weak links than they realize. We may be able to turn one of his pawns against him. Find the weak link in Whitman’s chain and exploit it until it breaks.” He met Roman’s eyes. “My concern is this, though. Do we have to worry about evidence being admissible in court? Because with some of our methods, it wouldn’t be, which would pose a problem for you during the case.”

Roman leaned back in his chair, closing his eyes and rubbing his temples. Ryan raised a crucial issue. If they found evidence Coldrick was involved but discovered it through nonlegal means, Roman wouldn’t be able to use it in court. It wouldn’t be the first high-profile case that disintegrated due to inadmissible evidence, and few things were more

frustrating than having cold, hard proof that someone was guilty, only to have it thrown out on technicalities. It was every DA's nightmare.

"I think the biggest question is a different one," Wander said, and Roman opened his eyes again. "It's not between Whitman or Coldrick. It's about whether we're going after the source of these threats head-on or continuing to dig into Whitman's dirt. Do we want to prove Whitman is corrupt, or do we want to make the threats stop?"

Wander always had a way of cutting through the fog, and this was no exception. He was right. Roman had to make a call on whether he wanted Wander's team to investigate the threats or go after Whitman himself. Admissible evidence wasn't nearly as much of a concern in the first case as in the latter. He wouldn't necessarily go to trial over the threats against him, but he sure as fuck planned on facing Whitman in front of a judge one day. And he'd better make sure he had the proof to put the man away for a long time.

"Can I say something?" Caleb asked. "And maybe I'm off target here, but I keep thinking about the FBI. You said they haven't been able to find evidence against Coldrick, right?"

Roman nodded.

"And they weren't able to trace any of the threats?"

Oh. Roman saw where Caleb was going with this. "You're thinking Whitman has bought off the Feds on the case."

"I don't know, but it doesn't sound like they're doing a great job, so it does make me wonder." Caleb gestured at the file containing evidence of all the threats. "Tracing anonymous text messages is a fairly routine process for law enforcement because they can subpoena the necessary tracking information from phone companies, VPN providers, and other sources. It may take some time, but I find it hard to believe they weren't able to trace them at all."

"Even if they used burner phones or prepaid cards, those are traceable back to the store that sold them," Lowell said. "They would've at least known where the phones or cards were bought, which would've meant security camera footage. Show me a shop that sells those and doesn't have security cams."

"It could be one special agent impeding the investigation," Ryan said. "Doesn't need to be the whole team. One guy, or gal for that matter, who

conveniently hides evidence or files false reports, and the whole case is stuck."

Shit. They were absolutely right, and that insight changed everything. If Whitman had a fed on his payroll, what were the odds he had more than one? Or maybe a judge or two? Considering the scope of his criminal activities, a lot of people had to have looked the other way, either passively or actively.

That meant Roman was fighting an uphill battle to build the case against Whitman. He wasn't giving up, but maybe it was time to use some of the senator's methods against him. "Whitman's the target. We take the bastard down with whatever means we have."

He breathed out. A weight had been lifted off his shoulders. He wasn't fighting alone anymore.

"The risks are considerable." Roman's gaze swept across the men who had become his allies. "Going after Whitman is lighting a fuse on a powder keg. Once he finds out we're not giving up and are intensifying our efforts, he will come after us, and what he's done to me so far will be child's play. I need you all to be aware of that."

The others showed nothing but determination, not even a hint of fear. "Bring it on," Ryan said, and it felt like he was speaking for everyone.

"Your support means more than you know," Roman said, his tone soft. "I can't do this alone. I've tried, and I'm exhausted." He met their eyes one by one, the loyalty reflected on their faces steeling his resolve. "In this case, justice has a price tag, and I'm ready to pay it. Whitman's corruption is a cancer in our system, and if we don't cut it out, it'll spread. The man is rumored to run for president. We can't let that happen."

"Then it's settled," Wander said with a decisive nod, sealing the deal. "We dig up everything—every dirty transaction, every illicit deal, every threat he's ever made against anyone. Hell, we drill down to the goddamn center of the Earth if we have to and build a case so tight not even Coldrick can shield him and wiggle her way out of it."

12

Caleb leaned back in his chair, inhaling the rich scent of roasted garlic and thyme. The dining room was a study in contrasts—dark wood panels set against the soft glow of flickering candles, making shadows dance on the walls. The mahogany table groaned under the weight of the feast spread before them. Gleaming porcelain plates held succulent slices of prime rib, beautifully pink in the center and perfectly charred at the edges. A colorful array of side dishes accompanied the main course: creamy mashed potatoes with flecks of chive, crisp asparagus spears glistening with butter, and a tangy cranberry relish that added a pop of color and flavor. Jesse's staff had once again gone all out on their Friday evening meal, as had become their custom.

Laughter bubbled up like uncorked champagne, the mood in the group light and easy after their hard work that day. For three days, they'd been digging into Whitman's background, and with every shovel they unearthed, they'd found more dirt beneath it. It had been sobering to realize how much work they'd have to do to serve Whitman the ice-cold justice he had coming to him. But for now, they relaxed.

Conversation flowed easily, punctuated by bursts of laughter and the clink of cutlery. The faces of Caleb's companions were relaxed and open. It was rare to find such camaraderie, and he knew how lucky he was to have found these men. They'd become like family to him. As close as he was

with his parents, he loved these men like brothers. Well, brothers he had sex with anyway.

Only one thing—person—was missing. Roman.

“Man, this is what I call a meal,” Ryan said as he forked a generous portion of beef onto his plate.

“Only the best for you.” Jesse affectionately scratched David’s head. The sub was kneeling next to Jesse’s chair, deeply content to sit there and be hand-fed by his Dom.

Caleb cleared his throat. “Anyone know where Roman is?”

“Probably in his room, working,” Wander responded, the lines around his eyes deepening. “The case has been eating him alive.”

A knot tightened in Caleb’s gut. If what they had already discovered ate at him, how much more would it affect Roman? The man looked like he was carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders again. He’d been more relaxed after that incredible scene they’d shared, but the stress relief had been short-lived.

“Should we send him a plate?” Alex suggested, his voice tinged with worry.

The laughter died down, the mood somber as they all considered Roman’s absence. Caleb could almost see the weight of the case in the empty chair at the head of the table. It loomed over them, unspoken yet oppressive.

“Man’s burning the candle at both ends,” Ryan said. He took a bite of his steak and chewed thoughtfully. “Can’t be good for him.”

Caleb curled his fingers around his fork, the metal cool and unyielding. He wanted to do something, anything, to ease Roman’s burden. Should he offer to do another scene with him?

“Roman’s tough, but he’s human,” Wander said. “This case…it’s personal. He won’t back down, not until it’s done.”

“Maybe he needs an outlet.” Ryan shot a pointed look at Alex. “A way to let off steam.”

“What are you suggesting?” Wander leaned back, arms crossed.

“I’m suggesting Alex.” Ryan gestured at his boyfriend with a sly tilt of his head. “My little slut’s been eager to have a go at that big cock the man reportedly has. Could help Roman unwind.”

Caleb clenched his hands. Alex? But…but why Alex? Sure, he was a slut, and Ryan did like to share him, but why would it have to be Alex? Caleb had already played with Roman. He knew him better than anyone here did, especially Alex, who'd barely exchanged more than a few words with him. And Wander had sent Caleb that first night. Not Alex, not anyone else. Caleb. So wasn't Roman his responsibility now?

Wander grinned. "I'd be okay with that. You excited to whore out your boyfriend, Ryan?"

Ryan ruffled Alex's hair, whose face was as red as a beet. "What can I say? I like to see him get used."

Caleb's gut twisted. The thought of Roman with Alex… A shiver of wrongness raced through him. He didn't want the image in his head of Roman's hands on someone else, of Roman finding solace in another's submission. It was like a punch to his chest, stealing his breath.

"No," Caleb muttered, more to himself than the group. He traced his thumb over the edge of his tattoo, hidden under the sleeve of his hoodie. A reminder of strength, of battles fought and won.

"You got something to say, Caleb?" Wander's voice cut through the tension.

"Roman…" Caleb said, then stopped. What the hell was he doing? He swallowed hard, his skin prickling from every pair of eyes on him. "He needs someone who understands him. Who knows him and can read him."

"Go on," Wander prompted, a challenge in his gaze.

"Roman should play with me." The words left Caleb in a rush, a bold claim hanging between them. Silence fell like a hammer.

"Excuse me?" Ryan blinked, disbelief written across his face.

"Me," Caleb repeated, emboldened by the rapid pounding of his heart. "I've already played with him. He knows me, and I can read him well. He feels safe with me."

Wander arched his brow. "Since when are you stepping up for Roman?"

"Since now." Caleb stood, his chair scraping against the floor. Determination surged within him, a force he hadn't known he possessed. "I can be what Roman needs. I can take care of him."

"But you're a sub, Caleb," Ryan pointed out. "This isn't how it works."

"Isn't it?" Caleb held Ryan's gaze as if challenging him. "Who says I can't make that call? Especially when Wander set me up with Roman to

begin with. He gave me to Roman as a present."

Wander slowly nodded. "I did, but that was meant to be a one-time thing."

"I don't think it was." Caleb shook his head. "I think you were hoping he'd connect with me. You knew he…"

He stopped, not wanting to betray Roman's confidence.

Wander scratched his beard. "You're right. I did. I knew he needed this, and I figured you two could help each other. But I wasn't expecting you to claim him. Because that's what you're doing, right? You're claiming him? Asking for him to be off-limits to anyone else?"

Eyes widened, shock rippled, clinking of silverware ceased. There was a palpable shift as the others absorbed Wander's words. Caleb felt their skepticism like a tangible thing pressing against him. They were clearly struggling to reconcile Caleb's submissive nature with the authoritative stance he'd taken. It was clear they didn't know what to make of it, that the lines between Dom and sub had suddenly blurred.

He swallowed. "Yes, Sir. That's what I'm asking."

"Are you sure about this?" Wander asked. "A claim like that comes with responsibilities. With expectations."

"Damn sure." Caleb stood his ground, his heart hammering. His assertion hung heavily in the room, a brazen declaration that challenged norms and questioned hierarchies. His voice was steady, even as his insides churned with a cocktail of fear and excitement. "I want to take care of him, Sir."

"All right," Wander said after a long moment. "But Roman has the final say, obviously."

Fuck. Caleb hadn't even considered Roman might prefer someone else over him. His heart fell. What if Roman wanted to play with Alex? Or with Jonah or David?

"Of course."

"Okay, everyone, you heard it. Roman is off-limits." Wander swept his gaze over the team with an unyielding steadiness that brooked no argument. "Caleb has first dibs, so to speak. Are we clear?"

Wander's question wasn't a question at all. It was a decree, one that demanded unity and respect. His support was a fortress around Caleb, an

unexpected stronghold that fortified his resolve. No one would dare go against the boss.

“Clear,” everyone responded, some with words, others with nods—an agreement forged not from complete understanding but from the trust they placed in Wander’s judgment. They would give Caleb and Roman their space because Wander demanded it, because he had earned their unquestioning loyalty.

Conversations resumed, but Caleb said little, grappling with the magnitude of what had transpired. What had possessed him to take that step? He hadn’t been exclusive with anyone since Boyd. Hell, the thought had never occurred to him. So why did he care so much now? Why had he been so quick to claim Roman for himself? It made no sense. All he knew was that something in him had awoken, fierce and possessive, at the thought of anyone else being what Roman needed.

After dinner, Wander pulled him aside. “Walk with me.”

Not a request but a command, but Caleb had known it would come. He followed his boss without a word.

In a secluded corner of the hallway where the light barely reached, Wander turned to face him. His brother’s eyes, those windows to a soul that had seen too much, searched Caleb’s face. “You’re playing a dangerous game.”

“It’s not a game, Sir. I’m well aware of the stakes.”

“Are you getting attached to Roman?” The question was direct, probing beneath the surface with surgical precision.

“No.” The denial was immediate, reflexive. But even as he spoke, uncertainty and a tightness in his chest seemed to contradict his words.

Wander studied him, the silence stretching between them. “You’ve never lied to me. It worries me.”

Caleb bit his lip. “I’m not lying, Sir. At least, not intentionally. It’s…” He sighed, staring at the floor. “I don’t understand it myself, Sir.”

Wander’s strong hand landed on his shoulder, and when Caleb looked up, his boss’s eyes were a hell of a lot softer. “Something happened when Ryan suggested Alex take care of Roman, yeah? How did that make you feel?”

Goddammit, why did Wander always have to ask the hard questions? “I think I was jealous.”

“Hmm, I figured. Can you tell me the exact thing that went through your head?”

“I…” Caleb swallowed. “I pictured him with Alex, and I didn’t like it, Sir. It was like I couldn’t breathe.”

“Like he was yours.”

Oh, crap. “Y-yeah.”

A squeeze on his shoulder. “I’m talking to you as a friend now, Caleb, as a Dom who’s seen this before. Not as your boss, yeah?”

Caleb nodded.

“Be careful. Roman’s not a trained Dom, so he doesn’t know the rules. He can hurt you without realizing it.”

“I know, Sir.”

“But more importantly, this can’t be more than sex.”

Caleb stiffened. Wander’s eyes, now only inches away, were endlessly kind. “Roman’s job, his life…they don’t allow for attachments. Being out as bisexual or being in a same-sex relationship? That would bring all kinds of complications for him. And a D/s dynamic?” Wander shook his head, the motion slow, deliberate. “Impossible.”

Caleb clenched his jaw, the muscle ticking. “I get it,” he said, voice low and rough with emotion he refused to show. “It’s just sex. Nothing more.”

Wander trailed his hand over Caleb’s shoulder to his cheek and cupped it with tenderness. “You know how much I care about you. I don’t want to see you get hurt, kid. And you’re so much more fragile than you realize. You have pain inside you that you haven’t worked through yet.”

Pain? What was he talking about? “I don’t understand, Sir.”

“I know you don’t. How I wish I could protect you from what’s coming, but I can’t. All I wanted was for you to have some fun and for him to let go. I never expected this.”

He was talking in riddles. His concern was clear, and Caleb appreciated that, but what was he so worried about? “I’m a big boy, Sir. I’ll be fine.”

Wander bent in and softly kissed his cheek. “Just remember, there are people willing to catch you when you fall.”

And with those mysterious words, Wander walked away with long strides. What had that been about? Anger, Caleb would’ve understood. Roman was Wander’s brother, after all. But he didn’t get the concern, the cryptic remarks about pain in his past or whatever. What did that even

mean? He'd been honest with Wander, hadn't he? He'd told him he didn't have all the answers yet, that he was figuring things out.

He knew Roman could never be his. Just like Boyd had never been truly his.

Oh fuck.

Here he was, caught up in the dangerous tangle of wanting more from a man who could never truly be his. Again. He had been here before.

The realization was a punch to the gut, leaving him reeling, breathless.

13

Roman’s eyelids, stubbornly resistant to sleep, peeled open to the dark. The red digits of his alarm clock glared back at him: 4:37. He exhaled a curse into the stillness of his bedroom, the sheets tangled around his body after a night spent chasing elusive dreams. Enough was enough. If he couldn’t sleep, he might as well do something else. Maybe he should get some exercise in. It had been a while, and his body showed it. The gym in the basement beckoned like a promise or a threat. He hadn’t decided which yet.

With a grunt, he threw off the covers and swung his legs over the side of the bed. His feet hit the soft plush rug, protecting him from the cold floor. His guest room was chilly at night, just like he preferred, but that meant getting up was a hardship.

He rose, muscles complaining, and shuffled toward the closet, where he snatched a pair of workout shorts and a T-shirt. He dressed quickly, swapping his silk pajamas for moisture-wicking fabrics—or so the labels claimed. Roman hadn’t actually tested it.

As he descended the stairs to the basement, the house was quiet. Everyone must still be asleep. Or not? The gym door stood ajar, and the lights were all on. Who else was up at the ass crack of dawn? He pushed it open, fluorescent lights flickering overhead as he entered.

Caleb.

Already pounding on the treadmill in a relentless rhythm, Caleb was a blur of motion. Earbuds in, world out, he was a study of discipline Roman envied. At Roman's arrival, Caleb glanced up, lifted his hand in a casual salute, and returned to his relentless run. Roman waved back and watched him for a moment longer than necessary, taking in the sheen of sweat on Caleb's brow, the way his tight tank top clung to the lean contours of his torso. There was an innate gracefulness to his strides, a poetry in the pistoning of his legs. He was, for lack of a more eloquent word, truly beautiful.

Shaking off the unexpected surge of appreciation, Roman walked to the far corner of the gym, where he'd carve out his path to redemption—one painfully earned rep at a time. He hated treadmills with a passion, and besides, he was not humiliating himself in front of Caleb. Nope. He'd choose a different instrument of torture.

The rowing machine groaned under Roman's clumsy movements. The repetitive pull and release was a metronome to his scattered thoughts. Sweat trickled down his temple, a salty testament to his efforts as he found a tempo that didn't scream for mercy. Each stroke was a conversation between muscle and willpower, a fight between quitting and persevering. His heaving chest was a not-so-subtle reminder of years spent behind desks rather than in the gym. Jesus, how long had it been? He was fucking dying, and he wasn't even going that fast.

Across the room, the treadmill whirred to a halt. Caleb stepped off fluidly, no stagger or stumble, just grace. The kind of grace that came from confidence, from being completely comfortable with your body because you knew its capabilities—and its limits.

Caleb wiped his face off with a towel and walked to the boxing corner, right in Roman's vision. Well, at least he'd have something nice to look at while he continued torturing himself.

Caleb wrapped his hands with a routine that betrayed his experience, tucked in the wraps, and tested their hold. He rolled his neck and positioned himself next to the boxing bag. The thud of glove against bag echoed through the room, even over the hum of the rowing machine. Roman couldn't look away as Caleb danced around the heavy bag in a well-practiced choreography of jabs and hooks, his footwork light and precise.

What was it Muhammad Ali had said? “Float like a butterfly. Sting like a bee.” That was what it looked like as if Caleb was floating, dancing, his body moving so fluidly. The roll of Caleb’s shoulders, the tightening of his arms, the flex and twist of his core with each hit held a beauty, a raw elegance that belied the inherent violence of boxing.

Finally, the rowing machine beeped, indicating Roman had finished his twenty minutes. Thank fuck for Caleb offering some much-needed distraction, or he would have never made it that far. He was panting as it was, needing a moment to catch his breath and wipe the machine down, then himself.

When he could breathe again without sounding like a steam engine, he went over to Caleb, who was still pounding the bag with relentless precision. This time, Caleb paused, his hands stilling the bag. “Good morning.”

“Good morning. Nice form. You make it look easy.”

“Thanks.” The corner of his mouth tipped up in a half-smile. “You’re up early.”

Roman sighed. “Couldn’t sleep. But don’t let me interrupt your workout.”

“The treadmill was my workout for today. This is just for fun.”

“Boxing is fun?”

“It sure is. It also happens to be a great cardio exercise, but that’s a bonus. Other than sex, it’s the best way to release some steam.”

Other than sex. He said it so casually. “Right. I’ll take your word for it, since I’ve never done any boxing.”

“Want me to show you some moves?”

Roman waved the offer away. “Nah, you do your thing.”

“I don’t mind.”

“You sure?”

“Absolutely. Let me teach you the basics. I promise you’ll love it.”

Caleb walked to a storage locker and pulled out an extra pair of boxing gloves. They looked worn, a history of battles etched into the leather. He tossed them to Roman, who caught them with surprising agility. Maybe it was the adrenaline, or maybe it was being close to Caleb, but Roman felt more alive than he had in years.

“Let’s start with your stance.” Caleb stepped close enough for Roman to catch the scent of his cologne mixed with sweat—a heady combination that sent a jolt of awareness through his veins.

Roman slid his hands into the gloves, the padding snug around his knuckles. He mirrored Caleb’s posture: feet shoulder-width apart, knees slightly bent, hands up protecting his face.

“Good.” Caleb circled him like a predator assessing its prey. “Let’s start with the jab. It’s quick, like snapping a towel.” He demonstrated, shooting his arm out with precision. “Try it in the air before we take on the bag.”

Roman mimicked the movement, the glove cutting through the air. It wasn’t perfect, but the potential was there, waiting to be refined. He threw another one. “Like this?”

“Exactly. Now the cross. More power behind this one.”

Caleb showed him, the force of the punch making a satisfying whoosh.

“Cross,” Roman repeated, pivoting his body as he aimed the punch. Hmm, that wasn’t good. No force behind it. He tried again.

“Here, let me—” Caleb stepped in, adjusting Roman’s shoulder firmly. The touch sparked heat wherever skin met skin, a current that ran down Roman’s spine. “Twist your torso more. The power has to come from your core.”

His breath ghosted over Roman’s ear, which made it hard to concentrate. Still, his next effort was better, even though his core was buried somewhere under the extra padding he carried.

He threw an uppercut next, the gesture less about technique and more about the fire building in his gut.

“Nice. Let’s run through it again.” Caleb retreated a few steps to give Roman space.

One, two, three, the punches flowed, each hit better than the last. Roman found a rhythm, a connection to the power he wielded with every strike. Caleb’s presence urged him on, stoking the fire within.

“Jab, jab, hook,” Caleb said. “Perfect. Do it again.”

He kept throwing out sequences, and Roman did them, faltering at first but then with more confidence.

“Good. Now let’s see you hit the bag.”

Caleb stepped back, his blue eyes tracking every shift of Roman’s frame. He circled, watching Roman intently, and Roman couldn’t help but

rise to the challenge.

Roman approached the bag, fists raised. He unleashed a sequence—jab, cross, hook—each strike punctuated by the grunt escaping his throat. Sweat ran in rivulets down his back, slicking his skin. This feeling of power, of losing himself to the physicality of the moment, was raw, so much more intense than Roman had realized. His muscles were screaming, those gloves weighing a hundred pounds now, but he kept at it.

“Keep your guard up.” Caleb guided Roman’s wrists, adjusting the angle of attack. “And pivot on your back foot.”

The subtle brush of Caleb’s fingers against his skin sent an unexpected jolt through Roman’s body, igniting a low thrum of arousal simmering beneath his focus. He grew half-hard, trapped in a tangle of exhilaration and desire as he shadowboxed the air.

Caleb watched him intensely, a smirk playing on those full lips. Tension crackled, a current that flowed with the rhythm of their breaths. Why Caleb was interested in him, Roman had no idea, but, man, was it intoxicating.

Roman’s fists thudded against the bag, a final barrage that left the air heavy with the scent of exertion. He stepped back, chest heaving, his sweat-drenched T-shirt clinging to him like a second skin.

“Damn.” Roman huffed out as he took off the gloves and stretched his red, raw fists. “I’m a mess.”

Caleb leaned against the wall, his eyes alight with an unmistakable spark of lust. “Don’t apologize. Men should sweat.” His tongue darted out, moistening his lips as if tasting the salt. “It’s hot as hell.”

Heat flushed through Roman, pooling in his groin. So he hadn’t imagined Caleb looking at him with want. Roman’s pulse hammered in his ears. The rules of engagement had shifted, and the unspoken invitation hung thick in the space they shared.

“Yeah?” Roman took off his shirt and flung it to the ground, then stretched, a flirtatious move he’d never attempted.

Caleb pushed himself off against the wall and came close. “You’re hard.”

“Mmm, I sure am. You wanna do something about that?”

Jesus, how did he have so much confidence all of a sudden? He was slick with sweat, still panting, yet he acted as if he was the most attractive

man on the planet because, somehow, to Caleb, he was. Caleb dragged his finger down Roman's chest. "What do you want me to do about it, Sir?"

Christ almighty. How was he supposed to resist the power of that word? Something broke free inside him. "Hands against the wall."

Caleb's eyes lit up, and he spun around, slapped his hands against the concrete with eagerness, and stuck his ass back. Roman didn't move, entranced by the surrender, the offering laid bare before him. Then he grabbed Caleb's thin running shorts with both hands and dragged them down. Oh, wow. The results of his handiwork from a few days before appeared, the red marks not fully faded.

"You like seeing your handprints on my skin, Sir?"

Caleb knew exactly what buttons he was pushing, but Roman couldn't bring himself to be angry about it. Instead, he slapped Caleb's right cheek, a fierce smack with his hand. "You'd better not get smart with me, boy, or I'll show you what marks I can leave on your skin."

They both froze. Holy shit, where had that come from? It had originated somewhere deep inside him, which scared Roman almost as much as the fact that he meant every word. What the ever-loving fuck was he doing? What had Caleb awakened inside him?

Caleb didn't say anything, as if he'd realized it too, but watched Roman over his shoulder with concern in his eyes. Roman took a deep breath. "I'm okay," he said softly. "I don't know what… I'm okay."

"That's all that matters, Sir."

Maybe he was right, and maybe he wasn't, but what did it matter? Heat pulsed through his body, and right now, that would have to be enough. "I need lube."

Caleb nodded to the corner, where a familiar bottle stood. Of course they'd have it everywhere in this house. Not that Roman was complaining. He hurried over, grabbed it, and rushed back, already shoving down his sticky underwear.

"I don't need prep, Sir."

"What?"

"I keep myself prepped now, Sir. So you can use me whenever you want. Just you."

Roman made a sound he didn't recognize, a sort of growl that came from deep within. Caleb had done that for him. "No one else?"

“No, Sir. Just you.”

He needed to have him. Fire burned through his veins, searing his insides. He put down the bottle and lined up behind Caleb, who helpfully spread his legs. Roman pressed his slick cock against his hole. If someone had told him that going in bare without any prep would be hot, he would’ve thought it ridiculous, but holy fuck, it was the most erotic thing ever.

“Beg for it. Beg for my cock.” The words fell from his lips like a dark promise of pleasure laced with dominance.

“Please, Sir…I need you to fuck me. Need your cock.”

He was lost. Irrevocably, utterly lost. With a shared breath that felt like a silent countdown, he pushed forward. Caleb’s body welcomed him, hot and tight, drawing him in until the world narrowed to the rhythm they created together. Roman gripped Caleb’s hips, anchoring him, each thrust punctuated by a grunt, a gasp, a groan. The smell of sweat and sex mingled, a potent blend that fueled Roman’s hunger.

“You can come when I do,” he snarled, and the little whimper Caleb made only added to the fire.

He fucked him hard, raw, without restraint, and Caleb met him thrust for thrust, taking everything Roman threw at him. They were caught up in it—the slick slide of flesh, the needy sounds between exhales—when the door creaked open.

Roman tensed, his gaze snapping toward the intrusion. Ryan and Alex stood there, frozen, eyes wide. Shit. Reality crashed over Roman like a bucket of ice water to his overheated body. He’d completely forgotten where they were, that the gym was a public space where anyone could walk in. He should’ve taken Caleb back to his room, should’ve ensured privacy.

“Fuck.” The word spat from Roman’s lips. But he didn’t stop, couldn’t stop, even as awareness prickled his skin. Caleb was panting against him, sharing his every breath. They were close, so goddamn close, and Roman was teetering on the edge of a precipice he had no intention of backing away from.

“Don’t stop, Sir,” Caleb urged, voice raspy, his plea slicing through Roman’s hesitation. Caleb’s eyes didn’t reflect any shame, only the same wild need clawing at Roman’s control.

So he didn’t. He kept moving, kept claiming, kept owning every gasp and whimper Caleb surrendered to him. He rode the wave of exhilaration,

of taboo, of the forbidden thrill that came with being watched. His rhythm never faltered, even as Ryan and Alex came closer, unashamedly watching them. Their presence, a silent audience to the carnal display, only heightened the tension coiling in Roman's core.

A guttural sound broke from Ryan's throat as he grabbed Alex and shed their clothes in a frenzied dance of limbs. They were entangled in seconds, their rhythm mirroring Roman and Caleb's. Grunts mixed with flesh slapping against flesh and heavy breathing—the raw music of primal need.

The sight spurred Roman on and drove him deeper into the haze of pleasure clouding his vision. He saw nothing but Caleb's flushed skin, felt nothing but the tight heat enveloping him, and heard nothing but the collective symphony of their unrestrained desires.

With each snap of his hips, Roman chased the edge, barreling toward release. Caleb keened below him, a siren call that beckoned Roman closer to the brink. His name, a ragged chant on Caleb's lips, was the last push Roman needed. Pleasure erupted, fierce and blinding, ripping through him like a storm. He allowed himself to fall, to shatter, to give in to the pulse of pleasure that obliterated everything else. Caleb shuddered against him, crying out as he, too, came.

Roman leaned against the wall, his chest heaving with ragged breaths. What the hell had come over him?

But more importantly, why didn't he feel any shame?

14

Caleb had every expectation of being discarded. Surely Roman had been spooked by getting caught and would make a run for it, unable to face Ryan and Alex. He braced himself for the inevitable rejection… but it never came.

Instead, Roman gently pulled out and nuzzled Caleb's neck with a sweet, tender movement. Caleb's stomach went all soft and swirly. "You good?"

"Yes, Sir. That was amazing."

"Yeah." Roman huffed out a short laugh. "Didn't mean to get caught in public, though."

"I'm sorry, Sir. I should've reminded you to lock the door."

Roman tugged his shoulder until Caleb turned around, almost tripping over his feet with his shorts still around his ankles.

"Let me take care of that first." Roman grabbed a gym towel and cleaned Caleb up, then bent and carefully pulled Caleb's shorts up. "There. That's better. Can't have you face-plant because of me."

"Thank you. Sir."

Roman wiped Caleb's jizz off the wall, then threw the towel in the big hamper in the corner of the gym. He put his own shorts back on as well, then looked at Ryan, who had Alex still bent over with his arms resting on a

stationary bike, pounding the crap out of him. “You weren’t kidding when you said he likes it rough.”

“They both do. One of the reasons why they’re such a good match.”

“Hmm, I can see that.”

Roman concentrated on Caleb again. “I’m not upset with you. Just wanted to put that out there because you apologized for not locking the door. That wasn’t on you.”

“No?”

“Tell me, Caleb, is it your job as a sub to manage your Dom?”

Caleb swallowed. “No, Sir. It’s my job to obey.”

“So why would you be at fault here?”

“Because you’re… You didn’t know that… Because it embarrassed you, and I should’ve prevented it?”

Roman tilted Caleb’s chin up with his index finger. “I couldn’t have been that mortified, though, considering I never stopped fucking you, now could I?”

Fuck, how the hell was Caleb supposed to answer that question? “No? I don’t know, Sir. I didn’t think you were the type for exhibitionism.”

“I didn’t think so either, but then again, I’m discovering a lot of new things about myself. Like the fact that I just fucked you senseless and came so hard I nearly blacked out…and I already want to do it again.”

Caleb’s insides lit up like a bonfire. “You do, Sir?”

“What is it about you?” Roman shook his head. “I can’t figure it out. It’s like you’re an addiction. I know I should say no, but I can’t. You have me hooked.”

Hmm, Caleb wasn’t sure he liked being compared to drugs. “Do you want to say no to me?”

Roman brushed Caleb’s bottom lip with his thumb. “No. I should, but I don’t want to.”

“Why not?” Caleb whispered.

“I don’t know. Maybe it’s because you make me see new sides of myself. It could be the thrill of dominating you or the fact that I get to indulge in sex with you, this gorgeous young guy who has no business wanting an old fart like me.”

“You’re not an old fart!”

Roman chuckled. “Compared to you, I am. Over twenty years older. That doesn’t bother you?”

“Not in the least. I told you I like older men. Guys my age are so immature and stupid. I don’t need some jerk who’s still living in his momma’s basement, playing on his PlayStation all day. I want a real man. Someone whose authority comes naturally, not learned.”

“You think my authority is natural?”

Caleb snorted. “Sir, you and your brother radiate dominance from every fiber of your being. It’s impossible for a sub like me not to want to obey you.”

“How did you see that when I had no idea myself?” Roman let out a long sigh. “Don’t answer that. In fact, let’s head out. Not that those two seem to want privacy, but I do.”

“Head out where, Sir?”

Roman held out his hand, and Caleb’s stomach swooped as he took it. “Wanna come with me to my room? We could get cleaned up, maybe take a shower? And after that, I’m sure we’ll be ready for breakfast.”

Caleb looked down so Roman wouldn’t see the shock in his eyes that must be showing. That proposal was about the last thing he had expected. Something had changed in Roman, but what? What had happened that he seemed to have accepted his connection to Caleb? “I’d like that, Sir.”

“Are you gonna keep calling me Sir all the time?”

“Do you mind?”

“Strangely enough, I don’t. On the contrary. I’m beginning to love how that word falls off your lips. You make it sound like an honor.”

“It is, Sir.”

“Thank you, in that case. Come on, let’s go.”

Ryan and Alex had started round two—or was it three already?—and ignored them as they walked past, which was fine with Caleb. They made their way up to Roman’s room, where he ostentatiously locked the door behind them.

“Do you want to shower?” Roman asked.

“Together?”

“You don’t have to. You can head to your room first to shower if you want. Or not shower at all.”

His insecurity was back. Funny how that changed with him. “I’d love to shower with you. I would need to grab some clothes, though, because I won’t fit into yours.”

Roman chuckled self-consciously. “No, they’d sag down your slim frame.”

“So let me get those, Sir. I’ll be right back.”

Before you change your mind, but obviously, Caleb wasn’t saying that part out loud. He dashed to his room and grabbed a pair of sweatpants and a hoodie from his closet, plus some socks and underwear. There, done. When he returned, Roman had laid out his clothes, a pair of khakis and a button-down.

“You like to dress formally, don’t you?” Caleb asked.

Roman rubbed his nape. “Yeah, it’s a little ridiculous here, I know. But I’m so used to wearing suits that even this feels like underdressing. It’s like… Like armor, I suppose. Like a uniform that gives me confidence. It makes me feel stronger, more sure of myself.”

“I didn’t think you were the type to have low self-confidence, Sir.”

“You’d be surprised. In my job? No. But personally, that’s a different matter altogether.”

“I like your clothes. They suit you.”

Roman snorted. “My suits suit me?”

Oh, Caleb hadn’t realized that pun. “They do, Sir. They make you look sharp. And hot.”

Roman slowly turned around and finished taking off his shirt. “One of these days, you’re gonna have to explain to me what about this”—he patted his round stomach—“is sexy to you.”

Caleb undressed in two seconds, carelessly dropping his wet clothes to the floor, and stepped closer. He put his hand on Roman’s chest. “Attraction isn’t about a perfectly toned body or a sixpack to me.”

“No? Then what is it about?”

“It’s hard to explain, but it has to do with someone radiating power, a kind of magnetic energy I’m drawn to. Masculinity, maybe. Like, I feel your presence inside me, this deep awareness.”

He was revealing more than he’d meant to, but how could he not when Roman looked at him like that with such honest neediness?

Roman licked his lips. “So you’re not just…submitting to me because my brother told you to?”

Caleb slowly shook his head. “I gave you a blowjob because your brother told me to. Everything since was because I wanted to serve you. Because I chose to.”

Had Wander talked to Roman about Caleb claiming him? He had expected him to. After all, Wander had made it clear the final decision rested with Roman. But Caleb wasn’t sure if Wander actually had. Roman hadn’t brought it up. Neither had Caleb, fearing it would make things weird, but now it felt like he was hiding something from Roman, and he liked that even less.

“We have agreements here in the house,” he said softly. “About who is allowed to play with whom and who needs to ask for permission. Because I’m a sub without a Dom of my own, Wander takes the role for me, and anyone wanting to play with me needs his permission. Lowell, Jonah, Jesse, and Master Mark have that permission already, though I can still say no anytime. It’s just that they don’t need to ask anymore.”

Roman frowned. “Should I have asked him for approval? Is that what you’re saying?”

“No, I…” He took a deep breath. “I took care of that. I…I claimed you, Sir. For me.”

“Claimed me?”

Caleb still had his hand on Roman’s chest and was rubbing it in slow circles, a soothing rhythm that helped him focus. “Ryan wanted to whore out Alex to you. Like Wander had done with me.”

Roman widened his eyes. “Alex? But they’re… Are they not exclusive?”

“Ryan is to Alex, but Alex is a slut, and Ryan has started to share him. With Alex’s permission, of course. And since we all figured you needed some stress relief, Ryan suggested letting Alex serve you.”

“But you stopped that.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“By claiming me.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“What does that mean exactly?”

Caleb didn’t look at him but focused on his hand, which was tangled in Roman’s chest hair. The man’s cock had grown half-hard again—a testament to his stamina and recovery time. “It means no one else can play with you but me, Sir. Unless you want them to.”

“Look at me, Caleb. Please. I need to see your eyes when you say things like this because it’s hard to read you otherwise.”

He looked up. “Sorry, Sir.”

“Let me see if I understand this. You claimed me, which means that you have Wander’s permission to play with me or serve me, whatever you wanna call it, and no one else can unless I specifically state I don’t want to use you?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Okay.”

“I’m sorry, Sir.”

“That’s fine by me. More than fine. I have zero desire to fuck Alex, no offense, and I barely know Jonah and David.”

Caleb forced himself to stay calm despite the whirlwind of emotions inside him. “You didn’t know me either when Wander gave me to you.”

Roman chuckled. “No, and I’m sure you remember how confused I was about the whole situation and how reluctant initially to take you up on that offer. I didn’t know what to make from it. But now I do know you. At least well enough to feel comfortable saying you truly want this.”

“Jonah and David would love to serve you.” Caleb forced himself to say the words. He had to because how could he be certain otherwise that Roman had truly chosen him? He’d always have that doubt in the back of his mind that the man hadn’t known any better, that he hadn’t been aware of all his options. “And they would have the choice to say no. As subs, we hold all the power. Outsiders don’t realize that. They think Doms are in charge, but we are. My submission is a gift freely given, but I can withdraw it just as easily. One word from me, and everything stops.”

Roman cocked his head, a half-smile on his lips. “I’d almost think you were attempting to persuade me to try Jonah’s and David’s services.”

“No!” Caleb took a shuddering breath. “No, Sir. Not unless you want to. I just wanted you to have all the information. Consent isn’t fully consent without all the facts.”

“Hmm, I see. Let me ask you. What do you want?”

Fuck, he should've known Roman would turn the tables on him once again. The man was a legal genius, used to logical reasoning and dismantling someone else's arguments. He knew all the tricks in the book. All Caleb could do was be honest with him.

He sank to his knees and bowed his head. "I…I would very much like to be the only one serving you, Sir. If you'll allow me."

"Jesus, Caleb…" Roman's voice dropped low. "I can't tell you what it does to me when you kneel for me. It makes me feel so big yet so small at the same time."

Roman's hand landed on Caleb's head, and instinctively, he closed his eyes and leaned into the touch, almost like a cat who wanted its head scratched.

"What am I going to do with you?"

Roman sounded like he was asking himself, so Caleb kept quiet.

"I don't think you realize what you do to me, the effect you have on me. You make me feel things I've never felt, make me see myself in a whole new light, make me try things I've never considered… And I don't know how to go back to who I was before you. If I even can."

A shuddering inhale. "But I'll have to cross that bridge when I get to it. For now, please get your gorgeous little red ass in the shower with me. And if you're a good boy, which I know you will be, I may just let you suck me off again."

Holy fucking yes, please.

15

Roman plopped down in the leather chair that faced Wander's massive oak desk, the scent of aged books filling his nostrils. Not his brother's books, Roman would bet. Probably Jesse's or whichever relative he'd inherited this mansion from. Light filtered through half-closed blinds, casting striped patterns over an oriental rug that had seen better days. Wander's desk was a landscape of organized chaos—stacks of files teetered on the edge, a silver pen set lay untouched next to a blotter, and a framed black-and-white photograph of their parents rested against a lampstand.

"We need to talk."

Wander slowly turned his chair around. "And a good morning to you as well."

Roman sighed. "Yeah, whatever. Good morning and all that."

"I see you're in a fine mood today."

"It's fucking Monday morning. What did you expect?"

Wander crossed his arms. "Considering your fun in the gym yesterday, not to mention the reprise in your shower, I would've expected you to be still floating on cloud nine, yeah?"

Roman rolled his eyes. "I see word got around."

"If you don't want people to know you're banging Caleb, you may not wanna do it in public. Or moan so fucking loud in your shower they can hear it three doors down."

Oops. Had he really been that vocal? “He’s very talented. Hard to hold back.”

“That he is.”

Oh, fuck. Of course. “Let’s agree never to mention again that you’ve fucked him too. That’s too weird.”

“I promise you that’s not the weirdest thing by far that’s happened in this house, but sure, I’ll keep quiet about it.”

Roman sat on the reading chair. “I like him.”

“I had an inkling.”

“You gave him permission to claim me.”

“He told you?”

“Yeah. Why didn’t you?”

Wander sighed. “Usually, I would have, but I wasn’t sure in this case. The connection between you and him is a little puzzling.”

“Tell me about it.”

“What’s going on, Ro?”

Roman struggled to articulate the chaos whirling inside him. “With everything going on, I don’t know what I’m supposed to do. With Caleb.”

“Enjoy it?”

“Don’t be flippant about it.”

“That wasn’t my intention. But you may be taking this all too seriously.”

Roman didn’t respond.

“Oh. *Oh.*”

“Oh indeed. I haven’t felt like this… Well, ever. He makes me feel alive and wanted and sexy, and Jesus, I can’t even believe I’m saying this, and to you, of all people. I know you don’t care, but I’m not used to discussing my sex life with you.”

“It’s all good, Ro. Nothing you tell me will go any further. You know that.”

Roman blew out a long breath. “The BDSM thing… The D/s play… It’s all new to me. The control, the trust Caleb puts in me, the way he looks at me when he kneels, like I’m a god or something…”

For a man who made his living yielding words like weapons, he sure had a hard time verbalizing the storm inside him.

“Ro.” Wander’s voice was gentle but insistent. “You take it at your pace. Caleb’s not just some plaything. He’s got brains and experience. The kid knows you’re new to this, and he’ll communicate for both of you.”

“Right.”

Wander wasn’t wrong, but BDSM was uncharted territory for Roman, a realm where he held no sway, had no experience, and he hated that. He hated not being in control, maybe even more because he was supposed to be.

“Am I a Dom?” he asked. “Tell me the truth.”

Wander rubbed his beard. “If you’d asked me a month ago, I would’ve said no, but I’ve seen a new side of you.”

“My dominant side?”

“Yeah, but more than that. I always knew you were bi, and I understood why you couldn’t act on it, but I don’t think I realized you’re more attracted to men than to women.”

“I’m not…” He stopped. Was he? He’d been in love with Yolanda, no doubt about it. And he liked women in general. For companionship, for sex, for everything. But did he like men more? “I know theoretically that even if it’s not fifty-fifty, I’m still bisexual, but it kinda feels like a betrayal if I admit I like men more.”

Wander shrugged. “That’s bullshit if you ask me. You can like men ninety percent more, and you’d still be bi, but does it really matter? We’re not talking about your public image. This is us, you and me. If you can’t be yourself with me, then with who can you?”

“With whom,” Roman corrected automatically and laughed. “Sorry. That was pedantic.”

“No kidding. Grammar snob.”

Roman held up his hands. “I’ll try to refrain next time.”

“So, back to our previous topic. I’m right, then, that you do prefer men?”

Roman blew out a breath. “I think I do. Though I didn’t realize it until you asked.”

“Fair enough.”

“Why did you send Caleb my way?”

“For sex. It was as simple as that. He loves sex and is a sucker for a big dick, and I knew you could use some distraction and sexual release. As far

as I knew, you hadn't been with a guy in a while, yeah?"

"Not since I was an assistant DA. Years."

"So that was why. I never expected you'd connect with him the way you have."

"I'm flying blind on the BDSM stuff."

"You could start by not calling it BDSM stuff," Wander said mildly. "And label it what it is. D/s play, impact play."

"I spanked him."

"I figured when I saw him sit down with a wince. He likes that."

Okay, maybe talking about this with his brother wasn't as weird as Roman had feared. "He sure did. It was another first for me, but I loved it."

"Sore hand?"

"Not as sore as his ass," Roman said with a laugh. "But damn, seeing my handprints on his skin gave me a thrill."

"See, that remark right there is pure Dom. That's how I feel about it. I love seeing my marks on Burke."

That was good to know, almost like a confirmation. "I fucked him right after."

"Even better. Their ass gets all tight because they're hurting, and it's like putting your cock in a tight, slick furnace. I love it."

No, he'd been wrong. It was still a little weird, but whatever. He'd get used to it. "Where do I go from here?"

"That depends on how seriously you want to take this. I can train you or find someone else if that's what you want. But…"

Roman swallowed. "But there'd be little sense in that if it's only for the few weeks I'm here and I go back in the closet after that. My heterosexual closet with an added vanilla compartment."

"Pretty much, yeah. So maybe don't try to make that decision now and take it one day at a time. See where things go. You don't have to figure it all out right fucking now," Wander said, his tone firm, steadying. "Caleb's not going anywhere. He'll wait for you, help you navigate the deep end."

"I still can't wrap my mind around the fact that he likes me."

"He certainly likes you enough to claim you and request exclusivity. That's a big thing around here. The only two people who are exclusive are Burke and I. Everyone else shares."

"Burke doesn't want to? 'Cause I know you're not opposed to sharing."

Wander sighed. “I honestly don’t know. I can’t stand the idea of sharing him, but I wouldn’t mind being able to play with others. But I realize the selfishness of that, so I haven’t brought it up. Monogamy is a price I’m more than willing to pay for Burke. He’s my whole world.”

Roman smiled at the goofy, lovesick grin on his brother’s face. “He’s good for you. And you for him.”

“True, and I don’t ever wanna do anything to lose him.”

“If I’m not ready for formal training but want to continue playing with Caleb, what do I do?”

Wander got serious again. “You two have talked about safewords?”

“We have. He explained the traffic light system to me. And he told me his hard limits.”

“Which are? Just checking to make sure we’re all on the same page. I am his Dom in a way, so I feel responsible for him.”

“I appreciate that, no worries. Erm, let me think. He specifically said no breath play.”

“Smart. That shit is risky. I only did it with subs I knew well.”

“And no drawing blood.”

“He’s also not a fan of golden showers.”

“Is that what I think it is?”

“Peeing on someone? It sure is.”

“Explain how that is arousing because I don’t get it.”

Wander nodded. “It’s not for everyone. It’s usually closely linked to humiliation play. Subs who love being humiliated as if they’re nothing more than a wall to pee against. And some like to piss during or after sex, filling their sub with urine rather than cum.”

Jesus, no. “Have you done that?”

“I have, and as a Dom, it has its appeals. But not many subs are into it, and that includes Caleb.”

“Thank god for that because that would be two bridges too far for me.”

Wander chuckled. “Just stick to the basics. Spanking, rough sex, maybe tie him up with some soft handcuffs. Or use a silk rope. Caleb can show you which knot to use so he can free himself if he needs to.”

Tie him up? Roman had no trouble picturing it: Caleb naked on the bed, arms and legs tied, all spread out for Roman’s pleasure. He could fuck his mouth like that, and Caleb would have no choice but to take it. Or—if he

put him in a different position—he could fuck his ass. Or spank him. Maybe use a paddle? He'd overheard Alex talking about that, and he was curious to see what that would do.

His brother's laugh brought him back to reality. "I see that got your mind spinning with options."

Roman laughed sheepishly. "It did."

"Also the mark of a Dom. Look, Ro, you can take this as far as you want and are comfortable with, but it's also okay to keep it light. As long as you're strict about safewords, it's all good with me. Caleb has enough experience to call red when he has to."

"Okay."

"I just want to say one more thing." Wander leaned forward, his eyes drilling into Roman's. "You can play with his body, but don't play with his feelings. He's getting attached to you, and I've never seen that from him. It's okay if you don't feel the same way. He's a big boy. He can handle that. But don't string him along. If you see it heading in a direction you know you can't reciprocate, cut him loose. Because if he ends up with a broken heart, I'll pick his side. We clear?"

Damn, Wander had never looked more like a Dom than in that moment. "Crystal clear. You have my word. I'll treat him well."

"Good. Now, let's talk about the case. Ryan and Alex headed to Boston this morning to spend a few days there and do some digging."

Roman needed a second to put his brain in work mode. "Please tell them to be careful."

"Ryan's a former homicide detective. He'll be fine. He's got good instincts. And Alex is a better shot than Ryan and me combined."

Roman rubbed his forehead. As soon as Wander mentioned the case, the tension flooded right back in. "Sure, but it's hard to shoot at what you can't see."

"True. But they will be careful, so don't worry. What's happening—"

The abrasive trill of Roman's phone cut Wander off. Roman checked the caller ID and held up a finger to Wander. Julie McKay, one of his junior lawyers.

"Julie?"

"Roman, we've got a problem." Her words, delivered in a clinical, detached tone, came as a punch to the gut. "The deposition with Dorian

Firestone and Leo Capatelli didn’t go as planned.”

His stomach sank. “What happened?”

“Well, I went to depose them this morning, and it quickly became clear they never actually witnessed anything illegal. It’s all hearsay and inadmissible.”

“Hearsay?” Roman’s voice was a serrated edge, sharp and dangerous. He felt like the office walls were closing in, the leather-bound books and polished steel mocking him with their silent, judgmental presence.

“All they had for me were rumors they’d heard, other people’s stories. In your notes, you stated they had firsthand, personal experience with several illegal activities, but that doesn’t seem to be the case.”

Fuck. Roman’s mind whirred, trying to piece together this new, jagged puzzle. He’d spoken to both men personally. Had questioned them extensively. Firestone had proof a developer had paid Whitman to secure a winning bid on a new apartment complex in Boston, and Capatelli had testified he’d been forced by Whitman to hire people without the right qualifications because they’d paid Whitman large sums of money. Witnesses didn’t just flip. They *were* flipped. Pressure, threats, or worse.

“That makes no sense,” he said, fighting to keep his voice level.

“I don’t know what’s going on—”

“Neither do I, Julie,” he said, his voice icy, anger simmering beneath the surface, but he held it in check. Barely. “But I’ll find out.”

“Look, I’m just saying, maybe you pushed too hard. This case…it’s taking its toll on you.” She didn’t say it out loud, but her tone hinted she questioned his competency, his grip on reality.

He clenched his fist so hard around the phone he was surprised it didn’t snap in half. “I’m fine, Julie. There’s nothing going on with me.”

“You haven’t been in the office in over a week. Be careful, Roman. This doesn’t look good.” The finality in her warning made his blood run cold.

“I appreciate your concern, Julie, but I promise you, I’m fine.”

He ended the call with an angry growl, then threw his phone onto the desk. “Fuck!”

He clenched his jaw tight, a vise of frustration that threatened to crack molars. He turned to face his brother, who had been watching him with hawk-like intensity. “You lost a witness?”

“Two. Both claimed to have seen illegal activities firsthand, but now they’re backtracking and stating it was only hearsay and rumors. Julie had to end the deposition.”

“Whitman got to them with either threats or bribery.”

“Yeah.” Bitterness filled Roman’s mouth. “God, I hate that son of a bitch. Every time I think I’m making progress, he makes a move, and I’m right back where I started. He’s not giving up.”

“You haven’t had any messages since the day after you arrived, yeah?”

“Correct. I suspect they’ve traced me here, and if they have, they’ll have done some research and know what you do for a living. So maybe they don’t want to take any chances.”

“Or they’re switching to another strategy. Whitman must be getting scared. I mean, if he’s taking the risk of going after witnesses…”

Roman’s heart sank. “That puts all of you at risk.”

“We knew that going in. You were clear about the dangers from the start.”

“I know, but—”

“But nothing has changed. We’re facing the same enemy we were before. The only difference is that he may be escalating. Well, we were expecting that too, and we’re ready for it. I’ve called in reinforcements from another company I often work with, and they’ll take over securing the house and perimeter so my team can focus on finding out all we can about Whitman.”

“I’ll pay for that.”

Wander firmly shook his head. “Jesse is covering the bill.”

“I can’t accept that.”

“You’re gonna have to find a way to because he’s not budging. It’s his house, you’re his guest, and the man has money like water. Accept his generosity, Ro. He wants to take care of you…like we all do.”

When he put it like that… “Okay,” Roman relented.

“Now I’d like you to tell me about everyone who has knowledge about this case, everyone who is officially looped in. Your office, Boston PD, FBI, anyone.”

“We’ll be here a while.”

“We’ll get some more coffee and snacks. I need to have the whole picture. When Ryan and Alex come back with names, I want to be able to

cross-check them to your list to see who could be a mole."

Roman took a deep breath. "All right. We'll start with Julie McKay…"

16

Find out everything you can about Isabella Coldrick.

That was the assignment Wander had given Caleb, and he was on it like a fly to a pile of shit. Hmm, that was a fitting metaphor in this case because if she was Whitman's right hand, she was dirty as fuck. He'd already found out all the basics—parents, sisters, education, résumé—but it was time to dig a little deeper. An initial Google search hadn't revealed much, but maybe social media would be more helpful.

Both of Isabella's sisters had a Facebook account and were sloppy with their privacy settings, which made Caleb's job so much easier. If one made a public post and tagged someone with a friends-only profile, it would still be public and visible to all. So many people didn't realize that, and it seemed Isabella was one of them. Caleb discovered several photos of Isabella, who went by Bella with friends, apparently.

The three had done a spa day and sported goofy smiles as they posed with neon-green face masks, looking like aliens. Roman had been right. She did genuinely care about her sisters. Everyone had a weakness, and it looked like her sisters were Isabella's. Caleb filed that bit of information away.

Twitter didn't reveal anything, but Isabella was active on LinkedIn. She'd kept her résumé up to date, but she also posted regularly about legal

news. Nothing stood out at first glance, though. No mention of Whitman or anything related to him. She had shared an update about the Harborfront deal Roman had mentioned, with a two-sentence intro that stated she was proud to have worked on this deal and that it would be great for the city of Boston.

The post hadn't gotten a lot of reactions, so it wasn't much effort to track the people who had responded and check their profiles. Most of them were fellow legal professionals, and a quick look at their résumés showed some of them had been classmates of Isabella or former coworkers. Two people with the last name Coldrick had reacted. Cousins, maybe? Or uncles?

He wrote down the other names, checked a few more similar updates, and noted the names of people who had responded to those. In his experience, people were far stupider online than they realized, exposing more hints and data than they wanted to. And if they did, Caleb would find it.

Next up was Coldrick Law. Caleb created a false profile as a paralegal on various job sites and searched for reviews of Isabella's firm. They were mixed. *She's a total bitch*, one woman wrote. *The kind that gives women with power a bad name*.

Well, she didn't do herself any favors there, considering everyone could see her name. Oops. Another was more forgiving, though they did mention *endlessly long days, but what else is new*? Indeed, law firms weren't exactly known as relaxed nine-to-five jobs.

Wait. She had two positions open. One was for a forensic accountant. Wasn't that interesting? What would she need one for? And the other for… Oh my god, she had posted a job for an IT specialist. Caleb sat up straight. He clicked on the job description and read it with rising excitement. She'd titled the position IT specialist, but what she was asking for was more of a cybersecurity specialist. Just when Caleb was ramping up his efforts to get into her systems, she wanted to find someone to keep hackers out.

What if he…? Whitman and Coldrick might know his name, but they wouldn't have his picture. Caleb was a stickler for keeping his face off the Internet, and he'd even gotten a buzz cut and let his beard grow for his driver's license picture. If he ever got pulled over, the photo still looked like

him, but it would be much harder to recognize him with a casual glance now that his hair was much longer.

He'd have to create an alias, one that was solid enough to withstand a background check, but that wasn't too hard for him. Backstopping, the FBI called it when creating a background for an undercover agent, and they'd become masters at it. Caleb had learned a lot from an agent who'd spilled some secrets on a forum—anonymously, of course.

With his hacking skills, creating a plausible background wasn't that big a deal. The biggest challenge was a social security number, since it would have to match and show the appropriate activity. And since he had no desire to spend a life sentence in prison, hacking into the Social Security Administration wasn't an option, though he sure would've relished the challenge. But he could think of ways around that.

Decision made, he all but ran down the stairs to Wander's office and came to a full stop. Roman sat opposite his brother, looking sad and dejected. Caleb wanted nothing more than to kneel at his feet and make him feel better, but now wasn't the time.

"Hi," he said stupidly, then shook himself mentally. "Sir. Sirs."

"What's up, kid?" Wander asked, and Caleb tore his gaze away from Roman and focused on his boss.

"I came across something interesting. Something we could use to our advantage."

"Talk to me."

"Coldrick Law has a job opening for an IT specialist, but what they're really looking for is a cybersecurity specialist."

"You're shitting me."

"Nope, they do." He raised his chin. "And I want to apply."

"No!" Roman jumped up. "Absolutely not."

"Sit your ass down, Ro," Wander said mildly. "At least give the kid the courtesy of letting him make his case."

Roman wasn't happy about being corrected by his brother, that much was clear, but Caleb didn't back down. He wasn't here as a submissive. He'd come as a team member of Dwyer Security, and he had a job to do. "We need an in with Coldrick. You said it yourself, Roman. You know she's involved, but she's impossible to get to. Well, if I apply for this job and get

hired, I could get into her system. None of it would be admissible in court, but at least we'd know where to look and who to investigate."

"You'd need an alias," Wander said slowly. "But you do have the skills to get hired."

"Yeah, I'd have to spend some time backstopping, but I'm overqualified for the job, so they should hire me. It's not like there are many of us available in this job market."

"Which means you'd also need a good story as to why you're applying. She has to know you could do better than her firm."

Hmm, Wander was right. Caleb would have to have a good reason for preferring Coldrick Law over other, potentially more lucrative, companies. Maybe something about wanting to stay in Boston? "I could say my boyfriend got a job in Boston?"

"You'd have to sell it, but that could work." Wander leaned back in his chair, steepling his fingers. "I'm not wild about you being on your own, though. You'd have no backup if something went wrong."

"Exactly," Roman said. "It's far too dangerous, and I won't have it."

Caleb quirked an eyebrow. "No offense, but that's not your call. I don't work for you."

"But…but…" Roman looked shocked. "I thought we…"

"You thought that because I'm a sub and you've been my Dom for the last few days, you could also boss me around in my job?"

Roman's cheeks colored crimson. "I guess that's not how it works, is it?"

Caleb wasn't angry with him. The separation between private and work, between play and real life, was hard to navigate, even for more experienced people in the lifestyle, let alone for a newbie like Roman. "Your brother is my boss, Roman. You're my Dom right now, but that has no bearing on this decision. When we're in your bedroom, you can tell me what to do. In this office, you can't. You can offer suggestions, and I will listen, but you're not in charge here."

"Right. Sorry, I didn't mean to…" He vaguely gestured.

"No harm done. It can be confusing." Caleb turned to Wander. "I understand the risks, and this is not something I offer lightly, but it's such a fantastic opportunity to get access to her. In my opinion, that outweighs the risks."

“I have to admit it’s tempting, especially considering what the job entails. You’d have full access to her entire system.”

“That’s the assumption, yes. I’m not sure if someone in her position would open the doors entirely to a new employee immediately, though. She may limit my access at first, and I wouldn’t blame her. In fact, if I truly did work for her, that’s what I’d tell her to do.”

“Then maybe mention that. If you get hired, I mean. Or in the job interview. That would create a sense of trust on her end,” Wander said.

“So you’re on board with this?” Caleb’s heart skipped a beat.

“No, not yet. I’m willing to entertain the idea, but I’ll need to discuss it with the whole team first. I want everyone to weigh in on this one, Ryan and Alex especially, since they’ll have the best idea of how dangerous Whitman is.”

“He hasn’t done anything violent, has he?” Caleb asked.

“Yet,” Roman said shortly. “He hasn’t done anything violent yet that we know of. He’s capable of anything, though, and he may do crazy things if cornered.”

“Roman’s right,” Wander said. “Just because he hasn’t resorted to violence yet doesn’t mean he won’t, especially if they find out who you really are.”

“So I’d better build one hell of an alias,” Caleb said. “Is it okay if I get started on that? Because Ryan and Alex won’t be back for another two days, and I don’t want to miss the deadline to apply for the job.”

Wander nodded. “You can build your backstory and apply once that’s done. But you can’t go for an interview until I’ve formally approved it. Deal?”

“Yes, Sir.”

Wander rose from his chair. “Burke just got home, and I’m in the mood to spend some quality time with my boyfriend, so I’m gonna head to our bedroom. Why don’t you two stay and talk? Sounds to me like you still have some communicating to do.”

With that, he walked out, leaving Caleb with Roman, who looked at him sheepishly. “I didn’t mean to…you know, make the decision for you.”

Caleb chuckled as he slid onto Roman’s lap. Conversations like this were so much easier sitting close together. When Roman pulled him close, he leaned against the man’s chest. “Oh, I think you absolutely meant to

make the decision for me, but you got called out. And that's okay. You're not the first Dom who thinks he can cross that line with a sub, and you won't be the last."

"Jesus, you don't pull your punches, do you? But thank you for your understanding. I'm well aware I fucked up."

Caleb snuggled against that soft chest. "It's all good, but I hope you now understand the difference between Caleb the sub and Caleb the cybersecurity specialist."

"I'll try to remember, but I may mess up a few times more before I get the hang of this."

Caleb swallowed. That sounded an awful lot like someone who was counting on more of these situations, right? Someone who was, consciously or subconsciously, planning for a future together?

No, he couldn't allow himself to think like that, to get his hopes up. He had to take this one day at a time. Otherwise, he'd drive himself crazy. Besides, it wasn't like he was in love with Roman or anything. Right?

Shit. Too fast, too soon. He couldn't.

Instead, he fell back on what came most naturally to him.

"For now, let me be your sub again," he whispered.

He slid off Roman's lap and sank to his knees, the plush carpet brushing against his legs like a welcome caress. The room seemed to hold its breath, and time slowed to a crawl as Caleb tilted his head up, his gaze locked on Roman's. His submission wasn't an act. It was etched into his very being, a core part of who he was.

He waited as silence stretched between them. The air crackled, charged with a current of anticipation that buzzed beneath his skin. He was like a live wire. All his senses homed in on Roman, hands resting on his thighs, fingers twitching with the urge to touch. This was where he belonged, at Roman's feet, ready to serve, ready to give himself over to whatever Roman had in mind. The rest of the world, with its chaos and questions, faded until all that remained was Roman, his command, and Caleb's eagerness to comply.

Roman swallowed. "What do you want to do for me?"

Caleb's throat tightened. Words lodged there, thick and eager. "Anything, Sir. Everything."

“Be specific.” Roman’s tone was a challenge wrapped in velvet, a command that demanded truth.

Caleb’s world narrowed to the man before him, his Dom. “I want to serve you, Sir. To obey you. To give you pleasure…in any form you desire.”

“Good boy.” Roman’s approval was simple, direct, and shot through Caleb like the finest whiskey—warm, intoxicating, addictive.

This was what he needed to focus on. Not on the future but on the present. Not on what might or might not be but about what was right here, right now.

On his Dom.

And on his submission.

Nothing else mattered.

17

He'd fucked up the day before, not a feeling Roman was accustomed to. Caleb had been graceful about it, showing nothing but understanding, but still, the embarrassment was real. He wasn't used to having to defer to others, least of all people who were much younger than him…and submissive. Yes, he had mixed up personal and professional with Caleb. Stupid, but he wouldn't make that mistake again.

That said, he still didn't like the idea of Caleb working for Isabella Coldrick. Not that Roman had any better ideas to get close to her, but the risks were too high. What if Coldrick discovered who Caleb was? What if Whitman found out? He hadn't shown violence so far, but a man who stood on the brink of losing everything was unpredictable. How far would Whitman go to protect his empire? Roman's gut said he'd go to great lengths.

But as Wander had made clear, the decision didn't lie with Roman. It was Caleb's call, and ultimately Wander's, and Roman would have to deal with it one way or another. And he would. Didn't mean he couldn't be a little salty about it.

"Let's get started," Wander said, and Roman focused on his brother. Ryan and Alex had returned from Boston and had a lot to share, so Wander had called another team meeting. He had refused to give details, but something told Roman it wouldn't be good news.

“Let’s start with the bad news,” Ryan said, and Roman mentally braced himself. “Rumors are circulating that there’s a price on Roman’s head.”

Roman jerked his head up, his heart skipping a beat. “What?”

“Two people confirmed they’ve been approached to take Roman out. The preference is to take him out of commission permanently and not kill him, but if there’s no other way, murder is acceptable. The reward is a million dollars.”

Roman’s lungs seized. A million dollars? Jesus, he was done for. For that much money, there would be a line out the door.

“I’m sorry,” Ryan said.

Roman held up his hand, unable to speak. He wasn’t sure what the expected reaction was when one found out there was a contract on one’s head, but surely shock would be okay.

“How credible are your sources?” Lowell asked.

“Very credible. I talked to a high-ranking Boston PD cop. And by the way, I do suspect Whitman has some cops on his payroll because my source said as soon as the rumors about Roman popped up, they were squashed hard by his superiors and labeled as unsubstantiated. Someone’s going to great lengths to make sure this credible threat on his life isn’t taken seriously.”

Roman swallowed. He’d suspected this for a while, but to hear it confirmed was still hard. How could he fight an enemy he couldn’t see? Whitman’s reach was so much longer and deeper than Roman could ever have imagined.

“I’m already trying to establish possible connections between Whitman and any LEOs,” Caleb said. “So far, I’ve found a few suspicious donations the senator made to relatively small and unknown law enforcement-related charities. One is linked to a Boston PD lieutenant, so my money is on him being dirty.”

Lowell muttered a curse. “I hate nothing more than dirty cops. They’re the ones who give us all a bad name.”

“Hear, hear,” Ryan agreed. “It’s the worst betrayal of everything that badge stands for.”

“Keep digging, Caleb,” Wander said. “In the meantime, I’ve called in a second team from a friend of mine to support us so we can focus on getting this bastard because we’ve already seen some activity. This weekend, two

unwelcome guests showed up at Jesse's club. Two men with Boston accents. These guys were asking about you, Ro."

A cold shiver ran over Roman's spine, the sensation too familiar. The kind of chill that crawled up your skin when eyes lingered too long, a presence in the shadows watching, waiting. His gut twisted.

"So they know where I am," Roman said, but it came out in a near whisper through the tightness in his throat.

"Sure looks like it," Lowell said with a sigh.

"High alert, everyone. No screw-ups." Wander's words fell like a gavel, final and resounding. His eyes, shards of ice, locked on Roman. "You're grounded, Ro. No more leaving the house."

Roman's throat constricted even more, and he felt as if the walls of the meeting room were pressing in close. The familiar itch to push back, to claim his autonomy, surged through his veins. But this was no courtroom where he wielded power, no professional situation where he was in charge. This was real, raw chaos snapping at his heels.

"Understood," he said, the heavy taste of confinement on his tongue. His very life was on the line, but he could still resent it, hate it.

"We also have good news," Ryan said. "We discovered Penelope Whitman, the senator's wife, is having an affair with her gardener. Yes, it's very cliché, but also very true."

"Can you blame her?" Alex quipped as he put a picture of the gardener on the screen. In his midthirties, with a powerful build forged by manual labor, a beautiful complexion, and soulful brown eyes, the man in question was indeed attractive.

Roman leaned forward. Thank god for the change of topic. He'd ten times rather focus on this than on the sickening realization of the danger he was in. A gardener, huh? Power plays were second nature in his line of work, but infidelity was a wild card that added a dangerous unpredictability to their strategy.

Ryan was relaying the details of late-night trysts and hushed conversations overheard by others, but Roman's mind raced. How could they use this info?

"I talked to her," Roman said when Ryan finished. "But she sealed up tighter than a damn vault."

Ryan shrugged. “We found out from others, then pressed her into telling the truth. She wasn’t happy about it, but once she started talking, she didn’t shut up.”

Roman tapped his fingers on the table. What had caused Penelope Whitman to change course? “Do you think she suspects something’s up?”

“Oh, I’m certain of it. This woman deserves an Oscar for playing the dumb trophy wife because she’s anything but stupid. And her survival instinct is finely honed. She senses trouble, and she’s gonna make sure she comes out on the other side and not go down with her husband.”

“We should be able to use that,” Lowell said. “It’s evident she married him for the money and the social standing, so if we make it clear she could lose all that, it would provide a powerful motive for her to cooperate. Threaten her with the fallout of Whitman’s crash and offer her a way out that keeps her name clean and her pockets lined.”

Ryan nodded. “I’m not sure how much she knows, though. I have no doubt she’s aware he’s up to his eyeballs in illegal dealings, but I don’t think she knows details, so as a witness, she’s not the strongest one.”

In this twisted game of dominance and deceit, sometimes the right incentive could compel a person to kneel. And if there was anything Roman understood instinctively, it was leverage—the kind that left a person bare and wanting or, in this case, desperate for a lifeline.

“All right, let’s dangle the carrot of a graceful exit before her and see what that gets us.”

“Do you wanna do it officially, or would you prefer me to handle it?” Alex asked.

If Roman went the official route, his whole staff would soon find out. There was no way to keep this secret. That meant that whoever was feeding Whitman information would pass along that bit as well, endangering not only Roman’s investigation but possibly Penelope Whitman’s safety. He couldn’t take that risk. “You handle this. She opened up to you, so she has at least some measure of trust. And I’m afraid that if I get involved, it will get back to the wrong people.”

“Unfortunately, that’s a legit risk,” Ryan said. “There’s no predicting what Whitman will do if he finds out his wife is about to turn on him.”

“Exactly.”

“We’ve made good progress on creating a list of Whitman’s connections and dividing them into categories of influence and importance.” Wander nodded at Alex, who clicked the remote. On the screen, a list of names appeared with brief descriptions and, in many cases, a picture. Most of the names were familiar to Roman, the same ones he’d come across in his investigation, but he also spotted some new ones.

“Efficient,” he said.

“Most of this is Caleb’s work,” Wander said. “Kid’s a genius at digging up dirt.”

“Exceptional.” Roman’s gaze lingered on the tattoos peeking out from beneath the sleeves of Caleb’s hoodie. The man’s appearance belied the sharpness of his mind. The contrast never ceased to intrigue Roman.

“Thanks.” Caleb was beaming. “Just give me a target, and I’ll uncover whatever you need.”

“Speaking of Caleb,” Wander said. Roman clenched his jaw. He knew what was coming. “He has suggested going undercover with Coldrick Law, since they have a position open for an IT specialist.”

Ryan’s eyes widened. “For real? That’s perfect.”

Caleb leaned forward, his eyes alight with a fervor that was both infectious and terrifying, and his lean frame vibrated with barely contained energy.

“Think of how deep we can go with this. With that level of access, I could get inside Coldrick Law and find out everything we need. We’d have Whitman by the balls.”

“Easy, tiger.” Wander chuckled, but the approval in his tone was clear.

Caleb’s excitement was contagious, sparking from him to every team member. Everyone nodded along, murmuring their assent. Everyone, except Roman, that was.

“Guys, come on.” Roman rubbed the bridge of his nose, frustration simmering beneath his skin. “We’re talking about sending him into the lion’s den. It’s not just files and data. It’s dangerous.”

“I can handle myself,” Caleb said.

“Of course you can,” Wander said before Roman could argue further. “That’s not up for debate. But the question is if the potential benefits outweigh the risks, and I would ask that for anyone on the team.”

“Sure, it’s a gamble, but think of what I could access, the intel I could gather.”

“Or you could get caught,” Roman shot back. The image of Caleb in Whitman’s crosshairs raised the hairs on the back of his neck. “We don’t know how deep this goes or who’s watching.”

“Which is exactly why we need someone on the inside,” Ryan said. “He’d have the kind of access you could only dream of.”

Caleb nodded. “I’d have direct access to Coldrick’s files and possibly even her communications with Whitman and their strategies.”

“But you’d be exposed, vulnerable,” Roman said. “One slip-up and you’re compromised. If she’s as deeply involved as we suspect, she’s dangerous. They won’t play fair.”

“I blend in. No one suspects the quiet tech guy.”

“Boss,” Caleb said to Wander, “this is our shot. I can do this. You know my record.”

Caleb was competent—no, more than that—he was brilliant. But brilliance didn’t stop bullets or blunt knives. Roman searched Caleb’s face for any hint of doubt, any sign this was more bravado than bravery. He found none.

“It might be our only chance to get the evidence we need,” Wander said, tipping the scales with a finality that Roman loathed to admit. “So you have my approval. But you better make sure your fictitious backstory stands up to a serious background check, yeah? I can’t imagine her letting just anyone get access to her files.”

“Yes, boss.”

And with that, they were preparing to make their next move in this high-stakes chess game, and all Roman could do was hope and pray they were ready for whatever countermove Whitman would make.

18

Caleb gripped the steering wheel of his rental car with sweaty hands as Boston's skyline loomed ahead like a concrete giant. The rapid beat of his heart echoed the thrum of tires on asphalt. He was close now, the investigation hinging on his success at the job interview.

Caleb Lingle had become Cal Lawrence, complete with a backstory and proper ID. The background check wouldn't be an issue—he'd made sure of that—and he barely looked like himself anymore now that he'd gone back to a buzz cut. His long hair had made him too recognizable, and even though it had hurt, he hadn't hesitated in taking it off. He looked like Cal now, but would he be able to play the role required of him? Only time would tell.

He'd driven his own car until he was sure he wasn't being tailed, then switched it for a rental with Massachusetts plates that wouldn't stand out as much.

"Ex-military." He tapped his fingers on the wheel. "Honorably discharged and moving with my boyfriend to Boston." The backstory was frugal but solid, designed to raise no questions yet offer a respectful nod to his supposed service.

Another deep breath filled his lungs. He was doing this for Roman. An unexpected shiver ran down his spine. Caleb wanted nothing more than to keep him safe…and make him proud. God, he would miss him when he got

the job. That was the biggest downside. He wouldn't be able to commute. The three-hour drive was far too long. No, he'd have to stay in Boston and hate every night of it. That was a much higher price to pay than losing his hair.

He took the exit ramp that spiraled toward the heart of the city, the stark lines of office buildings like LEGO blocks on the horizon. Parking was easy, courtesy of the access code he'd received, and he parked in the garage under the building, then made his way up to the eleventh floor, where Coldrick Law resided.

He squared his shoulders, the weight of the whole team's trust in him heavy. The reception area was all minimalist lines and cold efficiency. Behind a sleek desk sat a dark-haired woman with a headset typing furiously. She didn't look up.

"I'm here for a job interview with Isabella Coldrick," he said.

Her gaze flicked up, measuring him. Nodding curtly, she gestured toward the waiting area. "Have a seat. She'll be with you shortly."

Caleb perched on the edge of a black leather chair, its chill seeping through his clothes. The minutes crawled. He imagined Roman's hand at the small of his back, grounding him. He focused on that imaginary warmth, letting it silence the doubts gnawing at his calm.

"Mr. Lawrence?"

Standing there was Isabella Coldrick, clad in a tailored suit that whispered power and control. Her handshake was firm, her skin warm against his own.

"Thank you for your patience," she said, her smile professional yet genuine. "Shall we?"

"Yes, ma'am," Caleb replied, following her.

The path to her office was a maze designed to intimidate, but Isabella Coldrick walked with graceful movements and a commanding presence. Her office was a contrast to the sterile hallways and waiting room—rich woods and deep reds with Japanese-style art on the walls. She invited him to sit across from her expansive desk.

"Your résumé is impressive," Isabella said, her voice smooth as polished steel. "First, thank you for your service. What can you tell me about your time in the military?"

The way she worded that made it clear she understood he wouldn't be able to tell her everything. Exactly why they'd chosen this for his background. "I was a cybersecurity officer stationed at the Pentagon for five years, ma'am. My specialty was preventing cyber-attacks by developing early warning systems or adapting commercially available systems for our purposes."

"Why did you choose to enlist after your college degree? You could've worked anywhere."

Lowell had been the one who had predicted this question, and he'd also given Caleb the perfect answer. "I felt a sense of duty to my country. I feel every young man should serve in the military for at least two years. It teaches discipline and structure, but it also instills a sense of purpose and a love for your country. I'm proud of my service and the way I was able to contribute to the safety of our country."

"So why did you quit?"

"I decided not to reenlist because I'd met my boyfriend, now fiancé, and it was time for me to transition into civilian life."

"Gotcha." She leaned back. "I called Colonel Lewis, and he spoke very highly of you."

"Thank you, ma'am. I'm glad to hear that." Colonel Lewis had been Lowell, who had served in the military and knew the lingo to sell Caleb's background.

"He said you were the brightest on his team."

Caleb shuffled his feet. "That's… Thank you, ma'am." He laughed self-consciously. "The colonel certainly never shared that with me, but that's the military for you."

He'd been waiting for a moment to throw in a soft joke like that, and Isabella chuckled as if on cue. "Well, he certainly sang your praises to me. Said he was sorry to see you go."

"Yes, ma'am."

"What does your fiancé do, if I may ask?"

That had been the topic of a lot of debate. They'd needed a respectable job for him, but one that was strictly local and also wouldn't ever link him to Whitman. "He's an air traffic controller at Logan, ma'am."

She whistled between her teeth. "That's a high-stress job."

“Yes, ma’am. I couldn’t do it, but he loves it. He’s the calmest person you’ll ever meet. Everything could be falling apart around him, and he’d be the only one giving orders and not panicking.”

“I suppose that’s a requirement for a job like that. I can’t imagine having to do that at a big airport like Logan.”

“He loves it, which is why I had to move here. He’s so good at what he does that I didn’t want to make him move.”

“That makes sense, but why did you decide to apply here? No offense, but with your résumé, you could do better.”

They’d expected this question too. The fact that, so far, he’d been prepared for everything she’d thrown at him gave Caleb confidence. “In all honesty, ma’am, I don’t expect to stay for more than two years. But right now, transitioning back into civilian life will require time and energy, plus my fiancé and I have a wedding to plan. I specifically applied for a job that wouldn’t expect crazy hours and wouldn’t come with absurd amounts of stress.”

She smiled, her gaze dissecting him like he was a puzzle she was determined to solve. “I appreciate your honesty.”

“I’d understand if that doesn’t work for you, but I wanted to set expectations from the start, ma’am.”

“Which I respect. This job does come with challenges, but mostly in terms of what’s still lacking and what you’d have to develop. We have the required basic cybersecurity, but I want to level up. We have important clients, for whom attorney-client privilege is sacred, and we can’t afford to be hacked and for the wrong people to get access to our systems.”

“Understood, ma’am. I’m confident I can raise your cybersecurity to Pentagon levels. That’s not me bragging. That’s me giving you a guarantee.”

Relief filled her face. “I like your confidence.”

“This isn’t a job where good enough cuts it. You either have to do it well or not do it at all.”

“I could’ve said that myself. You’ll find we aspire to high standards here.”

“As do I, ma’am.”

She chuckled, looking years younger all of a sudden and much more like the relaxed woman in the pic with her sisters than the ice-cold lawyer.

“Do you think there’s a chance you could stop calling me ma’am?”

Caleb grimaced. “I doubt it, ma’am. Not anytime soon anyway, but I can try if you’d like me to. It’s become a habit. One that’s hard to break.”

She waved her hand. “In the bigger scheme of things, I can get over that minor infraction. When would you be able to start?”

“Immediately.”

“We’d set up a trial period of, say, a month. Maybe two.”

“Understood, ma’am. I also assume I’d only get partial access to your system during that time, which is only prudent.”

Her eyes widened ever so slightly before she caught herself. “Of course. Our information is sensitive. Client confidentiality is paramount.”

Caleb nodded. “I don’t walk into places expecting to have all the keys handed to me. Trust is earned. I plan to earn yours, ma’am.”

Isabella leaned back in her chair, tapping her pen on her desk. “I believe you’re exactly what we’re looking for. The position is yours if you want it.”

Caleb’s breath hitched and disbelief warred with triumph. This was it, the infiltration point, a crack in the armor of Coldrick Law. He’d done it. Yet the weight of what lay ahead pressed on him as a reminder of the risks, of Roman’s worried frown.

“Fantastic,” he blurted out, then got himself under control again. “I appreciate you giving me a chance, ma’am. When would you like me to start?”

“Let’s say Monday. That will give you the weekend to prepare yourself. I’ll have HR set up a contract for you and email that to you.”

“Sounds perfect, ma’am.”

“Very well, Mr. Lawrence. Welcome aboard.” Isabella stood, extending her hand across the battlefield of her desk.

Caleb rose and took it, his grip as firm as hers.

“Thank you, ma’am,” he said again, a sense of purpose solidifying within him. “You won’t regret it.”

She led him back to the exit, and he remained calm as he said goodbye. He walked out, each step measured, betraying none of the storm brewing inside. Behind him, the door closed, the click like the cocking of a gun. He had two days. Two days to prepare for the role of a lifetime—surviving in enemy territory.

Cheers went up when he got back to the mansion—after making sure his car had no trackers and no one followed him—and announced he'd gotten the job.

"Congrats, kid," Wander said, the gruff edge to his voice not quite masking his concern. "You're playing in the big leagues now."

"Damn straight." Caleb shot back, a half-cocked grin tugging at his lips despite the gravity of the situation.

Relief flooded through him, a sweet release after the tension of the interview. Yet beneath it simmered an undercurrent of something else—pride, maybe, or the thrill of the challenge ahead. It was a feeling he savored, one that reminded him of why he fought, why he played the game.

"Let's toast to the man of the hour," Ryan called out, and glasses were raised in salute.

Caleb's gaze flicked to the empty chair, Roman's absence a silent scream in the celebration. Soon, he'd seek him out, address the worry he knew would be etched in those dark eyes. But for now, Caleb let the camaraderie wash over him, anchoring himself in the present, in the victory.

The celebration had waned, the last echoes of laughter and clinking glasses fading into a quiet blanketing the mansion. Caleb's sense of triumph was a receding tide, ebbing away as he felt Roman's absence. The weight of what had been left unsaid pulled at Caleb's gut.

He found Roman in his room, the space dimly lit, the air heavy with an unspoken tension. Roman sat on the edge of the bed, his hands clasped tightly, the knuckles white. He'd hung his jacket over a chair, loosened his tie, and rolled up his sleeves, his usual impeccable appearance like a shield discarded.

"Roman," Caleb whispered, but it was enough to draw those deep brown eyes up to meet his.

"Judging by the cheers, I assume you got the job?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Caleb." Roman's use of Caleb's name now bore a different tone, one laden with concern. "You sure about this?"

Caleb nodded, but the certainty he'd felt earlier was a flickering flame in the draft of Roman's worry. He closed the distance between them until he stood before him. Without a word, he dropped to his knees, the gesture raw and telling.

Roman gasped, his gaze locked on Caleb's submission. It was a silent conversation, but this wasn't about play or power exchange. This was comfort, connection, Caleb's way of saying he understood the risks and the fear that shadowed them both.

"Jesus, Caleb," Roman muttered, the words rough around the edges. He reached out his hand, hovered, then gently rested it atop Caleb's head. The tremble in that touch showed a vulnerability rarely seen in the stoic DA.

"Hey," Caleb said softly, looking up, "I've got this. I'm not some rookie."

"I know. I'm an ass. I should've… Fuck, Caleb, I should've handled this better." Roman raked a hand through his short dark hair, a gesture of frustration that Caleb found both endearing and heart-wrenching.

Caleb's throat tightened, but he managed to keep his composure. "You don't have to apologize for caring."

"Yeah, but…" Roman sighed heavily as if the weight of his words was almost too much to bear. "I'm worried about you taking this job, stepping into the lion's den. It's not just the risk. It's the thought of you…of anything happening to you." His voice dropped to a whisper, a confession torn from somewhere deep within.

Did that mean Roman cared for him? Like, truly cared for him? Caleb was afraid to ask. Instead, he placed a tentative hand on Roman's forearm, the warmth of his skin grounding him. A storm of feelings swirled in Roman's gaze. Caleb's heart thudded against his ribcage. For a moment, time seemed suspended, the world reduced to the space they shared. Then Roman exhaled, a surrendering breath that seemed to carry the weight of his fears.

"Caleb, my sweet boy," Roman said. The unexpected term of endearment sent lightning sparks through Caleb's body. "I know you're competent and skilled." He lifted his hand to Caleb's shoulder but didn't touch it as though afraid the contact might shatter them both. "I'm scared for you. Scared shitless. I can't mask that with pleasure or pain. Not this time. I need—"

His voice broke, a rare crack in Roman's composed facade. He swallowed hard, Adam's apple bobbing. "I need more than that."

The words stung like a slap of reality cold against Caleb's cheek. Wasn't his surrender enough? "More?"

“I need you. Not Caleb the sub. Caleb the man. No games, no play. Just you and me.”

Caleb’s breath hitched, the sting blooming into understanding. This wasn’t a rejection. This was Roman laid bare, stripped of the pretense that their games could outrun reality. Caleb rose, closing the space Roman’s fear had carved out.

“Okay,” Caleb said, voice thick. “Tonight, we’re Caleb and Roman, not sub and Dom.”

“Christ,” Roman murmured, relief mingling with the turmoil across his features. “You have no idea how much I needed to hear that.”

Conflicted emotions played across Roman’s face, a storm brewing in those rich brown eyes that had seen too much and still dared to hope. The room felt charged with an intensity that had nothing to do with dominance and submission but everything to do with the raw honesty that vulnerability demanded.

Something unspoken passed between them. Roman rose and pulled Caleb up, and they stood chest to chest, the air between them thick with things unsaid.

“Come here,” Roman whispered. It wasn’t a command but an invitation, a plea.

Caleb went willingly into the embrace, wrapping his arms around Roman’s broader frame, finding solace in the strength of his hold. Roman’s arms settled around him, a fortress against the chaos of the world outside. Their bodies aligned perfectly, fitting together as though molded from the same clay.

“Tonight, let’s forget the roles, the expectations.” Roman’s breath was warm against Caleb’s scalp. “Let’s just be us, no scenes, no power play. Just…together.”

A shiver ran down Caleb’s spine, not from fear or cold but from the profound sense of connection Roman’s words evoked. He nodded against Roman’s chest, the steady beat of his heart a reassurance that no words could match.

“Let’s get ready for bed,” Caleb said, his voice husky with the remnants of vulnerability. The room now crackled with a different kind of tension, one devoid of whispered commands and obedient submission yet somehow more intense.

Roman kept his gaze locked on Caleb's, unguarded and raw. They moved in sync toward the bed, shedding layers of clothing with each step. Ties loosened, shirts unbuttoned, their usual meticulous undressing replaced by an urgency to simply be close.

In the muted light of the bedroom, Roman brushed his hands over Caleb's skin, tracing the lines of ink that mapped Caleb's history. His touch was no longer that of a Dom seeking submission but of a man yearning for connection. Caleb leaned into the caress, soaking up the warmth radiating from Roman's fingertips.

Roman pulled Caleb toward the bed. They lay side by side, facing each other, a collision of need and reassurance. When their lips met, the kiss conveyed their mutual desire for closeness without the trappings of their usual dynamic.

They deepened the kiss, mouths opening, breaths mingling, hands touching and exploring. They broke apart, their foreheads resting together as they caught their breaths. Roman's eyes, usually so full of authority, shimmered with something softer now. Caleb saw his own fears and hopes reflected at him.

"Stay with me," Roman said, not a command but a plea.

"Yes, Sir. Roman."

They slid under the sheets, cool against their heated skin. Roman stretched an inviting arm open for Caleb to nestle into. With a contented sigh, Caleb curled against Roman's side and his head found its place on Roman's chest as if it belonged there.

Before Caleb knew it, he was asleep.

19

“Heard Caleb spent the night in your room,” Wander said and lit his Cuban cigar with his engraved Zippo, a gift from Roman.

Roman sighed as he settled in the reading chair across from his brother. He lit his cigar and took a few puffs. “Not much escapes you, does it?”

“If it did, I should find a different profession.”

“Fair enough.”

Wander quirked an eyebrow. “You wanna tell me what’s going on?”

“If you want me to answer that, you’ll have to be more specific because there’s a lot going on at the moment.”

“Caleb. Talk to me about Caleb.”

Roman hadn’t expected his brother to back off, but a man could dream. “I don’t know,” he said, and wasn’t that the truth?

He had no fucking clue what he was doing. For the first time in his life, he was flying blind, and what was even more astonishing was that he didn’t mind so much. While he’d always needed control in every area of his life, somehow, he was okay with letting things develop naturally with Caleb. No rules, no promises, no secrets. Just that inexplicable connection, that invisible thread that bound them together.

“I’m gonna need a little more than that.”

Roman threw up his hands. “I don’t know what else to tell you. I’m as surprised as you by our… Whatever it is we share. This connection, this

bond.”

Wander blew out a big puff of smoke. “Having sex is one thing, but sleeping together, sharing a bed, that’s much more. That’s intimacy.”

“You’re telling me. I haven’t shared a bed with anyone since the day Yolanda moved out.”

“So why now? Why Caleb?”

Wander wouldn’t give up until Roman had at least made an honest attempt to answer his question. That much was becoming clear. “We had this connection from day one. Chemistry but more than sexual. He saw something in me I didn’t know was inside me, a layer of myself that had been hidden this whole time.”

“He saw the Dom.”

“Yes, and I still don’t understand how when I had no idea myself. All this time, I’ve known you were in this lifestyle, but not once did I develop an urge to experiment or to test if I had kinky tendencies. Not until Caleb.”

“So, where do you see this going? You’ve always been clear you can’t afford to come out as bi in your job, so training to become a Dom is out of the question.”

Roman’s phone buzzed, and he flinched. That damned ringtone—like an alarm bell to his fraying sanity. He checked the caller ID. It was Blake Monahan, the state attorney and, as such, his boss. Fuck. Heart hammering, he swiped the screen.

“Roman.”

“Roman, what the ever-loving fuck is going on with you?”

“Excuse me, sir?”

“You haven’t been in the office for two weeks. Working remotely for such an extended period of time is not allowed without prior authorization, which I do not remember granting.”

Roman swallowed. “I’ve been dealing with some personal issues.”

“Yeah, well, my patience with that excuse is wearing thin. Either return to work or resign.” Monahan’s voice was as cold and emotionless as the blade of a guillotine poised above Roman’s neck.

Resign? His heart sank. “I’m the lead on the Whitman investigation, sir. Without me, that—”

“You’ve become obsessed with that case to the point where I can’t help but question your objectivity.”

“You know about the threats against me, sir. I’ve reported each and every one.”

“I also know about the accusations your secretary made, your unsubstantiated claim someone reorganized your files, and about you causing an accident and not even remembering it, not to mention all the online rumors circulating about you. You can’t fault me for questioning your professionalism.”

No, he couldn’t. Which had been exactly what Whitman had intended to achieve. “I’ve never acted anything but professional, sir. My evidence in this case is above reproach.”

A long pause. “I don’t know about that, to be honest. I fear that with all this happening, Whitman’s lawyers would have a field day with you in court and would most likely manage to get some of your evidence thrown out.”

Roman sagged in his chair, his limbs feeling like lead. All this time, he’d worked his ass off in his job, and now that it came down to it, his boss questioned his professionalism? “I may be the lead, sir, but I’m far from the only one working on this case.”

“I know that.” Monahan cleared his throat. “But you can’t deny my concern is valid. Maybe stepping away wouldn’t be the worst thing, both for you and the case.”

Stepping away? Roman’s lungs seized so fiercely he struggled to draw a breath. He could only think of one reason why his boss, who had always supported him, would take this position. Whitman had gotten to him.

His mind raced, thoughts colliding. Should he walk away? He needed to keep chasing Whitman, but quitting meant losing resources and power. Returning to work was playing their game, wearing their noose around his neck. And it would only be a matter of time before it would tighten. He needed a strategic retreat. He looked up and met his brother’s eyes, heavy with unspoken words and shared resolve, and he nodded at Wander.

“Maybe you’re right,” Roman said, his voice cool but laced with an edge of defeat he hoped sounded genuine. “Lately, the investigation into Whitman has not been going well, and I’m hitting walls there. I’ve also been dealing with health issues.” Technically not a lie, considering the stress gnawing at his insides. “Maybe I need time to clear my head and get a fresh perspective.” Bile rose in his throat, but he forced the words out.

The silence on the other end spoke volumes. Roman's pulse throbbed in his temples. He pictured Whitman, smug and untouchable, protected by the very laws Roman had sworn to uphold.

"How much time are we talking?" The state attorney's tone was a blend of curiosity and skepticism.

"Four weeks should do it. I've got plenty of leave saved up."

"Four weeks…" Another pause, a consideration Roman knew was more about optics than concern.

"I'll step back from the Whitman case, regroup." Roman tightened his hand around the phone, the four-leaf clover tattoo on his arm stretching with the strain. He needed this, not just for his job but to strategize to outmaneuver Whitman's next play.

"Fine," came the reluctant response. "Four weeks. But I'm not making promises about you returning as lead in the case, Roman. We'll have to evaluate when you return."

"Understood." Roman ended the call abruptly, his breaths shallow. He'd bought himself time, but at what cost?

The silence in the room was deafening. Roman still gripped the phone tightly, knuckles white.

"Talk to me, Roman."

His brother's command shook him from his stupor. "Whitman isn't a snake. He's a hydra. Cut off one head, and two more grow back."

"You're officially off the case now?"

"At least for the next four weeks."

"Smart move."

"Feels like cowardice," Roman spat out. God, he hated the taste of retreat.

"If Whitman thinks you're off the job, he may leave you alone. That could give us some breathing room and time for Caleb to infiltrate Coldrick. We adapt for now and fight another day."

Roman released a sigh that seemed to come from his soul. "I don't know anymore. Whitman's influence is so much deeper and more far-reaching than I had ever expected."

He relit his cigar, which had gone out during the call, and inhaled deeply, the rich tobacco bitter on his tongue.

"You're questioning whether you can win this fight?" Wander asked.

Roman blew out a circle of smoke. “It’s hard not to when he keeps outmaneuvering me at every turn. This call had his fingerprints all over it. If he’s gotten to the state attorney, what chance do I have?”

They sat quietly, smoking their cigars.

“It comes down to our previous question. Do we want to bring Whitman down by legal means, or do we want to destroy him by whatever means available?” Wander asked.

“If I fully embrace the latter, my career as a DA is over.” Roman had no doubts about that. Even if he operated behind the scenes, sooner or later, his true involvement would leak, and he’d be fired. “I can’t advocate for vigilante justice as a DA, not even under these circumstances.”

Wander slowly nodded. “I guess the question is if you believe Whitman can be brought to justice within the confines of the legal system, considering how many people he has in his pocket.”

As usual, Wander penetrated through the BS to the core of the problem. If Whitman had been able to infiltrate the FBI, like they suspected, and had Boston PD cops in his pocket and now the state attorney, what were the realistic odds this case would ever go to trial? Witnesses would keep changing their stories or disappear altogether. The investigation would be stonewalled, obstructed, and frustrated at every turn. Evidence would be tainted by his rumor campaigns, or it would vanish. To build the case would take months at the least, but most likely another year.

And Roman wouldn’t be allowed to. He’d be fired long before then, and his successor would be discouraged from picking up the case. It would fizzle out…and Whitman would get away with it, allowing him to continue building his dirty empire, now untouchable. And if he ran for president, he’d bring all that corruptive power into the White House. Roman shuddered to think of the consequences.

“I don’t think anyone will be able to stop him by legal means,” he said slowly. “Not anymore. He’s bought off too many people.”

“I’m inclined to agree, though you know much more about this than I ever will. But from what I’ve seen, this is impossible.”

“That leaves us with illegal as the only option.”

Wander shook his head. “Not necessarily illegal. I’m not willing to go to jail to bring this bastard down. But we can certainly use methods that would get us the evidence that would cause his fall from grace, even if it’s

inadmissible in court. As long as the public knows the truth, he won't be able to keep getting away with it."

"You mean go public with what we have. Destroy his reputation."

"Exactly. I'm confident Caleb will dig up something at Coldrick Law. And if we give Whitman's wife a heads-up, she may rat him out and give us more ammunition to use against him. We'd be using his own methods, the same he employed to discredit you."

Roman could appreciate the poetic justice of that. "I can live with that."

Wander put a hand on his knee. "But can you live with losing your job? Because you're not wrong there, Ro. If we go this way, it's the end of your legal career."

Roman leaned back in his seat. How would he feel if he never returned to the district attorney's office? He let that thought sink in, but the expected despair and anger never came. Instead, there was…resignation, maybe even acceptance, and a deep sense that it would still be justice in his eyes if it brought Whitman down. The public might not know it, but Roman could look back and know he did the right thing, that he'd sacrificed his career for the greater good.

"I'd be surprisingly okay with that, and it's certainly a price I'm willing to pay to bring Whitman down."

"And not to be flippant about it, but it would also change your life in other ways, like being able to come out…and be a Dom."

Roman sat up straight. His brother was right. Without his job, he'd have no reason not to be openly bi…and to be with Caleb. "But what would I do instead? It's not like I have the financial means to retire this early."

Wander shrugged. "Come work for me. I could use your legal brain."

"You're serious?"

"Would I ever joke about that? Of course I'm serious. You know what we do, and you'd fit right in. Having someone with your legal knowledge and experience on board would bring so much added value. We'd be able to do different kinds of jobs. It would widen our expertise considerably, so yeah, you can start tomorrow if you want."

Roman's head dazzled. Working for Wander. He'd never considered that, but now that he did, it sounded so much more than tempting. It sounded…perfect. But first, they had to defeat Whitman. The senator might have won this battle, but the war…the war was far from over.

20

Wander had found Caleb a place to stay with Miguel, a friend of Connor's. Connor was a former client of Wander's, and Caleb had met him only once when they'd run into him at the shooting range. But he and Wander had stayed in touch, and that was how Wander found Miguel.

Miguel owned a tiny two-bedroom house in a Boston suburb and was all too happy to offer Caleb the use of the second bedroom…and to play his boyfriend when needed. He fit the profile in terms of sexual orientation—gay as a maypole, he'd told Caleb when they met—and age, fifteen years older than Caleb. As a bonus, he worked at Logan Airport, so even that part of the story checked out.

"If there's anything you need, let me know," he said to Caleb. "I owe Connor my life, so don't hesitate to ask."

Caleb was curious as fuck what that was about, but he didn't ask. If Miguel wanted Caleb to know, he'd tell him.

Caleb had only brought a weekend bag, intending to travel back home every weekend, so unpacking in the tiny bedroom was easy as pie, and all his clothes fit into the small closet. He'd ordered two suits and five different shirts, plus a collection of ties, all conservative, according to Roman, who'd been a big help in knowing what to get. The result was boring but presentable, and that was what mattered. But Jesus, Caleb hated wearing a

tie almost as much as those uncomfortable leather shoes that pinched his toes.

Having to switch cars was a hassle, but they couldn't risk him being tailed in his own car, so he parked it about halfway in a small town where he could make sure he wasn't tailed, then switched to the rental. On the way back, he'd have to do the same, except in reverse.

Still, that Monday morning, dressed to the nines, he took the T to Bowdoin and walked the last few minutes to Coldrick Law. His breakfast—scrambled eggs and a bagel with cream cheese, plus a cup of coffee so strong he'd been surprised the spoon hadn't stayed upright—sat uncomfortably in his stomach, swirling and sloshing. Maybe he should've eaten something lighter. Or skipped the coffee. Or not eaten at all.

When he walked in, Isabella was talking to the receptionist, and when she spotted Caleb, she smiled. "Good morning, Cal."

He swallowed. "Good morning, ma'am."

Isabella shot the receptionist a look and chuckled. "I told you he'd ma'am me within seconds."

Cal deliberately shuffled his feet in his best "aw, shucks" attempt. Lowell had impressed upon him the importance of selling his military background, including calling Isabella ma'am whenever he had the chance. Looked like that was paying off. "I hope it doesn't bother you, ma'am."

"Not at all. I think it's endearing." Isabella gestured at the receptionist. "This is Kathleen. Kathleen, please get Cal a security pass and give him a tour of the office, would you? Once that's done, send him to me. I've cleared my schedule for an hour to help him get settled."

Cal could barely hide his surprise. Isabella was planning on personally welcoming him to the office? That was unexpected…and a hell of a lot nicer than he'd expected from her.

Kathleen was friendly and polite but distant. Caleb was fine with that. He posed for the picture for his security badge, then followed Kathleen as she led him through the office.

"Ms. Coldrick's office." Kathleen gestured at the corner office where Caleb had had his interview. "Obviously, you can't walk in without an appointment. Charlotte is in charge of Ms. Coldrick's calendar."

Caleb waved at the blond, fiftysomething woman dressed in a coral-blue outfit who was on the phone, ruthlessly asking to get the information she

needed. She'd be a force to reckon with.

"These are our paralegals," Kathleen continued, pointing at a large square room with four cubicles. "Everyone, this is Cal, our new IT guy."

Heads popped up like meerkats, and he got waves and raised hands, which he promptly returned. "Welcome aboard," someone muttered before diving back into their digital trench.

"And this will be your office." Kathleen opened a door to the darkest, tiniest room Caleb had ever seen. But it only held one desk, and his heart skipped a beat.

"I'm not sharing?"

"No, Ms. Coldrick didn't think it smart, considering your job."

Thank you, Jesus, Joseph, and Mary. Not having to fear a coworker looking over his shoulder would make things so much easier for him. "I appreciate that. Privacy is of crucial importance for what I do."

Had he laid it on too thick? Judging by Kathleen's serious nod, he hadn't. Good.

Kathleen escorted him into Isabella's office, as requested, and then took off. Isabella was dressed stylishly in corporate black, her gaze as sharp as her stilettos. Jesus, how did women walk in those? He'd *so* break his ankles.

"Let's get started," Isabella said and explained what she wanted him to focus on first. Like most business owners, she had a vague idea of what she wanted but lacked the terminology and understanding to make it more specific, but Caleb had no trouble getting the picture.

"Let me see if I understood correctly. You want me to start by running a full system check to identify any weaknesses and, if I do, patch those first. Next, you're requesting an analysis of your cybersecurity with a plan of attack to upgrade it. Once we have that and you have given your approval, we'll execute it."

Isabella nodded, her eyes lighting up. "Exactly. Other than that, you will be doing some smaller daily tasks, like online research."

Kids' stuff for a man with his skills, but obviously, Caleb didn't mention that. "Sounds good, ma'am."

"At your advice, we've limited your role to read-only on most systems and files. If you need more access, please let us know. After your probation

period, I have every intention of handing you the keys to the fortress, so to speak."

By which time, Caleb hoped to be long gone, but they'd have to see. "Got it."

The first day went by in a blur. Caleb did run an honest-to-god system check and was delighted to discover her security had holes the size of Texas. Any teenager with decent hacking skills would be able to breach it, a fact he conveniently left out of his first report, though he did point out the weak points of her system. When she read it, she frowned deeply, probably realizing the dangers.

"I'll start fixing them tomorrow, ma'am," Caleb promised her.

"Thank you. You've already done a lot of work on your first day."

On the commute back to Miguel's, Caleb mused about his new boss. She wasn't as cold as he had expected. Ambitious and professional, yes, and he could picture her being cutthroat, but she'd also been kind and had said "thank you" and "please," not something everyone did, Caleb knew from experience. Maybe his preconceived opinion of her had been influenced too much by the knowledge she was aiding Whitman.

Dinner was a lovely home-cooked meal of yummy quesadillas—his mom's recipe, Miguel told Caleb. They ate together, sharing easy conversation. As soon as he retreated to his room, Caleb called Roman.

"Hey," Roman said. "How was your first day?"

Oh, crap. Caleb should've probably reported to Wander first, his actual boss. "Can I call you back in, like, five minutes?"

Roman laughed. "Forgot to report to my brother?"

"Yes, Sir." Caleb chuckled sheepishly. "I don't want him to get upset with me."

"I get it. Call him, and then we can chat, okay?"

Only after he'd ended the call did Caleb realize Roman hadn't been surprised by the call. Maybe he'd hoped for it? Or…counted on it? Butterflies danced through Caleb's stomach, a whole swirl of them. He called Wander.

"Hey, kid. How did it go?"

"Good, but no results yet."

"Impatient much? I'm not expecting anything this week. It'll take a while to gain her trust."

“I know.” Caleb sighed. “But I was still hoping to, you know, find something.”

“Tell me your first impressions of her and how she runs her business.”

“Efficient, professional, but she’s not the bitch I expected her to be.”

“Okay, interesting. What else?”

Caleb shared his thoughts about Coldrick Law.

“Good start. Let’s talk again tomorrow.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Oh, and, Caleb?”

“Yeah?”

“Tomorrow, your first call had better be to me and not my brother, yeah?”

Caleb’s cheeks heated. “Yes, Sir.”

But Wander was laughing as he ended the call, so maybe he wasn’t actually upset? Still, not something Caleb intended to test. With a sigh, he dialed Roman’s number again.

“He was messing with you,” Roman said.

“How do you…? Oh, you heard that?”

“I was talking to him when you called.”

Caleb rolled his eyes, even though no one could see it. “And you didn’t think that would be convenient information for me to have? Sir?”

Roman full-out laughed. “Nah, this was way more fun.”

He was becoming more like his brother every day. “I’ll keep that in mind for next time.”

“But tell me about your first day. How was it pretending to be someone else?”

“Both harder and easier than I had expected. I was called Cal a lot as a teenager, so that doesn’t take much getting used to. And the job is woefully below my level, but I still found myself taking it seriously, funnily enough. She asked me to do a security analysis of her IT systems, and every word I wrote in my report was true.”

“I didn’t expect you’d have any issues with the job, but I was hoping you wouldn’t struggle on a personal level with what basically comes down to lying to everyone.”

Caleb considered it. “Not really.”

“And how do you like Boston?”

“The T was packed this morning. I haven’t experienced that since I was in college.”

“Most Bostonians have a love-hate relationship with the T. We’ll defend it any day when outsiders attack it, but we bitch and complain every chance we get. And obviously, it’s much better than the New York subway.”

Caleb grinned. “Are you sure? Because most things are better in New York…like the Yankees.”

“Blasphemy!” Roman sputtered. “Pure blasphemy. Please tell me you’re not a Yankees fan because that could be a dealbreaker.”

“Atlanta Braves, actually, but only because my dad bought me a cap when he was on a business trip there when I was maybe eight. I’ve always stayed loyal.”

“Aw, that’s sweet. Nothing trumps childhood loyalty, so I can live with that. But I do need to know where you stand on football.”

Should he tease him? “Giants all the way.”

“Giants? Oh, boy, that’s not good. Not good at all. I may have to reconsider this.”

“I assume you’re a Patriots fan?”

“I’m from Boston. It’s been Red Sox, Patriots, Bruins, and Celtics for as long as I can remember. It’s in our blood.”

“So a Giants fan is a big no for you?”

“Let’s just say that my dad had far less of a problem with Wander coming out as gay and kinky than he would have with me showing up with a Giants fan.”

“Good thing I’m Pats Nation, then.”

Roman was quiet for a beat. “You serious?”

“I didn’t care much for football until I started working for your brother, who made it clear that being a Patriots fan was more or less a job requirement, so here we are.”

“You little shit.”

Caleb laughed. “Had you there for a moment, did I?”

“Hook, line, and sinker. But I’ll let it go because of the good news, benevolent ruler I am.”

“Too bad. I wouldn’t have minded another spanking…”

Roman swallowed audibly, and the mood changed, becoming charged. “I wouldn’t mind that either.” He sounded hoarse.

“Maybe we could do that when I get home Friday?”

“It’s a deal.”

“I miss you,” Caleb blurted, then immediately regretted it. Even though it was true, their relationship wasn’t in that phase yet. If it ever would be. After all, Roman had been honest that it could never be more than sex.

“I miss you too,” Roman said softly, and Caleb’s heart skipped a beat.

“You do?”

“Yeah. And I’m as surprised as you are.”

“Roman…Sir…”

“We’ll talk when you get home for the weekend, okay?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Stay safe, you hear me?”

“I promise.”

“And call me again tomorrow.”

As the week slowly passed, it became their new routine. Caleb worked, came home, ate, and called Wander. Then he called Roman, and they talked, each topic a stepping stone across the expanse between them. Books—Roman’s love for gritty crime novels versus Caleb’s preference for nonfiction. Sports—debating the latest game, plays dissected with fervor. Politics—a minefield navigated with care, opinions clashing and melding.

On the surface, they may not have had much in common, but they found new connections every day. They talked about everything except the case, as if by unspoken agreement. Caleb reported to Wander, but he never told Roman about the details of his job for Coldrick Law.

“Thinking of you keeps me sane,” Caleb said.

“Likewise. I can’t wait for you to come home.”

“Home…” A pang of longing shot through Caleb, sharp and sweet. “Only two more days.”

“Bedtime?” Roman finally suggested, the question a caress against Caleb’s ear.

“Yeah.” Caleb’s reply was a whisper of surrender. “Stay on the line?”

“Always.”

Phones tucked beneath pillows, they lay in separate beds miles apart, but their voices bridged the distance. A lullaby of presence, a promise in the dark. Words faded to murmurs, then to breaths, synchronized in sleep.

But Caleb knew he wasn’t merely falling asleep with Roman. He was falling in love.

Deeply.

Irrevocably.

Friday afternoon, he headed out straight from work. It had cost him a fortune to park for the day, but he hadn’t wanted to waste an hour commuting back to Miguel’s first, so he already had his packed duffel in his car.

Caleb slid behind the wheel and started the boring but reliable Subaru, cranking the heat up to max. The rental might not be sexy, but it did come with a lot more features than his old Toyota. One day, he’d have the money for a new car with heated seats and maybe even a heated steering wheel, but for now, this was a nice luxury. Plus, the bottle of Coke he’d put in his car that morning was perfectly cold, and he took a few big gulps before starting his drive.

Miles unfurled like ribbons of asphalt, the car eating them up one by one. Caleb’s mind danced ahead, picturing Roman’s embrace, the solidity of his body, the faint scent of his cologne that Caleb had come to associate with safety, with desire. The image of Roman, impeccably dressed in those tailored suits that hugged his form just right, flickered behind his eyelids.

Anticipation coiled tighter within him, a visceral ache that wouldn’t be eased until he was back at the mansion, until he was kneeling at Roman’s feet, surrendering to the command in those brown eyes. He wanted to feel Roman’s hand against his skin, see the imprint it would leave behind. Hear his voice telling Caleb what to do. Taste the man’s cum on his tongue. Ache for a day after a good dicking. He wanted all of him.

But most of all, he wanted his heart.

Finally, the gates of the mansion came into view, and with a big sigh, he lowered his window and put in his security code. He parked under one of the carports Jesse had set up for them and hurried through the biting wind to the front door. It opened before he could even get his key from his pocket, and Roman stood there with a big grin. “Fucking finally.”

Then he was in Roman’s arms, his lips caught in a bruising kiss. Lips crashed together, tongues dueled, teeth grazed, a battle for dominance that both craved and neither won. Their kiss was a reclaiming, a collision of

hunger and relief. Roman tasted like coming home—dark coffee and cinnamon, an intoxicating blend that seared through Caleb's senses.

Somehow, they managed to get inside and close the door, but Caleb lost his duffel as Roman dragged him up the stairs. Not that Caleb protested.

"Is that you, Caleb?" Wander called out.

"Later!" Roman yelled back, and laughter and catcalls erupted from down the hall. Caleb couldn't care less.

The world faded, and nothing mattered but Roman's touch, the heat of his body through the layers of fabric. They stumbled their way to Roman's bedroom, their mouths still fused. Roman's unyielding grip was like an anchor in this crazy storm threatening to drown Caleb.

They crossed the threshold of Roman's bedroom, and the door clicked shut behind them, sealing them away from the world outside. Finally, Roman let him go, and they stood opposite each other, chests heaving, eyes dark with want, and lips swollen.

Roman cupped Caleb's cheek and brushed his lips with his thumb. "You're so goddamn beautiful."

Caleb's heart fluttered. "Thank you, Sir."

"And how I have missed hearing that word from you. Say it again."

"Sir. You're my Sir."

"Yes, I am. Now…" Roman swallowed. "Present yourself to me."

Caleb had never undressed so quickly, flinging his clothes onto the ground in a way that would've earned him punishment from any other Dom, but Roman didn't seem to care, only watched Caleb with hungry eyes. When he finished, he sank to his knees in a fluid motion. He bowed his head, clasped his hands behind his back, and offered himself to his Dom, putting himself at Roman's mercy.

21

Roman had missed him. Six days since Roman had last seen him, touched him, commanded him. It had been six days too long.

Seeing Caleb had only driven that point home. Not that the constant pangs of longing during the week hadn't been evidence enough that Roman was far, far deeper into this thing with Caleb than he'd imagined. But watching Caleb now as he knelt in front of him, his posture one of absolute surrender, Roman experienced a maelstrom of emotions.

Longing. Need. Desire. And something much softer, much more tender.

He wanted to fuck him but also kiss him until they ran out of breath. Create marks on his skin but also hold him and take care of him. Dominate him but also be his equal. Hurt him…and cherish him.

Jesus fucking Christ, what the hell was happening? He didn't recognize himself anymore. From a man known for having few emotions, he'd grown into this guy who had so many feelings he couldn't tell them apart.

He'd have to figure it out later. Right now, he finally had his—boy? sub? partner?—back, and he wasn't gonna waste time by getting lost in his head. The air thickened with every ragged breath they shared. Roman drank in Caleb's form, every inch of his being yearning toward the lean lines of his body, the subtle strength coiled in his stillness, the sweetness of his surrender.

“Look at you…” Roman’s voice was laced with a hunger that surprised him.

Caleb didn’t move a muscle, too well-trained to respond. The power burst free inside Roman. He needed to…

“Open your mouth,” he said. “Raise your head and open your mouth.”

Caleb didn’t hesitate, and Roman unbuckled with lightning speed and took his throbbing cock out. Another time, he would take it slow, but right now, he couldn’t. His need was too strong, so he sank his cock into that wet heat. His hands sought Caleb’s hair, which was no longer there. Instead, he grabbed Caleb’s head and held it as he fucked his mouth.

“Fuck, yes…” Roman gripped Caleb’s skull tighter. The grip was a lifeline as much as it was a claim. Caleb’s throat, a velvet vise, welcomed him further, challenging Roman’s restraint.

Roman’s breath held in his chest as Caleb worked him with a fervor that was almost religious. There was no hesitation in Caleb’s movements, no protest on his lips, only the slick sounds of his mouth and the gasps that spilled out whenever Roman gave him a moment to catch his breath. Caleb looked up at Roman with eyes half-lidded with pleasure and an intensity that spoke volumes.

“Good boy,” Roman praised him, and the words that had seemed so cliché and maybe even corny now acquired a new meaning. Caleb *was* his good boy. And those words weren’t empty praise. They were a seal of ownership, an acknowledgment of their dynamic. Caleb had earned the right to be called that.

Caleb’s face lit up, proving how right Roman had been, as he eagerly continued to suck Roman off. Roman felt the pull, the seductive dance of power and surrender, and knew without a doubt that he was lost to this man, this moment, this new part of himself. This wasn’t temporary. This was who he was. This was where he was meant to be. Here, in the grip of something that terrified him and entranced him at the same time, he’d found a missing piece of himself.

He bucked his hips, thrusting into the warmth of Caleb’s mouth with abandon. Each movement was more forceful than the last, a primal rhythm driven by need. The sharp scent of arousal mingled with the musky undertones of their bodies—a heady mix that fueled the fire raging within him. Caleb was his to direct, to use, to possess.

God, he loved this, loved how Caleb let him chase the edge of control, loved the way submission painted itself across the younger man's features, loved the power. It was intoxicating, a heady rush that made his heart pound and his body sing with a primal satisfaction he'd never known. The awareness of his role as Dom, or maybe of who he was, thrummed through his veins like an electric current, demanding more, craving the dominance he had only glimpsed in his darkest fantasies.

But Caleb needed more.

The thought hit him with blinding clarity. If Roman wanted to be a good Dom, he had to provide Caleb with what he needed, which went beyond a rough blowjob. Clenching his teeth, Roman pulled back and caught his breath while Caleb did the same.

Roman would need guidance, training. He wanted to learn everything he needed to be the Dom Caleb deserved. Later. For now, he'd fly by the seat of his pants—which he was still wearing. Caleb had undressed, but Roman had only unzipped and taken his cock out and was otherwise still fully dressed.

He stepped back, sat on the bed, and beckoned Caleb closer with one crooked finger. Caleb didn't rise but crawled forward, and somehow, that drove Roman even crazier. He dragged his face up and leaned in to kiss him, nicking his bottom lip with his teeth until he encountered the coppery taste of Caleb's blood on his tongue.

"Jesus, the things you do to me," he growled. "I want to… I need to…"

Caleb looked up, those blue eyes filled with trust…and love. "Yes, Sir."

With a swift motion, Roman yanked Caleb over his lap. He rested his hand on his back, taking in Caleb's vulnerable position, the lean muscles of his back tapering down to where his ass presented itself as an offering.

Wait, was that…?

"You're wearing a plug?"

"Yes, Sir. For your convenience. I'm prepped, lubed, and ready to be used."

Fucking hell. Roman licked his lips, literally drooling at the sight. "Good boy. Such a good boy."

Shit, he couldn't wait to bury himself inside Caleb, but first, he had something else planned. He carefully removed the plug and threw it on the floor. Then he raised his hand and brought it down hard. The slap echoed in

the room, a sharp smack that shot straight to Roman's groin. The red imprint of his hand blossomed across Caleb's skin, a mark of possession. A shiver of dark pleasure ran down Roman's spine. He did it again, harder, and again, each strike a testament to his burgeoning hunger.

Caleb moaned beneath him, raw and uninhibited. It pierced the haze of Roman's arousal, grounding him in the reality of what they were doing, what he was doing. But instead of halting, the sound urged him on, stoking the fire of his desire.

"More?" Roman's voice was ragged.

"Please, Sir." Caleb gasped. "Need more. Hurt me, Sir. Please. Want to suffer for you."

That single plea shattered the last of Roman's restraint. He unbuckled his belt and tugged it free. Folding the leather in his hands, he measured its weight, the potential for the sweet agony it held. He brought the belt down across Caleb's ass, the leather biting into his tender flesh. Caleb jerked, uttering a strangled cry, and a surge of primal satisfaction rose in Roman. He hit him until he was sweating with the effort. The red welts from the belt crisscrossed the earlier handprints, painting a picture of discipline and desire.

Roman's breath came out in ragged heaves as his chest expanded with raw, untempered need. His cock was leaking, throbbing painfully, but he ignored it. This wasn't about him anymore, but about Caleb, about giving Caleb what he needed.

"Is this what you want?" Roman punctuated each word with another strike of the belt.

"Yes, Sir, oh god, yes," Caleb chanted, his body rocking with each impact, riding the edge of pain and pleasure with a grace that left Roman in awe.

With every lash, Caleb's moans crescendoed, a symphony of surrender that sang to Roman's soul. This was power. This was control, wielded with leather and skin, an exchange so potent it bordered on sacred.

"God, you're perfect," Roman growled, almost guttural. He hauled Caleb up by the waist and tossed him onto the bed like a master would claim his prize.

Caleb landed with a soft thud. His skin shimmered with a sheen of sweat, and his eyes…goddamn, his eyes were pools of pure, unadulterated

trust. They locked on Roman, waiting, needing, begging.

“Please, Sir…” Caleb’s plea was a whisper, but it echoed in Roman’s head like a siren call.

Roman yanked Caleb down by an ankle and flipped him so he was bent over the edge of the bed, his ass at the perfect height. Heat radiated from the skin, accentuating the bright red marks of his handiwork. What a beautiful sight.

He pushed Caleb’s legs wide. “Ass up.”

Not a second of hesitation.

Roman sent his pants to his ankles, followed by his underwear, then bent over Caleb. “I’m gonna fuck your blistering ass until I come, and then I just may do it all over again because it’s gonna feel so goddamn hot and tight around my cock. And you can’t come, my perfect boy. Not until I say so.”

Never had a “Yes, Sir” sounded sweeter.

Without preamble, Roman thrust in hard, burying himself to the hilt inside the tight heat of Caleb’s body.

A guttural roar tore from his throat as he claimed Caleb with a ferocity that bordered on desperation. The room filled with the sweet music of flesh slapping against flesh, Caleb’s moans, and the creak of the bed frame keeping time with Roman’s brutal pace. Each thrust was a declaration, a claiming, as much as it was a surrender to the need consuming him.

Caleb met every one of Roman’s drives with a push of his own, and their bodies found a rhythm born of raw, carnal synchronization. No finesse, no gentle lovemaking. This was primal. This was possession.

It didn’t take long for Roman to reach the point of no return, and why prolong it? He sent himself flying over it, crashing into his orgasm with all his muscles spasming and his vision going white. His cock spurted out its rich load, saved up from days without Caleb because Roman hadn’t touched himself. He’d wanted to wait for this exact moment. He slowed to a gentle pace, the squelching sounds of his wet cock sliding in and out of Caleb’s hole obscene yet so deliciously dirty.

Caleb lay panting, his fists clenched, probably from the effort to hold back his release. Should he fuck him again? Make him suffer for another round?

One day, he'd have the patience for that, perhaps, or maybe it was more a sense of cruelty. But now, he wanted nothing more than to reward his sweet, perfect boy for a job well done. He sank deep inside him and stayed there, pumping as he snaked his hand under Caleb's body and circled his cock.

Caleb moaned, eagerly thrusting into Roman's hand.

"It's your turn now, my sweet boy. Come for me."

Caleb furiously pumped into his hand, and then he stilled, his body tense as he spilled his load. Exhausted, Roman gently pulled out. He almost tripped over his pants and kicked them off, crawled onto the bed, and carefully dragged Caleb up as well, sparing his ass by letting him lie on his stomach.

He lay with his face a mere inch from Caleb's, both still panting and their hearts racing—victors in the aftermath of their carnal battle. As his pulse slowly came down, the haze of his release lifted.

He was in love with him.

Somewhere along the way, he'd fallen in love with Caleb.

Precious, sweet Caleb, so eager to please and serve him but strong enough to take a stand when needed and say no when he had to. Smart, brilliant Caleb, so dedicated to his job and Roman's safety that he'd been willing to enter the lion's den and work for Isabella Coldrick. Brave, fearless Caleb, seeing in Roman what he'd never realized and awakening the Dom inside him.

"Are you all right?" he asked softly.

Caleb nodded, a languid smile curving his lips. "Yes, Sir…more than."

The tenderness in those two words struck Roman harder than any physical blow could. A real, raw emotion that was as tangible as the leather that had snapped against skin. He'd also sensed it earlier that week, when they'd both admitted they'd missed each other. Hadn't they promised each other they'd talk later? Now it was later.

But no, he didn't want to rush into anything. Besides, Caleb needed aftercare. Rather than using words, Roman would show him what he was feeling.

With careful movements, Roman slid off the bed, every muscle in his body protesting. His feet touched the cool wooden floor, and he walked,

slightly unsteadily, to the dresser and retrieved the bottle of aloe vera lotion. The green bottle cooled his hand, which was still hot from spanking Caleb.

When he returned to Caleb's side, Roman knelt next to him on the bed and opened the cap. The gel flowed into his palm, cold and soothing. He met Caleb's eyes, seeking silent permission before touching the reddened skin that mapped out the path of his desire.

"Let me take care of you," Roman whispered.

Slowly, gently he rubbed the lotion over Caleb's flushed ass cheeks. He massaged in circles, his touch light, allowing the cooling balm to work its magic. Caleb sighed, the tension unwinding from his frame as his body yielded not only to the discipline but also to the aftercare, the nurturing that mended more than just the skin.

"Thank you, Sir," Caleb whispered. The gratitude in his voice struck a chord within Roman.

"My pleasure. You were so good, so perfect for me."

As Roman continued the soothing motions, a sense of rightness settled over him. He might've lost his job, but he had found something much more important. He'd found his purpose. He'd found love.

22

The weekend had been amazing. Caleb had spent most of it with Roman and a good portion of it in Roman's bedroom. He hadn't even unpacked his duffel in his room because why would he when he had no intention of being there?

They'd talked too. A lot. More than Caleb had expected, and even more surprising was how much he'd loved it. The getting-to-know-you stage of a relationship had always been somewhat tedious, but with Roman, it all felt so natural. They'd shared stories about their families, their upbringing, how they'd gotten into their line of work, and the weird experiences they'd been through over the years. Favorite foods, colors, movies, everything.

Hell, if Caleb had to fill out a questionnaire about Roman, he'd come a long way in knowing all the answers. Yet he wanted to know so much more, had so many more questions to ask.

Driving back to Boston on Sunday evening had hurt. Not in the sense of it being hard, but it had physically hurt to drive away and see Roman grow smaller in his rearview mirror. The only consolation was that it would only be for five days, and then he'd be back. Still, despite his emotional turmoil, he'd focused on possible tails and hadn't noticed any.

Monday morning, he pushed through the doors of the office building that housed Coldrick Law, among others, just as the city was waking up, its streets buzzing with the early rush of caffeine-driven ambition. The by-

now-familiar clack of his dress shoes on polished concrete echoed in the empty lobby. He was early, deliberately. He swiped his ID and headed straight for his tiny office, still grateful he didn't have to share it.

Would today be the day he finally found a link between Coldrick and Whitman's illegal dealings? The investigation was stuck, and Caleb hated it like he despised having to tap out in a grappling match. He always went for the win. Always. And this was no different. All he could do was dig…and keep his eyes and ears open.

Settling into his chair, he cracked his knuckles and dove into the digital trenches. Fingers flew over the keyboard, eyes scanned line after line of file names, financial transactions, and emails. It was grunt work, but it mattered. Each breadcrumb could lead to Whitman's unraveling.

He leaned back, scrubbed a hand over his smooth-shaven chin he still wasn't used to, and let out a slow breath, a silent plea to the universe for something, anything, to break their way. But alas, the universe wasn't inclined to grant his wish because a few days passed with nothing to show for it.

When he reported for work early Thursday morning, he considered not coming back the next Monday. What was the point if he wasn't making progress? He missed Roman, and he wanted to go home. Should he suggest to Wander that he walk away? Isabella might suspect something was up, though, and that would endanger the investigation. Crap.

Isabella's voice sliced through the silence, sharp and sudden. She stood in the hallway, right outside his office, making a call. "I'm tired of your excuses," she snapped. "I need to see results."

Her tone carried an edge, an unusual level of frustration. He tilted his head, straining to catch the conversation.

She spoke softer now, kinder. "I know. You've never let me down before. But this is… The stakes are high. Higher than ever before. I need this handled."

A long silence.

"Okay. Keep me posted."

She walked away.

Caleb chewed on his bottom lip, mind churning. Handle what? And who had been on the other end of that line? She hadn't mentioned Whitman's name, but then again, she was too smart for amateur mistakes like that.

Caleb needed to know who she'd called. He needed access to her phone. But how? Isabella always had her phone with her.

Wait.

The phone was the key. It was about time he got serious about gaining access. So far, he'd let it go as it seemed too risky, but her phone was her life. Anything incriminating would be on there, not on her computer or the office network where anyone could see it. No, she'd have it somewhere on her phone. He needed access to the contents.

She had an iPhone, so most likely, she had an iCloud account. He knew her email address, so all he needed was her password. The only way to get that was to watch her type it in…or install a keystroke logger. She was too smart to click on obvious spam links, but maybe he could think of something better?

Caleb's fingers danced over the keyboard with a ferocity that belied his calm exterior. He was in his element, the thrill of the chase surging through him like adrenaline. This was his chance at a breakthrough…and she'd never see it coming.

An hour later, he'd created a survey about Isabella's recent experiences at the spa she'd gone to with her sisters, all nicely branded in the same style as the spa. He'd even registered a similar domain name and email address, so it wouldn't stand out in any way. Now, all he had to do was text it to her, offer a gift card, and see if she would take the bait.

She did. It only took half an hour, and then she clicked on the link and filled out the survey. Caleb had even bought an actual gift certificate from the spa, so later, she wouldn't know how someone had gotten access to her phone, and he sent it to her within a minute of her completing the survey. Wasn't it interesting how even people who made as much money as Isabella did were still swayed by a fifty-dollar gift card?

Time to get to work. By clicking the link, Isabella had given him the tools to access her phone, including her iCloud.

"Come on," he muttered under his breath, eyes narrowed in concentration. A final keystroke, a held breath, and then, triumph. Access granted. He was in.

Caleb exhaled slowly, a smirk playing on his lips. It had been almost too easy to infiltrate her defenses. He riffled through the call logs with precision, searching for the number that had sparked this whole endeavor.

And there it was, stark against the screen—Joey DiMartino. The name didn’t ring a bell, but it might to Roman or Ryan and Alex. Still, Caleb would do his research.

Joey DiMartino wasn’t someone who liked leaving digital trails. That much was clear after a two-hour online search, but he’d still dropped crumbs here and there. He’d joined a Facebook group for alumni of his high school, right here in Boston, and that led to Caleb discovering more of his background. He was local. Had grown up on the infamous South Side. Wasn’t Connor, Wander’s friend, from the same area? Maybe he knew Joey.

Caleb found family members and did a cross-search for them, stilling when he hit the motherload on Joey’s father.

Oh. My. God.

Joey was part of the Italian mob, just like his dad and uncles. Caleb’s instincts screamed danger. Joey wasn’t some small-time crook. He was connected as well and as deeply as anyone could be. A shiver trickled down Caleb’s spine. They were messing with the mob now? Holy shit, this went so much deeper than he’d expected. Caleb was no stranger to risk. It was part of the job. But this? This was playing with fire on a whole new level.

“Fuck.” He breathed out, tension coiling tight in his gut. He needed to get this information to Wander as soon as possible, but he didn’t dare make a call from Isabella’s office, and sending a text or email was out of the question. It would have to wait until his lunch break when he would hopefully be able to sneak away and make the call.

In the meantime, he dug into Isabella’s iCloud. She wasn’t stupid enough to have everything spelled out there, and most of the files had an extra layer of encryption. Why would someone do that unless they had something to hide? The average person didn’t have that kind of security, so she was definitely hiding something. Not that it would keep him out, but he’d need more time to gain access to those files. However, he did find incriminating invoices and reports.

He ran a copy of her entire cloud and created a mirror account of it so he’d keep access. Unfortunately, he had actual work to do, the kind Isabella was paying him for, and if he didn’t want to arouse suspicion, he’d better get on with it.

When lunchtime came, Isabella needed him to do an urgent background check for a client and another one, and before Caleb knew it, it was time to

go home, and he still hadn't reported back. He sat uneasily on the T, constantly looking over his shoulder. Now that he knew who they were dealing with, everything had changed.

"Hey, Caleb, would you like—"

"Can't. I have an urgent call to make." Caleb stormed into the house. "Sorry."

Miguel waved him away. "Go. Do what you have to do. I'll put your food on a plate in the fridge."

Caleb's thumb was already on the Call button.

"Hey, kid," Wander said, voices murmuring in the background. "Everything okay?"

"I've found a lead," Caleb said. He wasn't sure what Wander had done, but the conversations ceased.

"I'm putting you on speakerphone. Everyone is here. Talk to me."

"Isabella made a call at nine-oh-six this morning that I partially overheard. I accessed her phone and traced it. She called Joey DiMartino. Does that name ring a bell?"

"DiMartino? Fuck, is he connected to the DiMartino family?" Roman asked. "They're Italian mob and have their fingers in a lot of pies."

"That's his father," Caleb said. "Sorry."

"Fuck," Roman said. "Fuck, fuck, fuck. We can't… We shouldn't be… You need to come home, baby. I don't want you messing around with the mob."

A flash of heat went through Caleb at that term of endearment, but before he could say anything, Wander's voice came through the line. "One thing at a time, Ro. Let him finish his report first."

"I don't know what Joey does for Isabella, but she calls him on average three times a week, sometimes more, so there's a strong connection."

"I'll say. What else?"

"I copied her iCloud. She has a lot of encrypted files on there. I'll need some time to get access to those, but my gut tells me that once I do, we'll have our smoking gun."

"Good work, kid." Pride rang in Wander's voice, and Caleb's cheeks heated at the praise.

"Thank you, Sir."

"Anything else?"

“Not right now. She kept me busy today, but I’ll do some more digging once I’ve had some dinner.”

“All right. Keep us posted.”

“Wander, I think Alex and I should head to Boston,” Ryan said. “See what we can find out about this Joey DiMartino. If he’s mob, he won’t be hard to find.”

“He’ll also be dangerous,” Roman said sharply. “You don’t wanna fuck around with the Italians and get found out.”

“Then we better make sure we fly under the radar,” Ryan answered. “We knew going in that this wouldn’t be a walk in the park. This connection doesn’t change anything.”

Roman groaned. “I have a bad feeling about this.”

Caleb swallowed. Roman wasn’t the type to say things like that lightly.

“What kind of bad feeling?” Wander apparently had come to the same conclusion.

“I don’t know. The idea of you going up against the mob is… It’s terrifying. You know how many cops have tried that and failed? How many federal agents we’ve lost over the years because they attempted to infiltrate organized crime?”

“We’ll keep our distance,” Ryan said. “I promise we’ll tread carefully. I know what I’m doing.”

“With all due respect, but I’m not sure about that,” Roman said. “I know you’re a former detective, but solving murders and dealing with killers isn’t the same as going after the Italians.”

A heavy silence fell. What should they do? Caleb wasn’t blind to the dangers, but what was the alternative? They couldn’t back off now, not when they were so close to bringing Whitman down. “Can we maybe ask Connor if he’s heard of Joey DiMartino? And see what he thinks?”

“That’s a great idea,” Wander said. “Connor’s family was in organized crime as well, so he’ll have a unique perspective. I’ll reach out to him and get his thoughts. For now, keep digging, kid. But, Caleb…”

“Yes, Sir?”

“Keep your eyes wide open.”

“Yes, Sir. I’ll be careful, I promise. I’ll be home tomorrow.”

Home.

He couldn’t wait.

23

Snowflakes danced outside the window of Jesse's mansion, a stark contrast to the warmth enveloping Roman as he trudged into the living room. He was exhausted after a night of lying awake, all kinds of horror scenarios running through his head, followed by nightmares in which Roman had done everything he could, but those he loved had still died. His parents. Wander. Caleb. He'd woken up terrified, the realization that they'd been mere dreams only coming slowly.

"You look like shit," his brother said. "Bad night?"

With a deep sigh, Roman settled on the couch across from Wander. "The worst."

"Nightmares?"

"Never-ending ones, and everyone died."

Wander winced. "I hate those. You wake up more tired than when you went to bed."

"No kidding."

Wander leaned forward. "Is it that bad feeling you had?"

"I don't know, man. I wish I did, but I can't tell if it's because I'm so concerned for Caleb or because I genuinely have some kind of premonition."

"You're in love with him, yeah?"

What was the use of denying it? “Yeah, very much so. And yes, you’re allowed to laugh.”

Wander grinned. “Why would I laugh? I’m happy for you, Ro. He’s just as crazy about you as you are about him. I could say I knew this would happen when I set you two up, but I honestly had no clue you’d connect this way. But it’s beautiful to see.”

“You don’t think I’m too old for him?”

Wander shrugged. “That’s not for me to decide. That’s Caleb’s choice, and I’m pretty sure he doesn’t give a fuck.”

“He told me he likes older men.”

“There ya go. Ryan and Alex have a similar age gap, by the way, and those two are so happy it annoys the fuck out of everyone else.”

Roman chuckled. “Which Ryan takes great pleasure in, I’m sure.”

“That he does. But it’s hard to be upset with him when it’s so easy to see how happy Alex makes him. He’s like this little ray of sunshine that brought light to Ryan’s darkness.”

“Just like Caleb did with me.”

Wander cocked his head. “With you, it wasn’t so much darkness. It was more emptiness, loneliness. He brought life.”

His brother had seen so much more than Roman had realized. “You hit the nail on the head with that one.” And since they were on the topic of Caleb, he might as well come clean about his plans. “I’m meeting Mark in a few minutes, and I’m gonna ask him to train me. Caleb spoke of him highly, so I asked Jesse for his number.”

Wander widened his eyes. “That’s a big step, Ro. I’m impressed. You’re doing that for Caleb?”

Even if Roman hadn’t recognized the trick question, he still would’ve answered with the truth. “No, I’m doing this for me. I owe it to myself to discover this part of myself…and to become the Dom Caleb needs.”

“Great answer. I know you didn’t ask for it, but you have my blessing.”

Roman smiled. “No, I didn’t ask for it, but it means a lot to me, so thank you. I hope to make you proud.”

“You always have, so there’s no reason to expect any different now.”

The doorbell rang. “That will be Mark.” Roman rose from the couch. “I’ll see you later?”

“Let me know how it goes with Mark.”

Someone had already let Mark into the library, so Roman made his way over there as well. He caught his reflection in a hallway mirror and cringed. Jesus, he looked like a corpse with his gray pallor and bags under his eyes. Still, he hadn't wanted to cancel the appointment he'd set up after much thought. He could use the distraction, and even more, he needed help—from someone other than his brother.

"Master Mark?" Roman's baritone was steady, betraying none of the uncertainty knotting his gut.

Master Mark turned from where he stood by the fireplace, the flames casting an ominous glow on his chiseled features. He assessed Roman with a gaze that bored down to his very soul, measuring and weighing him. Roman offered a handshake that was met with a firm grip. "Roman Dwyer."

"Mark Wilson. Pleasure to meet you. You resemble your brother."

"Thank you. That's a compliment in my book."

"It was certainly meant as one. I'm very fond of Wander, both as a friend and a Dom."

"Let's sit." Roman gestured at the couch, and they chose seats opposite each other.

"What can I do for you?" Mark asked.

Roman took a deep breath. "I've been…experimenting with D/s play lately."

Mark quirked an eyebrow. "You're new to the scene? I would have expected with your brother…"

He left it unfinished, but Roman had no trouble following what he had wanted to say. "I had my reasons, both professional and personal, but things have changed."

"Who have you been playing with? No, let me guess." A long pause. "Caleb."

"Yes. How did you know?"

"He's the most versatile sub here…and you're his type. He likes older guys. Are you two together?"

How the hell did he answer that question? "I hope so, but let's keep that between us for now."

"Gotcha. My lips are sealed."

"When I arrived, Wander sent me Caleb as a…a distraction, I suppose. A way to blow off some steam. One thing led to another, and here we are."

“Hmm.” Mark’s lips quirked in a knowing smile. “Wander does have a knack for stirring things up, doesn’t he?”

Roman let out a dry chuckle. “He sure does.”

“What do you need from me?”

Roman got up and walked toward the window, the thick rug in Jesse’s library muffling his steps. Snowflakes swirled outside, a silent dance against the windowpanes, but the storm inside him raged fiercer. He wrestled with the unraveling of a life meticulously built into…into, what, exactly? A free-for-all where he had no clue what to expect, what to do, who he was. It scared him as much as it exhilarated him.

“Caleb and I connected.” He turned around and leaned with his back against the window. “He got under my skin. And he needs this. He needs me to be…more.”

“He needs you to be his Dom.” Mark’s eyes were unyielding, but Roman respected him for it.

“Yes.” The single word was a pledge sealed with newfound conviction. “And I want to be what he needs.”

“Hmm.” Mark tapped his fingers on the armrest. “What have you done with him so far?”

“Rough sex, spanking, and I spanked him with my belt as well.” Amateur stuff for Mark, undoubtedly, but one had to start somewhere, right?

“And that went well?”

“Very well. He loved it, and so did I.”

“What exactly draws you to this? To him?” Mark’s questions were probing, but Roman wasn’t offended. The Dom took his role seriously, and Roman could only respect that.

“It’s not just about what he needs. It’s about what I crave too. The control, the trust…it’s intoxicating.”

“Intoxicating.” Master Mark chewed over the word as if tasting a fine whiskey. “But are you drunk on power or drunk on him?”

“Both,” Roman said without hesitation. “But it’s not some fleeting high. It’s grounded in something real, something solid between us.”

Mark ceased his tapping. “When you’re with Caleb, when you’re calling the shots, how does that make you feel?”

“Alive.” The truth surged through Roman like an electric current. “More myself than I’ve been in years. I love the responsibility, the intensity. It’s like I discovered a new part of me, like I unleashed something. It’s hard to explain, but it’s not a game for me.”

“Good. Because for Caleb, this isn’t a game either. It’s his reality. It’s who he is at his very core.”

“I’m beginning to understand that, and that’s why I’m asking for your help. I want you to train me, to help me become the Dom Caleb needs.”

Mark whistled. “You really are serious about this.”

“As serious as can be.”

“Does Wander know? Does Caleb?”

“Yes and no. I told Wander, but I can hardly ask my brother to train me, since that would cross boundaries between us I’m not comfortable crossing. And I haven’t talked to Caleb about it because…” He couldn’t tell Mark Caleb was in Boston, but he had to give him something. “I wanted to get your approval first.”

Mark leaned back in his chair, steepling his fingers. “You know I’ve had my share of scenes with Caleb, right? Intense ones involving sex. I just wanted to put that out in the open.”

The words hit like a punch to the gut. A fleeting storm cloud of jealousy darkened Roman’s thoughts. He’d known this, of course, but to hear the man mention it so casually was still jarring. A pause, brief as a heartbeat, and then Roman drew in a deep breath, expelling the unwanted emotion. “I’m aware, but it was before he and I met and connected. And Caleb speaks highly of you and trusts you. That’s enough for me.”

Mark nodded. “Glad to hear it. He’s a sweet kid and a fantastic sub. Very eager to please.”

Roman sat again, some of his unrest spewing out of him. “He is.”

“Trust is sacred. Consent, communication, and trust are the pillars of what we do.”

“Understood.”

“Training you means taking on responsibility for you, and I don’t do that lightly. Granted, the fact that you’re Wander’s brother makes it easier, but still. As your trainer, I’m responsible for you. So before I make a decision, I need to make sure you understand what it is we do. I play by the principles of RACK. Are you familiar with that?”

“Risk-aware consensual kink?” Roman recalled a term from the depths of the online forums he’d scoured.

“Correct. There’s a crucial difference between RACK and the often-cited principle of safe, sane, and consensual, which is a philosophy I don’t adhere to. Do you know the difference?”

He’d done his homework. “RACK can include kinks that aren’t considered safe per se.”

“Exactly.” A shadow of a smile played on Mark’s lips. “I’m glad to see you did your research. RACK operates based on a clear understanding of the risks involved and explicit consent. Breath play, for example, can be considered unsafe by some, but it would be covered by RACK.”

“Gotcha.”

“It’s not just about what you do. It’s about why you do it, how you do it. And always, always with consent.”

“Consent is everything,” Roman echoed solemnly. This was more than a passing fancy. This was a commitment to Caleb’s well-being, to their future. The Dominant within him awoke, hungry for the knowledge that would make him worthy of the title.

“Training as a Dom is not a four-week course or even a four-month one. You’ll commit to a year of training with me, with at least one session per week. Of course life can get in the way, but that’s the goal.”

“I’m on board with that.”

“As part of your training, you’ll also have to submit to me. We’ll train with Caleb as your sub, but we’ll also do sessions with you as sub and me as Dom. It’s crucial for every Dom to have been in a sub’s shoes so you know what that feels like.”

Oof, that wouldn’t come easy to him, but he understood the principle behind it. Good lawyers were the ones who had worked both sides of the aisle as well, both as a prosecutor and as a defender. “I have no issues with that. You come highly recommended.”

“Thank you.” Master Mark’s nod was curt, decisive. “Training is intense. It will challenge you, strip you down to your core. You ready for that?”

Roman met his stare head-on. “Yes.”

“Then I’m willing to take you on as my student. We can train here or at Jesse’s club, whichever you prefer. Though I guess that for now, here is

better. After all, you're staying here for a reason…"

At least Mark didn't expect an explanation. "Yes, that would be best. And thank you. I won't let you or Caleb down."

"See that you don't." Mark stood, his presence commanding. "Our first session starts tomorrow. Be in the dungeon at seven p.m. sharp."

"I will be there." Roman's reply was a promise etched in steel—as unwavering as his determination to master the art of dominance. For Caleb. For them both.

24

Caleb was home again, in the arms and the bed of the man he loved. The man he belonged to. How perfect could life be?

He was still breathing heavily, his heart racing as the scent of sex hung thick in the air after another vigorous round of sex that Saturday morning. Sheets tangled around their legs, and the dim light from the bedside lamp cast a warm glow over Roman's skin.

"Why'd you decide to get this tattoo?" Caleb tapped the small four-leaf clover on Roman's biceps.

Roman chuckled softly. "A moment of rebellion, I suppose. Wander had all these big tattoos, but I couldn't, not with my chosen career. So I picked something small, something I could easily hide. A nod to our Irish heritage."

"I like it, even though it's very un-you."

"Un-me? Why?"

Caleb pressed his lips together, frowning. "Because you're a man of control? And that is a symbol of luck, of fate if you wish."

"Maybe that's why I chose it, to remind myself that control only gets you so far. Part of it is luck. Like meeting you…" He kissed Caleb's nose.

"Oh, that was very smooth. I'm impressed, Sir."

Roman grinned. "Yeah? You'd almost think I make my living using words, hmm?"

“Almost. Maybe I’ll write you a beautiful piece of code, since words are not my thing.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that. You have some words that are pretty powerful to me.”

“Like what?”

“The way you say ‘Yes, Sir.’ Gets me hard every time.”

Caleb smiled, his insides warming. “I’ll have to remember that, Sir.”

“Like you didn’t know already.”

“I did, but it’s still good to hear. What else?”

“Other words I like from you?”

Caleb nodded.

Roman’s eyes darkened. “You haven’t said them yet.”

Caleb’s throat tightened. Was Roman hinting at what Caleb thought he was? He swallowed. “Neither have you.”

Roman cupped his cheek with endless tenderness. “I’m scared shitless. I’ve never felt like this.”

“Not even with your ex-wife?”

“No. I loved her, don’t get me wrong, but it wasn’t like this. This is… Jesus. Caleb, I’m terrified of fucking this up, of losing you.”

Caleb’s heart felt like it had doubled in size. “I’m not that easy to get rid of.” He took the leap. “Because I love you.”

Roman’s breath caught. “You do?”

“You know I do. I’ve fallen hard for you.”

He didn’t have to wait long for Roman’s response, thank fuck. “I’m so in love with you. Head over heels, crazy for you.”

Caleb leaned his forehead against Roman’s. “I’ll never take that love for granted. Ever.”

“Neither will I, though I’m bound to fuck up. I’m not good at this, my sweet Caleb. My track record shows that. But I want to get it right this time, with you. I want to be worthy of you.”

“You already are, just the way you are.” Should he ask the question that had been on his mind so often lately? If not now, then when? Wasn’t that part of this conversation? It should be. “Can I ask about your job? Because you said before you couldn’t come out.”

“It would’ve been really, really hard, but I would never have asked you to be my dirty little secret. You mean too much to me for that.”

He spoke in the past tense as if he no longer had that problem. What did that mean? “I’m glad because I wouldn’t have done that. No matter how much I love you, I can’t be shoved back into a closet. I’m too out and proud for that.”

“As you should be.”

“So what’s the solution?”

Roman inhaled sharply. “After my leave of absence officially ends, I’ll be resigning.”

What? He couldn’t do that. Caleb didn’t want that responsibility on him. “Roman…Sir…you can’t do that for me.”

“It’s not for you. You played a part in my decision, but the biggest reason is Whitman. We can’t bring him down by playing by the rules. He’s got too much power for that. So we have to color outside the lines, and that’s incompatible with my job. I take my ethics too seriously for that. So it’s time to walk away.”

“B-but what will you do?”

Roman brushed through Caleb’s hair. “Wander offered me a job.”

“On our team?”

“Yes. Would you be okay with that, working with me when we’re together?”

“Hell, yes. One hundred percent. In fact, I would be…” Caleb, lost for words, kissed Roman. Hard. “Perfect. It would be perfect.”

“I’m glad because I have two weeks of leave yet, and once that’s done, I’m resigning.”

“Aren’t you afraid you’ll miss it?”

“I’m sure I will, and it won’t be easy in the beginning. Prepare for a grumpy boyfriend.”

Caleb grinned. “Like you’ve been Mr. Sunshine so far?”

Roman put his hand over his heart. “Ouch. Have I been that bad?”

“No. Not at all.” Caleb kissed him again. “And even in the moments that you struggled, I understood.”

Roman caressed his shoulder. “Thank you. I asked Master Mark to train me.”

“You did?”

“Thought it was time I learned the ropes. Literally.” Roman’s attempt at humor veiled the gravity of his decision, and Caleb saw through it.

“You’ve been making big decisions.”

Roman frowned. “Should I have discussed these with you?”

“No, because they weren’t my decisions to make. I’m not sure I would’ve even given my opinion had you asked. Too scared of influencing you. These things are too big to be anyone else’s decision but yours and yours completely.”

“You’re so goddamn wise for your age.”

Caleb beamed. “Thank you, Sir.”

“I want to find a nickname for you,” Roman said. “Not something generic like baby or babe, and not kid ‘cause that’s what my brother calls you. Or baby boy ‘cause that’s Ryan’s name for Alex. It needs to be something special, something unique. Something that has meaning to us.”

If Caleb’s insides grew any warmer, he’d burn. “I’d love that, Sir, but I don’t have any suggestions.”

“I’ll figure it out. It’ll come to me. Probably while I’m in the shower or about to fall asleep or something, like most brilliant ideas.”

Caleb chuckled. “Let me know when you do.”

“Figured if we’re doing this…” Roman traced the ink curling over Caleb’s right arm with his thumb. “I should do it right. I want to be all in. Both as your boyfriend and your Dom.”

“Training together.” Caleb breathed out the words, each syllable threaded with joy.

“Yep. I have my first solo session with Master Mark tonight, and we have a tentative scene with you planned for tomorrow if you’re on board.”

Was Roman kidding? Of course Caleb was on board. Returning to Boston with Roman’s marks on him would help him get through the week. A shiver of anticipation rippled through Caleb. He leaned in and brushed Roman’s lips in a kiss that held promises and the thrill of new beginnings. “Can’t wait.”

Before Caleb knew it, Sunday afternoon had arrived and, with it, the first joint session with Master Mark. Roman had reported his first training had gone well and that they’d made a plan for the first scene with Caleb, though he hadn’t given any specifics.

Master Mark showed up in his usual leather pants, bare-chested, with his hair tied back in a ponytail. Caleb felt nothing but affection for him, not even a trace of attraction.

Master Mark kissed Caleb's cheek. "Glad to see you found happiness, boy. I wish you nothing but the best."

"Thank you, Sir." Caleb beamed as he looked at Roman. "And thank you for agreeing to train my Dom."

"It's my pleasure. You know how this works, but let me explain this to Roman, okay?"

"Yes, Sir."

Master Mark turned to Roman. "When we do a session with Caleb, I will only address you. You're his Dom, and as such, he only listens to you. It's your job to communicate with him, okay?"

"Understood."

"Why don't you start by telling him what the plan for today is?"

"We're going to try several floggers today so I can see the difference and get a first experience in wielding them," Roman told Caleb. "Because it's a training session, the buildup will be different from what you're used to and may have a lot of interruptions for my benefit."

"Yes, Sir."

"Well explained, Roman." Master Mark nodded at him. "Managing expectations is crucial in situations like this. Caleb is a trained sub who can easily lose himself in a scene, so it's important for him to know that may not happen today, which will prevent him from getting frustrated. Okay, let's get started. What's your next step, Roman?"

Roman took a moment, then asked, "Do I have your consent for this session?"

More formal than was necessary, but Caleb appreciated the thoughtfulness behind it. "Yes, Sir."

"Do you have any warnings for me, any new limits, hard or soft, you need me to be aware of?"

Oh, he was doing great. "No, Sir, and thank you for checking."

"Any areas on your body that hurt that you'd like me to avoid today?"

"No, Sir."

"Good," Master Mark said. "Let's go to the St. Andrew's cross, which is my preferred location for a flogging. It's crucial to secure the arms of your sub so they won't be tempted to instinctively shield themselves and get hurt in the process."

Caleb obediently followed and took up position, linking his arms around the cross. “We’ll cover different types of knots later,” Master Mark said as he quickly secured Caleb’s hands. “In some cases, you’ll want to use a slip knot a sub can get out of easily, but in this situation, you need something he can pull on without it getting loose.”

Caleb eagerly breathed in the scent of leather and anticipation. Shadows clung to the walls like specters, the soft light from various candles and small lamps casting a suspenseful dance over the array of implements that promised both pleasure and pain.

“Each flogger has its own voice,” Master Mark said as he laid several out for Roman. “Its unique song of seduction and discipline.”

“How do you choose?” Roman asked.

“Consider the sub’s experience, their pain threshold, and what message you want to convey.” A slow smile spread across Master Mark’s face as he selected a medium-weight flogger. “For example, is your goal to punish, to bring pain, or to bring pleasure?”

“What should it be in this case?”

“I’d say a mix of pain and pleasure because, for Caleb, those two are closely related.”

“Okay.”

Master Mark’s arm swept through the air, the flogger slicing a precise arc before it kissed the padded bench next to Caleb with a thud. “Wrist loose. Let the tool do the work. Control is key.”

He hit the bench a few more times and handed the flogger to Roman, handle first. “It’s not about power. It’s about the exchange, the dance. Try it on the bench.”

Roman swooshed the flogger through the air. It landed unevenly, and he gave it another try, but his movements were still a bit stiff.

“Loosen up,” Master Mark encouraged. “Ease up on the grip. Let it be an extension of you. Feel its weight, its balance.”

Caleb bit his lip as he watched, almost jealous of that stupid bench. Even though he knew Roman had to practice first, he wanted to feel the leather kiss his skin, set it on fire, and paint Roman’s marks all over him.

“Precision,” Master Mark said. “It’s not about striking hard. It’s about striking right.”

Roman nodded, giving it another go.

“Good. Keep your eyes on where you want it to land.”

Roman arced his arm, and the flogger sliced toward the leather stool with a calculated snap—so much better than before. The thud of leather meeting leather was satisfying, though nowhere near as much as it would be on Caleb’s skin. Roman kept practicing for about a minute, then stopped.

“When you flog your sub, this is the area you want to target.” Master Mark used the handle of another flogger to trace a square on Caleb’s back and ass. “The ass cheeks are fine, but avoid the tailbone. And stay away from the kidneys, which are located about here.” He pointed them out.

Roman’s intense look of concentration showed how seriously he took all this, and a new wave of warmth flowed through Caleb.

“Buildup is important, but the how once again depends on your goals. Sometimes, you’ll want to build up agonizingly slow, almost like you’re teasing and edging. Other times, you’ll want to do a quick warm-up and then let it rain down hard. But intensity isn’t just about force. It’s also about tempo, rhythm. It’s a dance.” Master Mark put his hand on Roman’s shoulder and squeezed briefly. “Try again on the bench and find the beat.”

“Find the beat.” Roman echoed. He swung again, this time a series of hits. The creak of leather kissing leather grew rhythmic, almost hypnotic. Caleb stood shivering in anticipation. When would he feel the flogger’s cruel kiss?

“Much, much better. Think you’re ready to try it on Caleb?”

“Yes.” Roman sounded confident.

“Start with his buttocks. Since they have the most flesh, they can take a lot.”

Caleb closed his eyes and hugged the cross, his body taut with anticipation. The flogger cracked, then hit, and Caleb sighed as he absorbed its sting. Oh fuck, finally. Leather swooshed again and curled against his ass with a sharp snap. The heat took a second to penetrate, but when it did, Caleb hissed.

He opened his eyes and watched as Roman flicked his wrist again, confident and self-assured. So sexy. His movements had a dark beauty to them, a seductive promise of pain and pleasure.

Roman paused, seeking Caleb’s eyes. Caleb blinked slowly, unable to find the words. But Roman seemed to understand anyway because a sexy smile curled his lips…and he hit again. And again.

“Good.” Satisfaction laced Master Mark’s words. “That’s it, Roman. You’re getting it.”

Roman arced his arm down again, the flogger slicing through the air with precision. *Thwack*. Leather met flesh, Caleb’s ass absorbing each calculated blow. His body broke out in sweat, and his heart raced in a mix of excitement and pain.

“More.” The word was torn between a plea and a demand.

Roman obliged, the flogger biting deeper, drawing moans from Caleb’s lips, sounds he didn’t consciously make. The flogger ventured a little higher on Caleb’s back but focused mostly on his ass. Caleb couldn’t wait to see what it would look like. Jesus, he wouldn’t be able to sit for a week. And it would be totally worth it.

“Good boy,” Roman murmured, the words filled with pride, and Caleb’s heart soared.

“T-thank you, Sir.” The honorific slipped from his lips like a sacred vow. Sweat glistened on his taut body, and his muscles quivered under the dual assault of pain and pleasure. Pure adrenaline, with that blessed endorphin rush right on its heels, lifted him higher. The room echoed with the rhythmic impact of the flogger, Caleb’s sharp intakes of breath, and the grunts Roman let out every time he hit.

“Enough,” Roman said.

Caleb could’ve taken more, but he didn’t protest. He knew better, and besides, this session wasn’t for him. It was for Roman, and he’d done brilliantly.

With a nod from Master Mark, Roman untied Caleb, who stood shaking on legs that felt like jelly. Roman’s hands, steady during the session, trembled now as he brushed Caleb’s damp forehead.

“Hey,” Roman murmured, voice gravelly with raw emotion, fingers trailing over Caleb’s flushed skin, a silent promise of gentleness after the storm of sensation.

“Careful,” Master Mark said, his tone soft yet firm. “Now comes the most important part. Aftercare.”

Roman fetched a plush blanket from the nearby shelf and wrapped it over Caleb’s shivering form. His movements were tender, a stark contrast to the controlled ferocity of moments before. He carefully lifted Caleb, sliding

beneath to cradle him in his arms and carry him to a couch, where he gently lowered them.

Caleb snuggled close to Roman. His ass was on fire, but it felt so good. So grounding. He'd wear the marks with pride.

"Take your time. I'll be upstairs for the debrief later," Master Mark said, and then they were alone.

"You did so well," Roman whispered, lips brushing Caleb's ear. "So fucking beautiful for me."

Caleb's response was a contented sigh, the tension easing from his limbs as he curled closer to Roman's warmth. "Thank you, Sir."

"I love you, Caleb. My precious boy."

"Love you too, Sir."

25

Watching Caleb drive off to Boston had been much harder than Roman had expected. He'd missed him before, but after this weekend, something had changed. Was it that they'd expressed their love? Was it because Roman now knew they had a future together? Or was it the growing intensity of their investigation into Whitman? He wasn't sure, but it had been hell to let Caleb go.

Ryan and Alex had left for Boston that Friday night, just as Caleb had started his drive back, to see what they could find out about Joey DiMartino. Caleb had done a little online digging over the weekend but would keep chipping away at it as well. It was now Wednesday, and Ryan and Alex had returned from Boston to report back. One only had to look at Ryan's tight face to know bad news was coming.

"Hit us with it," Wander said, and Ryan rose. Alex turned off the lights, and the projector whirred to life, showing a picture of a handsome thirtysomething guy with short dark hair, brown eyes, and an aristocratic nose that hinted at his Italian heritage. He had a five o'clock shadow on his square jawline and a faint scar running along his left cheek. The combination was attractive but with a clear nod at the danger that simmered underneath.

"Joey DiMartino is third-generation Italian mob," Ryan said. "He hails from Boston's infamous South Side and grew up in a family with strong

connections to organized crime. His great-grandfather emigrated to Boston around the turn of the century, and his grandfather was the one who developed the family business, so to speak. Joey's father, Antonio DiMartino, still runs the empire. He's done time for smaller stuff, but no one has ever been able to pin anything big on him, something that would put him away for a long time. Joey is thirty-four and married to his high school sweetheart, Allie, and they have two kids, Lucia and Marco. While Allie presumably knows Joey is involved in illegal practices, he keeps her and the kids completely out of it to protect them."

"That's not uncommon in the mob," Roman said. "There's an unwritten rule that you keep wives and kids out of it."

"A rule that Joey adheres to. He's not your run-of-the-mill mobster, though. He prefers to operate behind the scenes and is rarely seen with his father and uncles. It seems he has the role of enforcer, but everyone we talked to mentioned how smart he is and that he prefers intelligence over brute force. He's not afraid to get his hands dirty but only as a last resort when nonviolent and often psychological methods have failed."

Roman let out a sigh. "That fits with the threats against me."

Ryan nodded. "It does. But make no mistake, Joey is unafraid to escalate to violence when needed. Remember those witnesses you had that changed their story?"

"Dorian Firestone and Leo Capatelli?"

"We spoke to Firestone. He identified Joey from a picture, but only after we put a lot of pressure on him and guaranteed him we wouldn't force him to testify. All Joey did was hand the guy pictures of his grandkids. Firestone recognized the threat and buckled."

Roman swallowed. "That's the first real link between Whitman, Coldrick, and Joey DiMartino."

"Technically, it links Whitman and Joey, but yeah, this is our first evidence that Joey is indeed doing the dirty work for Whitman through Isabella Coldrick."

"And Capatelli?"

"He refused to talk to us, clearly scared out of his mind. They got to him, but you already knew that."

Roman rubbed his temples. "It was the only explanation for why he suddenly changed his story. I've seen it before, and honestly, I can't even

blame him when the mob shows up at your doorstep. Why would he put his life on the line to testify against Whitman?”

Wander tapped his pencil on the table. “I spoke to Connor, and he knew Joey, and not in a good way. Connor’s family is part of the Irish mob, and they’ve been feuding with the DiMartinos for as long as both empires have existed. Connor confirmed Joey is as smart as they come but with a taste for mind games. I think his literal words were that Joey doesn’t just break legs. He breaks your will first and then your legs. He said that if we were involved with Joey, we were playing in the big leagues.”

“Christ,” Roman muttered, the realization hitting him like a ton of bricks. Caleb was out there, isolated in Boston, potentially crossing paths with these vipers. If Joey caught wind of who Caleb was…

“Roman?” Wander’s voice cut through his spiraling thoughts, bringing him back.

Roman pushed back the fear clawing at his chest and schooled his features into the mask of composure he wore so well. “We need to keep this tight. No leaks. If Joey suspects…”

“We know the risks,” Wander said firmly. “We move carefully. We can’t afford any mistakes.”

“We also found something interesting,” Lowell said. “Once we had a picture of Joey, we checked all our security cam footage again. Guess what? He’s been checking in on your apartment, Roman.”

With a few clicks, Lowell pulled the footage up on the big screen. “After you showed up here, we installed some extra security cams. Inconspicuous ones, including one above your neighbor’s door aimed at your apartment and one directed at the street.”

He pressed Play, and the footage showed Roman’s street. Within seconds, a black Honda drove by slowly, the tinted windows making it impossible to see the driver. “We ran the plate. It’s registered to Giorgio DiMartino, Joey’s uncle.”

The footage changed. It was raining now, but that same car drove by again.

“We have him on camera at least once a day, driving past your apartment. And there’s this.”

Now, the images showed Roman’s front door and a guy wearing a Red Sox baseball cap ringing his doorbell. His face was turned away from the

camera, but he was still easy to recognize. Joey.

“He’s been keeping tabs on your apartment, stopping by regularly. He even talked to your neighbors and asked them if they knew where you were.”

Roman snorted. “Good luck with that. I doubt my neighbors would even be able to describe me. I’m never home.”

Lowell chuckled. “Which is exactly what they told him. We have sound on that camera, so we were able to catch the conversation.”

“So now we have a clear link between Joey and Roman,” Wander said. “But it’s nowhere near enough to bring Whitman down. Where do we go from here?”

“Where is Caleb on getting access to the encrypted files in Isabella’s iCloud?” Ryan asked.

Wander slowly shook his head. “It’s proving to be a challenge. She used high-end encryption software, and Caleb’s not been able to get past that. The password changes daily according to a list Isabella has, but Caleb doesn’t know where she keeps it.”

“She wouldn’t have encryption like that unless she wanted to safeguard something crucial, something she doesn’t want to fall into the wrong hands,” Alex said. “And if Caleb can’t get in, we’re talking high-level security.”

“Agreed,” Roman said. “So if we can’t get access to her files, where does that leave us?”

“We have to go back to Boston and dig some more,” Ryan said.

Hell, no. Roman opened his mouth to protest, then caught a warning glance from his brother and closed it again. Wander was right. This was his team, and Roman had to let him make the decisions.

“How certain are you that you’re flying under the radar?” Wander asked Ryan.

Ryan crossed his arms. “Are you questioning my skills?”

“Ryan, this isn’t the time to get all pissy with me, yeah? We’re not dealing with low-level idiots here. This is the mob, and Caleb is out there, working in the lion’s den. So I’ll ask you again. How certain are you that Joey isn’t on to you?”

Ryan held up his hands. “Sorry, you’re right. The truth is that we can’t be certain. We were careful, but we can’t be sure our questions didn’t

somehow get back to him. But even if they do, there's no link to Caleb. Joey may suspect someone is on to him, but how would he connect the dots to Caleb?"

"I don't know," Wander said. "But I don't want to count on him not figuring it out. Caleb's life hangs in the balance."

The room was thick with tension, each man wrapped in their own cloak of concern and anticipation. Roman's heart hammered a brutal rhythm, and his mind waged war between the desire to keep everyone safe—especially Caleb—and the knowledge that risks were necessary in this investigation. His chest felt tight, constricted like a vise of worry clamped around him.

Caleb's safety hung in the balance, a precarious thread that Roman vowed to protect with every fiber of his being. Roman couldn't shake the chill of dread settling in his bones. Joey DiMartino was a threat unlike any they'd faced, and the more they dug, the bigger the chance Joey would find out the truth and come after them, after Caleb.

"Roman?" Wander asked.

Roman buried his head in his hands. "I don't know. Everything in me screams to get Caleb out of there, but I don't know if that's because the danger is real or because I love him."

He'd said it without thinking, and it wasn't until a soft chorus of "Aw…" rose that he realized he'd shown his hand. "Yeah, yeah, whatever. I love him, okay? We're together now, officially. I think."

"You may wanna leave those last two words out," Alex said with a smile. "Everything before that was perfect."

"Thank you." Roman sighed. "My point is that I don't know if my opinion is influenced by my feelings for him."

"Of course it is," Ryan said calmly. "I would feel the same way if it were Alex. That's why we have a team to weigh in and counterbalance your overprotective urge."

"Thank you." It meant so much more coming from Ryan, who wasn't exactly known as the warm and fuzzy type. On the contrary. So hearing him acknowledge he'd react the same way made Roman feel seen and validated.

Wander leaned back in his chair, rubbing his bald head. "What added value does Caleb still have in Isabella's office? Yes, he's trying to get into the encrypted files on her iCloud, but he can do that from here as well.

She’s already proven to be super cautious, and in over two weeks on the job, all he overheard was that brief phone call with Joey.”

“That call did prove to be a major breakthrough, though,” Lowell said. “Just playing devil’s advocate here.”

“True,” Wander acknowledged.

“If he stays, he might be able to piece a few more things together, is all I’m saying,” Lowell said.

“But do we need him to?” Roman asked. “With what we know now, don’t we have enough to connect everything ourselves?”

Wander put a strong hand on Roman’s arm. “You know we don’t. Yes, we have evidence that suggests a link between Whitman, Coldrick, and Joey, but it’s thin and nowhere near enough to act on.”

Roman shook his head. “That’s not what I’m saying. Of course what we have now isn’t enough to get Whitman convicted, even aside from the fact that some of our evidence was obtained in ways that would make it inadmissible in court. But we do know where to dig now. We can look for known associations between the DiMartinos and others, maybe even use that to figure out who’s been bought on the Boston PD or within the FBI. We haven’t unraveled the whole messy knot yet, but we do know which threads to pull.”

Wander scratched his beard. “Good point.”

“I just…” Roman swallowed again, unable to dislodge that ball of pure fear inside him. “I can’t explain it, but I’m scared for Caleb.”

Ryan narrowed his eyes. “You said that before, that you had a bad feeling about this.”

“I do. I don’t know why, but I do.”

Ryan turned to Wander. “Call Caleb back. We’ll figure out how to get more evidence without putting him at risk.”

“You changed your mind?” Wander asked.

“Yeah. Bad premonitions have a reason, and I always take them seriously. Call him back.”

“Okay.” Wander picked up his phone, swiped a few times, and pressed the Call button. “It’s on speaker.”

“Hi, this is me. If you know me, then you also know what to do. If you don’t know me, why the hell are you calling me?” Caleb’s cheeky voicemail greeting answered.

Roman’s heart skipped a beat. The call had gone straight to voicemail?

“He could be on a call with someone else,” Alex suggested, but his tone suggested he didn’t believe it.

“Check his location,” Ryan said.

Wander swiped, his face tense. “Fuck.” Then again. “Fuck, fuck, fuck. His location is off. Last known location was Coldrick Law…three hours ago.”

Roman’s throat was so tight he couldn’t swallow. “Is there any reason why Caleb would turn off his location?”

He knew the answer, but he had to ask.

“No,” Wander said. “He’d never turn it off voluntarily. He’s been compromised. We have to assume he’s been taken.”

26

Caleb drummed a staccato rhythm on his desk, his eyes fixed on the screen that taunted him with its refusal to yield secrets. The glare of his laptop mocked his every attempt to infiltrate Isabella's encrypted iCloud fortress. He swore under his breath, frustration coiling in his gut like a tight spring. The digital walls stood impenetrable, yet within those walls lay the vital thread that could tie Isabella to Whitman, unraveling the entire sordid case.

"Damn it," he muttered, slamming the laptop shut. He needed air, a momentary escape from the depressing defeat of the morning's efforts. He'd take his lunch break outside this time, clear his head.

The chill of the outside world greeted him, a reprieve from his heated mind. He stepped over the biggest snow sludge, not wanting to get his nice shoes dirty, and walked to Subway. Nothing fancy for him. A simple sub would do.

"Turkey melt with bacon on Italian bread," he said to the Subway employee when it was finally his turn.

He made it a meal with a Coke and two of those delicious raspberry cheesecake cookies. Unfortunately, the restaurant was packed, so he'd have to eat it at his desk after all. At least he'd gotten some fresh air, right?

The bag with his sub and cookies in one hand and his Coke in the other, Caleb stepped out onto the sidewalk. He dodged people brushing past him

until the world shrunk to a pinpoint of cold, hard pressure against his back.

“Move, and you’re dead,” a voice hissed, barely above a whisper but laden with lethal intent.

A gun. His heart jackhammered and adrenaline flooded his system. He froze, breath hitching. Years of judo and kickboxing screamed within him, urging him to fight, to exploit the attacker’s balance, to break free. But even as his muscles tensed, ready to react, his mind roared louder with the knowledge that any sudden move could be his last. As fast as he was, he couldn’t outmove a gun.

“Easy, easy,” Caleb said, his voice a forced calm belying the terror snaking through his veins.

“Walk toward the black car,” the voice commanded, and Caleb obeyed. He couldn’t see the man’s face, but he knew who it was. Joey DiMartino wouldn’t hesitate to shoot him. Every instinct, every trained response to refuse to get into that car and fight his way out had to be curbed. He couldn’t risk a struggle, not when Joey’s finger twitched on the trigger with eager anticipation. It would cost Caleb his life.

“Get in.”

Caleb stared at the nondescript sedan idling at the curb, its back door ajar like the jaw of some urban predator. Fuck. He had no choice.

He stepped toward the car, his dress shoes scuffing the pavement. The interior was shrouded in shadows, a stark contrast to the vibrant chaos of the street he was being torn from. His hands trembled, betraying the fear he tried to cloak under a mask of stoicism, but he managed to get in without stumbling, even holding on to his lunch.

The door closed with a thud, sealing his fate. Seconds later, Joey—he could see his face now—slid in next to Caleb in the back seat, gun still in hand. He took Caleb’s drink with his other hand and gave it to the driver, then did the same for the bag with Caleb’s food.

“Phone. Now.” Joey stretched out his hand, waiting, unyielding.

Caleb had no issues handing over his phone. He wasn’t stupid enough to use an easy code or—worse—face ID. Joey held it in front of Caleb, muttering a curse when it didn’t unlock. “Your code.”

And so it began. Caleb took a deep breath, mentally bracing himself. “No.”

Joey’s hand was quick, the back of it striking Caleb’s cheek with such force his head whipped to the side. Pain splintered across his face, a bright flare that momentarily washed out the dread. Caleb’s eyes watered, but he set his jaw, the sting on his skin fueling his resolve.

“Your code.”

“You heard me the first time. No.”

Joey grabbed Caleb’s chin, forcing their gazes to lock. “I can make this very unpleasant for you.”

“Already is.”

Joey’s grip eased, and his face relaxed a little, almost as if he was amused. “If that’s how you wanna play it.”

“I don’t want to play at all.”

“You’ve got a wicked smart mouth on you. Won’t do you any favors.”

Caleb didn’t think that statement needed a response, so he kept silent.

“We’ll revisit this later.” Joey curled his fingers around the phone and turned it off, the screen’s glow dying. With a flick of his wrist, the dead phone disappeared into Joey’s jacket, severing Caleb’s hope of being tracked.

Caleb swallowed the metallic taste of fear and defiance on his tongue. Seconds later, Joey blindfolded him with rough fabric that bit into his skin. The sensory deprivation sent his already heightened awareness into overdrive as the vehicle pulled away from the curb. Every jolt of the car, each turn and acceleration, compounded the disorientation, twisting Caleb’s sense of time into an unending spiral.

The city traffic meant lots of stops and turns, the occasional honking car, an ambulance passing by, but then the traffic thinned, and the car’s motion lulled into a steady hum. Had they hit a highway? Caleb’s senses remained on high alert. How much time had passed? Ten minutes? Twenty?

Through the cloying thickness of fear, the scent of Joey’s aftershave wafted toward him, a stark reminder of his captor’s presence. Caleb’s heart hammered against his ribs, a relentless drumbeat echoing the dread pooling in his gut. But it wasn’t just the fear for himself that gnawed at him. It was also the thought of Roman, how he would take this, how worried he would be. And even more important, fear for Roman’s safety, which now depended on Caleb being able to resist the inevitable interrogation.

The car’s engine finally went silent, ending the dull roar that had filled Caleb’s ears for god knew how long. Rough hands gripped his arm, yanking him from the false sanctuary of the back seat. Where were they?

Gravel crunched underfoot as Joey marched him across an uneven lot, his viselike grip on his arm preventing him from falling as Caleb tripped twice. They stepped over a threshold, and the sudden change in acoustics told Caleb they were inside a room. The stench of mildew and stale cigarettes almost made him gag, and somewhere, a faucet dripped a steady rhythm.

The blindfold was ripped off, and Caleb blinked against the sudden light. A motel room, he concluded once his eyes had adjusted. The curtains were pulled close so he couldn’t see the name. No obvious signs of branding anywhere, so probably not a chain motel. He still heard traffic, so they were close to a major road. The I-90, possibly?

Joey shoved him onto a desk chair that creaked ominously under his weight. Caleb’s wrists were yanked behind him and secured, the zip ties biting into his skin with cruelty.

“Comfortable?” Joey asked calmly, circling Caleb like a predator sizing up its prey.

“Not particularly. The zip ties are a bit tight.”

Joey grinned. “I bet they are.”

A third man entered the room, carrying Caleb’s lunch. Caleb’s stomach rumbled, but he doubted he’d get to actually eat his sub.

“What did he get?” Joey asked the other guy.

“Sub and cookies, plus a Coke.”

“I’ll take the Coke and the cookies. I have a sugar craving.”

Joey took his time eating the cookies, his eyes never leaving Caleb as if he were sizing him up, determining his best approach.

Finally, Joey crunched the paper bag into a ball and threw it into the trash. After a long sip from the Coke, he said, “Let’s have a little chat, shall we?”

His tone was friendly enough, but Caleb had no illusion their conversation would be. He braced himself for the threats, the pain, and whatever twisted game Joey wanted to play. He could handle pain. It was familiar territory, but never like this. Never without trust, without care.

“Who do you work for?” Joey asked.

Caleb pressed his lips together.

With a sigh, Joey took a switchblade from his pocket and clicked it open. “Let me ask that again. Who do you work for?”

Caleb shook his head.

Joey pressed the blade against Caleb’s cheek. “Would be a shame to ruin that pretty face.”

“Go to hell.”

The knife cut a cold, sharp path down his cheek, drawing blood. “Wrong answer.”

It stung, but Caleb had suffered much worse. And he would endure this too. He couldn’t—wouldn’t—betray Roman. Not even under the threat of steel or the shadow of death that loomed in Joey’s icy stare.

“Who sent you?” Joey asked.

Caleb didn’t react.

“Fine, have it your way,” Joey growled, withdrawing the blade with a suddenness that left Caleb’s nerves jangling.

Joey’s fist crashed into Caleb’s cheek. A sharp explosion of pain reverberated through his skull. Caleb’s head snapped to the side, and spittle flecked the grimy floor of the motel room. Another blow followed, knuckles finding the tender flesh just below his ribs. Air whooshed from his lungs in a pained gasp, and for a moment, the world narrowed down to pulsating agony.

Oh fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck… It hurt. It hurt so bad. He sucked in a breath, then another one.

“Who’s your employer?” Joey asked.

“Fuck you,” Caleb spat, the words tasting of iron and resolve. Or maybe that was the blood in his mouth. Not that it mattered.

The questions kept coming, a barrage meant to disorient and break him, but Caleb held firm. Pain bloomed across his body as Joey’s frustration turned physical again and again, but still, Caleb gave no ground. Silence was his only shield now, coupled with a stubbornness that refused to wilt under Joey’s harsh glare. No names would slip past his bloodied lips. He’d sooner die than betray the trust Roman and the team had in him.

Somehow, Caleb retreated inward, away from the relentless assault, the same way he did when he was in a scene. His mind separated from his body, and though he felt the pain, it didn’t touch him on the inside.

Instead, he conjured up images of Roman, each memory a balm against the brutality of the torture. The two of them in bed, cuddling. Roman's soft flesh against Caleb's skin. The impact of Roman's hand on his ass. The lust in Roman's eyes when Caleb kneeled for him. The warmth of Roman's hand on his back, steady and sure, grounding him when the rest of the world seemed intent on tearing him apart.

Would he see Roman again? Or was this the end for him?

Fear was a living thing, a serpent coiling tight around Caleb's heart. It whispered of unspeakable consequences, of never kneeling for Roman again, never feeling the reassuring pressure of his grip. Yet as Joey delivered another punishing hit, one that sent sparks dancing across Caleb's vision, the fear was kept at bay by the fortress of Caleb's will.

Roman's eyes swam in his mind—those brown depths that held storms and secrets alike. The image of him, so vivid it hurt, was a lifeline thrown into the roiling sea of Caleb's despair. Somewhere beyond these walls, Roman was fighting for him, and that knowledge lent Caleb a strength he didn't know he possessed. Caleb's body bore the brunt of Joey's rage, but within him, something unbreakable took root and flourished. With Roman etched into his very soul, no amount of pain could truly conquer him.

Joey's hand clamped down hard, fingers biting into Caleb's jaw, forcing him to meet his gaze and return to the present. The room was a blur through Caleb's tears and sweat, and he'd taken a few hits to his face as well, but Joey's eyes pierced through the haze with predatory precision.

"If you think this is bad, you ain't seen nothing yet," Joey said.

All Caleb could do was blink. Even if he'd wanted to, he wouldn't have been able to form words. Everything hurt, everything swam, everything was blurry. He could barely think, let alone speak.

"Stubborn little…" Joey muttered, releasing Caleb's face with a shove so his head knocked back against the wall.

Pain splintered through Caleb, another jolt in the relentless tide, and then everything went black, and he was sucked into blissful oblivion.

27

Frantic didn’t even come close to describing Roman’s state of mind. All he could think of was Caleb. Even as Wander and the others were brainstorming possible solutions, his brain remained focused on Caleb. Was he still alive? The thought that he might not be was unbearable. Just when Roman had found love, would fate cruelly rip it out of his fingers?

“Roman?” Wander asked.

Roman raised his head, surprised to feel wetness on his cheeks. He hadn’t even realized he was crying. His movements were slow as he wiped the tears away, as if he was moving through a fog. “What is it?”

“We need you to focus, Ro,” Wander said gently. “Caleb needs you to pull it together. I know you’re worried sick. We all are. But we have to push past that and concentrate our efforts on finding him.”

Roman blinked and sucked in a deep breath. Wander was right. Crying didn’t help anyone, least of all Caleb. “Okay.”

“Have you heard what we discussed?”

“Sorry, no.”

A warm hand landed on his shoulder. “No worries. Our working theory is that somehow, Joey DiMartino figured out who Caleb is and took him. So we need to find Joey. If we find him, we’ll most likely find Caleb.”

“Right. So how do we find Joey?” His brain slowly started up again, like an old computer. “Have we tried tracking his car? The one on the

security cam footage outside my apartment?”

“We don’t have that ability, Ro. Not without involving law enforcement.”

Of course. “I can make some calls.”

“We fear that would put Caleb in danger. If Joey gets wind of the cops being involved, he may take drastic measures.”

Drastic measures. That was code for killing Caleb. Oh god, Roman couldn’t let himself go there. “Okay, so let’s not do that. What options do we have?”

“Alex and I are heading back to Boston to see what we can shake loose from the people we already talked to,” Ryan said. “Maybe one of them knows something they haven’t shared yet.”

They needed someone with contacts in the city, someone linked to the mob. “What about Connor?” Roman asked his brother. “Can we reach out to him and ask him if he still has connections?”

Wander nodded as he whipped out his phone and made the call. “Connor, you’re on speaker with the team,” he said as soon as Connor picked up, thankfully not wasting any time. “We have an emergency.”

“What happened?” Connor asked.

“Caleb was investigating our case in Boston, and he’s gone missing. We suspect Joey DiMartino has him.”

“Fuck.”

“We were wondering if you have any ideas on how we can find him. His phone is off. His last known location was the office building he was working in, and we don’t have any leads as to where he could be.”

“Do you have the license plate and model of Joey’s car?”

“We do.”

“Send it to me. I can pull some strings and get a BOLO out.”

“Won’t that drive him to violence?” Roman asked.

Connor was quiet for a few beats. “Men like Joey are inherently violent, unfortunately. They don’t need a trigger. In my experience, putting pressure on them can work positively, since they also have a finely honed survival instinct. If Joey fears it’ll be game over for him, he may turn on your guy.”

“I thought the mob never ratted each other out,” Wander said.

“Each other? No, but from what I understand, the man he’s working for isn’t organized crime.”

“He’s not,” Roman said.

“So Joey won’t have the same loyalty to him that he would have to his family members. At the end of the day, this is business for him, not personal. He won’t take the fall for an outsider.”

Roman leaned forward, a thought sparking in his head. “You’re saying pressure on him could work well? Public pressure, I mean?”

“What are you thinking?”

If he wanted Connor’s honest opinion, he had to give the man more information. “I’m investigating Senator Whitman. He’s our target and the man Joey works for.”

Connor whistled between his teeth. “Can’t say I’m surprised because rumors about him have been flying for years, but damn, that’s a wicked tough fight you’re in.”

“Ideally, Whitman goes to prison for a long time, but right now, I’ll settle for him losing his power and influence and, above all, his job. He’s up for reelection in November, so it needs to go public before then,” Roman said.

“Gotcha. You’re thinking of going public now? Do you have enough dirt on him?”

“No, not yet. That’s what Caleb was working on.”

Someone in the background spoke to Connor, and they waited to hear what was happening. “Hi,” a strange male voice spoke. “I’m Miles Hampton, one of Connor’s housemates. I couldn’t help but overhear the discussion. Mind if I share an idea?”

“You may wanna mention you’re former FBI,” Connor said dryly.

“Right. Forgot about that. Yes, I used to work for the FBI.”

It couldn’t hurt, right? “What’s your thought?” Roman asked.

“You said you didn’t have enough on Whitman yet.”

“Correct.”

“Does he know that?”

“He knows I’m investigating him.”

“But does he know where you are in your investigation? Does he have a mole that has fed him recent updates?”

“He doesn’t, not anymore. I’ve taken a leave of absence, and ever since, I haven’t updated anyone about our progress.” The implication hit. “You mean…”

“If there’s reasonable cause for Whitman to assume you could have the evidence, that could be enough to spook him. Go public with what you know, hint at the evidence, and include enough details so he can only surmise you’ve got the goods on him, then reference the kidnapping. If he thinks he’s about to go down, he won’t want to add murder to his charges.”

Roman looked at Wander. “Could this work?”

“You’d know that better than I do. I’m not gonna lie, Ro. I’m out of my depth here. Organized crime is not my area of expertise.”

“Fair enough. Connor, what do you think?” Roman asked.

Connor’s answer came quickly. “I think Miles is on to something here. Yes, I could totally see this working.”

“We could combine it with putting pressure on Whitman’s wife like we discussed,” Ryan said. “She was out of town last week, so we didn’t get a chance to talk to her again, but she’s back.”

Hope bloomed inside Roman. “How do I do this? How do I go public?”

“Do you have contacts at your local TV station? I’m sure you know some reporters,” Miles said.

“I do. You think I should go that big?”

“If you want it to work, yes,” Miles said. “For Whitman to be sufficiently spooked, you have to reach a big public. This needs to be front-page news, the lead on all the news reports.”

“But what if…?” Roman’s throat closed again, and he had to force the words out. “What if it backfires and they hurt Caleb?”

Silence descended. “I’m gonna be honest with you, Roman,” Miles said softly. “They’ve probably hurt him already, trying to get information out of him. But they have no reason to kill him, not until they’ve gotten every detail out of him. As long as he keeps his mouth shut, they’ll let him live. And once you go live, his chances of survival increase significantly. So the question is, how easy would it be for them to get Caleb to talk?”

“The kid won’t break,” Wander said. “Not unless they bring serious threats to the table. Don’t forget, he’s a sub with an affection for impact play. It’s not the same, but his body knows how to handle pain. He can compartmentalize that. It’s his fear for others that would be his downfall.”

Wander’s faith in Caleb brought Roman hope. If Caleb could withstand torture, Roman could power through his despair and do his job. “I’ll start making some calls on the way to Boston, since I’ll have to do those

interviews in person," Roman said. "For something this big, they'll want to talk to me directly rather than through Zoom or something."

"I'm sorry. I don't know everyone there. Who said they were heading to Boston to talk to Whitman's wife?" Miles asked.

"That would be me and Alex, my partner," Ryan said. "I'm Ryan Mason, former homicide detective and now a PI for Dwyer Security."

"Good to meet you, Ryan. Would you care for some company? Connor and I may be of use to you. Connor because he's local, and me because of my background as an FBI agent."

"No need to sell me," Ryan said. "We'll take all the help we can to get Caleb safely home."

"Everyone is coming," Wander said in a tone that left no room for debate. "If Roman is traveling, we'll have his back. Lowell and Jonah, you're his primary, with Alex and me as backup. Sorry, Alex, I need you to cover Roman. If Connor and Miles go with Ryan, he'll be fine."

"Yes, boss," Alex said.

"Let's pack up and be ready to move out. How much time do you guys need, Connor?"

"We'll be there in fifteen," Connor said.

"All right. Everyone be ready to leave in twenty," Wander said.

Roman had no time to worry as he had to focus on packing a bag and then shaving, grooming, and getting changed into a nice suit. He needed to look every inch the professional, even if this would be the very last thing he'd ever do as a DA. After this, his career was officially over, but he was at peace with it. All he cared about was getting Caleb back.

Connor wasn't tall, but the man was built like a wall, casting an imposing figure. Miles was taller and much leaner, but he carried himself with that unmistakable confidence of a law enforcement officer. Both were carrying, as were Wander's men. Roman was the only one without a firearm…and he was okay with that.

They piled into two cars, and the ride flew by while Roman made call after call, talking to TV reporters as well as the *Boston Globe*, the *Washington Post*, and the *New York Times*. Miles was right. For this to work, everyone needed to hear about it, and so Roman talked and talked and talked to anyone who would listen.

He dropped names, shared evidence that wasn't confidential, hinted at bought cops and LEOs, and speculated that the attorney general of Massachusetts didn't seem interested in taking Whitman down. He showed evidence of the slander campaign against him, defended himself against the accusations, and shared the pictures of Joey surveilling his home. And last but not least, he made clear references to other pressure tactics, like going after Roman's loved ones, including his boyfriend. Yes, he was casually coming out, but he didn't care. It would only help make this story bigger. Joey might not know what Caleb was to Roman, but he would understand soon enough when it hit the news.

Before Roman knew it, it was time for his first TV interview. Wander and his team stayed in the background as Roman sat down with Michelle Claiborne, Boston's most prominent TV anchor, known for asking the tough questions.

"We're here with District Attorney Roman Dwyer tonight, and he has some bombshell revelations about Massachusetts Senator Douglas Whitman," she said in the intro, perfectly dramatized for maximum effect. "Roman, what can you tell us about your investigation into Senator Whitman?"

A lot. He could tell them a lot. He took a deep breath. "I first came across rumors about Senator Whitman's dealings when I overheard a call in the courthouse from a man who claimed he'd been pressured by Senator Whitman into taking the fall for something. It coincided with a host of rumors, so I started digging, carefully at first."

He walked her through the investigation, sharing whatever he could without endangering people or violating his professional ethics.

"There have been many rumors about you recently," Michelle said. "Rumors that have cast doubts about your mental health."

Roman nodded. "I'm aware of those, but that's exactly what they are—rumors. They were started by people closely connected to Senator Whitman in an attempt to discredit me."

"Your secretary accused you of sending inappropriate sexual messages."

"She did, but I proved that I was in a meeting with several witnesses when those messages were sent, so they weren't originated by me."

"This interview is, by your own admission, not sanctioned by the Massachusetts Justice Department."

“Correct.”

“Why?”

“I never asked them for permission, knowing I wouldn’t get it. I have been stonewalled and thwarted by cops from within the Boston PD, coworkers, supervisors, and even FBI agents at every step in the investigation into Senator Whitman. It only proved to me how deep Senator Whitman’s influence extended.”

“Let me get this straight. You are accusing the senator of bribing people?”

“Yes. Bribing, paying them to look the other way, exchanging favors for favors, whatever you want to call it. He’s done whatever he could to frustrate my job.”

“Those are heavy accusations.”

“Yes, but I can back them up. I have collected a broad range of evidence over the last months, all leading to the inevitable conclusion that Senator Whitman is as dirty as they get.”

“Are you planning on bringing charges against him?”

“Me personally? No, I think that after this interview, that ship has sailed. I’m pretty sure that by the time we’re done, I will be fired. But I do hope my successor will have the courage to do the right thing and indict Senator Whitman. The evidence is overwhelming, so ignoring it would only prove the senator’s guilt.”

“That’s a high price to pay for the truth.”

Roman shrugged. “It’ll be worth it.”

“So why now? Why did you decide to go public?”

Roman swallowed. Moment of truth. “Because someone closely connected to the senator has threatened someone I love. My boyfriend.”

Her eyes widened. “I wasn’t aware you’re gay.”

“I’m not. I’m bisexual, though up until now, that isn’t something I’ve been open about.”

“But you’re in a relationship with a man now.”

“Yes, I am, but I won’t reveal his name or any details. All I will say is that he’s being threatened right now and I implore Senator Whitman not to add another charge to the already considerable list of felonies.”

She opened her mouth, then closed it again, narrowing her eyes. Roman could practically see her figuring it out and processing her next move. “We

all hope for a peaceful solution for your partner," she finally said smoothly.

"I appreciate that, Michelle. Thank you."

After a few more questions, she finished the interview, and Roman leaned back in his chair.

"Off the record," she said, "is your boyfriend in danger?"

Roman nodded. "The gravest danger imaginable."

"That's why you went public. You needed Whitman in the public eye."

"Can you blame me?"

"No. I would've done the same thing. And between you and me, and still off the record, I'm not even a little bit surprised by your findings against him. Like you said, rumors have been circulating for years."

"And now they're not rumors anymore."

She patted his hand. "Your boyfriend is in my thoughts, Roman. I hope it'll all work out."

"So do I."

By the time he finished his last interview, the story had broken everywhere, not just on the local news but in all major newspapers, blogs, and websites, as well as on CNN and all news channels. The headlines were all a variation on *Boston District Attorney Drops Bombshell Investigation into Senator Whitman*. Roman coming out was a mere footnote, but his remark about his boyfriend being threatened was reported everywhere.

"And now we wait." Wander put a hand on Roman's shoulder and gave him a comforting squeeze.

"Have you heard from Ryan yet?"

"Yes. Not here."

They found privacy, with Alex, Lowell, and Jonah standing guard, something that didn't go unnoticed by the news crews.

"They spoke with Whitman's wife," Wander said softly. "She's agreed to cooperate with them. They've taken her to a safe location, and she's telling them everything she knows."

Thank fuck. "Any ideas for a location where Caleb may be held yet?"

"No, but they're working on it. Keep the faith."

He would keep the faith. If only because the alternative was too horrible to consider.

28

Pain.

Every-fucking-thing hurt.

His ribs. His head. His cheeks. His jaw. His back. Hell, even his teeth ached. Everything pulsated and pounded, smarted and stung, throbbed and thumped. It was agony, sheer agony.

Caleb drifted in and out of sleep—or maybe it was consciousness? All he knew was that not being aware was bliss and being awake was torture. He hadn't seen Joey again, just the driver of the car, who checked in on him occasionally. Maybe every hour? Caleb had lost all sense of time.

He was hungry but, above all, thirsty, not having had anything to drink since his few sips of Coke right before Joey had kidnapped him. How long could one go without water? At least a day, right? Had twenty-four hours passed already?

The room was dark, so it had to be night. That meant that it was, what, maybe ten hours since lunch? Twelve? He still heard a lot of cars outside, so it couldn't be past midnight on a weekday.

Wander would come for him. Caleb had to cling to that belief, even if despair threatened to creep in at the thought of his phone being off. How would Wander ever find him without being able to track him? He was at some rundown motel, not a property the DiMartinos owned. At least, he

didn’t think they did, but what did he know? Maybe they had purchased it for exactly this purpose.

But Wander would come for him. His boss would stop at nothing to find Caleb, that much he knew. Caleb was so much more than an employee to him. Wander loved him like… Well, not quite like a brother, but like a close friend, maybe?

And there was Roman, of course. Roman, who also loved Caleb, though in a different way. Roman, who would be worried out of his mind. How Caleb wished he could tell him he was okay, that he was alive. For now anyway.

Then again, if Joey had wanted to kill him, he could have already. Easily. So clearly, he had a reason to keep Caleb alive. Most likely because he needed information from him. Which meant Caleb had to hold out. Once he started talking, he’d lose his value.

But how much more torture could he take? After that one shallow cut on Caleb’s cheek, Joey hadn’t used the knife again, thank god. Caleb had never been a fan of blood play because all that red made him a little squeamish. Not to the point of fainting, but he definitely didn’t consider it sexy. Getting beat up wasn’t his idea of fun either, but somehow, he could handle it better. Or maybe he was just telling himself that.

To be honest, he wasn’t even sure if his thoughts were making sense anymore. It was hard to focus on one thing. He was so hungry. No, thirsty. And his head fucking hurt. Jesus, who was he kidding? Everything hurt.

When he woke again, it was much quieter outside. Past midnight, then. Other than that, nothing had changed. He still hurt. He was still thirsty. Or was he hungry? Both.

Fuck, thinking was hard. Maybe he had a concussion? Hadn’t Joey slammed Caleb’s head against the wall? That would make sense. It would also explain why he had trouble seeing clearly. Everything was blurry. His right eye throbbed like a mother, so maybe Joey had hit him there?

He was so thirsty. Next time that driver came, he’d ask for some water.

BAM! The door was kicked in, and Caleb’s eyes flew open. Oh fuck, bad idea. He closed them instantly as pain barreled through his head.

What was happening?

He was thirsty. He needed to ask for water.

“Can I have some water?” he whispered. It came out a barely audible croak.

“Caleb,” someone said. “You’re safe.”

No, he wasn’t. Joey was trying to trick him. “Water. Please, I need water.”

“Give him some water.” The voice sounded familiar, but he couldn’t open his eyes. It took too much effort.

Cool water hit his lips, and he took a greedy gulp, promptly choking on it. Every cough hurt like a knife to his chest, and by the time he was done, tears were streaming down his face. “Please… Please, I need water.”

“Careful, Caleb. Take little sips.”

He tried, but his mouth wouldn’t cooperate, and the water ended up dripping down his chin.

“His face is too swollen.”

“That’s okay. He’s still getting some in. Keep at it.”

Who were all these people? They sounded familiar, but one of them had a distinct Boston accent, so he couldn’t be a friend. No, Joey must have sent them to try and trick him into talking.

“I won’t talk,” he said between sips. “No matter what you do. I won’t talk.”

“You did good, kid. You did so good. We’re all so proud of you.”

That was the guy with the Boston accent. Why did he sound so nice? Why would he say he was proud? “You can’t trick me.”

“He’s out of it,” someone else said.

“Look at his face. He must have the mother of all concussions. We need to get him to a hospital.”

A hospital? That made zero sense. Who were these people? Caleb forced himself to open his eyes, and he looked straight into the kind blue eyes of a man built like a tank. He had short hair, a square jawline, and dog tags dangling around his neck. He looked familiar.

“Who are you?” Caleb managed.

“I’m Connor. We met before, remember?”

Connor. Caleb blinked. “You’re from Boston.”

“I am. Born and raised, but I live close to you.”

“With Indy and Josh.”

“Indy, Josh, Noah, and Miles and his men.” He nodded at a guy who stood guard at the door. “That’s Miles.”

“Where’s Wander? And Roman? Oh god, where’s Roman? Did you hurt him?”

Connor shook his head. “Roman is fine, kid, I promise. He’s on his way.”

“You’re… You’re a friend?”

“I am. We’re here to take you home, kid.”

Kid. Wander always called him kid. Roman had never decided on a pet name for Caleb, had he? Fuck, why was thinking so hard? “Everything hurts.”

“I bet. They worked you over hard.”

“My head… I can’t concentrate.”

“I suspect you have a concussion. We’re taking you to the hospital as soon as Wander and Roman get here.”

“Okay.” He blinked. “Imma sleep for a bit…”

“Actually, it’s better if you stay awake.”

Caleb’s eyes drifted shut.

“Stay awake, kid. Don’t fall asleep. Here, why don’t you drink some more water?”

The cold liquid against his lips woke him up again, and he drank.

“Caleb!”

Had he drifted off again?

Gentle tapping against his cheek. He winced. “That hurts.”

“I know, and I’m sorry, but you need to stay awake, kid. Ambulance is on the way.”

Ambulance? “Where’s Roman?”

“Also on the way.”

“Can’t leave before he’s here.”

“Then I hope he hurries the fuck up because I can’t keep you awake much longer, and hell if I let you die on my watch.”

Die? “I don’t wanna die.”

“That makes two of us. Glad we agree. So I’m gonna need you to do your wicked best to stay awake, okay? When you see that bright light, head the fuck in the other direction.”

He was funny. Connor was funny. His name was Connor, right?

Fuck, everything hurt.

But at least he wasn't thirsty anymore.

"Caleb!"

Right. He needed to stay awake. "I'm trying."

"I know you are."

Sirens came closer. "Where's Roman?"

"He should be here any minute. I think Wander is breaking the sound barrier to get here."

Caleb chuckled, then spasmed as pain flared through him. Bad idea. Bad, bad idea.

"Caleb!"

That wasn't Connor. That was… "Roman?"

"Oh Jesus, Caleb…" Gentle fingers touched his head, his face. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

Caleb forced his eyes open. "I didn't talk."

Roman knelt in front of him, his eyes wet with tears. "You did good. No one else would've been able to hold out, but you did."

"Everything hurts."

"I know." Roman caressed Caleb's left cheek, and even that hurt. "Ambulance is here, baby. We'll get you the good stuff."

"Can't fall asleep. Connor said so."

"He's right, but we'll let the EMTs take care of you, okay?"

Caleb blinked, and then two EMTs were standing over him. One shined a light into his right eye, then his left. "That fucking hurts," Caleb mumbled, sounding drunk.

"Pupils slow and dilated," one of them said.

"Can you tell us what happened?" the other asked Caleb.

Caleb snorted. "I got beat up. What do you think happened?"

"He hasn't lost his sense of humor," the EMT said dryly. "That's a good sign."

"Everything fucking hurts. Literally everything."

"Can you tell us what day it is?"

He had no clue. He'd been at work when Joey had gotten him, but what day had it been? Thursday? Friday? "Close to the weekend."

"And who is the president?"

Who the fuck cared about the president? "Can we focus on me, please?"

“We are, buddy, but we’re trying to see how you’re doing.”

Ah, okay. “Bad. I’m feeling horrible. I think I have a concussion. Connor thinks so too.”

“Certainly sounds like it, but we’ll let the doctors make that call. I’m gonna check your abdomen, okay?”

He lifted Caleb’s shirt.

“Jesus Christ,” Roman said, sounding broken.

“I’m gonna press on your abdomen now. That may hurt, but I need you to tell me if it’s unbearable.”

Unbearable? What did that even mean? His whole body was unbearably painful. But when the EMT pushed on Caleb’s abdomen, his vision went white, and a wave of nausea barreled into him.

“His abdomen is distended and extremely painful to the touch,” the EMT said. “We need to get him to a hospital now. He may have internal bleeding.”

Internal bleeding? “That doesn’t sound good.”

“It’s not, so we’ll get you checked out as soon as possible. Who’s riding in the ambulance with him?”

“I am.”

Caleb’s eyes drifted close again.

“You’re the guy from the news tonight, that district attorney.”

The guy from the news? What was the EMT talking about?

“Correct.”

“This your boyfriend?”

“Also correct. Can we go now?”

“Yes. Let’s load him up.”

He should stay awake. He really should stay aw—

This time, he didn’t open his eyes again when they called his name.

29

It had been hours, but Roman refused to go home or even take a nap in the waiting room. As if by staying awake, he was somehow keeping Caleb alive. Bullshit, yet he couldn't bring himself to do it. Caleb needed him. Not being able to hold his hand was bad enough, but Roman would not leave the hospital. And if something happened while he was asleep, he'd never forgive himself.

Wander's team was right there with him. All of them. Connor and Miles had booked a hotel room around the corner from the hospital to get some sleep, but everyone else sat on the uncomfortable chairs of the waiting room, faces tight. No one said much because what was there to say?

Internal bleeding. Thank god the EMTs had spotted it and had rushed Caleb to the hospital. He'd lose his spleen and maybe one kidney, but he also had a broken rib that had nicked an artery, which was a much bigger problem. That was why he'd been in surgery for hours now, and the doctor still hadn't come back with an update.

Joey had worked him over good, especially for a man who supposedly didn't prefer violence. Of course he'd attempted the nonviolent route with Roman and hadn't gotten anywhere. Roman tried hard not to blame himself for that.

If only they'd found Caleb sooner, but it had taken hours to locate him, and they'd only uncovered the address because Penelope Whitman had

overheard a frantic phone call between her husband and Isabella Coldrick, discussing the situation. Whitman had seen the news and wanted to know the threat Roman had referred to. When he'd found out they had kidnapped Caleb—who'd been referred to as the spy who had infiltrated Isabella's office—he'd ordered them to release him immediately.

Penelope had reached out to Ryan, who had decided to pay Isabella Coldrick a visit, taking Connor and Miles with him. She'd refused to see them until they'd made it clear they had the dirt on her and her role in Whitman's affairs. Once she realized it was game over for her, she'd told them everything they needed to know, including the location of the motel. She must've given Joey a heads-up because no one had been there when they'd arrived, but at that point, all that mattered was that they'd found Caleb.

They still didn't know how Joey had figured out Caleb's identity, which bugged Roman, but it bothered Wander even more. Where had they fucked up that Caleb had been exposed? How had they made the connection between Caleb and Roman?

All the news outlets were still reporting on the story, and the interview he'd done with Michelle Claiborne was repeated over and over again. She'd already texted him with a big thank-you. The interview had elevated her status from a local reporter to a national one, and she'd gotten a job offer somewhere big. That was great, but even better was that reporters had started to dig into Whitman's background, and the first unsavory stories were already coming out.

Of course the senator himself hadn't been seen yet. He'd been smart enough to hole up somewhere, but he wouldn't be able to get away with that for long. Dawn was breaking, and by midday, he'd be forced to give a statement. Whether he would ever spend time in prison for everything he'd done was still a question, but at least his political career would be over.

As expected, Roman's career was over too. He'd gotten the call from the attorney general minutes after he'd finished the interviews. The man had denied up and down he'd been bought by Whitman, but Roman didn't believe him for a second. All he'd said was that the AG had a chance to prove his loyalty to the justice system by picking up where Roman had left off in the investigation. He wasn't holding his breath. Either way, he was done.

A woman in dark-blue scrubs entered the waiting room, and Roman sat up straight.

“Family for Caleb Lingle?” she asked.

Roman got up. “I’m his partner. His parents are still on the way.”

Wander had called them with the news, and they’d immediately jumped into the car, which would be faster than waiting for the next plane. They should arrive in an hour or two.

“I’m Doctor Williams, trauma surgeon, and I operated on Caleb. He made it through surgery and is now in the ICU in stable condition.”

Thank fuck. “That’s great news.”

“We had to remove his spleen and his right kidney. His left kidney should increase in production to make up for it, but we’ll keep a close eye on it. We called in a vascular surgeon to repair the tear in his artery, and that went well. But Caleb has two broken ribs, a fracture in his jawbone and his right orbital bone, he lost two teeth, and he has a severe concussion.”

Jesus, that was one hell of a long list. Roman pushed down the nausea rising in his throat. “Will he make a full recovery?”

“He should, but it will take time. He has a long road ahead of him.”

“I understand. Thank you, Doctor, for all you’ve done for him.”

“My pleasure, Mr. Dwyer.” She extended her hand. “I caught some of the news, so I wanted to say thank you for exposing the senator’s dirty dealings. I wish we had more people like you dedicated to justice above all.”

“I appreciate that.” He took a shaky breath. “Can I see him?”

“Absolutely. Follow me.”

Minutes later, he sat by Caleb’s side in the ICU. Caleb’s face had swollen even more, barely recognizable with how black and blue it was. His right eye was all colors of the rainbow and swollen shut—that was also where he had the orbital fracture—and his jaw was almost black, but underneath, he was as pale as the sheet covering him. He was breathing on his own, though, so that was encouraging.

Roman carefully pulled down the sheet to check Caleb’s chest, which was covered in surgical dressings. Between those, more bruises colored his skin. Was there any place on his body where they hadn’t hit him?

Tears formed in Roman’s eyes again. He’d come so, so close to losing Caleb forever. If Ryan and the others hadn’t found him when they did or

had waited to call for an ambulance, he might not have made it. He would've bled out internally. Just the thought made it hard to breathe.

Roman carefully took Caleb's left hand, the one without the IV, and pressed a kiss on it. He settled into the chair and, holding Caleb's hand, waited for him to wake up.

Caleb's parents arrived around ten in the morning, dead tired from a night of driving. Wander had texted Roman about their arrival, and Roman waited for them outside the ICU. Caleb clearly took after his mom, who had the same eyes and bone structure.

"Roman Dwyer," Roman introduced himself. "I'm your son's… boyfriend."

Had Caleb even told his parents about him? He wasn't sure, but he knew they were fully supportive of him and his sexuality, so he hoped for the best.

"Theo Lingle. It's a pleasure to meet you." Theo's handshake was firm.

Much to Roman's surprise, Caleb's mom hugged him. "I'm Rose. I'm so pleased to meet you, even if it's under these circumstances."

"Thank you. I have to warn you about his appearance. He looks rough."

Rose winced. "But he'll be okay?"

"The surgeon said he's expected to make a full recovery, but it will take time. He lost his spleen and a kidney, and he has several fractures."

"Do you know who did this to him?" Theo asked.

"Yes, sir, and once Caleb is awake, we'll cooperate fully with law enforcement."

"Good. And please call me Theo. I don't think we're that far apart in age."

No, probably not. "I hope that's not a problem for you?"

Rose smiled at him. "Caleb has always been honest about his preferences, Roman. I assume you're his Dom as well?"

Oh, damn. The kid really had been open with his parents. "I'm training to be one, yes."

"Good. He needs that."

Shit, what was the appropriate reaction here? Funny how he had no trouble commanding a courtroom but was now tongue-tied and awkward as a teenager. "I'll do my best to be the man and Dom he needs."

Rose nodded, her smile widening. “That’s all we can ask for. Now, can we see our son?”

Her smile faded when she entered Caleb’s room, and a cry of distress flew from her lips. “Oh God, my poor boy…”

They sat by his bedside for hours, waiting for him to stir. Finally, Theo and Rose decided to head to a hotel to catch a few hours of sleep. Roman promised to call them if anything changed.

Caleb took his sweet time, but around three that afternoon, he opened his eyes. “Roman?”

It came out soft as a whisper, but to Roman, it was the sweetest sound he’d ever heard. “I’m here, precious.”

“Precious?” Caleb attempted a smile.

“I’ve decided on that as a pet name for you. You’re my precious, Caleb. My everything.”

“I like it.” He winced. “Everything hurts.”

“I know. You had surgery, but you’re expected to make a full recovery.”

A tear formed in Caleb’s left eye. “I didn’t talk.”

Roman caressed his left cheek, the one that was mostly unscathed. “You were so, so brave. Even under torture, you never told them anything.”

“I didn’t want to betray you or Wander.”

“And you didn’t. I don’t think anyone else could have held out under those circumstances.”

“I’m tired.”

“Go back to sleep, precious. I’ll let your parents know you woke up. They’re here, by the way.”

“They are?”

“Wander called them, and they drove all night to get here. They’re in a hotel now, catching some sleep, but I’ll call them and tell them you woke up. I’m sure they’ll be here when you wake up again.”

Over the next few days, Roman was either sleeping or at the hospital, where Caleb slowly recovered from his ordeal. After five days, he was deemed well enough to go home. Jesse arranged for special transport to Albany—wasn’t it amazing to have money?—and a few hours later, Caleb was tucked into bed in his bedroom. Due to his injuries, Roman didn’t want to sleep next to him yet, scared he’d inadvertently hurt him, and as much as

it sucked, Caleb had agreed. His parents had decided to head back home, reassured he would recover, but Caleb had loved having them there.

He was still in a lot of pain, but that was also because he'd refused to take opiates as painkillers any longer than necessary out of fear of getting addicted. Roman didn't think he was that much at risk, but arguing had proven fruitless, so he'd given up. It was Caleb's body, after all, and thus, his choice.

"We figured out how they discovered Caleb's identity," Wander said one morning as he and Roman were having breakfast together.

"Oh? What was it?"

"His car."

"I thought he switched cars halfway to and from Boston?"

"He did, but we forgot one crucial detail. Isabella Coldrick had told Joey about her new employee, and Joey, being naturally paranoid, decided to check his background story. So he drove by the address listed, which was Miguel's, and saw two cars parked. One was Miguel's and registered to him, but when he ran the other, he discovered it was a rental. That struck him as odd, so he made a call to the rental company and, with some bullshit story, found out that the rental agreement was signed by Dwyer Security."

"Fuck…" Roman slowly shook his head. "All the trouble Caleb did to create a solid background that would withstand a thorough check and going through the trouble of switching cars, and something as stupid as this tripped him up."

"Not his fault. This one is entirely on me. It was a gross oversight that could've cost him his life."

"Let's be grateful he survived."

"Yeah, but at what cost? I'm not so worried about the physical recovery, though living with one kidney definitely has its limitations, but the psychological effects? He could very well develop PTSD from this."

Roman had considered the same thing. "I've already talked to him about it. He's starting therapy with a trauma specialist the day after tomorrow. They say the sooner you start talking, the better it is, so we set that up as soon as possible."

"I will cover the bill."

"Jesse was way ahead of you, man. That man loves spending his money on us. It's a weird but welcome experience."

Wander let out a brief laugh. “He sure does, and I couldn’t be more grateful. Just know that Caleb’s salary is covered, regardless of when and if he gets back to work.”

“If?” Roman snorted. “You know he’s already been on his laptop, right, trying to get into the encrypted files on Isabella’s iCloud?”

“Jesus, why didn’t you take his laptop away? He needs rest.”

“No, he needs to do what he can to keep his mind occupied. If all he can do is think, he’ll be reliving that trauma time and again. It’s better for him to channel his energy into something productive. That’s what the trauma specialist told me.”

“You talked to them?”

“I wanted to know how best to help Caleb through this, so yeah, I did. It was a super useful session, and she’s amazing.”

“Glad to hear it. Any updates on the investigation?”

Roman let out a sigh. “It’s still going through the judicial chain of command, but now that the attorney general has resigned, it’s gonna be even slower.”

The AG had not survived the publicity storm that had erupted once more details about the case had become known. *The Boston Globe* had put their best reporters on it, probably with an eye on winning another Pulitzer, and had dug deep, finding more and more buried dirt. Two days later, Senator Whitman had resigned his office, citing health reasons, and no one had seen him since. The AG had followed the week after.

Penelope had filed for divorce and stood to make a tidy sum from it because their prenuptial had included a cheating clause for Whitman, but not for her. Since she was able to prove he’d cheated on her, he owed her at least two million dollars. Good for her. Roman didn’t like her, but he had a grudging respect for her survival instincts. And when it had mattered most, she had helped them find Caleb.

“What’s the score now for resignations and terminations?” Wander asked.

“Two Boston PD lieutenants and one captain, one FBI agent, the AG, one administrative clerk, and two legal aides in my office, plus six or so officials at county and city level. And I don’t think it’s over yet. The press is dubbing it spring cleaning, and they’re having a field day with it.”

“Good. Hopefully, this will truly bring a new appreciation for truth and justice, yeah?”

Roman shifted in his seat. “They offered me my job back.”

Wander quirked an eyebrow. “Did they now?”

“I didn’t accept. Wasn’t even tempted.”

“The reactions to you coming out were positive.”

“I know, but I’m done anyway. Sooner or later, my role in all this will become known. My full role, I mean, and people will know I went outside the law. As a DA, that’s not a line you can cross. But even more importantly, I’m done living a life that is so limited by my job. I want to be with Caleb and spend the rest of my life with him…and as much time as possible. I can’t think of a better way to do that than to work for you, so if your offer still stands…”

Wander met his eyes. “You still trust me? You were the one who warned us about the risks, and we didn’t listen. Caleb paid the price for that.”

Roman put his hand on his brother’s shoulder. “Of course we trust you. Not just me, but Caleb too. We both know who’s truly at fault here, and it’s not you or anyone on your team.”

“Thank you.” Wander’s voice broke. “I feel like I let you down.”

Roman rose from his chair and pulled his brother into a tight embrace. “You didn’t. You helped me find my way out of this mess, and I’ll never forget it. Plus, indirectly, you helped me find a part of myself that I never knew I needed.”

Even during Caleb’s recovery, Roman had met with Master Mark for training, determined to keep his word. Caleb was nowhere near ready to do scenes again, but when he was, Roman would be prepared.

“I’m honored to have you on my team,” Wander said. “And even more honored to have you as my brother.”

“Same.” Roman hugged him again, holding on a little longer this time. “Same.”

EPILOGUE

Six Months Later

Naked, prepped, and lubed, Caleb knelt motionless by the bed, waiting for his Dom to arrive. His Master. His boyfriend. His whole world.

They'd grown so close after Caleb's ordeal, as he referred to it. Roman hadn't left his side, not even when the nightmares had started. He'd accompanied Caleb to the twice-a-week sessions with the trauma therapist, never once complaining. And when Caleb had thought he was ready to do a scene again but had safeworded after a few minutes, Roman had held him as Caleb had broken down. He'd been endlessly patient with him, never pushing him beyond what he could handle.

Now that the nightmares had subsided, he was able to do scenes again, and he was the happiest he'd ever been in his life with Roman by his side. He loved nothing more than to serve his Master, and he couldn't wait to see what Roman had in store for him this time. They both loved impact play, but in his training, Roman had discovered other kinks as well, and Caleb was usually his willing partner in trying out anything new.

Footsteps tapped in the hallway, and Caleb breathed out, then stilled completely. The door opened and clicked shut, the heavy thud echoing in

what had once been the room Roman stayed in and was now their joint bedroom.

Roman surveyed him, taking in every inch of Caleb's taut body as if caressing the lines of muscle and skin. "So pretty," he said hoarsely. "So goddamn beautiful."

Caleb didn't respond, content to stay on his knees, awaiting Roman's command. His mind quieted. Nothing else existed but this moment, this man, this burning need to obey. This was where he belonged—on his knees, beneath Roman's command, ready to submit to whatever desire Roman had.

"Tell me, precious, what do you want to do for me?"

The question was a test, a challenge wrapped in velvet tones. It set Caleb's nerves alight, and a thrill laced through the obedience etched into his bones. He tilted his head up, baring his throat in submission, his voice steady despite the storm inside him.

"Anything you command, Sir. I exist to please you." His words were a vow, spoken with the fervor of absolute devotion.

"Anything?"

"Anything. Everything." All Caleb needed was Roman's command, and he would obey, his pleasure entwined with his submission.

"Get on the bed."

Without hesitation, Caleb rose from his knees and climbed onto the bed, its sheets cool beneath his heated skin.

"Touch yourself for my pleasure," Roman commanded, his voice a low growl that reverberated through Caleb's core. "But you're not to come. Not yet."

Caleb sprawled back on the mattress, trailing his fingers down his chest, across the taut planes of his abdomen, to the straining heat between his thighs. He wrapped his hand around himself, a gasp escaping his lips as he stroked in a slow, measured rhythm. Caleb moved his hand with a precision that belied his hunger, the slide of flesh against flesh creating a slick melody.

Roman slowly undressed as he watched Caleb. The man still preferred his suits, and Caleb loved him for it. He unbuttoned his dress shirt and took it off, then sent his suit pants to the floor. He'd lost some weight, and his upper body was more defined than it had been, but it didn't matter to Caleb.

He loved him no matter what, and his attraction had little to do with Roman's physical appearance.

Once he was fully naked, he sank onto the bed next to Caleb. The air was thick with tension, desire crackling between them like static. Caleb looked at Roman in a silent plea for approval, for further instruction. Each movement of his hand was deliberate, a dance of pleasure and restraint. A flicker of satisfaction crossed his features as Roman followed Caleb's self-induced unraveling.

"Good boy."

It was all Caleb needed to hear. The praise fueled him, stoked the fire in his belly. He kept his pace steady, his breathing ragged as the heat coiled tighter within him, threatening to consume him whole. Yet he dared not cross the line Roman had drawn. The brink of ecstasy was his to balance upon but never to tip over. It was a game of trust and control, and Caleb played it willingly, knowing his reward lay in the hands of the man who commanded his very soul.

"Look at you, taking your pleasure from your hand. So desperate to come, yet holding back for me."

Caleb's breath hitched. The words wrapped around him like a touch, one that teased and pulled at his senses. His movements became more fervent, driven by the need to showcase himself, to revel in the vulnerability that was so cherished by the man before him.

"Fuck, yes…just like that." Roman's approval was both command and benediction, urging Caleb closer to the edge he wasn't allowed to tumble over. "You're beautiful like this—unraveled, needy."

Heat flushed Caleb's skin. He was lost in the moment, in the weight of Roman's stare, in the dirtiness of the words that painted him as nothing less than a work of art—a masterpiece of submission.

"Touch your hole," Roman said, his tone leaving no room for hesitation. "Play with it. Show me how much you want my cock, how desperate you are."

Obediently, Caleb shifted, trailing his fingers lower. He circled the rim, sensitive from when Roman had fucked him earlier that day, teasingly at first, but then pressed in, and a low moan spilled from his lips at the intrusion. The sensation was slick, dirty, and utterly intoxicating.

"More."

Roman's command was simple, but it echoed with the weight of unspoken trust between them. Caleb complied without thought, adding another finger, stretching himself, losing himself to the dual sensations and the man who orchestrated them with nothing more than words and an authoritative presence.

"God, yes." A predatory glint gleamed in Roman's eyes. "That's it, good boy. Fuck yourself with your fingers. Pretend it's my cock."

Caleb moved his finger in tandem with the strokes of his other hand, the combination driving him to dizzying heights of arousal. Each movement was an affirmation, a silent vow to please and be pleased in return.

"Beautiful," Roman whispered, and Caleb knew it was true because Roman made him feel it, like he saw himself through Roman's eyes.

His breathing was labored as his body became a tightrope of tension and need. Sweat slicked his skin, the saltiness mingling with the fading scent of Roman's cologne. A moan clawed up from his chest. He delved his fingers deeper, driven by the relentless urge to obey, to show his devotion in the rawest form.

"Please." Pleasure edged him toward oblivion. But he couldn't—wouldn't—cross that line. Not without Roman's say-so. His muscles coiled, teetering on the precipice of release, yet he held back, clinging to Roman's command like a lifeline.

Roman drank in Caleb's struggle, every quiver and whimper stoking the fire in his gaze. Between them ran the tangible electricity of their connection, a silent dance of dominance and submission.

"Enough." Roman's voice sliced through the fog of Caleb's arousal, sharp and unyielding. "Shower. Now."

Caleb stilled his hand, his body protesting the abrupt halt. Chest heaving, he rose from the bed. But disobedience wasn't an option. Caleb stumbled toward the bathroom on limbs trembling with unspent desire, the cold air hitting his fevered skin like a shockwave.

Roman trailed him, each step a measured assertion of his control. He turned on the water and, when it had reached the right temperature, gestured for Caleb to step under the spray. Droplets traced paths over Roman's body, mapping out the terrain Caleb yearned to explore again and again.

"Take care of me, precious."

Caleb’s hand trembled as he picked up the bottle of shampoo. His fingers, usually so sure and steady on a keyboard, now fluttered like nervous birds. Roman stood before him, all commanding presence and raw masculinity, and Caleb shivered with the power of it all.

Caleb poured shampoo into his palm, the scent sharp and clean, and stepped behind Roman. He worked it into a lather, then touched Roman’s scalp. He massaged gently, his touch reverent, worshipful. Each circular motion was a silent promise, a pledge of servitude and desire.

Roman’s body came next, and the forest-scented shower gel was Caleb’s favorite. He would forever associate that smell with the love of his life. He traced the contours of Roman’s body with his hands, mapping the expanse of his chest, the curve of his waist. Water sluiced over Roman’s body, mingling with the soap as it cascaded in rivulets. Caleb washed Roman with a focus that bordered on obsession, his movements deliberate and slow. This act of washing wasn’t merely about cleanliness. It was an intimate dance of power and vulnerability.

Roman’s breathing grew heavy, syncing with the rhythm of Caleb’s strokes. With each sweep of his hand across Roman’s broad back, Caleb felt the responsibility of his submission, the trust it required, the power it gave him. The satisfaction of serving Roman filled him, as potent and heady as the steam surrounding them.

Caleb knelt to wash Roman’s legs. And once they were done, he finally got to do his favorite part, cleaning Roman’s impressive cock and his heavy balls. He took great care, handling them like one would fragile glassware.

When he was done, he rose, water streaming from his body as he stood at attention, every muscle taut with readiness. He waited silently for Roman’s next command.

Roman ran a finger down Caleb’s wet cheek, a simple touch that seared straight through him. “You’re never prettier than when you’re on your knees for me. Will this need for you ever go away? Will I ever look at you and not want you?”

“I hope not, Sir.”

Roman wasn’t the kind of Dom who punished Caleb for speaking. In fact, he’d made it clear he wanted Caleb’s responses. Theirs was a dance, not a one-way marionette act.

“Turn around.”

Caleb pivoted on his heel. His flesh prickled with anticipation, every nerve ending firing in sync with the pulse of desire throbbing through him. He bent forward, palms flat against the cool tiles, ass presented for Roman's taking.

Roman loomed as a force behind him, both protective and commanding. A hand grazed Caleb's hip, a silent acknowledgment that made his breath hitch. Without warning, Roman was inside him, claiming him with a firm thrust that tore a raw groan from Caleb's throat.

The pace was relentless, each drive deeper than the last, Roman's grip on Caleb's hips bruising. Power and possession were etched into every movement as Roman used his big cock as an instrument of pleasure and punishment.

"Mine," Roman grunted, the word a growl of ownership that spiraled pleasure tighter within Caleb's core.

"Yours, Sir," Caleb choked out between ragged breaths.

Roman's thrusts quickened, and Caleb met each one with a push back of his hips, a silent plea for more, harder, everything. The slap of skin on skin created a carnal symphony that crescendoed around them. Sensation coiled, an insistent pressure begging for release. Caleb rose on his tippy-toes, his teeth clenched as he fought off his release with all he had.

Finally, the command he'd been hoping for. "Come for me, precious."

The order shattered Caleb's restraint. Pleasure detonated, wave after shattering wave, as he came, crying out Roman's name, his body a vessel for the ecstasy that Roman wrung from him. Seconds, or maybe lifetimes later, he felt Roman's release, a hot rush deep inside him that marked him in the most intimate of ways.

"Will it always be like this?" Roman asked as they were cuddling in bed, their bodies cooled off.

"You're in a reflective mood today."

"Mmm." Roman kissed the top of his head. "I guess I am."

"What brought that on?"

Roman was quiet for a long time, but Caleb waited patiently. He'd learned that Roman rarely spoke without thinking and he liked taking the time to carefully formulate his words.

Roman pressed his index finger under Caleb's chin and pushed it up so their eyes met. "Are you happy?"

“Yes, Sir. Happier than I’ve ever been in my life. Happier than I thought possible.”

“Even living with the team rather than having a place of our own?”

“For now, yes. Maybe that will change, but I love being here with you.”

What was going on? Why all these questions? “Do you not like living here?” he asked.

“I’m content to be wherever you are, and I mean that. And I do love working for Wander.”

It had taken Roman a little time to adjust, but now he’d become a full-fledged team member, able to offer legal advice to clients, act on their behalf, or defend them in court. He’d passed the bar in New York with flying colors, and he’d left Boston in the rearview, seemingly with no regrets.

Whitman had finally been indicted, and the trial against him was scheduled to start in a few weeks. Isabella Coldrick and Joey DiMartino had been arrested for their parts and were awaiting trial as well. Caleb had eventually managed to get into all the files on her iCloud, and the evidence there had been a true goldmine. It had been inadmissible, of course, but the FBI had promptly subpoenaed all of Isabella’s digital storage and had gained access themselves.

“Caleb,” Roman said, and Caleb frowned. He wasn’t used to Roman calling him by his name anymore. “I want to marry you.”

Caleb widened his eyes.

“Shit, that didn’t come out right. I wanted to ask you… Fuck.” Roman took a deep breath. “I love you so much, Caleb Lingle. Will you marry me and spend the rest of your life with me?”

“I do.” Caleb’s face broke open in a wide grin. “Just practicing for the real thing.”

“Thank god. I didn’t know how you would react, since everyone here has such unconventional relationships. I wasn’t sure if marriage was something you wanted.”

“It’s something you want, something that means a lot to you, and that’s all the reason I need.”

“I’ll get you a ring. Something practical but beautiful…like you.”

“Aw…” Caleb’s eyes unexpectedly grew moist. “I love you, and I love our life.”

“So do I.” Roman kissed the tip of his nose. “But I will love it even more when you have my last name.”

“Who says I’m taking your name and not the other way around?”

“Oh.” Roman’s cheeks grew red. “I didn’t even… Of course that’s an option too.”

He shouldn’t tease him. In some ways, Roman was still letting go of his more traditional views. “I will proudly become a Dwyer, Sir.”

“Really?”

“Caleb Dwyer. Sounds perfect to me.”

Roman’s expression lost its tension. “You’re perfect to me. Absolutely perfect, and I couldn’t possibly love you more.”

Caleb snuggled close again. “Yes, Sir.”

SIGNED PAPERBACKS AND SWAG

Did you know I have a web store where you can order signed paperbacks of all my books, as well as swag? Head on over to my web shop and check it out!

BOOKS BY NORA PHOENIX

Forestville Silver Foxes

A brand-new contemporary MM romance series set in the small town of Forestville, Washington, featuring characters in their late forties. These silver foxes think they missed their chance at happiness…until they meet the love of their life, right there in Forestville. A feel good small-town romance series!

- Renovating the Model
- Awakening the Sheriff
- Healing the Twin
- Protecting the Nerd

The Foster Brothers

Growing up in foster care, four boys made a choice to become brothers. Now adults, nothing can come between them…not even when they find love. The Foster Brothers is a contemporary MM romance series with found family, sweet romance, high heat, and a dash of kink.

- Marked: Myron
- Jilted: Jaren

- Hired: Hadley
- Loathed: Lagan
- Nicked: Nordin

Irresistible Dragons Series

A spin off series from the Irresistible Omegas that can be read on its own. With dragons, mpreg, stubborn alphas, and a whole new suspense plot, this is one series you don't want to miss.

- Dragon's Mate
- Dragon's Honor
- Dragon's Fight
- Dragon's Magic
- Dragon's Stand
- Dragon's Surprise

Forty-seven Series

An emotional daddy kink duology with a younger Daddy and an older boy. Also includes first time gay, loads of hurt/comfort, and best friend's father.

- Clean Start at Forty-Seven
- New Daddy at Forty-Seven
- Perfect Daddy at Fifty-One (novella)

White House Men Series

An exciting romantic suspense series set in the White House. The perfect combination of sweet and sexy romance, a dash of kink, and a suspense plot that will have you on the edge of your seat. Make sure to read in order.

- Press (a press secretary and a reporter have an impossible attraction)
- Friends (a beautiful friends-to-lovers romance between an FBI agent and a Secret Service agent)

- Click (a sexy first-time romance with an age gap and an awkward virgin)
- Serve (a high heat MMM romance with age gap and D/s play)
- Care (the president's son falls for his tutor; age gap and daddy kink)
- Puzzle (a CIA analyst meets his match in a nerdy forensic accountant)
- Heal (can the president find love again with a sunshine man half his age?)

No Regrets Series

Sexy, kinky, emotional, with a touch of suspense, the No Regrets series is a spin off from the No Shame series that can be read on its own.

- No Surrender (bisexual awakening, first time gay, D/s play)
- No Rules (grumpy/sunshine, D/s play, service kink)
- No Secrets

Perfect Hands Series

Raw, emotional, both sweet and sexy, with a solid dash of kink, that's the Perfect Hands series. All books can be read as stand-alones.

- Firm Hand (daddy care with a younger daddy and an older boy)
- Gentle Hand (sweet daddy care with age play)
- Naughty Hand (a holiday novella to read after Firm Hand and Gentle Hand)
- Slow Hand (a Dom takes in two abused boys and discovers they need a Daddy)
- Healing Hand (a broken boy meets the Daddy he needs)

No Shame Series

If you love steamy MM romance with a little twist, you'll love the No Shame series. Sexy, emotional, with a bit of suspense and all the feels. Make sure to read in order, as this is a series with a continuing storyline.

- No Filter
- No Limits
- No Fear
- No Shame
- No Angel

And for all the fun, grab the No Shame box set which includes all five books plus exclusive bonus chapters and deleted scenes.

Irresistible Omegas Series

An mpreg series with all the heat, epic world building, poly romances (the first two books are MMMM and the rest of the series is MMM), a bit of suspense, and characters that will stay with you for a long time. This is a continuing series, so read in order.

- Alpha's Sacrifice
- Alpha's Submission
- Beta's Surrender
- Alpha's Pride
- Beta's Strength
- Omega's Protector
- Alpha's Obedience
- Omega's Power
- Beta's Love
- Omega's Truth

Don't miss out on the extras in the box sets of the Irresistible Omegas. The first box set contains books 1-3, the second box set includes books 4-6, and the third box set includes books 7-10. All box sets have bonus scenes you don't want to miss.

Ignite Series

An epic dystopian sci-fi trilogy where three men have to not only escape a government that wants to jail them for being gay but aliens as well. Slow burn MMM romance.

- Ignite
- Smolder
- Burn

Or grab the Ignite box set, which includes all three box, bonus chapters, and an exclusive bonus novella about a sweet alien named Pax.

Stand Alones

I also have a few stand alones, so check these out!

- Professor Daddy (sexy daddy kink between a college prof and his student. Age gap, no ABDL)
- Out to Win (two men meet at a TV singing contest)
- Captain Silver Fox (falling for the boss on a cruise ship)
- Coming Out on Top (snowed in, age gap, size difference, and a bossy twink)
- Ranger (veteran suffering from PTSD falls for a sunshine animal trainer, cowritten with K.M. Neuhold)
- Every Shade (collection of shorts and novellas)
- The Little CEO (a daddy kink short with age play)

Ballsy Boys Series: *Cowritten with K.M. Neuhold*

Sexy porn stars looking for real love! Expect plenty of steam, but all the feels as well. They can be read as stand-alones, but are more fun when read in order.

- Ballsy (free prequel)
- Rebel
- Tank
- Heart
- Campy
- Pixie

Or grab the Ballsy Boys Box Set, which contains all books and an exclusive, never before published bonus novella.

Kinky Boys Series: *Cowritten with K.M. Neuhold*

More sexy porn stars! This is a spin off series from the Ballsy Boys, set in Las Vegas…and with some kink!

- Daddy
- Ziggy

AUDIO BOOKS BY NORA PHOENIX

Most of my books are now out on audio, available through Amazon/Audible and iTunes.

Forestville Silver Foxes

A brand-new contemporary MM romance series set in the small town of Forestville, Washington, featuring characters in their late forties. These silver foxes think they missed their chance at happiness…until they meet the love of their life, right there in Forestville. A feel good small-town romance series!

- Renovating the Model
- Awakening the Sheriff
- Healing the Twin

The Foster Brothers

Growing up in foster care, four boys made a choice to become brothers. Now adults, nothing can come between them…not even when they find love. The Foster Brothers is a contemporary MM romance series with found family, sweet romance, high heat, and a dash of kink. Narrated by John Solo.

- Jilted: Jaren
- Hired: Hadley
- Loathed: Lagan
- Nicked: Nordin

Forty-seven Series

An emotional daddy kink duology with a younger Daddy and an older boy. Also includes first time gay, loads of hurt/comfort, and best friend's father. Narrated by John Solo.

- Clean Start at Forty-Seven
- New Daddy at Forty-Seven

White House Men Series

An exciting romantic suspense series set in the White House. The perfect combination of sweet and sexy romance, a dash of kink, and a suspense plot that will have you on the edge of your seat. Make sure to listen in order. Narrated by John Solo.

- Press (a press secretary and a reporter have an impossible attraction)
- Friends (a beautiful friends-to-lovers romance between an FBI agent and a Secret Service agent)
- Click (a sexy first-time romance with an age gap and an awkward virgin)
- Serve (a high heat MMM romance with age gap and D/s play)
- Care (the president's son falls for his tutor; age gap and daddy kink)
- Puzzle (a CIA analyst meets his match in a nerdy forensic accountant)
- Heal (can the president find love again with a sunshine man half his age?)

No Regrets Series

Sexy, kinky, emotional, with a touch of suspense, the No Regrets series is a spin off from the No Shame series that can be read on its own.

- No Surrender
- No Rules

No Shame Series

If you love steamy MM romance with a little twist, you'll love the No Shame series. Sexy, emotional, with a bit of suspense and all the feels. Make sure to listen in order, as this is a series with a continuing storyline. Narrated by Kenneth Obi.

- No Filter
- No Limits
- No Fear
- No Shame
- No Angel
- No Shame Series: the complete series (all five books with bonus materials)

Perfect Hands Series

Raw, emotional, both sweet and sexy, with a solid dash of kink, that's the Perfect Hands series. All books can be read as stand-alones. Narrated by Kenneth Obi.

- Firm Hand (daddy care with a younger daddy and an older boy)
- Gentle Hand (sweet daddy kin with age play)
- Naughty Hand (a holiday novella to read after Firm Hand and Gentle Hand)
- Slow Hand (Dom who doesn't want to be a Daddy takes in two abused boys)
- Healing Hand (a broken boy meets the Daddy he needs)

Irresistible Omegas Series

An mpreg series with all the heat, epic world building, poly romances (the first two books are MMMM and the rest of the series is MMM), a bit of suspense, and characters that will stay with you for a long time. This is a continuing series, so read in order. Narrated by John Solo.

- Alpha's Sacrifice
- Alpha's Submission
- Beta's Surrender
- Alpha's Pride
- Beta's Strength
- Omega's Protector
- Alpha's Obedience
- Omega's Power
- Beta's Love
- Omega's Truth

Irresistible Dragons Series

A spin off series from the Irresistible Omegas that can be read on its own. With dragons, mpeg, stubborn alphas, and a whole new suspense plot, this is one series you don't want to miss.

- Dragon's Mate
- Dragon's Honor
- Dragon's Fight
- Dragon's Magic

Ignite Series

An epic dystopian sci-fi trilogy where three men have to not only escape a government that wants to jail them for being gay but aliens as well. Slow burn MMM romance. Narrated by Kenneth Obi.

- Ignite
- Smolder
- Burn

Or grab the box set, containing all three books plus bonus materials.

Stand Alones

- Professor Daddy (sexy daddy kink between a college prof and his student. Age gap, no ABDL) Narrated by Kenneth Obi.
- Coming Out on Top (a toppy twink and a gentle giant get snowed in). Narrated by Kenneth Obi.
- Captain Silver Fox (falling for the boss and age gap on a cruise ship) Narrated by Tim Paige and Liam DiCosimo.
- Out to Win (a coming out for you set at a singing competition). Narrated by Charlie David.
- Ranger (veteran suffering from PTSD falls for a sunshine animal trainer, cowritten with K.M. Neuhold) Narrated by John Solo.

Ballsy Boys Series: *Cowritten with K.M. Neuhold*

Sexy porn stars looking for real love! Expect plenty of steam, but all the feels as well. They can be read as stand-alones, but are more fun when read in order. The Kinky Boys is a spin off set in Las Vegas. Narrated by Kenneth Obi.

- Rebel
- Tank
- Heart
- Campy
- Pixie

Kinky Boys Series: *Cowritten with K.M. Neuhold*

- Daddy
- Ziggy

CONNECT WITH NORA

Connect with me on social media:

Hang out in my FB group Nora's Nook
Follow me on Instagram
Follow me on Twitter
Follow me on BookBub
Sign up for my newsletter
Join me at Nora After Dark

Check out more of Nora's books:

Forestville Silver Foxes
The Foster Brothers
The Forty-Seven Duology
No Shame series
Perfect Hands series
Irresistible Omegas series
Irresistible Dragons series
White House Men series
Ignite series
Ballsy Boys series
Kinky Boys series

And for an overview of all my books and audio books, head over to my website!

MORE ABOUT NORA PHOENIX

Would you like the long or the short version of my bio?

The short? You got it.

I write steamy gay romance books and I love it. I also love reading books. Books are everything.

How was that?

A little more detail? Gotcha.

I started writing my first stories when I was a teen…on a freaking typewriter. I still have these, and they're adorably romantic. And bad, haha. Fear of failing kept me from following my dream to become a romance author, so you can imagine how proud and ecstatic I am that I finally overcame my fears and self doubt and did it. I adore my genre because I love writing and reading about flawed, strong men who are just a tad broken..but find their happy ever after anyway.

My favorite books to read are pretty much all MM/gay romances as long as it has a happy end. Kink is a plus… Aside from that, I also read a lot of nonfiction and not just books on writing. Popular psychology is a favorite topic of mine and so are self help and sociology.

Hobbies? Ain't nobody got time for that. Just kidding. I love traveling, spending time near the ocean, and hiking. But I love books more.

Come hang out with me in my Facebook Group Nora's Nook where I share previews, sneak peeks, freebies, fun stuff, and much more: https://www.facebook.com/groups/norasnook/

My weekly newsletter gives you updates, exclusive content, and all the inside news on what I'm working on. Sign up here: http://www.noraphoenix.com/newsletter/

You can also stalk me on Twitter: https://twitter.com/NoraPhoenixMM
On Instagram:
https://www.instagram.com/nora.phoenix/
On Bookbub:

https://www.bookbub.com/profile/nora-phoenix