

LOT 62

From Nothing #2

NORDIKA NIGHT

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to the underdogs of the world.

we see you.

LOT 62

From Nothing Book Two

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nordika night

what's next?

BUT FIRST!

A REMINDER THAT THIS IS **BOOK 2** IN THE FROM **NOTHING SERIES!** Garron Park (book 1) must be read first.

LOT 62 is a bit more dire in parts than Garron Park. HEA promised!

Maddox and Devon are a product of their upbringing, which makes them irrational, not as mature as they should be, floundering without good role models, and harsh. The situations they face in Lot 62 are brutal, and sometimes they don't react the best way. They probably don't respond to situations the way you would, so keep that in mind if it is triggering/upsetting.

I do not wish to portray their relationship as a guideline for healthy relationships. They are aggressive and physical, which is problematic outside of books. Their dynamic is purely fictitious.

Again, Garron is a fictional town. Garron Park is a fictional trailer park. It is not meant to represent any other trailer park or the citizens and communities within trailer parks.

Possible triggering themes and/or content warnings:

- relatable relationship struggles
- poverty and financial hardship
- a courtroom/trial
- some violence, murder, guns, attempted murder
- a crooked cop
- drug and alcohol use
- too much swearing
- explicit sex scenes including minor kinks
- being frustrated with the characters
- loss of possessions
- emotional and physical pain

Lot 62 is written in Canadian English. Heavy on the extra letters within words, with more Zs than Ss compared to British English, and we throw some French words in there just for funsies. If you come across any errors, please reach out to me at nordikanight@gmail.com

OUR FAIRYTALE

LIFE WAS HELL FOR a really long time. Then Maddox happened, and he fucked our shit up in a good way. The best way.

My useless and lame life got some sort of boost. My biggest rival turned into my biggest love, and even though we still fought on the regular, the fire behind it was different. Better. Burned fiercer. Maddox Kane came along and rocked everything I thought I knew, and as prideful as I was, it was damn difficult to change my tune.

Our hate-filled feud turned into an aggressive, tension-filled trip to damnation, and I swear to fuck, I'd never been more eager to doom myself. To him. He was it for me. He saved my life so many times I had an IOU list longer than I'd ever be able to repay, but he helped me not feel so guilty about it by beating on me, even when he was saving me. What logical world that made sense in, I didn't know, but it worked for me. Because Maddox lifted me up as much as he beat me down, and through it all, he stayed the same worthy opponent I'd always had. He matched my energy, never failed to rise to the challenge, and pushed all my buttons with a skill

level only he had. Somewhere along the line, he pushed the right one; the one that opened my cynical heart and let him in.

It's no surprise that our love story started bloody. Literally. The day after he made me bleed in a fistfight, he helped me heal from a beating my dad gave me. He still made me bleed even a year later, but that wasn't about to change. Being rivals must have been our kink because, *damn*, it became my favourite dynamic.

Moving in together was no easy feat. For how badly I wanted it, sometimes I wanted to kill him more. Relationships were new to both of us, and we fucked it up more than we helped it, but it remained thrilling. And infuriating. And fucking sexy. We grew as a couple, fought more than ever, kept challenging one another, and figured out how to mesh our personalities into one hot-box of a trailer. It took some black eyes and split lips, but we got there in the end. Because all that really mattered was that we were both there, living and fighting in the same life—*for* the same life. Together.

But all fairytales had a villain, and this piece of shit life was ours.

1

-DEVON-

EYES ROLLING, MY HEAD fell back against the wall behind the reception desk. The shop wasn't open yet, but my lips were. Parted on a held breath, I choked on air and weaved my fingers through Maddox's hair, not to control him, but to encourage him to keep doing exactly what he was doing.

His now-skilled tongue slipped down my shaft, lips suctioning around me like sucking me off was the driving force to starting his day right. *Goddamn, Maddox.* The guy was a quick learner, and shit, he could suck a dick. My dick.

This was one of those moments. A rare one, where everything felt good for a fraction of time because he *made* it feel good. Maddox controlled the air around him as much as he controlled me, and even though this was sort of a blowjob out of spite, he made sure I became a prisoner to his pleasure.

I hadn't made it home last night, and Maddox didn't like that. The shop I owned with Nate and Xavi was far busier than we'd ever planned, and I'd lost track of time and stayed here working all night. So, with his mouth on

my cock and his hands digging into my hips, his fury blocked out the world and kept me present in this moment only. His mouth and his energy shut off my brain just enough to forget about all my responsibilities and enjoy this for what it was. 6 AM spite head.

“Fuck, Madd,” I groaned, tugging on his hair.

He ignored me, continuing to suck me off how he wanted to. He had to be at work in half an hour, but I loved him for stopping by first. He was soft under that hard shell. I loved him for that, too.

The side door to the shop opened, but Maddox didn’t even pause. He was mostly hidden behind the desk, so Nate, walking in with bags under his eyes and a coffee mug in his hand, couldn’t see him.

“That better be Madd on his knees,” Nate teased. “And he better hurry up because Paul will be here in ten to pick up his boat.”

I gave my brother the finger as he walked through the shop to the apartment at the back. Paul was always early, but it didn’t matter because Maddox wouldn’t let me last another ten minutes. He took my cock so far down his throat he gagged, but he squeezed my hips to pull me forward anyway. The constriction of his gagging throat had my knees weakening and my fingers in his hair tightening.

“Ah, fuck,” I panted, losing my mind. My body tensed, my dick throbbed, and I came on Maddox’s command. Straight down his throat in a rush of intense pleasure, Maddox took it all and didn’t rush the finish.

Well, that woke me up.

Maddox licked his lips as I pulled him to his feet, doing my pants up and kissing the remnants of myself off his glistening lips. The shop was hot as hell, but Maddox was hotter. Fuck, this guy was sexy in his construction clothes. I grinned when he wiped his lips. He’d gotten better at swallowing,

but only if it didn't fill his mouth. I had to come into the back of his throat or this prissy bitch would gag and spit it out.

"If that's punishment, I'm going to piss you off more often," I laughed, kissing him again.

"You piss me off at least three times a day, asshole. Don't push it." He totally wanted me to push it, but not like this. Not about this. He grabbed my jaw hard. "You're coming home tonight. Got it?"

Guilt. Fuck. "Got it," I promised. "So needy."

Maddox growled at me, right back to being angry. "Don't make me admit I miss you, Devon. I'm not about that shit."

I rolled my eyes at him, but my heart beat strong with the kind of love he threw at me. It was harsh and honest, and I thought it might be the best kind of love to ever exist. "I'll be home."

"I'll kick his ass outta here at six, Madd," Nate said, coming back into the shop. "You have fifteen minutes to get to work."

"Shit," Maddox cursed, stealing my coffee. "See you tonight." He kissed me once more, hot and quick, and then ran for the door.

I admired his ass in his work pants as he left, bumping into Xavi on the way. They exchanged a quick 'hi, bye,' and then he was gone. Off to work for another long day. I really did miss him. We'd both been working so hard and so much that we either didn't have time to see each other or we were too tired to make anything of it when we were home together. We strived for full-time work forever, and now I hated it a little bit. But that shit needed to change, because I refused to lose Maddox over work and money. We'd survived without it before, and we could do it again.

"Go home and get your dick sucked, Dev. You guys live together. The shop is for work." Nate gave me a look that was an attempt at being

motherly, but it failed hard.

I lifted an accusatory brow. “Oh yeah? Like you and Xavi don’t fuck around here all the time?”

“In the apartment!” Nate defended. Nate and Xavi still lived in the converted staff room turned apartment at the back of the shop. That place would always hold good memories of the night I got out of jail and came here with Maddox, but I was glad not to be living with them anymore. They were a bit much for me. Too happy. Too fluffy and giggly. Too positive.

“I saw Xav bend a chick over that hoist like three days ago,” I told him. “Get off your high horse.”

“That was one time,” Xavi laughed, not at all sorry.

“Yeah, right. I’m pretty sure I saw that same chick give you a blowie yesterday,” I lashed out at Nate. “Right there.” I pointed at the front door of the shop. “So don’t throw your bullshit about the shop being for work at me, dicks. I ain’t stupid. You two can get off here, so can I.” I finished my speech right as Paul walked in the front door.

“Is it ready?” he asked, nodding to his boat.

“It’s ready.” I led him to it.

Still couldn’t believe we actually pulled this off. We owned the shop we always dreamed about. Life was fucking good, but in my experience, that typically meant shit was about to hit the fan. When that happened, I just had to make sure it had nothing to do with me and my prick of a boyfriend.

2

-MADDOX-

I'D SPENT ALL OF my twenties, and even a large part of my teens, hoping for full-time work. Financial stability had always seemed like such a dream, like if I got it, everything else in life would be better. But now that I had it, I resented the fuck out of it.

I got so focused on the money portion of things that I forgot to consider everything else. I wanted a steady income so I didn't have to worry about paying bills or making rent, but I never stopped to consider what I'd lose by gaining financial independence.

I was too fucking tired to enjoy weekends at the track like I used to. I was too physically exhausted after work to put in the right amount of focus and energy to keep up a great sex life with Devon. At the end of the work week, I was so beat that we ended up fighting for half the weekend. And not the fighting we thrived on, but the kind that left one or both of us hurting. I hated it. Which was why I made the extra effort to go see that workaholic this morning. I was craving him, missing him, but pissed at him for not coming home last night, so I went to that prick like a dog on a leash.

Worth it, though. He's hot when he gets off, and I didn't mind feeling smug about it.

"You going to the track this weekend, Madd?" Tom, one of the newer guys at Garron Construction, asked as we packed up for the day.

"Yeah." I took off my reflective vest and cracked my neck, sore as shit. "You?"

"Hell yeah. Can't wait to party." Tom was younger than me by six years. He was twenty, living it up in his party days, and barely gave a shit about motocross. He just liked to drink, try to get laid, and fuck around. He sucked at it because he was weird and awkward, but whatever. It was fine to want that shit, but even when I was twenty, weekends at the track were all about fucking Devon over and beating him in the race. I was all about motocross. Still was, but too tired to put in the energy like I used to.

"Nice." I sucked at conversations.

"Jeff said you're in a relationship. Do I get to meet this chick on the weekend?" Tom asked.

"Sure, but she's got a dick." I couldn't wait to get out of here.

"You're gay?"

"For him." I guess I didn't really have a label. I hadn't had a lot of time to even think about it. It was just Devon. Simple as that.

"Well, I can't wait to meet him," Tom said. "See ya tomorrow."

"See ya." I grabbed my lunch pail and headed for the parking lot. I needed a shower, a nap, and Devon.



OF COURSE, DEVON WASN'T home when I got back to our trailer on Lot 62. So I took a shower, ate an old doughnut from yesterday morning, and crashed on the couch for a quick power nap. It was hot and muggy inside, so the scratchy couch fabric stuck to my skin, but at least the power was on and the fan blew tepid air at me.

On Friday nights, we went to my mom's for dinner. She sucked at cooking and we usually left hungrier than when we arrived, but whatever. It was her new thing, and we were all making an effort. Tonight, all I wanted to do was be with Devon. Fucking, fighting, bickering, or just sitting and shooting the shit, I didn't care.

Almost a year later, I still couldn't believe I was dating him. *Devon fucking Sawyer?* Yeah, never saw that shit coming. But here we were, living together, in a relationship, fighting like it was our calling, having the best sex of my life when we found the time to do it, and still mostly happy. Our relationship was rocky at best, but to me, it felt pretty damn perfect.

Devon was even more of a piece of shit trailer trash than I was, but holy shit did I love him. Like, heart completely consumed, wanted him for life, ride or die type of loved him. He was mine and I was his, and even though we fucked shit up more often than not, I couldn't imagine going through this clusterfuck of a life without him now.

I told him I loved him one day and he punched me in the mouth for it, claiming I just had to say it first like it was some competition. He basically beat the confession back into my mouth and then said it himself. He thought he'd won that fight, but I was happy enough to let him think that. We loved each other. We said it. It didn't have to be this big thing. Done.

But now I hated how our lives got in the way of us. Did everyone deal with that shit? Was life and all its demands the reason why so many couples

split up? Or did we just have a time-wedge between us because we worked so much? I mean, Garron Park was full of divorced couples, widows, or spouses who lived alone because their partner was in jail, but was that our future? I sure as shit hoped not. I didn't want the stress of life to split us apart, but at this point, I didn't know how to make it stop.

Thinking about that made my chest get tight, ruining my attempt at a nap. I hopped off the couch, pacing the double-wide trailer we called home, waiting for Devon to get back from work. When seven o'clock hit, I got pissed. Nate said he'd kick him out at six, and he still wasn't home? Fuck you, Devon.

I got sick of being angry, so just to spite him, I left. I walked across the park with my fists clenched and pulled the door open at my mom's trailer.

And saw Devon.

"Fuck, Maddox," Devon cursed me. "I thought we were meeting here, you prick. I've been waiting." He had a half-eaten plate of some shitty casserole my mom made in front of him.

My first instinct was to hit him for pissing me off, but seeing him here, knowing he came looking for me at my mom's, well, it settled my fists a bit. He stood up to get me a plate while my mom said hello, but I didn't let him go. I grabbed his wrist, felt him tense for a punch he thought he was going to get, and pulled him in for a hug.

"You fucking softy," he joked against my neck, wrapping his arms around my middle.

I didn't say anything because there wasn't anything to say. Just feel. Yeah, I missed him, and I had gotten pretty tired of missing him so often, but now wasn't the time for that chat.

“Honey, sit!” Mom interrupted. “I made... uh, something.” She pointed at a casserole that honestly looked disgusting.

“It’s better than the last one,” Devon whispered in my ear. He grabbed me a plate and we sat down.

Mom still wore her scrubs—her cleaning uniform for the hospital—and shovelled way too much of that casserole on my plate. She got by alright, made most of her shifts, managed to make these horrible dinners on Fridays, and hadn’t gotten herself into too much trouble lately. She was still a wino, but she had slowed down on the pain pills. Either that or she was better at hiding it from me now that I didn’t live with her anymore. Probably that.

“How was work?” Mom asked, ignoring her dinner but swirling her wine.

“The same as it is every day,” I answered. “You get more shifts at the hospital?” I nodded at her scrubs.

“I’m just filling in for a girl who’s on leave.” Mom waved it off like it was no big deal. It was a big deal because the old her would have never taken extra shifts, let alone showed up for her own. The only reason she still had a job there was because they were so desperate for cleaning staff. I was proud of her, and she knew it, but she didn’t want to acknowledge it in case it put pressure on her and made her fail. I could respect that.

I took a bite of the casserole and damn near gagged. “What is this?” I chewed slowly, trying to either swallow really fast or not at all. “Is that tuna and... spaghetti sauce?” Jesus.

“I didn’t have any hamburger meat! I thought tuna would work. It’s not that bad!” She threw her arms wide like I was offending her dinner effort

even though her own plate sat mostly untouched in front of her. Some of the noodles were pushed around strategically to make it look like she ate more.

Oh, it was definitely that bad, but Devon ate it anyway. Nate and Xavi showed up, bickering about something like old wives, but it made Mom happy, so I was all for it. I pulled Devon away and told him we were leaving. He didn't argue, but he lit a smoke as we walked home. He'd been doing that more lately, and I kind of hated it because it was another expense we didn't need.

"Steven Patterson came by the shop today," Devon said. "That guy is such a piece of shit he tried to buy the building back for three times what we paid for it."

I looked at him and frowned. Money wasn't worth dreams, but that was a pretty penny. "You guys gonna do it?"

"Fuck no. I wouldn't sell that asshole a kidney for a million bucks."

"You've got two kidneys, and a million bucks would be nice," I laughed. But yeah, Steven Patterson, the original shop owner, was one of the biggest assholes I knew. Well, other than Devon's dad, but we didn't talk about that because fists usually flew.

"You know what'd be even nicer?" Devon asked, looking at me with a sick grin on his face. "If you told me what is up with you and your job lately. Spill it, Madd. I know you aren't happy."

Guess he wanted to talk about it now then. "It's not about the job. It's just..." Why was this so hard? Why did I feel like a whiny bitch for admitting I missed him? "We're just busy all the time and it fucking sucks." Good enough.

"I know," Devon agreed. "We're good though, right? Like us? We're solid?"

Yeah, we were solid during the three hours a week we managed to be awake around each other. I nodded in answer, but that wasn't good enough for Devon. He tossed his smoke, put a hand on my chest, and physically forced me to stop walking.

"Don't shut me out, Madd. Tell me shit."

But how? How did I tell him I wish he worked less, had more time for me, and didn't spend all his energy on the shop when that was his dream? I couldn't take that away from him just because I was a needy boyfriend. I wanted him to live his dream. I guess I just thought I'd also be his dream. I felt pathetic even thinking that, so I shook my head and shrugged.

"Just miss you. The times we used to do shit together." Too sappy, so I added, "And I hate you for making me give a fuck about where you are." There. Credit.

Devon grinned at me. "I miss you too. Come on. I got us something to help with that, and I owe you a blowie from this morning." He dragged me back to Lot 62.



THERE ALWAYS CAME THIS sense of power with being the bottom. With Devon fucking me hard and deep, my body became very aware of what it did to him. He wanted me so badly he literally couldn't contain himself, and that shit felt good. He thrust his hard cock inside me, eyes rolled back, unrestrained moans escaping his lips, and a sheen of sweat over his chest. Me. I did that to him. And I was damn proud of it.

“Fuck, you feel good, Madd,” he rasped at me. “I’ve wanted to fuck this ass all day.”

“So fuck it,” I snapped, getting impatient.

Devon reached between our bodies and wrapped his hand around my throat. “Are you mouthing me off while I’m fucking you?” He slowed his pace but increased his depth. I couldn’t help the groan of satisfaction that came with that. “I fucking own you right now, Maddox.” He rocked our bodies together, fucking me without actual friction. Just motion, and holy shit, he was going to win this fight.

“Fuck you,” I panted, loving every minute of this. When Devon got bossy, I revelled in his demands.

“You’re mine, Maddox,” he repeated, rocking into me. “Fuck, you’re mine.” Our eyes connected as he spoke that possessive bullshit I loved. My head filled with pressure from his grip on my throat, but it made the rest of my body come alive. I grabbed his hips, controlling him as much as he controlled me. “Fuck, Madd. Come with me.”

I stroked my cock a few times, and then we were both gasping moans and breathing too hard, hitting that peak together. We didn’t always come at the same time, but when we did, it felt different. Deeper. A better connection. A stopped fraction of time where nothing else mattered except the two of us and the tension we bred.

I lit up with electricity and Devon’s forehead hit mine way too hard. He came inside me, groaning in my face, and I held my breath, coming all over his abs. When his head slipped off mine, hitting my shoulder, I grabbed his hair and brought his mouth to mine.

“I love you,” he wheezed, those smokers’ lungs taking hold. “I’m not losing you over work bullshit, Madd. Shit. I love you.”

I'd never get tired of hearing him say that. The way he said it was aggressive, punching those words straight into my bloodstream to pump through my heart. "Love you. We'll figure it out." I bit his bottom lip.

"We better," he said, giving me one more kiss before pulling out. He let out his usual groan of admiration, watching his cum drip from my ass. With his finger, he pushed it back in and growled. "Makes me want to fuck you again."

"Shower with me instead." I got up, grabbing his hand.

We showered, barely fitting in there together, ran out of hot water after a measly eight minutes, fought over a single towel, and sat on the front deck to cool down. It was still hot, but at least the humidity had fucked off for the night.

"Don't make fun of me for this," Devon started, setting a bag on his lap. "But I thought these might help during the day." He passed it to me.

I looked inside to find two boxes. "You got us phones?" I laughed. "What the fuck, Devon? We don't need these. We have the shared ones."

"They're shitty phones, but at least we can message each other throughout the day. Might make it feel like we don't go sixteen hours without seeing each other. Just try it."

I pulled out a phone and hunted for the power button. "I don't even know how to use this bullshit."

Devon laughed, and then he laughed even more. "What the hell is wrong with us? It's like we don't even live in this century."

"We don't," I agreed. "We live in Garron Park."

3

-DEVON-

I KICKED MY LEG out, carving the berm and gritting my teeth. This track was a shit show. These berms were half blown out, and the chunder up ahead would make my kidneys ache tomorrow. None of that mattered because Maddox was on my tail, and a little clunky dirt wasn't going to stop me from whooping his ass. He'd been taunting me all day about this race, claiming my tires were shot and my brakes were unreliable, but I had something he didn't have. More damn determination to win the bet we'd set. And I rode clean, even with a clapped-out bike.

There was a rookie ahead of me, and he managed the first half of the track just fine, but he was new around here, and had no idea what was coming. We were on the second hour, and despite the weather threatening to muddy up the track, I lived for this shit.

I twisted the throttle, gaining on the rookie while Maddox gained on me. The adrenaline that rushed through my blood, knowing he was behind me, thrilled the shit out of me. Maybe I liked being chased, but maybe I liked

leading him even more. With him at my back, I thrived under the challenge of it.

As we rounded the bend and flew over a hill, we entered a forest stretch that was tight, full of roots and fallen branches, and had chewed up dirt that hit my goggles and made seeing the track impossible. I ripped off a tear-away, seeing an opportunity to bypass the rookie on the next hill. My brakes might have been shot, but he didn't have the guts to gun it up that steep slope.

His tire reached the bottom of the incline a few seconds before mine, and when he wobbled, trying to stand up and lean forward to increase momentum, I kicked out beside him and grinned as his head whipped in my direction. I gunned it, almost kicking out the back tire, but managed to manoeuvre my way up the slope. My tires hit the flat top together, knocking me forward a bit, and then my rage kicked up and my competitive side came out.

Maddox was *right fucking there*.

The trail narrowed, and he fought me for the lead position, but fuck him. I cut him off just in time, blocking his path to the front of the pack. The rookie was right on his tail, and for a few kilometres, we weaved through the forest faster than was probably sane. Downshifting when necessary and climbing back to fourth and fifth whenever I could. My heart thumped along with the rev of the engine, and when the course opened up, I shifted into fourth, then fifth, and gave it everything I had.

Getting through a rocky stretch that exhausted my arms, climbing over logs that rattled my helmet, and ripping another tear-away off my goggles when the rain started, I breathed in the ripe humid air and glanced to my right. Maddox's front tire was level with the middle of my bike, and all that

was left between us and the finish line was the south hill. Wide enough for two bikes. Barely.

A flash of black and red came into my peripheral, and then he pulled a dick move. One I just pulled on him before the narrow trail. He fucking gunned it and cut me off. Climbing the hill, my blood boiled when he weaved, blocking my chances of taking the lead at every widening of the path.

Tempted to nudge him, I almost rammed my front tire into his back one, but I pulled back at the last second. It'd only end with both of us crashing and burning, and I wasn't dumb enough to do it. The flag at the finish line came into view, and for the last stretch, the track opened up again.

Neck and neck, we fought hard battles, gaining and losing that precious inch until the checkered flag waved and we kicked down to neutral.

My forehead was slick with sweat, the rain dampened my gear, and my bike's motor sizzled under every drop when I turned it off.

Maddox looked at me and I looked at him, ready to fight—once again—for our place on the podium.



MADDOX GLOATED, AND FOR once, it made me smile. The track camp was even more crowded than usual, and my boy was celebrating his win. He'd been a moody son of a bitch lately, so it was nice to see him having a good time, even if it meant I had to place second to him.

Yeah, I was pissed he beat me, but damn, he deserved it. He rode hard, outmanoeuvred me, and earned that victory all on his own. Even though I

wanted to knock that smug smile right off his pretty face, I liked seeing it there more.

“What’re you smiling at?” Nate sat down beside me, handing me a beer. “The old you would have kicked his ass for showboating like that.”

I cracked the can and laughed. “Don’t worry, I will. I’ll let him think he’s getting away with it and then I’ll knock him right off that high horse.” I grinned at Maddox across the fire pit.

“Things good with you guys?” Nate asked. “Xav said Madd’s been grumpy.” My brother looked at me with real concern, not prying, but honestly worried.

“He’s always grumpy. It’s Maddox.” I sighed because I knew something was up with him. “But yeah, we’re good. Just trying to figure out how to fit it all in.”

“Go home earlier at the end of the day, fuckwit.” Nate scoffed at me. “Make time for your man or he’s gonna leave your ass.”

That was my worst fear, and it was worsening each time I messed up by staying at the shop too late. “Yeah, but you and Xavi live at the shop. I don’t want it to seem like I’m not pulling my weight.”

“Fuck off with that shit, Devon. You put in so many hours you basically live there. What’s the point in having a place with Madd if you’re never home?” he asked. “Plus, me and Xav aren’t tethered to the loves of our lives.”

“Love of my life?” I scoffed, but it didn’t have any heat behind it. Was Maddox the love of my life? How was I supposed to know? Ah, fuck it. I knew he was. “He’s still my biggest competitor. I can love him and hate him at the same time.”

“Hell yeah you can,” Nate agreed. “But to do either, you gotta make time for him. Stop being a selfish twat. The shop is fine, but your relationship won’t be if you keep this up.”

He had a point. I hated when he had a point. He got arrogant about it and threw it in my face, but maybe I deserved that. “I know. He’s more important.”

“Glad you finally figured that out,” Nate said, basically calling me slow. “Now go beat his ass for gloating.”

“Can’t,” I admitted with a grin. “He won, so he wins the bet.” I knew he was going to ask, so I just said it. “He bet me that if he won, I had to suck his dick on the podium.” I laughed. “Fucking prick.”

“Hop to it then, princess. Make him work for it, though.” Nate shoved me from behind, propelling me towards my man. Even my brother knew I was neglecting my relationship, and if he knew, Maddox must have been pissed all to hell with me for it. I’d do better.

But was I really so secure in this thing that I got comfortable putting Maddox second to the business? The sad look in his eyes, hidden under his rage, told me I was fucking up big time. It was time to make it right because I could survive losing just about anything, but not him. Anything except Maddox.

I took my beer and walked up behind him. Maddox stood in a group of people, but was talking to some guy I didn’t know. The guy was listening and Maddox was bragging, so naturally, I’d put a stop to that.

“You fucking cheated,” I snapped, pushing him from behind.

Maddox’s green eyes flared with the challenge when he turned to face me head-on. “How the fuck did I cheat, Sawyer?” Knew he’d buy into my bullshit—our bullshit. That type we thrived on.

“You cut me off on the south hill.”

“It’s not my fault you don’t know strategy,” he barked back.

“Strategy?” I scoffed. “You ride dirty as fuck, Kane.”

“Mhm.” He grinned at me. No one else could see it, but I loved that grin.

“Woah, Madd. Calm down.” The guy behind him tried to ease the tension, which made me tense.

Who the fuck did this guy think he was and why did he think he stood a chance at getting between us? And no one called him Madd except me and our brothers! Or told him to calm down. I was the only one allowed to say that to him! I raised an accusatory brow at my boyfriend, waiting to see how he wanted this to play out. I was one snapped string from knocking his buddy out, but it was more likely I’d take it out on Maddox just because I could. If he wanted to fight, I’d fight. I’d always be up for the rush of taking him on. But if he wanted to disappear from here and collect his winnings from our bet, I’d be up for that rush, too.

“This is Tom,” Maddox said, tilting his head at the young guy who spoke up without taking his eyes off me. “He works with me.”

Great. Another looker who got to spend more time with him than I did. I eyed this bastard up and tried not to be a complete dick about it. I was totally a dick about it, though. He was young, but not young enough to be innocent, which meant he immediately posed a threat to me. He looked like he worked out, and to be honest, I didn’t fucking appreciate that. Not one bit.

“This is Devon,” Maddox went on because I didn’t say anything. “The girlfriend you wanted to meet.” He grinned at this Tom asshole.

Okay, first, those grins were for me. Second, fuck him for calling me the girlfriend. “Fuck you, Maddox. You’re the bitch in this relationship.”

“Sexist,” he accused with a laugh, egging me on in hopes of a fight. When I nudged him with my elbow, he grabbed it. And didn’t let go. He actually kind of held me possessively, like he owned me and was making sure Tom knew it. Shit, I liked that. Really liked that.

“Hey, man,” Tom said, holding out his hand. “Nice to meet ya. I thought you two were gonna kill each other.” He laughed nervously, still wondering if we were going to fight.

I shook his hand but didn’t enjoy it. “It’s not off the table yet.”

“Killing each other is our kink,” Maddox said like a smooth bastard. “But making bets is even better. And I’m pretty sure I won today, yeah?” There was that grin just for me.

“Yeah, and I’m ready to knock you down a few pegs, you dumb fuck.” I grabbed his wrist.

Maddox laughed, in a good mood tonight. “See ya, Tom.” He didn’t even spare the guy a glance as he dragged me away. Towards the podium.

“Why you so happy tonight?” I asked with a bit of a bite. Better not have anything to do with Tom.

“Because I beat your ass on the track and now I’m about to get what I want,” he answered. “Plus, I hate it when you get all insecure and shit, but seeing you get your back up like that around Tom? Cock hard.”

I punched him in the shoulder. “Fuck you! I work around lame-ass Nate and Xavi all day, but you’re out there with all these ripped guys! How am I supposed to compete with that?”

Still seething, I didn’t notice his foot. He kicked my legs out, and as soon as my back hit the ground with a thud, his knee pressed to my chest and his hands pinned my wrists to the dirt.

“Compete with that?” he scoffed. “You don’t compete with that. *They* can’t compete with you. It doesn’t fucking matter what they look like because they aren’t you, Devon. Get jealous all you want because I love fucking it out of you. But if you keep second-guessing yourself, I’m gonna kick your ass so bad you’ll have to take a month off work. And trust me, during that month, you’ll learn pretty damn quick how badly I only want you. You, Devon. Just you. So shut the fuck up, yeah?”

Well, fucking fuck! My chest heaved against his knee with an influx of *feelings!* And none of them were anger, so I didn’t know what to do with them. “How much have you had to drink?” I spit the question at him like he was the dumb one for making me ask it.

“I dunno, like three beers. Why?” He didn’t let me up.

I felt like an idiot, but I looked right into his eyes and damn near pleaded with him. “Let’s go home. I don’t wanna be here anymore. Let’s just go home. Can you drive?”

His knee let up on my chest. “Why?”

“I just wanna be with you. Alone. None of these other people.”

Maddox studied me, making sure I wasn’t lying. “This is just about us spending time together? Nothing else?”

Yeah, something else. I was all weird and emotional or some shit, and I wanted to take it out on him by loving him rather than fighting him. I palmed his cheeks and sighed. “I’ve been fucking up by working too much. You don’t come second to anything, okay? I just want you to myself tonight and tomorrow because come Monday...” I let that trail off. “I love you, alright? I fucking love you, and I hate myself for not showing it lately.”

Maddox wet his lips before leaning down to kiss me lightly. “Get your shit and let’s go.” He got up, pulling me to my feet. “But if you think you’re

getting out of that blowie, you've got another thing coming."

I laughed and followed him back to the trailer. When I exhaled, the tension left my body. When Maddox kept hold of my hand the whole way back, I relaxed even more. I wanted him and nothing else. No distractions, brothers, young Toms, or bullshit parties. Just him and me.

4

-MADDOX-

I KNEW THIS IDIOT was more sentimental than he liked to let on. I'd been studying him for most of my life, but over the past year, I'd really learned how to read him. His aggression often meant he felt something too strongly. His jealousy was based on insecurity. His loud mouth lost words whenever he tried to be sweet. And his main vulnerability was himself. Devon didn't think he deserved anything he had in life, which was why he fucked it up so often.

Devon saw himself as someone who would always dream but never get. Now he had the business he'd been wishing for, financial stability, a steady relationship, a safe place for his mom, a safe home for himself, and love. And he didn't have a damn clue how to handle all that. Everything he'd ever hoped for was within his grasp, but when you spent your entire life in survival mode, yearning for something, it became impossible to stop and appreciate it. He couldn't appreciate it because he was waiting around for it to be taken away from him. But guess what? He'd be the one to fuck it all up and lose it because he didn't believe in himself.

Well, fuck that. I'd believe in him enough for the both of us. I'd have no problem calling him out on all his mistakes and reminding him how worth it he was. Yeah, he came from a shit family, had a shit life, and was a shit person in general, but he'd done everything in his power to turn that around and become someone better. Now he needed to take a hot minute to be proud of that. To respect himself for it. Like, how many people could come back from the kind of life he had?

As we walked into our trailer that night, Devon was one of my favourite versions of himself. Shy as fuck and angry about it. I loved it when his cheeks flushed from embarrassment because he didn't know how to handle feeling sensitive. We'd spent so much of our lives being aggressive and hostile towards each other, and even most of our relationship thrived on tension and overreactions, but when he got deep and emotional, he was cute as hell.

"I... I didn't mean to take you away from the party, Madd. Fuck, sorry. I should have let you stay and enjoy your win." *Ah, here we go with his unworthiness again.*

"Devon." I cut in, preventing him from saying anything else stupid. "Shut the fuck up."

"No," he scoffed, slamming the trailer door behind him. "You just won a race and I didn't even let you enjoy it!"

"When have I ever wanted to party more than I wanted to be with you?" I raised a brow. "Even when we hated each other, we fucked with each other at parties. So fuck off and come here."

Despite how hard he tried not to, he blushed a little more and my lips split into a smile I could no longer hold back. I laughed against his hair, pulling him in tight.

“Fuck you, Maddox.”

“I can’t help it,” I laughed, hugging him and loving how hard he hugged me back. “I love it when you get all embarrassed.”

“I’m not embarrassed,” he snapped.

“Yeah, you are.”

Devon pushed me away and headed to the fridge. Our trailer contained only second-hand furniture, but it worked fine. After the initial few weeks of hell living together, which was a clusterfuck of getting used to each other and fucking all the time, it took us a bit to settle into this new arrangement. We went from enemies to tense lovers, to roommates sharing a living space, so yeah, it took a bit to figure out how that looked for us. Meshing our personalities in one small space was a lot to handle.

What I wouldn’t give to go back to that now. We’d had way more time to spend here fighting and fucking until we crashed into bed, satisfied and exhausted. Now we crashed into bed, exhausted but unsatisfied. It sucked.

“You want a beer?” he asked me, standing in front of the fridge.

I shook my head. He stood there, contemplating if he wanted one while letting all the cold air out, but we both knew he’d turn down the beer and grab a popsicle from the freezer instead. He’d been eating those things for weeks, especially when it was hot at night. There was only one left, and I knew he’d eat it.

He grabbed the orange popsicle—nailed it—and sank down onto the couch. “Come here, Madd.”

I sat on the opposite end, leaning back against the arm to face him. He bent his legs up, faced me, and opened the popsicle, building up to say something. I was in no rush, ready to watch him struggle for words, so I kept my mouth shut and let him suffer on his own.

“Let’s hash our shit out. I miss you. You miss me. So what are we gonna do about it?” He slid that popsicle into his mouth and my eyes tracked the whole show.

“Try harder.” I shrugged. “We’re fine, Devon. We just need to make time for each other or some shit.”

“Some shit?” He sucked, distracting me. I’d wanted to have this conversation with him for weeks, and now that we were having it, my eyes were too focused on that icy treat being fucked in and out of his mouth like my cock wanted to be.

“I don’t fucking know, Devon. You’re all hot and horny over the shop, and I’m happy for you. Like fuck, you got your dream job, so enjoy it. I’m being weird about it, so I’ll just spend more time with you there, yeah?”

“Is that what you think?” he asked, pointing the treat at me. “You think I love that place more than you?”

Yes. “I didn’t say that. Stop putting words in my mouth.” He was such a dick sometimes. More so because he was right. “I’m just saying you dreamed of that job. You didn’t dream of me, so it’s fine for you to want it more.” Yet, it wasn’t fine because my feelings were hurt no matter how hard I told them not to be.

He licked the orange stick and shook his head at me. “You were my fucking nightmare, Maddox. Now you’re my wet dream. I love you more than that place and I want you more than anything. So fuck off about it. I know I need to do better.”

Yeah, but he had a shitty way of showing me I meant more. “Just come home at night. That’s all I want.”

Devon nodded. “I know. I promise. At least you don’t have to worry about me getting hit on by a bunch of other assholes,” he scoffed, letting

that insecurity out again.

I rolled my eyes for two reasons. One, this conversation was supposed to be about us and spending time together, but he morphed it into jealousy, just like the twat he was. Two, he was around half-dressed people on boats all day long. Of course I had to worry about that shit, but I trusted him. For some crazy reason, I believed in us, and I loved him enough not to bring it up.

“First, Jeff and his abs, and now Tom and his...” He looked at me.

“His what?”

“He’s young and hot, and he’s cocky as shit. He’d try to take you from me!”

Tom was a nerdy idiot who worked out to handle his anxiety. I glared at him as he sucked that fucking popsicle, his lips suctioning around the length of it and the juice dripping down his chin. *Goddamn you, Devon.* “Goes to show how much faith you have in us if you think some young fuck can break us up.”

Devon groaned, blushed, sucked, and glared all at once. “I’m just being dumb.”

“Yeah, you are. And he’s not that much younger than us, so stop being a dick. I don’t want him or Jeff. They aren’t even gay. What have I ever done to make you feel like there’s anything I want from someone else? Seriously, tell me, because I’m fucking sick of you being all insecure.”

He nodded at my lap. “Got hard while talking about them.”

I shook my head at him in exasperation. “You’re such a fuckup, Devon.”

“I can see it!” he shouted. His foot came between my legs to rub my cock through my motocross pants. “You have a hard dick.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “*From you!* You and your fucking popsicles! Why do you have to eat those things every night, taunting me with them?”

He licked it.

“I’m gonna kill you.”

He sucked it.

“Not even just with the damn ice pops. All the fucking time. You move, I want to fuck you. You smile, I want to hug you. You challenge me, I want to kill you. There is no in-between with you. I love you so much I hate you. So stop being a dick, stop being insecure, stop comparing yourself to the assholes I work with, and get some fucking confidence. You’re hot shit, Devon. My dick is hard because of you.” I huffed.

Devon slowly sucked the thing, staring at me.

“Don’t push me right now,” I warned.

“You always yell these nice things at me in the most asshole-ish way.” He set the popsicle in a glass on the coffee table. “You tell me you love me while calling me a dumb fuck.”

“I do and you are.”

He straddled my lap, arms around my neck. “You’re a dick and I love you for it.” He kissed my neck with cool lips. “And I’m sorry.”

“For what?” I grabbed his hips, needing to hold onto him.

“For being jealous. For questioning everything all the time. For not being home enough. For neglecting you. For all of it.” He pulled back to look at me. “You’re everything to me, Madd, and I’m sorry I keep messing up.”

We kept fucking up. There were no two ways about it, but if he wanted to take all the blame, I’d let him. For now.

5

-MADDOX-

SOMETHING WAS BURNING.

My eyes opened, blinking rapidly a few times in the early morning light. My first thought when I realized Devon wasn't in bed with me was that he left the stove on again before going to work. My second thought was that this asshole was trying—but failing—to do something nice for me. That was confirmed when I heard him curse the damn toaster like it was out to get him.

Seriously? This dumbass couldn't even handle a toaster? Who had I tethered my life to? I really needed to reconsider my life choices.

But when I took a minute to think it all through, I couldn't come up with anyone better for me than Devon. Were there better people with more life skills, superior time management, and less of an anger problem? Sure. But those people wouldn't excite me like Devon did. He was a fuckup of mass proportions, but he was *my* fuckup and I wouldn't want him any other way.

I stretched out in bed, knowing I should probably get up and help him before he burned the whole place down, but lying here listening to him

panic, curse, and freak out was just too damn amusing. He ate my mom's shitty dinners because he was a worse cook than she was. Devon couldn't even boil water without messing it up, and trust me, we'd fought about it. He hated that I could do it better than him, so he roughed me up every time I did. I'd never stop, though.

He sucked at a lot of things, and even though it meant I'd forever have to pick up his slack, I was happy to do it because he fucking *tried*. He tried so hard. Like shit, he was out there right now trying to make some surprise breakfast while screwing it all up, getting pissed, and probably breaking the toaster, but at least he was doing it. It showed he cared, even if he couldn't pull it off and I'd have to spend the next half hour calming him down. Hell, I wasn't perfect at many things either.

"Fuck this fucking toaster!" Devon shouted, and something banged.

I smiled at the fan, resting my arms behind my head to enjoy the audio of his chaotic mess.

"And fuck this bread! Fuck this outlet! Fuck you, toaster setting one! *One*? Fuck that!"

What a dipshit. I laughed out loud, but tried to hide it because these walls were paper thin.

"Maddox!" Devon yelled as another burst of laughter left me. "I fucking heard that!"

I pictured him out there looking all hot and angry. His blond hair would be a mess from running his fingers through it, his chest would be sweaty with panic, and his cheeks would be flushed from frustration. This was the real Devon. Not 'tough guy Devon' or 'best competitor Devon', just the Devon who sucked at everything. This Devon was an epic failure at mundane tasks, but who tried them anyway because he was a goddamn

sweetheart. He hid his sweet side, even from me, but that's exactly why he did all this and then brushed it off like it was no big deal.

It meant the world to me.

"Get out here, Maddox. You're eating this shit!" he shouted with all the rage of an angry bull.

The lame smile stayed on my face the entire time I got up, got dressed, and took a piss. When I walked into the kitchen, Devon glared at me for wasting his time. He glared even harder at the plate of food he left on the table for me.

"Eat it, prick."

"Morning," I laughed. "You're in a good mood."

He scowled at me. The breakfast he made was rock-hard toast with rubbery eggs on top. I'd eat it, hate every minute of it, and love him for it while resenting him for making me swallow it. But love was stronger than resentment because of all the effort he put in. Plus, I was right about his appearance. Sexy, frustrated, flushed cheeks, and a light sweat going. Hot damn.

I pulled the chair out to sit down, but Devon grabbed my bicep and spun me towards him. "Don't eat that shit, Madd," he sighed. "I wouldn't even eat that." He nodded towards the garbage can where his breakfast, plate and all, sat on top.

I ran my hands up his chest and held him by the neck. His blue eyes met mine, bashful and furious, maybe even a little embarrassed. "You fuck up everything you touch, Devon, but I love you for it."

"Well, fuck me for trying to do something nice," he scoffed, attempting to push me away.

I held on tighter, grinning right in his face. “Then get on your knees. You still owe me a blowie.”

Devon didn’t find it funny. He reached between our bodies and rubbed my cock. “That all that matters to you, Madd? You just wanna get off and go back to bed?”

I groaned, pushing into his hand. “I wanna get off and then spend the whole day with you.”

“I just did this nice thing for you, and now you wanna force me to my knees?”

“You *fucked up* this nice thing for me and now I want you because of it,” I countered.

“You like it when I fuck up?”

“I like it when you try.”

“Maybe I’ll screw up your blowjob. I screw everything else up.” He glared at me.

I moved my hands, one into his hair and one around his throat, forcing him to look at me. “You never fuck that up. It’s like you belong on your knees right in front of me.”

“You’re such a dick,” he scoffed again.

But he did drop to his knees. I watched every second of his mouth on my dick, and when he looked up at me, I tried not to collapse. Devon’s mouth was my biggest weakness. It used to piss me off the most, but now I loved every bullshit comment that came from his lips. He revved me up with his words, said the sweetest things I reluctantly loved, and smiled like some poor sap that actually was happy. I loved all of it.

Just as I was about to come, I pushed him back, dropped to my knees with him, and pushed him onto his back. Straddling him, I pulled his cock

out and fisted us both in my hand. “You make me crazy,” I told him, jerking us off together and hating that I felt so attached to him that I didn’t want to come unless he did. “I want you every second of every day, and I hate that I can’t have that much of you.”

“Maddox,” he moaned, grabbing my legs as his hips bucked in pleasure. “I love when you’re a pushy dick like this.”

“I’m fucking you before this day is over,” I warned.

“Mm, yes,” he agreed. “Shit, that feels good. I’m gonna come already.”

It’d been like fifteen seconds, but we were both pent up with desires we never got to act on anymore. With our cocks rubbing together, we both lost ourselves to the sensation, the heat, the thrill of the moment, and the undeniable chemistry we had. There was no better feeling than being trapped in a moment like this with Devon. I wanted him so badly that when we took the time to do something dirty, it didn’t matter that we were on the kitchen floor with the smell of burnt toast around us. I’d take it even if I was stroking out, and I’d still think it was the hottest thing of my life.

Breathing hard after that, I pushed off the floor to get up, but Devon grabbed my hips to keep me there.

“Don’t go,” he wheezed, reaching up to grab a sorta-clean dish towel off the stove rack. He wiped up our mess and looked at me. “Just stay here with me.” He pulled me down beside him.

Our fingers linked between our bodies—our usual attempt at cuddling—our chests heaved from exertion, and I felt really damn good. Maybe we’d be able to make things better now that we both remembered how good it felt to fool around.

Devon stared at the tiles on the ceiling. “I’m a sensitive bitch, but I love you, Madd. Too much.” He squeezed my hand but didn’t look at me. “Nate

called me out on it. He said something about you leaving me because I neglect you, and it freaked me out. I don't want to lose you. *I can't*. I won't survive it."

I rolled on my side, the kitchen floor digging into my hip bone. "I'm not leaving you, you dumb fuck. I love your ass."

"Just my ass?"

"All of you." I kissed him. "We just have to pay more attention to each other."

"I promise," Devon agreed again, kissing my neck. "I might fuck everything else up, but I refuse to fuck us up."

Good. That was something I could get behind.



DEVON KEPT TO HIS promise all week. He came home at a reasonable time, we had dinner together every night, and we had more sex than we'd had in months. My heart was happy, I was happy, and my cock was definitely happy.

But then they got swamped at work again, and Devon went back to his previous ways.

Monday night, he didn't get home until nine. I waited around all night for him, stewing in frustration. He didn't even answer the texts I sent.

Tuesday was the same. We texted a bit, but at seven, I called him and he told me he'd still be a few more hours. I just went to bed at ten and pretended to be asleep when he got home. I heard his apology, but I acted like I didn't.

On Wednesday, my anger hit higher levels. He finally came home just before bed, but I was already in a shitty mood by that point. We fought a bit, sat in awkward silence on the couch, and then he went to bed and I stayed on the couch.

Thursday night, he actually came home in time to hang out for a bit. He talked about how busy they were at work, and I told him about the job site we were working on. We tried to have sex, but it wasn't the right mood, so we went to bed frustrated. Again.

It was almost the end of the workday on Friday, and Devon had been messaging me a bit throughout the day. He said he was going to try to get out of there early so we could go to my mom's for dinner, but he wasn't sure of a time yet.

"What're you all pissy about?" Tom asked me.

"I'm not."

"Trouble in paradise?" Jeff asked.

They could both fuck right off and out of my paradise. None of their business. I ignored them, stewing in my mood. Yeah, there was trouble in paradise because it didn't feel like paradise when I sat at home waiting for him all the time. I was sick of it. Did I need Devon by my side all the time? Hell no, but it pissed me off that he sometimes forgot about me like I meant nothing to him. It hurt. I never thought I'd be the type to get attached to another person, especially after everyone but my brother fucked me over my whole life, but I was. I was attached to Devon. I craved his company and missed him when he wasn't around. I just wanted to spend time with him. Was that so much to ask?

I knew he'd been having a busy week, but when I saw Xavi and Nate last night when I got home and Devon wasn't there, it wedged that blade in

deeper. He *chose* not to come home that early, and I started to think he just preferred working over spending time with me. He was all adamant he didn't want to lose me, constantly telling me I didn't come second to anything, but words were one thing and his actions weren't adding up.

I was sick of feeling like a needy little bitch. I decided to text him. Better to get the letdown over with now if he wasn't going to be home. I didn't much care for texting, but he was right. At least it gave me the chance to talk to him a bit throughout the day.

Maddox: *You gonna be home on time tonight?*

"You should come with us to the tractor pull in Shelton tonight," Jeff offered. "A bunch of us are going. Heidi is coming, too. Just come for a beer and to get out of the house, man."

"I can't. I gotta wait for Devon and then go to my mom's," I said, feeling like an idiot because Devon probably wouldn't even show up, and I'd skip my mom's dinner because I was in a bad mood.

"Bring Devon," Tom offered.

"He'll probably be late getting home." It was an auto-reply, and it made no sense. It contradicted my reason for not going, but it was too late to take it back now.

"So come with us! Devon can meet us there." Tom laughed.

My phone pinged.

Dipshit Devon: *Might be a little late tonight, but I'm off tomorrow.*

My heart broke or some stupid shit like that. Of course he'd be late. There wasn't a race at the track this weekend, so we didn't have to go anywhere, but I still wanted to see him tonight. Instead, I'd spend my night waiting around for him, getting more and more angry as the clock ticked.

"Fuck it. I'll come." It was better than the alternative.

I called my mom to say I wouldn't make dinner, but she didn't seem to care. I'd let Devon know, and he could show up if he wanted. For once, I was doing something for me. A one-night break from sitting at home like a dog waiting for his master.

6

-DEVON-

I KNEW ENOUGH TO feel guilty. I was way later getting home than I should have been. I meant to leave at seven, but by the time I locked up and left, it was after nine. I did it for good reasons, though. I was trying to get ahead on a few jobs so I'd have the whole weekend free to spend with Maddox. I rushed home in a blur, excited to see him. I'd missed that asshole all week, even though most of it was my fault.

But he wasn't home.

I'd gotten so used to coming home and finding him half-asleep on the couch or already in bed that it threw me to come home to an empty trailer. It was nothing but emptiness and bad omens.

Was this how he felt all the time? Waiting on me and getting more and more worried as the time passed? Fuck, I hadn't fully realized how much of a piece of shit I was until this very moment. I'd never, not even once, had to wait for him because he was reliable. He put me first. He waited for me.

I grabbed a popsicle from the new box Maddox bought me and tried texting him, but all I got was a random wrong-number text about a tractor

pull. I waited, but he never showed up, so I walked over to his mom's place hoping he'd still be there for dinner.

"Hey, Naomi. Is Madd still here?"

She swayed on her feet and smiled at me. "He didn't come tonight, hun. Said he couldn't make it. You wanna come in and eat?"

My hope died. "No, thanks though. Did he say where he was going?" There was a bad feeling in the pit of my stomach, but that was probably guilt and shame.

Naomi shook her head. "I'm sure he'll be back soon, hun."

I hoped so. I went back home to wait, but by ten, I really started to worry. By eleven, I bathed in guilt. I'd left him waiting like this so many nights, he was probably doing it to me just to give me a taste of my own medicine. It didn't taste good. By midnight, I was calling him every ten minutes, begging him to just let me know he was alright.

Had he finally had enough of my shit and left me? His stuff was still here, so I didn't think that was the case, but the fact that it went through my mind was enough of an indicator that I was messing up the only good thing I ever had in life. Maddox was a pushy asshole, but he'd never gone somewhere without telling me. What was he doing and why was he ignoring me? Why did my calls go straight to voicemail?

Who was he with? Nate and Xavi hadn't heard from him, so I knew he wasn't with them. What if he finally gave in to temptation and went after someone else for a quick hookup because I'd abandoned him? I knew we hadn't been having as much sex lately, but would he really do that?

Shit. Shit. Shit.

I paced the trailer, checking the window every twenty seconds to see if his truck came in, trying to keep my shit together while I waited. What if he

didn't come home at all tonight? What if he got drunk and stayed with someone else so he didn't have to drive? Could I survive a whole night of not knowing where he was? I couldn't handle this shit. I couldn't stand not knowing where he was, and the worst part was that I knew it was my fault. I pushed him to do this. I pushed him away because I was the dumb fuck he always called me.

My heart beat out of rhythm, my stomach got upset, my mind reeled with a thousand different possibilities, all of which got progressively more dire, and my muscles hurt from being tense.

Finally, at 1:30 am, Maddox's shitty truck drove in and parked outside. My stomach got even more upset, but relief filled me. He came home. I waited for him to come in, deciding on an emotion. Relief or anger? Through the window, I watched him close the truck door and walk up the steps. He didn't look drunk or anything, and he drove, so he must be mostly sober. What the hell did I know? He could have been at a strip club or something. As soon as he walked through the door, anger won and I tore into him.

"Where the fuck have you been, Maddox?" I shouted.

Maddox jumped, not expecting me to be lancing him with questions in the middle of the night. "Shit, Devon. I went to the tractor pull."

"With who? Why the fuck wouldn't you tell me that? Or answer any of my texts?" Oh, I was livid without a right to be. He went to a tractor pull two towns over and didn't think to let me know?

"I did," he snapped at me. "My phone died, and I don't have a spare charger, so I sent you a text from my boss' phone saying where I was and telling you to come when you got home. Relax."

I checked my phone, seeing that random text from the assumed wrong number. 'Phone dead. Going to Shelton tractor pull. Meet me there.'

"How the fuck was I supposed to know that was you?" I yelled at him. "I thought it was a wrong number!"

"Don't get all pissed at me, Devon. I don't know anything about phones. I've never had one before!" Maddox shook with anger, pissed at me for accusing him of doing something he didn't do.

"Who'd you go with?" I asked. The insecure, jealous part of me made an appearance, and I knew it was going to fuck everything up. I tried to staunch it, to stuff it down and ignore it, but the accusatory question burned through my tongue anyway.

"A bunch of people from work," he answered calmly.

"Tom?" I hated myself for asking.

"Yeah."

"Jeff?"

"Yeah," he growled. "And his girlfriend. And Heidi, a few of her friends, and the spouses of people I work with. Stop assuming I fucked around on you, asshole. You know me better than that!"

"Well, did you?" I needed to shut up. I was being a dick, but Maddox was off living some separate life from me, and the way that made me feel was soul-shattering. The guilt was even worse because it was no one's fault but my own.

"No, and I hate you for even asking me that."

I trusted him. I really did. But guilt was a fucking cunt, and it reminded me how at fault I was for all of this, which made me reckless and hostile. I knew he loved me. I knew it, but I was being a prick, insinuating he cheated just to make him feel worse than I felt. What the hell was wrong with me?

“You know what, Devon? Fuck you. I sit around here every night waiting to see if you’ll come home in time to hang out, but you never fucking do! So excuse me for spending one night out with a few people so I didn’t have to sit here and feel sorry for myself.” He glared at me, but there was actual pain in his eyes, and it made me feel even worse. Had I seen this coming? Or worse, had I seen it coming and ignored it?

“I was worried about you!” It was my last chance at redemption.

“No, you weren’t. You were jealous. You were pissed because, for once, you had to be the one to sit here and wonder when I was coming home. Well, welcome to my fucking life, Devon.” He backed towards the door, and something cracked inside me. No.

“Maddox...”

He sighed, rubbing the back of his neck and looking completely defeated. “I love you, Devon. I love you with everything I have, but I need to go right now. I’m going to stay at my mom’s tonight—”

“No, Madd! Please!”

“—before I say something I regret,” he finished.

“Maddox, please. I’m sorry, okay? I’m so fucking sorry.” I followed him towards the door, desperate to keep him home, unable to watch him walk away. I couldn’t breathe.

“Don’t come after me. Give me a night, Devon. I love you.” He backed through the door, his green eyes on me, but full of sadness. The door closed in my face and my entire world imploded.

I crashed to my knees right there at the door. “I love you, Maddox,” I cried through my anguish.

I’d never hated myself more. I hated everything about myself. Pain shot through my knees, but it was nothing compared to the shattering of my

heart at watching the man I loved walk out the door.

This was my fault. I drove him to do this because I couldn't shut my mouth and let him explain calmly. This was where it left me. Broken on the floor of our trailer on Lot 62, the place that was supposed to be our home, our fresh start. This was our dream.

But watching him walk out the door, leaving me behind with all that sadness in his eyes, well, I realized *he* was my only dream and I'd fucked it all up. I'd lost it. I lost him.

"No, no, no, no," I cried, hyperventilating and panicking. "Maddox, please!" My body crumpled into a fetal position, my chest chock-full of pain and despair. There was pressure in my ribs and a tension in my head that hurt worse than the laboured breaths trying to come from my lungs. All my eyes saw was Maddox walking out on me.

I fucked up. I fucked up so many times, for so long, that I didn't deserve all the chances he gave me. Maddox was the only thing I truly wanted, and I didn't even show him that. I had it all. All of it. Everything I'd ever dreamed of, and I let it slip through my fingers because I was nothing more than a piece of shit asshole from Garron Park, doomed to the same fate as everyone else from here.

I inhaled carpet, crying on the floor. I was destined to become my dad. He pushed my mom away so hard that she broke. She turned to drugs and alcohol, fried her brain, and fucked her life as it was. Was I doing that to Maddox? Was I pushing him to a life he didn't want to live? He was so much better than me, and he deserved so much more than who I'd been.

I cried on the floor for so long my eyes burned and my head ached, listening to my phone ring in my pocket. It wasn't the ringtone for Maddox,

so I ignored it, unable to pick it up. I ignored it for so long that the front door banged open and Nate ran in, picking me up off the floor.

“Fuck, Dev. Madd called me from his mom’s.” Nate picked me up by my armpits. “You’re okay. You’re okay. You’re okay.”

I hyperventilated even harder. I wasn’t okay. I was broken, ashamed, and halfway to death. Even my lungs refused me air because they knew I wasn’t worth it.

“Breathe,” Nate demanded. “Fucking breathe!” He smacked me on the back, and a choked, forced, ragged rush of air rasped into my lungs and made me cough in a fit.

I choked up bile and started to sweat. “I’m hot. Too hot. I’m burning.”

“You’re okay,” Nate said, feeling my forehead. “You’re just hurting, man. Come on. Get up.” He stood, pouring me a glass of water from the kitchen.

I shook my head. “I can’t.” I didn’t have the energy to stand. I didn’t deserve to get back up.

“Yeah, you fucking can.” Nate pretty much dragged me to my feet, shoved me out the front door into the night air, and pushed me into a lawn chair on the front deck.

I sat there just breathing for a minute, trying to get myself under control. The night felt better against my skin, but I was still too damn hot. I ripped my shirt off and threw it on the lawn, thanking whatever fucking luck let us have a trailer with a private deck. Last thing I needed was the whole park seeing my breakdown.

I hung my head in shame because that was exactly what I deserved. Public humiliation. Nate lifted my chin and handed me the water and a pack of cigarettes. “Drink that and smoke these. Vent. Tell me what’s going on.” He sat down beside me.

“What’re you even doing here? It’s late as fuck.” I took a drink and lit a smoke.

“I was at Kaylee’s when Madd called, so I came here when you didn’t answer.”

“Well, go back to her. I’m not worth losing out on your hookup. I’m fine.”

“You’re worth everything, you stupid shit. What happened?” He took a smoke and lit one for himself.

What happened? “I fucked up and ruined everything.” Tears pricked my eyes because that reality was not one I wanted to live in.

“What do you mean you ruined everything?”

“Madd left.” My throat got tight and pressure built in my chest.

“For the night, right? Just for one night?”

I took a long drag and rubbed my temples. “I don’t know, Nate. He said he needed to go before he said something he’d regret. But why couldn’t he just lock me out of the bedroom and stay here? Why’d he actually have to leave?”

“Because you wouldn’t have stopped if he stayed. He needed the distance, Dev. Just for one night.”

“Why would he even come back? I’m such a fuckup and he deserves better than me!” Ah, shit. That truth hit hard.

“Yeah, but he wants you, though. So stop being a mess and tell me what the real problem is.”

“Me! I’m the real problem!” I lost my shit. “I fucked everything up by working too much, ignoring Madd, and leaving him here to wait for me all the time. I fucking neglected him, Nate. How?” That was the big question. How had I even managed that? He was on my mind all the time, but had I

put him off so much that I'd reverted to fantasizing about him rather than living with him in reality?

"Why'd you do it then?" Nate asked, being the level-headed one.

"For money! So that I didn't turn into Dad! So I could do something to make Maddox proud. I just wanted to earn enough to give him everything he ever wanted."

"All he wants is you, Dev." Nate laid it out there, plain and simple. "You can't work your way to financial security just so you don't become Dad. It doesn't work like that. You've got a life, a boyfriend, a love that none of the rest of us have, and that shit has to come first. What's money matter if you lose all that?"

I sighed, knowing he was right. "I know, but I never wanted to become like Dad. I don't want to leech off anyone or need to be saved all the time. I want this business to work so badly because I don't want Maddox to ever feel like he needs to save me again. I don't want him to just take care of me. Like fuck, Nate. He saved my life more than once, and I was just trying to make this work so that he felt... taken care of. *I* wanna take care of *him* for once."

And in the fucking process, I neglected him. *So smart, Devon.*

"Dad's a loser, Devon, but you aren't him. If you don't get out of that mind space, you're never going to let it go. You can't spend all your time trying not to become him because you're forgetting to actually become someone for yourself. Hard truth, man. Ever since we got that shop, you've turned into a douche that doesn't do anything but work."

That hurt. "I know. I just wanted to take care of him."

"He's taken care of, Dev. He wants you to love him."

“I do love him! Fuck, I love him.” I sucked my smoke down to the filter and tossed it. “I just wanted to get through this first year of business, set ourselves up for success, and make it so that Madd never had to worry about us again. That we’d always be solid and decent with cash.”

“We are. We’re successful, man. We did it. We’re through the first year, and we’re not just breaking even anymore, we’re profiting. So stop putting all your hopes into the shop. Stop with this noble act of trying to take care of him. He knows it. But relationships like yours work both ways. You take care of each other, and right now, you might be making bank, but you’re failing him.” Nate looked at me with honest eyes. “Maddox is right fucking in front of you. Are you gonna fight for him?”

“I don’t deserve him.”

“You deserved for him to walk out on you tonight,” Nate said, without pity. “Keep that attitude and he’ll kill you.”

“He sits around here all the time waiting for me, Nate. I... I’ve been treating him like shit without even meaning to. He deserves better, and I deserve for him to leave me.”

“Jesus fuck, Devon.” Nate groaned in frustration. “Get your head out of your ass. He fucking loves you. Whether you think you deserve it or not, he wants you. So fuck off with this self-destructive bullshit, and go get him back.”

A new stream of tears dripped down my cheeks. “He told me not to come after him.” I wiped my face and lit a new smoke. “He...”

“He needs to calm down,” Nate filled in for me. “Which is smart. It’s better than you two saying shit you don’t mean just because you’re both hurting. Give him tonight and then stop fucking around. Let me ask you

something.” Nate looked me straight in the eyes. “If we fail at owning the shop, what’s the worst that could happen?”

I shrugged.

“We’d break it down, sell the pieces, sell the building, and move on. We’d start over with something else.” He grabbed my cheeks and got in my face. “But if your relationship with Madd fails? You can’t sell a broken heart and start over, Devon. He’s in your heart for life, so put him first.”

I let Nate’s words sink in. Businesses and jobs could come and go. It wasn’t like I was unaccustomed to living in poverty, so when I got a taste of security, I went overboard to try to provide for my new family. Yeah, owning our shop had been a dream of mine, but now that dream was getting in the way of the only thing that mattered. Maddox fucking Kane. If I lost him, I’d lose myself.

Nate was right. I couldn’t rebuild a broken heart, and I sure as shit couldn’t sell it. I had a chance to make this better, to do better, to get my boyfriend back, and that’s exactly what I was going to do.

-MADDOX-

XAVI HELD UP A pair of motocross pants and raised his brow at me.

“No. I don’t wear purple. I’m gay enough as it is.” I put them back on the rack.

“What makes purple gay?” he scoffed. “I like purple.”

Foreshadowing if I’d ever heard it.

“Black and red. Those are my colours,” I stated. “I’ll get the purple bullshit for Devon.”

“Yeah, if you ever talk to him again.” Xavi rolled his eyes and kept walking down the aisle.

I followed, needing to defend myself. “I’m allowed to be pissed at him, Xavi. Don’t make me feel like shit about this.”

“I know you’re allowed to be pissed at him,” he said. “But it’s been two days, man. He’s dying not being able to talk to you.”

At least he knew what it felt like every damn day for me. I didn’t want to be petty, but I was. Devon needed to learn a hard and fast lesson.

Unfortunately, the lesson was that I was a needy idiot and he wasn't meeting my needs. Hated that I even had needs.

"Don't be an asshole about this. He fucked up, and he knows it, so let him back in."

"You giving out relationship advice now? Shit, I didn't realize you'd ever been in one." This prick thought he knew shit? He didn't.

"Haven't fucked shit up with Nate yet," he laughed. "But also, fuck you. I see this drama from the outside. I see how much you're both hurting right now because you love each other and you miss him. You can be mad and still be around him, Madd. That's basically your default setting anyway, so go home."

"It's not that easy," I said, wandering an aisle just because. "He forgets I even exist sometimes, and I'm sick of it."

What was the point of being in a relationship if we never saw each other? I loved that asshole more than anything in the world, but was love enough? It couldn't just be one-sided.

"He doesn't forget about you. Ever. He just sucks at prioritizing. He works his ass off all day, and I'm pretty sure he does it *for* you."

"For me?" I scoffed.

"Yeah! He wants to provide for you. You've done everything for him, and this is the only way he knows how to give it back to you."

I shook my head at that. "It's not a competition." Which was weird because everything else in our life was. "I don't need him to provide for me. I've lived with nothing forever. I just need him."

"Then go fucking see him! Stop being stubborn. Go talk it out with him, not me." Xavi tossed a pair of motocross gloves at me. "And buy him those. His are ripped to shit."

I bought the damn gloves, but I wasn't sure I'd ever give them to him. He'd probably see it as something else I did for him he'd have to repay. I needed to knock that lame thought from his head.

It took a lot of pride-squashing, but Sunday afternoon, I walked into our trailer to hash this out with Devon. But he wasn't home, which pissed me off and hurt me at the same time. Did I really expect him to just sit around and wait for me? Of course he wouldn't. He'd be out there, doing whatever the hell he wanted, just waiting for me to man up and come crawling back to him. Well, screw that. If he wanted me, he could be the one to come looking.

I grabbed some work clothes and walked back to my mom's place. I'd stay with her for one more night, and then I was going home whether Devon was there or not.



I'D BARELY SLEPT SINCE I left home. My mind wouldn't shut up. I felt weird sleeping in a place without Devon, and I constantly wondered if I was the one screwing everything up. Had I made a huge mistake by walking out on him to give myself space?

It was late, but I couldn't sleep. The phone Devon gave me pinged on the nightstand, lighting up the ceiling.

Dipshit Devon: *You okay? I miss you.*

I read it fifteen times, choking on emotion each time. The bubbles showed up like he'd send another message, but they disappeared just as quickly. I missed him, too. So much it hurt, but I didn't know how to suck

up my pride and walk across the park again to be with him. It sucked being aware of my stubbornness, but not knowing how to tame it.

Ten minutes later, as I was typing out my reply for the hundredth time, I heard his voice. He said something to my mom, and my whole body bristled with a mix of relief and nerves. I put the phone down and stayed there, waiting to see if he'd come in. Had I ever been more nervous?

The door opened, and Devon blocked the sliver of light with his body. He stood there looking as vulnerable as he did the first night he slept in my bed, and that broke me a little. I hurt him as much as his dad did. I couldn't bring myself to say anything to him, maybe because my guilt was too strong, but we stared at each other without needing the words yet. All I wanted was to touch him, hug him, hold him, or maybe fight him. It was hard to tell what my feelings meant sometimes, but Devon had never struggled to understand me.

"Can I stay here with you?" he asked softly, waiting to be denied.

"I don't want to talk," I warned.

He nodded. I nodded. Devon closed the door, undressed, and climbed into the tiny ass bed with me. The bed where everything started. He hesitated for a few seconds, but as soon as he put an arm over my chest and rested his cheek against my shoulder, all my resolve broke.

Devon brought me life when I'd had none in so many days. I turned to face him and he pulled me in, our mouths meeting in frantic need. I kissed him for the first time in days, and it dawned on me then that he tasted like home. Like love.

"Fuck, I missed you," he whispered against my lips. "I'm sorry. I love you."

“Shut up,” I groaned, weaving my fingers into his hair and pulling him against me.

Devon’s legs entwined with mine, and our bodies thrashed together in an attempt to get as close as we could. His mouth never left mine unless it was to kiss my neck, my cheek, my jaw. It was probably the wrong time to be all over each other, but we got caught up in a PG-13 make-out session that felt like the hottest thing we’d ever done.

It wasn’t fuelled by sex, though. It was the closeness I craved. Togetherness and union, comfort from the man who hurt me because he loved me so much he wanted to provide for me. I missed him and understood him, but I needed him to miss me and understand me back. Even though I was mad at him, I needed to be invested in him. I needed to invest myself in him because Devon was my future, no matter how many times we fucked it up.

“Don’t leave me, Madd,” he breathed.

“I told you to shut up,” I snapped at him, still pulling him against me.

I pushed on his chest and climbed on top of him, settling myself between his legs. Our bodies rocked together, fuelling one another, giving and taking everything we had, and communicating without the right words but all the right actions.

Devon’s hands travelled down my body, caressing my shoulders, my sides, and my hips until he grabbed my ass and pulled my groin against his. His touch brought vibrancy back to my dull existence, and when he moaned low in his throat, that vibrancy turned feral. I captured that sound by crushing my mouth to his.

“Fuck, Devon,” I rasped, needing all of him at once.

“Shut up,” he mocked me. “We shouldn’t fuck right now.” He pulled me closer.

“I know.” I kissed him everywhere I could.

“We need to talk first,” he declared, grinding his hips against mine.

“Yeah.” I thrust my hard cock against his.

He let out a slow breath and whispered, “Please.”

I’d never been good at impulse control. Plus, I needed him. It wasn’t about the sex. Yeah, I wanted to fuck him, but this time, it was an attempt at amends in the only way we knew how to achieve it at the moment. Our love language had never been healthy anyway, so what was the harm?

I sat back on my heels and tugged his boxers down, his cock springing free right before my eyes. He reached for my boxers, but there was nothing he could do in this position. So I stood up, took them off, and grabbed a bottle of lube that was still in the dresser drawer.

I got conflicted about my own emotions. I wanted to be rough with him because I was mad at him, but I wanted to worship him because he was the only thing in my life I’d ever believed in. I knelt between his legs, tempted by the sight of him, and dropped the bottle on the bed. Instead, I pushed his knees to his chest and spread his legs wide so I could lick his perfect ass.

“Mmm, fuck,” Devon panted when I rimmed his hole. His hands ended up in my hair, but they didn’t try to control me. It was an act of trust, something to show me he wanted whatever I gave freely.

I got him worked up with my tongue, then added a finger inside him, easing him open to take a hard fuck. So much possessive, filthy shit went through my mind, but my mouth didn’t say any of it. I wasn’t in a talkative mood, so instead of telling him how much I loved his ass, I showed him with actions until his legs shivered and his breathing turned shallow.

“Maddox,” he moaned my name in a desperate whine.

Chills of want spread over my skin and intensified in my gut. I added another finger, alternating between finger fucking him and tongue fucking him. I was as desperate for this as he was, so bluntly, I asked, “Are you fucking ready?” Impatience.

“Mmm, yes.”

“You sure?” I shoved my tongue in his ass with my fingers.

“Oh god,” he groaned. “Holy shit, just fuck me,” he demanded.

I grabbed the lube and slathered my dick. I tugged on his thighs and brought him closer, and with all the intention to slam into him, I didn’t. I eased inside him, slow and steady, making sure we both felt everything. Devon’s face slackened in pleasure, and when his eyes fluttered, I swallowed my anger and reminded myself that I loved this prick no matter what. My mood changed right then and there, no longer wanting to be hard and fast with frustration, but slow and sentimental because I missed him. I missed this. I wanted to make goddamn love to him or some shit.

Jesus.

Devon noticed, or maybe we were on the same page, because he pulled on my arms and brought me down until our bodies were flush. We moved together, his ass meeting my thrusts, a new tempo added to the music we typically made. It wasn’t the chorus, but it was a bridge, something different to give pause and enjoy the melody. His hands snaked around the back of my neck, pulling my mouth to his. Our lips never parted and our bodies never separated as we ground together in my tiny ass bed, and shit, it was kind of perfect.

Devon rambled some sappy shit against my lips and I drank it in, feeling it in my heart and knowing that somehow everything would be okay. “I love

you. Fuck, Maddox, I love you,” he declared.

I wanted to say it back, but my voice didn’t work. I slid my hand under his lower back and tilted him up a bit. Devon gasped as the angle changed, and that burning fire in my chest intensified when he really started to moan. To feel him all around me, back in my arms, connected with me after too long apart, I got lost in the extreme of him—of us. Devon’s ass clamped around my cock and that was it for me. We came together in a sweaty mess of love, desire, and a little emotional pain. My body locked up with pleasure, from every hair on my head to the tips of my toes. My feet tingled, my ass muscles clenched so hard it hurt, and my breath lodged in my throat.

And I finally found my voice. “I love you,” I confessed with a pulse of emotion. “I fucking love you.” And I did. I loved him more than anything, and I was sick of this kind of fighting with him. It wasn’t our style, and I didn’t want it to last any longer.

Devon pulled me down even more, his cum sticky between our bodies. He wrapped his arms around my neck and breathed into my hair, holding on for dear life. I think I did the same.

We stayed like that long enough for our sweat to chill, our heartbeats to even out, and our breathing to regulate.

“Never make me leave you for three days again, asshole,” I said.

“Never again. I promise. I can’t live without you.” He hugged me tighter.

It might not have been the conversation we needed to have, but it was as good as it was going to get tonight. It was enough for now.

8

-DEVON-

SLEEPING IN THE SAME bed as Maddox felt surreal. I'd never realized how much I took it for granted until he was gone. It didn't matter that the bed was too small to fit both of us, or that we were at his mom's place. All that mattered was that we were wedged together again, and now that I had him back, I'd never let go.

We made a deal. We were going to talk this through tonight. I promised to be home at six, and he promised to come back for good. I wouldn't let him down again, and I sure as shit wouldn't make the same mistake. I'd already made it enough times.

"Devon!" Xavi shouted from across the shop. "It's 5:30! Get the fuck out of here before Madd blows his shit... again."

I stared at the engine I was working on, thought about trying to finish it, and then thought better of it. It'd still be there tomorrow. I said goodbye to Xavi, grabbed my shit, and headed out front.

And ran right into Nate, yelling at our dad.

“Get the hell out of here, Jim,” Nate seethed. “You aren’t getting anywhere near him.”

“He’s my son! I have a right to—”

“What the fuck is going on?” I snapped at both of them, pulling Nate back to stand at my side. “What are you doing here?” I glared at my dad.

“Devon,” Dad pleaded for some reason. “I’m here to apologize.”

Yeah, no. “You lost that right when you tried to kill me, and then you completely lost it when you tried to frame us to get out of debt. Fuck you.”

“I’m trying to get back on my feet,” he said, looking like the pathetic waste of space he was. “I just need a little help.”

It was always just a little help. “Not a fucking chance, old man,” Nate snarled. “You won’t get any help from us.” Nate pushed me behind him and spoke quietly. “I’ve got this. Go home to Madd.”

“Madd?” Dad asked, his face confused. “You’re... *what?*”

Nate cursed under his breath. We’d been keeping my relationship a secret ever since our dad got out of prison. We didn’t want to give him a reason to go after Maddox. He hated Maddox enough as it was because he challenged him that night and never stopped. When my dad first got out of jail, he came straight to Garron Park looking for me, but he ran into Maddox instead. Maddox didn’t hesitate to put my dad in place, and when he didn’t get the message with words, Maddox beat him bloody. Loved him for it, but it put a target on his back, so I’d been keeping the rest of our relationship and living arrangement a secret to protect my boyfriend. Jim wasn’t dumb, though, and small towns talked.

“They’re working on a bike together,” Nate lied, but Dad didn’t buy it. “Just go, Dev.”

“I’ll leave when he leaves.” Maddox would understand me being a bit late for this. I wouldn’t leave Nate alone to deal with this.

“Fine, I’m going,” Dad relented. “But can we meet up, Devon? Can we make amends?”

“No. Leave.” I hated the tiny tinge of guilt that flashed through me. He was an asshole who had legitimately tried to kill me, but he was still my dad. Lowlife or not, he was the only one I’d ever get, and I didn’t know if his desire to make amends was real or not. “If I ever change my mind, I’ll find you,” I added for some reason.

Nate didn’t like that, but he didn’t say anything about it. Dad nodded and backed away, not ready to take us both on at once. We stood there together as he climbed into a beat-up old car and pulled out of our lot. I had no idea where he got the car, but by the looks of it, he lived in it.

Nate turned and grabbed both of my shoulders. “Don’t you dare feel bad for him, Devon.”

“I don’t,” I half lied. “He made his bed.”

“Yeah, he fucking did. I’m not letting him mess with your life anymore. Don’t let him back in.” Nate gave me a stern look.

I wasn’t stupid enough to let my dad back in. I knew better than that. He was a manipulative con artist with no moral compass and shitty values. He had no familial loyalties, and he only ever thought of himself and what would get him ahead without considering how it impacted anyone else. But there was a part of me that wanted to check in on him from a distance just to make sure he wouldn’t be a danger to us.

“I won’t,” I promised. “You alright?”

Nate nodded. “Yeah, just hate him. I mean it, Dev. Don’t let him in. Nothing good will come of it.”

“I know.” I *did* know. I really did. Which was why I’d keep an eye on him to make sure he stayed away.

“Okay, get. Don’t keep Madd waiting. Sorry about that slip-up.” He cringed. “I just don’t want you to lose Maddox, okay? You guys are... you’re just fucking meant to be or something, so go be with him and make it all right again. I can’t thrive in life if I’m worrying about the kind of fighting you two suck at.”

What a loser. “Your life revolves around the kind of fighting we do?”

“Yeah,” he laughed. “Fists and fucking are your things. Whatever this is, it’s not. You guys suck at the emotional kind of fighting and it’s dragging me down, so go fix it.” He shoved me.

I was already running late, but I’d speed all the way home if I had to. I’d never keep Maddox waiting again.



THE RELIEF AT SEEING Maddox back at home was too much for me to bear. He had a smug grin on his face, ready to fuck with me about something, but I ignored it while secretly loving it, and fell right into his chest. I hugged him.

“It feels good to have you back here,” I said against his neck.

He wrapped his arms around me and scoffed. “You’re such a sappy fuck.”

Yeah, I couldn’t deny that.

“I...” He fumbled, sucking at words sometimes. “I really... uh, I just like...” he paused and I laughed. “Fuck you! It just feels good to have you

home for once. Fuck you for making me say that.” He shoved me away with a scowl.

I missed that scowl. The one bred from defiance and challenge rather than genuine hurt and heartache. I let my eyes roam his body, and after a second of perusal, they rolled.

Maddox had gained a lot of muscle ever since he started working construction. On top of that, he had a really dark tan, the best t-shirt tan lines I’d ever seen, and a new level of ruggedness to him that made my dick extra hard. He obviously just got home, so he was still dirty and wearing his work clothes—a pair of dark blue utility pants and a bright orange t-shirt.

Seeing him like this made me realize how long it’d actually been since I got home early enough to witness him in his work gear.

“Damn, Madd. That’s really working for ya.” I motioned to everything about the way he looked. “You’re hot as fuck.” And he was mine. All mine.

Maddox groaned at me. “Don’t make me hard or we’ll never talk.” He pointed at the deck, which was about to become our therapy room. “Beer?”

“I’ll get it.” I kissed him and then shoved past him through the door.

“Don’t try that sweet bullshit on me, Devon. I know you better than that,” he shouted from the deck.

Sweet bullshit? I was just getting him a beer. I smirked into the fridge, grabbing two cans, and relaxing because it felt good to be here with him.

Settled on the deck, two beers deep, we weren’t off to the best start. Talking things through rationally had never been a strength in our relationship. Every time Maddox opened his mouth, he either fumbled for words or insulted me. Every time I tried to respond, I either called him an asshole or apologized for something too general. He told me to stop taking all the blame and I told him to stop acting like it wasn’t all my fault.

We hadn't gotten anywhere.

"Alright, fuck it." I stood up and set my empty can down. "This ain't working."

"So that's it?" he scoffed. "We're just going to ignore it?"

No. I'd never ignore anything with him ever again. "No. We're going to fight, you dumb shit. That's how we talk best. I'll beat the answers out of you."

Maddox stood up and pulled his t-shirt off. Jesus, he didn't even hesitate. I'm not gonna lie, that dark tan line on the back of his neck... damn, that was hot. "Right here? Now?" He clenched his fists in preparation.

"Always so damn eager to fight," I chided. "It's too hot here. Let's go to the beach."

He laughed. "Oh, so you want me to drown you?"

Chirping. Our comfort zone. "If you think you can win that easily? You might accidentally workout all day, every day, but I have to be nice to people all day. It makes me fucking feral and I'm ready to take it out on you."

We walked down the path behind our lot. The forest was calm; the river moved leisurely, and the birds sang nicely. Our pent-up energy would churn it all up.

The main beach of the trailer park was a ways away and around a bend, so when we got to the section behind our lot, we were alone, secluded, and hidden from the main area. Maddox stripped right down to his boxers and kept his eyes on me while I did the same.

"Rules?" I asked, tossing my shirt with my pants.

"Like you'd play by them anyway," he bitched.

“You just can’t let it go that I win with sheer skill and strength, can you?” I shoved him in the chest, feeling my blood come alive.

“More like dirty moves and sexy distractions,” he countered, pushing me back.

“Maybe we should fight with clothes on then, eh? Since you can’t control your dick if I’m half naked.”

He mumbled something under his breath about it not mattering if I was naked or not. My face got hot at that. Blushing could come later. First, I had confessions to make.

“I neglected and ignored you,” I started this thing off with the truth.

“I’m not a fucking princess, Devon,” he snapped. “I don’t need you around all the time.”

“Yeah, but I left you alone to wait for me every night. Tell me how that made you feel.” Feelings, his favourite. It was a trigger word.

“Feel?” he scoffed predictably. “This isn’t about feelings. It’s about facts!” He pushed me, and when I grinned, he swung at me. Already worked up. *That’s my boy.*

I caught his wrist and kicked him in the thigh. “Yeah, the fact that you felt ignored, right?”

Maddox swept my legs out and came down on me as I fell. “I didn’t feel anything. It just fucking sucks to... I never knew if you were coming home or not!” he shouted, hitting me in the ribs.

I rolled out from under him, getting a mouthful of sand in the process. “You think I take you for granted?” I totally did, but he needed to express it.

“I thought you were trying to stay away from me,” he seethed, swinging his fist at my face. “I thought you were over me, that you wanted out of this

relationship, and you stayed at the shop to avoid me!” He landed a hard punch to my jaw.

“Maddox!” I shouted, trying to calm him down.

“If you want out of this, just fucking tell me and get it over with!”

I lunged for him. He threw out a knee, but I blocked it and tackled him to the sand. Straddling his hips, I pinned his arms on either side of his head. “I don’t want out of this. Ever. I wasn’t avoiding you. I was trying to be worthy of you, and I fucked it all up. I just didn’t want to end up like our parents, but I know that’s a mistake now.” I looked into his green and angry eyes. “I fucking love you, Madd. I never want out of this.”

“I have a job, too! Stop trying to take it all on yourself,” he snarled at me, struggling to get free.

“I know that!” I pinned him down harder. “And I didn’t realize that by trying to make our lives better, I was making them worse. I took you for granted, thinking you’d always fucking be there, but when you left...” I swallowed tears. “I’ll never make that mistake again.”

Maddox paused for only a second. He studied the sincerity in my eyes, and then he kneed me in the side so hard I groaned and fell off him. He flipped me onto my stomach, pulled my arm behind my back, and twisted until I cried out in pain.

“We aren’t them,” he seethed in my ear. “But if you keep acting like this, doing everything in your power to prevent being like your dad, you’re going to end up like him anyway because you’ll be alone, miserable, and pathetic.”

He released my arm and fought to get me on my back again. His words hurt, but I knew they were true. I neglected Maddox just like my dad neglected my mom. For different reasons, but still, neglect was neglect.

“Look at me,” Maddox demanded. I met his eyes. “I’m proud of you,” he said rather reluctantly, but with all his honesty. “And I never want you to give up on the shit you give a fuck about, okay? But stop doing it for us, for me. I honestly don’t give a damn if we lose everything. The trailer, the bikes, the trucks, and our phones. I don’t need all that. I just want you to come home. And if you’re never there and we never talk or see each other, what’s the point of being in this thing?”

The fight left my body and I stopped struggling. That’s how he felt? He never saw me, so what was the point? “You don’t want to be in this anymore?”

“What? Have you not listened to a thing I said?” He let me go, and we both sat on our sorry asses facing the water, simmering in a fruit punch of feelings that were still too uncertain to mix.

“Yeah, I heard you say what’s the point.” I rubbed sand out of my hair.

Maddox sighed, bringing his knees up. “I’m so fucking in this thing, Devon, that it scares the shit out of me.” He looked at the sunset, but I sensed his vulnerability, so I looked there, too. “It felt like I was losing you over the past few months, and it fucked me up. I thought you were pushing me away, and I... you’re it for me, okay? I know you get all jealous and shit, but I don’t understand what I’ve ever done to make you insecure about our relationship. I don’t even see other people.”

I glanced at him, wanting to butt in. I held my tongue and let him go on because I needed to hear it.

“I just want you in all the ways. But when you never come home, I sit there like a pathetic, love-struck fool who waits and waits and waits for you, but you never show up. It hurts. I hate that it hurts, but it does. It

scared me, Devon. It scared me because I thought you didn't love me anymore."

Fuck. *Fuck!* I did that to him? I made him doubt my love for him? I was officially the shittiest person alive. Maddox was the one and only thing I cared enough about to try harder for, but my attempts at trying were an epic failure. All I accomplished was hurting him and scaring him. *I scared Maddox Kane.*

"Holy shit, Maddox," I sighed in shame. "I'm so fucking sorry." I turned my body to face him, but he kept his eyes on the sunset. "I'm sorry I made you feel like that. I love you, and I'm sorry you doubted me. How do I make this right?"

Maddox rubbed the back of his neck and relaxed a bit. Looking at me with honest eyes, he said, "We moved in together after only a few months. It's gonna take us time to figure each other out."

"Yeah, but not like this. Not after a year."

"A year of starting a new business, changing our living arrangements, and worrying about your dad."

"I don't care. I don't want you to worry about us. We have enough shit to worry about, and I want this relationship to be the thing you can always count on. I want to be the thing you can count on. I hate that I made you second guess it all."

"So, you aren't looking for a way out?" he asked, eyes shy.

"Fuck no. Never. I'll kill you if you ever try to leave me. I never want to lose you. It... it broke me when you walked out on Friday night." I reached over and grabbed his hand. "And I know that was my fault. I get why you did it, but I don't want that to happen again."

He gripped my hand harder. "It's not all you. I suck at saying shit, and you suck at listening." He laughed a bit. "Like come on, we had to start a fight just to get to this point."

I grinned at that. "Yeah, but we got here. Are you okay?"

He nodded, linking our fingers. Sand scratched between our palms, but I liked the grit of it. Gritty like our love. "Not to sound like a broken record, but I missed you, Devon. I miss when we used to fuck around all the time or when we'd get up to shit that wasn't work or taking care of our moms. I mean, I know life changes and all, but I miss when you were always up for a challenge. This." He motioned to the beach where we just fought. "This felt like the old us. I missed it."

He had a damn point. Yeah, we'd been trying to have a conversation, but the fight that got us here was the shit we used to live for. Thrive on. I got so consumed in trying to do better that I forgot how to measure up to him. I forgot to challenge him back. No wonder we were out of sorts.

Might as well get back to that. Immediately.

"Can I ask you to do something with me that's going to piss you off, but you'll do it anyway?" I asked.

Maddox laughed. "You're so fucking backwards."

I smirked. "Will you tail my dad with me?"

He ground his teeth together. "Why?"

"Because I'm stupid. Because I know I'm not letting him back in, but there's a part of me I can't ignore, and it's telling me to keep an eye on him. I just wanna watch him for a bit to make sure he isn't..." What? Coming after us? Plotting something? Suffering? Going after Nate? All of the above?

“You’re so dumb, Devon,” Maddox groaned. “I’ll do it with you because if I say no, you’ll do it anyway and fuck it up even worse.” He stood up, pulling me with him. “We good?”

“We’re good. I love you.”

“Love you. Fresh start?”

“No. Don’t erase our start. Just a new chapter, yeah?”

His eyes got shy again, but he nodded.

I nodded. Sorted.

“I’m going to swim, and then you’re going to suck my dick while I make your useless ass dinner.”

I really was useless in the kitchen, so that was a fair trade. “Deal.”

He leaned over and kissed my lips. Then he shoved me so hard I tripped over my feet and landed right on my back, getting another mouthful of sand.

Asshole. I smiled at the sky.

9

-MADDOX-

I LOVED TO SAY I told him so, and I told him so.

Devon was less of a moody twat these days, and I knew it was because he actually came home from work on time and had more fun. Sure, he still worked late a few nights, but at least he cleared it with me now and didn't let it happen too often. He stuck to his word and shit was finally good.

Were we nailing this relationship bullshit? Not even close, but we were doing a lot better. And it showed. Even our brothers commented on it, which of course earned them a mutual beating. They ran off like pansies before any real fighting could start, jumping up and clicking their heels to go home.

And it always felt good to wake up to him on Saturday mornings. I felt the bed shift and cracked my eyes open. Devon lay on his back, hand on his dick, leg bent over my waist, looking like a trailer park model. Goddamn. He let out a groggy groan, massaging his cock through his boxers, and I straight-up watched him for a bit.

Putting my arm behind my head, I propped myself up a bit to admire him. His shitty skull tattoo rose and fell with his deep breaths, his abs contracted subtly, and the outline of his cock was prominent through his blue boxers. How the hell did he become mine?

“Are you jerking off right beside me?” I accused, knowing he was awake. This wasn’t a repeat of ground zero, morning one. No more pretending to be asleep.

“Mhm,” he moaned, reaching inside his boxers and pulling himself free. “I just had the hottest dream about you.”

“Yeah?” I rubbed myself. “Tell me.”

Devon cleared his throat and ran his thumb over the head of his cock. “It was Garron Park fight night,” he started. “And I kicked your ass.”

“Unlikely.”

“Shh. My dream,” he hushed me. “You were all bloody and sweaty, looking at me like you wanted to kill me.” His voice had a sleepy rasp to it that made this retelling even hotter. He jerked himself off without a lick of shame, and my eyes drank it all in. “The announcer shouted that I won, but you weren’t gonna stand for that.”

“More likely.”

“So you tried to challenge me to another fight. You came at me all hot and angry—so sexy, by the way—but I overpowered you and wrapped my hand around your throat.”

I loved it when he did that. His throat grabs used to piss me off. Now they pissed me off and turned me on. He reached over and through the front flap of my boxers, pulling my dick out. He put my hand on it and then took his away. Automatically, I slow-stroked my cock.

“There was a crowd of people chanting for us to keep fighting, but it’s like we didn’t even give a shit about them. I held your throat and you glared at me, and then we just started making out in front of everyone.”

Why was that so easy to picture? We panted a bit, feeling the rush of his dream. My eyes shifted between my hand and his.

“So we’re making out all hot and rushed, and you pulled on my hair. So I tightened my hand on your throat, and then you begged me to fuck you. No, you *demand*ed that I fuck you right there. It was so hot, Madd. It was like you needed me to or you’d die.”

My lungs worked overtime and my body heated up. My cock leaked, anticipating the next part of his dream. “Then what?”

“So, I pushed you back against the cliff. You know, the one we always jump off?” he asked. I nodded, even though that cliff was nowhere near where the fights happened. Whatever. It was his dream. “And we just started ripping clothes off each other. I was so into it that I started sucking you off in front of everyone.”

I watched precum leak from his cock, the sight of it making me throb with need.

“And I was just gagging on your dick, Madd. No fucking shame. I love sucking your cock. Have I ever told you that? And I love how you taste when you come. Oh, god.” He moaned and his leg pressed into mine, making my abs clench and my lower back sweat. My hand worked faster.

“What happened next?”

“You got impatient,” he laughed as he moaned. “True to form, even in my dream. You pulled me up by grabbing my jaw, and then you threatened me. You said if I didn’t hurry up and fuck you, you’d bend me over the guardrail and tongue fuck my ass until I came.”

“Fuck,” I groaned.

“And Dream Me is thinking there are too many good options, and I wanted them all, right? But shit, Maddox... the look in your eyes made me crazy. I shoved your face into the cliff and fucked you. Hard.”

I full-on jerked off. My hand moved with the pace of his breathing and my eyes tracked his hand, watching him match my tempo.

“And everyone was watching us, and you were making the hottest sounds. So I wrapped my hand around your throat again and pulled you up so I could bite your neck and fuck you at the same time.”

Holy shit, this is hot. “You wanna be watched?”

He groaned and bit his lip, looking hot as hell. “I don’t know, Madd. Not really. But this dream got me going, and now telling you is getting me going. Anyway, so I’m fucking you hard and deep from behind, holding you by your damn throat, sinking my teeth into your neck, and damn, you were loving it. You shouted that you were gonna come, and then everyone watched as... mmm.” He swallowed, building me up so fast I was gonna blow. “Everyone watched as I came in your ass and you came hands-free all over the... *fuck*, I’m gonna come right now,” he warned. “Madd... fuck.”

I needed him. I rolled towards Devon and pulled him in. I kissed his neck and made his dream come true. I bit him where his shoulder met his neck, and he lost his mind, which made me lose mine.

“Ah, yes!” he rasped, coming all over my cock. Our knuckles bumped and the feeling of his hot cum on my dick threw me into overdrive. I jerked myself against him, covering us both with my mess.

I groaned against his skin, tasting the salty sweetness of his sweat. Devon dropped his dick and grabbed my hips, grinding us together to finish me off.

We jumped right off that cliff from his dream, and by the time I took my first real breath, I was still soaring.

We were a panting mess of sweat and sticky cum, but it felt right. All from his dream.

“Can I admit something?” he asked through laboured breaths. I held on to him, but not too tight because it was too damn hot in here. “I love it when you’re an asshole,” he said. “When you get rough with me and treat me like you own me. I love that shit.”

Good, because I loved doing it. I was pretty dominant to my core, but so was Devon, so the fact that he liked to handle my aggression was a win in my books. I grabbed his jaw and kissed him hard. We were a mess, hadn’t showered or anything, but I couldn’t find it in me to care. Sometimes, the connection became more important. This was how we showed sentimentality.

“Now I’m gonna piss you off, though,” he laughed against my cheek, pushing me off him so we could both fall on our backs.

“Why?”

“How pissed would you be if I was late to the fair party tonight?”

I looked over at him, wondering what he meant and giving him a look to tell him to get the fuck on with it.

“Brian VanErp asked if we could taxi his boat across the bay for triple the money. Nate and Xavi can do it on their own, but I kind of want to be there to see the new marina and make some connections. You wanna come with us?”

“We’re supposed to take Heidi and Jeff to the fair,” I said, but I wasn’t mad. I understood this one. “You go and I’ll meet you at the fair. Xavi and Nate are going anyway.”

“You sure? I don’t mind skipping it.”

Yes he did, but that was alright. Brian VanErp had just built an entire marina on the other side of the bay and was going to be sending his clients to Devon’s shop. He needed to be there for marketing connections, and I was happy to support him in that.

I kicked him in the hip hard enough that he fell off the bed and thumped to the floor. He cursed me, but was too lazy to get up. “I’ll go with Jeff and Heidi, but you’re driving my drunk ass home later.”

“Fair deal,” he agreed. “I’m too satisfied to move. Bring me coffee.”

I kicked him again on my way to the shower.



THE MORNING STARTED OFF with a bang, and my day went pretty good, but the night wasn’t off to the best start.

“What are you doing here?” I snapped at my dad and then turned to face my mom. “What’s he doing here?”

Dad looked smug and vulnerable at the same time, and Mom looked guilty. Oh, I knew exactly what this was. We’d lived through it a hundred times before. I’d come by to see if she wanted to come to the fair with me, but the last thing I expected to find was my dad.

“Calm down, honey,” Mom tried to deflate me. “I invited him.”

Knew it. “Why?”

My dad had been an asshole to my mom throughout their marriage. Technically, they were still married, because who the hell could afford a divorce? He was a selfish asshole who judged everyone for everything they

did, yet he never held himself to the same standards. He wasn't ever physical with her, but he neglected her and gaslighted her whenever it suited him. Everyone was beneath him, including his sons.

"We're just talking, hun," Mom said. "We figured tonight was a good time because you boys were supposed to be at the fair." She smiled at me, but I wasn't buying it.

I looked at her harder, noticing for the first time that she appeared more put together than usual. Her hair was curled, she had way too much makeup on, and she wore a cute little summer dress. Was she seriously trying to impress this piece of shit?

"How many times are you going to let him brainwash you, Mom? You better not go back to him." It was none of my business what she did, and I had no right to tell her that. But Xavi and I were the ones who always had to hold her together after Dad broke her heart again and again. I thought we were done with this shit for good.

"Calm down, honey. We're just talking. Excuse me." Mom disappeared into the bathroom. She'd never been good with confrontations.

I glared at my dad. I wasn't good to him for much more than cash if he was hard up. I didn't like him and he didn't like me. It was as simple as that. But now that I was looking at him, I realized he looked different, healthier or something, which made me realize I hadn't seen him in a long time. He hadn't come to us for money in... months, maybe even half a year or even longer than that. I forgot he existed there for a bit.

"You still fucking a guy?" he asked.

"You still fucking up your life?" I fired back.

He gave me a grin, but I couldn't tell if it was condescending or pleased. Did he want to fight with me? "I came here to give you a heads up, but if

you're going to be like that, then I'll fuck right off."

Was this a manipulation tactic? "A heads up for what?"

"Jim Sawyer is back in town," he said.

"I know that." Devon had been dragging me to stalk his dad every once in a while, just to keep tabs on him. We wanted to know if he was planning something against Nate and Devon. It was Devon's idea, which I hated, but I had to admit that it felt better to know where that bastard was and what he was doing.

"Word is that he's setting something up. Something big." Dad gave me a level look. Was he honestly just being helpful?

"Something like what?"

Dad shrugged and stretched out on the couch like he owned it. "Dunno. But I caught him sniffin' around the Park building. I talked to Gary about it, and he said that Jim's been asking about Lot 62."

How did Jim know we lived on that lot? Fuck Garron for being a small town, and fuck everyone in it for still falling prey to Jim Sawyer's influence. Fuck Gary, the park manager, most of all. We didn't own the lot, so there was no way he could hold it as collateral over our heads, but he could sure as shit take it away if he had the connections and the nerve. Which he fucking did.

"Just thought you should know," Dad said. "That's all."

I almost thanked him.

"And I ain't here to fuck with your mom again. It's not about that."

"Does she know that? Judging by the way she's dressed, she thinks this is a date."

"I have some things to make up for. It's nothing more than that," Dad said, and then the conversation stopped because Mom came back.

I hugged my mom, gave my dad a warning look, and then headed over to Mary's place to meet up with Heidi and Jeff. Devon's mom still lived with Mary, and Heidi was a great caretaker, so things had been going pretty well. It wasn't permanent, but it was the best we could do for now. Care facilities were expensive, and we might have been doing better, but we weren't doing that much better. It was a miracle Mary even agreed to take her.

I needed to ignore what my dad said, remind myself that my mom wasn't my responsibility, and deal with it all later. When Devon was around.

Tonight, I'd get drunk. I needed some damn fun.

-DEVON-

I ITCHED TO GET to the fair. Well, I itched to get to my man. We did the boat delivery, checked out the new marina, and networked with a few rich assholes who'd be sending business our way when the time came. We did our part, and now I was ready to get out of here and help Maddox have a good night.

Xavi and Nate were as impatient as I was, but Brian VanErp was one of those chatty bastards who didn't understand social cues and lulls in conversations. We'd been inching away from him for forty minutes, but he just kept on yammering. And I left my damn phone in the truck, so I couldn't even text Maddox to let him know.

Brian was going on about docking fees and clubhouse plans, which were way above my economic standing, but Xavi's phone kept going off every few seconds in his pocket. He finally stepped away to answer it, and to my relief, it was for me.

"It's Jeff," Xav said, handing me his phone with a shrug.

I walked down the dock and answered. "Jeff? What's up?"

“Hey, Dev. You guys almost here?”

“We’re still at the marina in Long Pier. Madd meet up with you okay?”

“Yeah, he’s here.” There was a tone to his voice.

“What happened?” My back straightened.

“Uh,” Jeff kind of laughed. “Well, I’m pretty sure, no, I’m one hundred percent sure that Madd got drugged. He’s... he’s all fucked up and hilarious, and he will not shut up about you. Shit, he’s getting mauled, man. You might wanna get here quick.”

“Mauled? What do you mean he’s getting mauled?” I walked back to Nate and Xavi.

“Everyone at this party is on something, but it’s hitting Madd the hardest, like he got drugged twice or something. He’s all horny and... yeah, he’s just getting mauled. But he keeps asking where you are, Dev.” Jeff laughed again. “Shit, sorry. He’s fine, but I’m trying to keep him contained.”

“Contained how?”

“Let’s just say he’s down to fuck and waiting for you.”

Good Lord. “Thanks. Don’t let him do anything stupid. Or anyone stupid, for that matter. We’re leaving now. Thirty minutes.” I hung up on Jeff and ran down the dock. “Sorry, Brian, but we gotta go. Catch ya next time though, yeah?”

Nate and Xavi hopped in the front and I climbed into the back, checking my phone and seeing three hundred missed messages from Maddox. All getting increasingly more ridiculous than the last.

“What happened?” Xavi asked. “Madd okay?”

I couldn’t help smirking as I read through his very suggestive messages. “Yeah. He’s all fucked on Molly or something and he’s getting harassed.”

“What?” Nate laughed.

“No way,” Xavi denied it. “Madd wouldn’t take Molly. He’s damn near petrified of drugs.”

“Jeff said he thinks he got drugged.”

“By who?” Xavi snapped, getting into big brother mode.

“Good fucking question.” Because who the hell would drug my boyfriend with something that made him horny?

“So, we’re just grabbing him and getting outta there?” Nate asked. “I don’t even care if we stay.”

“Guess we’ll see how he is when we get there.” He better be alright.

Insecurity set in a little. He was drugged, horny, and would definitely have a hard dick. But did he have control?



WE PARKED AT THE back of the lot, the fair going on all around us, but the party pavilion was at the back. Jeff, Heidi, and a few other guys I recognized from Maddox’s work stood there with a few buddies from Garron Park.

“Oh, thank fuck,” Jeff laughed when he saw us.

“Maddox!” Heidi shouted. “Devon’s here!” She turned to me and smiled. “You’ve got that boy whipped, Dev. He’s been getting hit on, propositioned, and felt up, but he keeps pushing everyone away and looking for you,” she laughed.

I swooned. Fucking hard.

“Devon,” Maddox growled at me, walking right up into my personal space. His eyes were glazed, but his smile was unfiltered. “Fucking finally.”

He gripped the back of my neck and damn near broke my nose when he smashed our faces together. His free hand travelled straight to my fly.

“Shit, Madd.” I tried to hold him off. “Behave.”

“I wanna fuck. Right now. Come on,” he whisper-shouted like an idiot. “I’ve been waiting for you all night. Damn, you look good.” He blatantly eye-fucked me.

I rolled my eyes and shoved him behind me so I could thank Jeff and Heidi. I’d never heard him drunk ramble, other than that night he knocked out Fancy Jeans Guy. I knew that prick’s name, so I didn’t know why I’d succumbed to Maddox’s nickname for him. When I turned to thank Jeff and Heidi, they were laughing at me. Nate and Xavi laughed even harder because Maddox was being a suggestive fool, feeling me up from behind. He wrapped his hands around my waist, and I fought with him to keep them out of my jeans. Holy hell, he was horny. Maddox kissed my neck and whispered filthy things in my ear, rubbing me through my pants.

I tried to push his hands away and actually thank these guys for calling me. “Thanks for keeping him... contained.” I grimaced when my button popped open. “Fuck, Madd. Chill for a minute.” I pulled his hands out of my pants, but he fought me the entire time, touching me everywhere he could reach.

“He’s been like this for an hour already,” Jeff laughed. “He wouldn’t touch anyone else, though, so... good luck with all that.”

“Who gave him that shit?” Xavi asked.

Jeff shrugged, but he subtly looked across the group, giving us a signal. Fucking Tom. I knew that young prick was after my man.

“Devon,” Maddox complained against my ear, grinding his hard dick against my ass. “I need to fuck something! Your mouth, your hand, your

ass, I don't care. Something!"

Oh my god, what the hell was wrong with him?

"I'll put lube in a plastic bag and fuck the gap between the mattress and the box spring, I'm so fucking horny right now!"

What? *What?* "Have you done that?" I couldn't help my laugh that time. "Wait. We don't even have a box spring."

"Sex! Now!" He tried to push me away from the crowd. "Please, Devon."

Everyone in the group broke out laughing, Nate and Xavi the loudest, tugging him away from me.

"Come on, lover boy," Xavi laughed. "Get in the truck."

"Devon!" Maddox shouted after me. "Let's go!"

"You better go," Heidi said, laughing her ass off. "Honestly, Dev, he only wanted you."

"Thanks, guys. Thanks for putting up with that." I gave them each a nod. Liked Jeff a lot more now.

How the hell was I going to keep Maddox occupied for the forty-minute drive back to Garron Park without letting him fuck me in the back seat? And with Nate and Xavi right up front?

I sighed.



MADDOX WAS OUT OF control. I'd seen him horny before, but nothing compared to how wild and unhinged he was right now. He wouldn't take no for an answer, not that I was too firm about it, but still.

“You want me to pull over somewhere so you can deal with him?” Nate asked from the driver’s seat, stifling a laugh.

“Just fuck me right here,” Maddox answered before I could, tugging me forward, still trying to get in my pants. “Just ride my cock like a—”

“He’s on Molly,” Xavi cut in. “You fuck him once and he’ll just be ready to go again in sixty seconds. Better to just keep driving,” he choked, trying to hold in a laugh.

“Devon.” Maddox licked my neck, saying my name with a voice that got harder and harder to resist. “Remember that time we fucked at the track and were late for the starting line?” He rubbed my dick.

“Shut the fuck up, Maddox.” I moved his hand and tried to keep his mouth occupied so he didn’t spill all our dirty secrets.

“Let’s flip fuck,” he demanded on a loud moan.

Oh my god. “Maddox, shut up.” I glanced up front, trying not to die of embarrassment. “We aren’t alone.”

“I’m whispering,” he said like a cute bastard. “I want to flip fuck all night,” he stage-whispered.

“Yeah, you’re whispering loud enough for the car behind us to hear. Shut your goddamn mouth.”

“Was that a yes to flip fucking?”

“Fucking hell,” I groaned. “Turn the music up.”

“You seriously gonna fuck him back there?” Nate laughed harder.

“Unless you wanna hear all the bullshit he’s saying, I’m gonna do something.”

“Yes!” Maddox got amped. “Sit on my cock, Devon. Now.”

I wrapped a hand around his throat and leaned right into his face. “Say another word, and I won’t even touch you for the rest of the night. You’ll be

fucking the mattress like you said.”

“No,” he pouted.

“Shut this mouth. Got it?”

He nodded. His green eyes tracked my every move, his hands roamed all over me, and his cock pressed at the seams of his jeans.

I pushed him to lean against the door, undid his pants, and tugged them down just enough to pull his dick out. I couldn’t believe I was doing this. I might have dreamed about a public fuck, but our brothers weren’t in that dream.

“Music,” I snapped at Nate. So messed up.

“No cum on my seats, Madd.” Nate warned before turning the music up.

“Mm,” Maddox moaned as soon as I started jerking him off. “Devon can swallow like a—”

“Maddox!” I barked at him while our brothers laughed. I grabbed his throat for the hundredth time and got in his face again. “Shut your goddamn mouth or you can jerk yourself off.”

But Maddox was a pushy fucker. He pushed on the back of my head and pretty much forced me to swallow his cock.

“Oh, shit yeah,” he moaned. “I’ve wanted this mouth all—”

I pulled away, overpowering him. “Last warning,” I growled at him.

“I’ll just whisper,” he panted.

“No. You’ll keep your mouth shut. Lips together.”

He did it, but I knew it wouldn’t last. I’d love this if Nate and Xavi weren’t here. Honestly, I wished I’d been drugged so I could block all that out and enjoy Maddox in this fine form.

Nate turned the music up, and I got lost in the sensation of Maddox and how badly he wanted me. As I sucked his cock, Jeff and Heidi’s words kept

floating through my mind, pumping up my ego. He was this horny, and he didn't even touch anyone else. He said *no*. He asked for *me*. He wanted *me*, even when I wasn't around and a bunch of other people were throwing themselves at him. He still wanted me.

I wanted to reward him for that. I became eager to please him so thoroughly that he'd continue to want me and only me. I wanted to claim him as much as he claimed me. I took him deep into my mouth, letting him thrust his hips to hit the back of my throat. I listened to his failed attempts at stifling his moans, and I enjoyed every second of it, despite the scenario.

"Devon," he moaned. "Holy shit. You..." he kept rambling. His fingers weaved into my hair and he pushed me down even more. I took a breath through my nose, let my hips buck a bit to hump the damn seat, and let him fuck my face like the dominant prick he was. "Mmmm. Just. Like. That." His body trembled and his breath hitched as he came down my throat in warm bursts.

I became a greedy cum slut because I eagerly swallowed every bit of him and licked him for more. I couldn't get enough. The pressure in my pants almost hurt so good, like I liked the torture of needing to get off but not being able to. When Maddox tugged on my hair and brought my mouth to his, I couldn't help my moan.

"I love you, Devon," he breathed my air and swallowed the desire I tried to hide from our brothers. "I fucking love you."

"I told you to shut this mouth, Maddox."

He ignored me. "Fuck me. Right here. Right now."

"Madd..." He just got off and he was already this rowdy again? What the hell was he on?

He pushed me back and climbed on my lap, straddling me. We barely fit back here, but his head hit the roof like he didn't care. "We can be quiet."

"You couldn't be quiet if your life depended on it right now." I grabbed his hips to make him sit still. If he kept grinding on me, I'd come in my jeans.

"I know, but I really want you." Pouting was new for him. I didn't hate it. "Please, Dev."

I honestly wasn't that put off by this. The only thing holding me back was that it was our brothers. They probably didn't want a live show of their brothers fucking. Plus, they were sober.

"Nate, pull over," Maddox demanded. "Pull over so I can fuck my man."

My man. I swooned again.

"Maddox, look at me." I turned his face to mine. "You can make it until we get home."

He shook his head. "I can't."

"Fifteen minutes, Madd," Xavi called back.

Maddox's green eyes met mine in the darkness of the back seat. "I can't wait fifteen minutes to have you. I can't even wait another minute."

"When did you turn into a pouty little brat?"

"I'm not a brat. I just need you, babe."

"Babe?" I laughed. Okay, that was a surefire sign he was fucked up.

He smiled like a loser. "Felt weird saying it."

"Felt weird hearing it."

He rested his forehead against mine, wiggling his hips to entice me. "Come on."

"Just fuck," Nate said. "Go for it, Madd."

“Nate,” I snapped at my brother to shut up. Maddox didn’t need any encouragement. “How long does this shit last?”

“Depends how much he took, but probably a few more hours. His dick will fall off before then at this rate.”

Maddox humped me like a Mississippi leg hound. A few more hours? I was game, but what if he didn’t settle down?

“I’m sorry, Devon,” Maddox said against my cheek. “It’s not just the sex. I love you. It’s not just sex.”

Had I ever swooned this much?



BY THE TIME NATE pulled through the entrance of Garron Park, Maddox had damn near succeeded in making me come in my jeans. By the time we got to Lot 62, I barked out an impatient demand for them to just leave and not look back; they didn’t need another show in case Maddox got rowdy before the trailer door even opened.

Luckily, he waited until we got inside.

Maddox slammed my back against the bedroom door frame, hand shoved down my pants and mouth on mine in a sloppy kiss. He weaved his fingers into my hair and yanked my head back to expose my throat. With his lips on my skin and his hand rubbing my cock, he growled in desperate need.

“Bend. The fuck. Over.”

I shoved his chest to make him back off. Not because I didn’t want it, but because I was less than a second away from blowing my load in my boxers. I stalked towards Maddox, hand already clasped around his throat. In the

dim light of the trailer, our eyes met and fought a war that had no clear loser and no direct winner. Whatever battle we waged, we'd both benefit from it.

"Kneel."

"No."

I grinned, tightening my hold on his throat. For once, his compliance didn't require words. I looked at him, and he looked back, and with a flare of his nostrils, Maddox dropped to his knees.

My pants hit my ankles, and my cock hit the back of his throat. Groaning in pure bliss, I grabbed the back of his head and fucked his face like he fucked mine in the truck. I needed to get this orgasm out of the way so I wasn't operating on a hair trigger all night.

"Where'd your cute mood go, Madd?" I asked, watching his eyes widen and tear up from the threat of suffocation. "No more calling me babe and telling me you love me? Thought Molly was supposed to make you happy."

Just to get the upper hand, he cupped my balls and licked the tip of my dick before swallowing me back down. I was so edged, built up, and riding the sanity line that I buckled forward. With the roll of his throat when he swallowed, I came. Pulling back to come into his mouth, I squeezed his cheeks so he couldn't swallow, fucking his tongue and coming all over it. The orgasm was abrupt and fast, and not near satisfying enough. I knelt down, kicking my pants off my ankles, and forced his mouth open.

"Look at you, Madd. Holding a full load in your mouth without gagging."

He stuck out his tongue, letting my cum run down his chin, and my eyes zeroed in on it. I gripped his jaw and leaned forward to lick it up, shoving it back into his mouth with my tongue. Oh fuck, yeah. We'd never played around with cum too much, but it was safe to say I had a new kink.

Maddox moaned against my mouth, not at all thrown off by it like he had been in the past. He sucked my cum back into his mouth and then pulled away. With his eyes on mine, he spit it into his hand, almost grinning, but not quite. Whatever way he looked at me, it was fucking feral. Primal. Goddamn predatory. And I knew whatever way he wanted to dominate me, I'd love every second of it.

He pushed on my chest, knocking me off my knees to crash to my back. Then the fucker spread my legs, pushed them as wide as they could go, and shoved that handful of cum straight inside my ass.

"Fuck," I groaned at the abruptness of it. Two fingers pumped it into me, slicking and stretching me, and making my dick hard again. "Jesus, Madd."

He didn't let up, but his drug-hazed grin came back and his glazed eyes watched his fingers fuck my ass. "I'm fucking wild right now, Devon. I will fuck as many loads inside you as I can, and you're going to beg for more."

Jesus. Bashful and horny, to happy and sappy, to dungeon master and kinky fuck. Loved all versions of him.

He leaned back to pull his shirt off, so I watched him as I did the same. When he leaned over me to open the drawer of the dresser, I pushed his already undone pants over his hips and down to his knees. With a bottle of lube in hand, I slathered his dick while he got naked, and then he grabbed my legs and pulled me between his.

"I can't fucking wait." He lined up and pushed into me, making my jaw slacken and my eyes roll. My cock woke all the way back up, and my ass clamped down at the intrusion. "Ah, fuck, Devon," he moaned, fucking into me hard and deep. "You have no idea." He shook his head and leaned back, watching himself fuck me.

I bore down, easing the burn and increasing the pleasure. The bedroom carpet burned my back more than anything, but when Maddox grabbed my neck and pulled me up to straddle his bent legs, I got my knees under me and rode him as hard as he fucked me.

“Reach behind me,” he rasped against my mouth. “Finger me.”

I pushed two fingers into his mouth, watching his tongue slip between them to get them wet and dripping. Maddox’s hips thrust upward, and it took everything in me not to sink back to the floor and let him fuck the life out of me. When my fingers were wet, I leaned into him, slid them through the lube on my abs, and reached back.

“Mmm, fuck.” His head fell forward against mine when I started to finger his ass. I couldn’t get the right angle, so I pushed him to his back and rode his cock while reaching back to shove my fingers back inside him.

It riled him up and made him powerful. He held my hips steady and lifted his ass off the floor to fuck me from the bottom. My breathing turned audible, coming out in choppy rasps that matched each thrust. With precum leaking from my tip to his abs, I pulled my fingers from his ass and flipped the script.

I eased between his legs, poured lube on my cock, and spread him open. “Fuuuck.” The tight squeeze of his ass gripped every sensitive inch of my shaft until I bottomed out and held still.

“Fuck me hard, Devon. Fuck me so hard.” He stroked his cock and pulled his balls up, giving me the best view.

Grabbing his ankles like *holy shit handles* and holding them up, I gave him exactly what he asked for. The floor stung my knees, the air burned my lungs, and the sweat scorched my skin, but holy fuck, his ass felt amazing around my cock.

“Oh, fuck. Don’t stop.” He grabbed at me, spreading his legs and pulling me down. His blunt nails raked down my back painfully, but the pleasure overwhelmed everything else. “Fuck me. Just. Like. That.” He spread his legs wider and let me use my hips to angle him just right.

I knew his body. I knew what felt good, what felt amazing, and what would get him off. I looked right at him, scraping my nails down his shoulders and arms as I kept my hips moving. When his lips parted on a silent moan and he held his breath, I knew he was there.

“Cover me in come, Madd. Fuck, you feel good.”

“Devon,” he cried out, squeezing the hell out of my length. My abs rubbed against his dick, and his cum shot up between our bodies to land on his chest and chin.

I leaned forward to lick it up, sharing it with him as he continued to moan beautifully. Unabashed. Unhinged. So sexy. I didn’t think I’d be able to again so soon, but as the taste of his cum filled our mouths and he moaned because of it, my cock throbbed deep inside him, filling him.

“I’m not done,” he panted, trying to catch his breath. I kept languidly rocking into him, bringing him back down to earth. “I’m not done with you yet, Devon. I wanna come in your ass and be full of your cum before I fall asleep.”

I kissed him, sucking his lips clean. “I know your reboot time isn’t that fast, Madd.”

His chest heaved against mine, our sweaty bodies rubbing together as the rush faded to something calmer. “Well, whatever the fuck I’m on is a wonder drug,” he laughed, pushing me back. I pulled out and helped him stand. My legs were jelly, so Maddox pushed me onto the bed. “Mm, my favourite view,” he said of me on my stomach, ass on display for him.

Maddox blanketed me with his body, his dick sliding easily inside me again. “Madd,” I groaned. Maybe moaned. “You need a break.”

“I just wanna stay here for a minute,” he whispered against my neck, biting my ear. “You have no fucking idea how bad I wanted you tonight,” he said.

I did. I saw it. Felt nice to hear, though. “How bad?”

“So bad that the thought of taking my dick out of your ass for even one second makes me fucking feral. So bad that I had to pinch my dick not to come in my jeans at the fair just from the thought of you. So bad that I’m already ready to go again.” He rocked his hips, his cock hard and thick. “Do you need a break? Do you want water or something?” he asked as he started fucking me again.

The movement of his body made my dick rub against the bed. My body heated up and my hips tilted all on their own, giving him better access.

“Say it, baby.”

I’d never get used to him calling me that. It felt special, meant only for rare occasions or something like that. “Say what?”

“Tell me I can fuck you again.”

I wasn’t drugged, so I had no idea why or how my body was eager to go again, but it was. A whole night of sex sounded daunting—exhaustingly daunting, but I couldn’t think of anything else I wanted.

“You can fuck me again,” I said into the blanket. “You can fuck me as many times as you want, Madd.”

I moaned when he slammed into me. “I fucking love you, Devon.”

I knew he did. I was seriously the luckiest person alive.

-MADDOX-

MY ASS HURT. REAL bad.

Not just my ass, either. My legs felt like they'd run a marathon, my cock was sensitive, my ab muscles ached, and there were scratch marks all down my back and shoulders. Great night, though.

Devon didn't move beside me. Face down and naked, he had his own scratch marks, his hair was a mess, and he'd drooled all over his arm. Sexy.

"Devon," I whispered, shaking him. "Shit, I'm sorry. Are you okay?" I guess I got pretty rowdy last night.

He groaned. "Fuck off."

I laughed, but it hurt my head. "Do you need anything?"

"For you to leave and let me sleep," he complained, not even opening his eyes. "You kept me up until six this morning."

I checked the alarm clock beside the bed, noticing it was only nine. I got up, grabbed him a glass of water, and picked up the thin blanket off the floor. Covering him up and trying to tuck him in, I kissed his hair.

"Love you."

He only moved enough to give me the finger. I smiled, closing the door behind me to give him some well-deserved peace and quiet. I chugged three glasses of water, did the whole morning routine thing, and got the coffee going.

What actually happened last night? Who gave me that? I wasn't the experimental type when it came to drugs, and all I'd had was a few drinks and a toke or two. I guess if I was going to get drugged with something, that wasn't so bad. But I couldn't imagine what I would have done if Devon hadn't shown up. I'd probably still be jerking off like a madman. Either way, the night might have been fun, but I didn't enjoy having no control over myself. I had zero filter, and no control over my impulses, and I wasn't a fan of the feeling. Was it Molly or was it something else?

The coffeemaker beeped at the same time someone knocked on the door. Who would come this early on a Sunday?

"What?" I shouted, pouring myself a coffee.

Xavi let himself in, carrying a container of pastries from Gina a few lots over. She ran a completely illegal little bakery out of her trailer, but her treats were to die for.

"Morning, sunshine," Xavi laughed.

I groaned, knowing he would only be here to bust my balls. "What do you want?"

"This is a wellness check for Devon. Need to make sure you didn't kill him with sex last night."

I faked a laugh and told him to fuck off.

He must have been serious because he peeked inside our bedroom door to make sure Devon was breathing.

"Not dead," I confirmed. "Coffee?"

“Yeah. I brought these.” He held up Gina’s baked goods. “Let’s chat.” He walked out the front door and sat on the deck. Wonder what he wanted to chat about.

I threw on a pair of sweats but didn’t much care if I looked as shitty as I felt. I was exhausted, but my body was too sore to lie in bed any longer, so I poured him a coffee and headed out front, ignoring the mess in our kitchen. The sun was already hotter than I could handle, so I dragged my chair into the shade and sat down.

“How you feeling?” Xavi asked, laughing at my misery.

“Like shit.” I took a sip of coffee and smoothed my hair out with my fingers. “Like hungover but also kind of moody.”

“Nate said the comedown from Molly can be kind of depressing, so I just wanted to check in.”

“Well, aren’t you a considerate asshole.”

“Yeah, I am. You get all your fucking out of your system?” he laughed again.

“Ugh, I think my dick is broken.”

Xavi laughed harder. He laughed so hard he had to set his coffee down. I glared at the lawn, ignoring the pleasure he took in my embarrassment.

He got himself mostly under control and picked his coffee up. “What the hell is flip fucking and why did you want to do it so bad?”

My hand slapped my face, attempting to cover my humiliation. “Did I say that out loud?”

“Like five times,” Xavi laughed. “You really wanted it. So what is it?”

“Don’t ask me that shit, Xav! Look it up on the internet like everyone else.”

“No, tell me! God, you weren’t this shy last night.”

“Why do you care? You gay?” I narrowed my eyes at him.

He only grinned.

Mortified. Gay sex chats with my brother weren’t my thing. He might have gotten me to open up about it initially and he talked me through some of my logistical concerns, but now that part was over and this didn’t need to be a topic of conversation.

“Madd!”

“Ugh, it’s when you both fuck each other.”

“Like—”

“Yes, like that,” I cut in. “No strict top or bottom. Switching. Don’t make me elaborate.”

“Hawt,” Xavi said, nodding. “So he tops for a bit and then you flip him over and—”

“Fuck off, Xavi.”

He couldn’t help but laugh again. “I’m proud of you, Madd.”

“Why?”

“Because. When we showed up there, you were going wild. You jumped Devon the second you saw him, and I swear you would have fucked him right there in front of everyone.”

Really glad I didn’t do that. No matter how hot his dream about it was, I had no intention of sharing the sight of my man.

“You’ve just come a long way is all. Jeff and Heidi said you were only interested in where Devon was. You love that fucker for real, don’t ya?”

“Unfortunately,” I said, smirking.

“Happy for you. But like, you don’t even look at anyone else anymore?”

Why the hell were we having this conversation? “Is this what you wanted to chat about? Jesus, Xavi.” Gay chats about sex and then the relationship

chat? What was going on?

“Just answer me.”

My god. “No, I don’t look. It’s not that I wouldn’t, it’s just that no one else draws my attention like he does. Not just his body, but like...” Lame. Whatever I was about to say was lame. “Nevermind.”

“I wanna hear it. Say it. I’m interested.”

“Why?” I studied him.

“I’ll tell you later. Just explain it to me.”

Sketchy. But if he wanted to hear it, I’d say it. “No one will ever look at me with the same level of challenge as Devon does, you know? Like sometimes, it’s not even his body that turns me on. It’s the way he says something, or the way he clenches his jaw when he’s pissed at me. The way he tries and fails at so many things. It’s more about what he puts out there than what he looks like. Does that make sense?”

“Yeah, kinda.”

Might as well go on. “I used to hook up before, right? I liked the way she looked, got horny, and got invested in it because it was a way to get off. That’s not shade to anyone I’ve been with before, but it’s not what I like now. With Devon, his entire demeanour fucks with me. He doesn’t just put out vibes like he’s down to fuck. He either pisses me off, fucks with me, challenges me, or forces me to want to fuck him. One look from him and I don’t get the chance to just *succumb* to it like I used to do with everyone else. He... controls me so much that I don’t even have a choice with him. It’s not just sex, it’s like connecting with him on all levels. And I don’t mean that in the romantic bullshit kind of way, but the matched energy, same level of challenge, fight until the death kind of way.”

I looked at my brother, feeling like a loser for admitting all that. But Xavi didn't look like he was about to make fun of me. He looked like he was taking it all in, trying to fit it to something in his life. *Wait, what?*

"You find that with someone?" I asked.

"Not that exactly, but something. I dunno. Still trying to figure it out." He looked a bit shy.

"Look, Xav," I sighed. "If you'd have asked me a year and a half ago if this is how I'd feel about that fuck up in there, I'd have killed you for even suggesting it. All I know is that I'm grateful Dad made me hate Devon when we were kids because it led to this. Life is messed up and it ain't always pretty, but sometimes it works out alright, yeah?"

"Yeah," he said, smiling. "Speaking of fucked up, Dad's been around."

"Okay, so we're just breezing by that comment about you maybe finding someone?" I raised a brow.

"Yeah, for now," he laughed. "I'll tell you when I figure it out."

I gulped cool coffee. "Dad was at Mom's last night before I went to the fair. She was all dressed up, and he pretty much called me gay and then warned me that Jim was sniffing around. What's his deal?"

Xavi leaned back. "I don't know. I don't trust him, but he showed up at the shop the other night and gave me his old set of tools. Dad said I'd get more use out of them than he would, and it felt real. Genuine or something. Not a trick this time, but we've been tricked too many times to believe it."

"This isn't the first time he's tried to play nice just to take something from us. We're too old for this shit now."

"Yeah, but Mom isn't. She still loves his broke ass even if she hates him, too."

True. No matter how old we got or how many times our mom messed up by drinking, taking too many pills, or letting our dad back in, she'd still be our mom and we'd always look out for her. It was some fundamental rule of being a son, and our mom, while a useless tit most of the time, had never actually done anything to harm us intentionally.

Our dad had, though. A part of me wanted to blame that on addiction. I wanted to write his behaviour off as the drugs and the stress and tell myself he was a better person while clean. But when had he ever been sober and stayed clean long enough for us to actually learn who he was? Never. Not in my memories, at least.

"He seems..."

"Sober," Xavi said, voicing my thoughts. "Don't get your hopes up yet, though. What'd he say about Jim?"

"Something about him being at the Park building and asking about this lot." I finished my coffee and grabbed a danish from the container.

"If Jim comes around here, I'll kill him myself," Xavi said. "Okay, maybe not, but I'd want to. Nate's been ignoring him. Devon?"

"Devon's a dumbass who can't let it go. He's been following Jim around, checking on him while keeping his distance." And I hated it. Yeah, it was advantageous to know where Jim was and what he was up to, but I didn't like Devon being anywhere near him. Plus, Devon was a softy and something told me he worried a bit about his dad.

"Well, keep an eye on him. Don't let him get hurt again," Xavi warned and I nodded, not needing advice on taking care of my boyfriend, thank you. "They lucked out with Mary being able to take in their mom like that. If her daughter hadn't moved out, she'd be living with us at the shop. So don't let Devon mess anything up. Things are finally settled."

Were they? Jim got out of prison, and he might not have done anything yet, but I had a feeling it was coming. He held a grudge like a motherfucker and he wasn't one to let his sons one-up him, so sooner or later, that old bastard would come crashing back into our lives, and I needed to be ready for it.

So, I said the only thing I truly felt. "If anyone is going to fuck with Devon, it'll be me." I took another bite of the pastry, feeling better to have something in my stomach.

Xavi laughed, the tone of the conversation lightening. "Yeah, I'm still not convinced you didn't kill him last night."

I groaned in embarrassment, hating how ridiculous I'd been last night. If I ever got drugged like that again, I hoped it wasn't alone. That way, I wouldn't be the only one making a fool of myself. "He'll be fine."

"It was that blond guy you work with, eh?"

"What?" I gasped. "Tom? No way. He's way too timid for that."

"Jeff thinks it was him, but I don't know." Xavi shrugged. If it was Tom, it had to be an accident. No, I couldn't believe it because there was nothing he could have possibly gained from drugging me. He wasn't even gay.

It felt good to spend the morning shooting the shit with my brother. We hadn't spent as much time together lately because life liked to get in the way of everything. Nate showed up some time later. He checked on Devon just like my brother had, and proceeded to grill me about everything I'd said last night.

Like fuck I'd explain flip fucking again. Jesus.

When Devon finally woke up and zombie-walked to the deck in a pair of sweats, he demanded I make him a whole pot of coffee. I laughed, stood up,

and tried to massage his muscles, but he pushed me away and told me I was banned from touching him for at least twenty-four hours.

Something fluttery but comfortable happened in my chest. I wasn't one to make assumptions, but I thought it might be genuine happiness.

-DEVON-

MY DAD WAS UP to something, and I didn't know how to approach it without setting him off or getting Maddox involved. He became shady as fuck, and when I caught him talking to random people around town, in the park, or near the shop, I knew something was up. But my suspicions really rose when I spied him chatting with Gary. Gary was the park manager, and I had no idea what business my dad would have with him, but I didn't like it.

On top of worrying about my dad, I had Tom to deal with. What the hell was that little bitch up to? The not-so-rational part of me wanted to ask that question with my fists, but the newly responsible boyfriend part of me knew it'd be bad for Maddox if I made a scene at his work. I'd fight Tom, Maddox would get in shit for bringing trouble to the work site, he'd try to knock me out, and it'd be a whole new mess, so I'd have to come up with a different way to confront Tom.

Being mature sucked. Like, *no thanks*.

But there was also the sorry-for-myself part that wondered why it seemed that every time we got our shit together, something came stalking through

our lives to haunt it. Our dads were both back now. Maddox didn't know what his dad's deal was, but there was at least a small chance he had good intentions. My dad, on the other hand, didn't have a good-intentioned bone in his body. He was here to fuck my life up, I just didn't know how yet. He'd pulled the 'sorry, let's make amends' line plenty of times before, and guess where it got me? Stabbed, beaten, bloody, pushed down, and suffering. This time would be no different. I wasn't in the forgiving mood, but I *was* in the mood to keep my eye on that traitorous fuck.

Which was why I walked across the street to an old park, making a big mistake that Maddox would kill me for if he found out. No one came to this playground because it wasn't maintained, and to be honest, it was more of a death trap safety hazard than anything. Nothing but a cesspool of spent condoms, syringes, and rusty metal. I hated myself for doing this, but I hated it even more that I did it in secret. Lying to Maddox was shitty of me, but this was the only way I knew how to protect him. Lying to my brother was my own fault because I knew he'd tell me not to meet with Dad, and he'd call me the idiot I am for even thinking about it.

I might've been an idiot, but I wasn't stupid. Jim was coming after us for something, and if I could figure out what it was and get ahead of it, it'd be the only way I knew how to protect my family and my boyfriend. *That* was more important to me than acting like an asshole.

Night had mostly set in, and whatever light tried to shine on the park was blocked by the canopy of tree leaves. I saw the glowing ember of a cigarette and headed straight for it. Chin up, defences intact, and anger simmering under the surface of my skin where it was most useful to me.

"You came," he said by way of greeting.

“What do you want?” I needed to get straight to the point. Get in and get out before anyone came looking for me.

“Like I said, I’m just trying to make amends.” He inhaled, not a fatherly instinct left in him. Maybe he never had one.

“Cut the shit. We both know you don’t give a fuck about amends, so tell me what you want and then leave me be.”

“You’ve grown a pair,” Dad laughed smugly. “You never had the nerve to talk to me like that before.”

I’d thought about talking to him like that before, but he was right; I hadn’t had the balls because the beating wouldn’t have been worth it. I was a new Devon now. A Devon who had the power to protect the three most important people in my life. Maddox. Mom. Nate. I had the balls because of them.

“I’ve got something going,” Dad said, tossing the butt of his cigarette to the sandy playground. “And if it all works out, I’ll be out of your life for good. Out of Garron. No strings attached.”

Good story. That’d never happen. “Why am I here then? Get on with your shit and get out of Garron.”

“There’s something I need.” Of course there was. There was always something he needed. Even if I didn’t have it, he’d need it from me or expect me to get it.

“Money?”

“No. Well, maybe like a hundred bucks or something to put a deposit on a boat rental. The boat is my way out.”

Leaving Garron would break his parole and send him straight back to prison, so I’d pay a hundred bucks to help him break it. “So, what else then?”

“I need a favour. You remember Patrick Harris?”

The loan shark my dad was in debt to. The guy he made a deal with for that stolen boat, and the guy Maddox threatened to get me and Nate out of jail last year. “What about him?”

“He has something of mine and I need it back.”

“So get it yourself. I’m not your thug.”

“I can’t. That’s the problem. It’s at Garron Park,” Dad said, lighting another cigarette.

“Patrick Harris doesn’t live in Garron Park. He’s from Redding. Stop lying to me.” Impatience and skepticism clawed at my nerves, telling me to run and never look back.

“Patrick hid it at Garron Park. Gary has it in his office. They’re buddies or something. I’ve been trying to get in, but Gary doesn’t like me.”

No shit. “Wonder why?” I crossed my arms. “You want me to steal this thing from Gary’s office?”

“I wouldn’t ask if I had any other choice.” Yes, he would. “You live there. You go to his office to pay rent. I just need you to snoop around a bit, and if you find it, I need you to get it for me.”

It’d never be that simple. “What do I get out of this?”

“Me gone from your life forever. I’ll leave you and Nate alone, never come back, and won’t mention anything about the fact that you’re... nevermind.”

“The fact that I’m what?”

“Fucking that Kane boy you hated all your life,” he scoffed. “How the hell did I raise a fag?”

He didn’t raise a fag. He didn’t even raise a son. He didn’t do anything, but it wasn’t worth it to get going on that conversation with him. The

sooner he was out of my life, the better.

“If I do this, you swear you’ll leave for good? You’ll never come back, you won’t fuck with Nate or Mom? You won’t fuck with Maddox?”

“You have my word.” His word meant shit to me. “But only if you do this. If you don’t, that pretty boyfriend of yours...”

I’d kill him before he laid a hand on my pretty boyfriend. “When?”

“As soon as you find this thing, I’ll leave. The same day. I’ve got a plan in place. I just need my property back from Harris and a boat to get out of here. There’s nothing left for me here, boy, so the faster you get this done, the faster I’m gone.”

I’d be gone soon, too, because as soon as Nate or Maddox learned I agreed to do this, they’d bury me deeper than six feet under. But how many times had Maddox saved me? It was my turn now, and I wouldn’t fuck it up. I had plans of my own, and they had nothing to do with actually helping my dad.

“What is it? What am I stealing?”

Dad grinned.



MADDOX WAS ASLEEP ON the couch when I got back to Lot 62. His bent knee rested against the back cushions, his other leg out straight, one hand on his stomach, and the other behind his head. His dark hair looked damp from a recent shower, and his black boxers sat loosely on his hips because the elastic band had stretched out from age and wear. Maybe I’d buy him some new ones. He looked like he’d shaved a bit, but not down to

the skin. I'd told him once that I loved him with a bit of stubble, and ever since, he kept a bit of stubble. It matched his dark lashes, his dark energy, and his dark soul.

But the best part about finding him asleep on the couch? He trusted me. He knew I was out, but he didn't wait up worrying about me. I loved him for that and hated myself for it even more. I loathed lying to him, but until I knew more about where this item was my dad wanted, I'd keep lying to him to protect him. Knowing Maddox, he'd charge into Gary's office, steal the thing, and fuel up my dad's boat just to make sure he actually left. I didn't want him sacrificing his freedom for my problems this time. I'd do the dirty work to get my dad out, and someday, Madd would understand it.

I kicked off my shoes and settled down right on top of him. I got comfortable between his legs, put all my weight on him, and felt the vibration of him groan against my chest. I rested my cheek there, just to get more of the feeling.

"Fuck, you're heavy," he complained, draping his arm around my back.

"Muscle weighs more than fat, bud." I smiled against his chest.

He slid his hand up my back and played with my hair, making me shiver. Neither of us said anything, choosing to enjoy the comfort of silence so I didn't have to lie to him and he didn't have to ream me out. I crushed him. He played with my hair. Our bodies stayed connected, and that's all that mattered. I really did want to tell him what I'd done, and I wanted to talk shit through about Tom, but none of that mattered enough. Mostly, I wanted to ask him how he was. How his day was.

Instead, I kept my mouth shut and listened to him breathe.

Maddox cleared his throat after a while. "There's a bat locked in the bathroom."

“What?” I laughed.

“It got in. It was flying around all insane and shit, so I locked it in the bathroom and closed the door. You can deal with it.”

“Are you afraid of bats?” I asked, laughing.

“No, but I *am* pissed off at you,” he said. “For doing whatever you did tonight. So now you get to deal with the bat.”

Shit. I refused to look at him. I kept my cheek on his chest, hoping to prolong the peace. “I was just—”

“Don’t lie to me, Devon. Heidi said she saw you at the park with Jim, so just spare me whatever bullshit you were going to tell me. I don’t know why you did it, and you don’t have to tell me, but if you’re going to be stupid, at least be careful.”

Instinct told me to get defensive. I ignored it. I relaxed into him, still cheek to chest, and wrapped my hands around him, calming my breathing. “He says he has a plan in place to leave for good. I’m trying to stay a few steps ahead of him to make sure he follows through.”

Maddox ran his fingers through my hair. In a soft voice, he said, “Things are never that simple. You know that. Just be careful and stop lying to me.”

“Okay,” I said without making a promise. I’d lie to him if I believed it’d keep him safe. “I love you.”

Did we just have a half-ass fight without actually fighting?

“Love you,” he said. “Now go deal with the bat.” He shoved me and I fell between the couch and coffee table. I watched him from the floor, admiring the way he walked to the bedroom. “Hurry up. We’re fucking when you’re done.”

-MADDOX-

MY MOOD WAS SHIT. The coffee maker broke this morning, work dragged, and I couldn't stop worrying about dumbass Devon. I knew him well enough by now to know he was up to something, and I had no doubt his dad put him up to it. Whatever it was, he better be careful.

Devon was smart enough to know his dad was a risk, but he was also heroic enough to think he could save us all from Jim. He'd do whatever it took to get Jim out of our lives, even if it meant doing something potentially dangerous and reckless to accomplish it. Which was why I found myself wanting to leave work and take a sick day just to make sure Devon was actually at the shop working and not off being shady.

Maddox: *How's work?*

He better answer. Could I track his phone? I wished I had some sort of technology knowledge, but I stayed in the dark about all of that. Had never needed to know.

It was afternoon break, so I sat on the tailgate of the work truck, eating a packet of dry crackers with even drier peanut butter between them. I needed

to get through two more hours of work before I could go check on him, but my mood got progressively worse as the day went on. I sent a text to my brother asking if Devon was at work, but he barely checked the phone he usually forgot he owned, so I didn't hold my breath.

"Hey, Madd." Tom walked up with a shy sort of look on his face.

I watched him without saying anything. I guess the look on my face basically betrayed my question because he started explaining himself.

"I just wanted to tell you what actually happened at the fair." He leaned against the truck. "I never meant for you to take that drink."

"What? So you meant to drug someone else?"

"No," he sighed. "Myself. It was supposed to be mine. I'm kind of... awkward, if you hadn't noticed." He blushed like a young fool. "So sometimes I take that shit to get out of my comfort zone. I was mixing drinks, put it in one cup, and I guess I messed up the cups. I'm really sorry."

My eyes widened. "An honest mistake?"

He nodded. "And I didn't even realize I'd done it until you were... fucked up. By that point, it was too late to tell you. Everyone was on it, so I just thought maybe you took it on purpose, but... I dunno, I realized you didn't when you kept asking what was wrong with you. I felt so guilty that I told Jeff to call Devon. I'm sorry."

Jesus. "What even was it?"

"An MDMA blend. But I think you might have been on something else too, I don't know. I don't usually get like that on it, so it made me wonder."

I did smoke a joint that was offered by one of Heidi's friends, so maybe. Great, so I was on some ecstasy/coke/weed high or something. I didn't know shit about drugs other than that I didn't do them, so it's not like I

could tell what it was. All I knew was that it dropped all my inhibitions and made me horny.

I looked at Tom. He was nervous as shit, and I believed that it was a mistake. Now that I knew he only put something in a drink for a good time, I debated whether it was even all his fault. Leave it to me to get drugged twice in the same night. All by my own stupidity. Thought Devon was supposed to be the dumb one in our relationship.

“I’m really sorry, okay? I honestly didn’t mean to do it.” He looked at the ground.

“It’s fine. It... nothing bad happened. Just be more careful of that shit.”

“I will.”

“Plus, you don’t need drugs. You’re fine how you are.”

He blushed again. “Devon gonna kill me?”

“Probably,” I laughed. “He’ll at least punch you. Might want to steer clear of him for a bit.” Honest truth. I patted the tailgate to invite him to sit down. My crackers tasted like shit, so I gave them to him. Even made a joke about them not being spiked. Too soon, maybe.

“Can I ask you something?” Tom asked.

Ugh, hated when people said that. Never knew what was coming, and I generally sucked at conversations. I nodded.

“How’d you, uh, know you were gay?” He studied the crackers.

Oh, that wasn’t so bad. “I didn’t. Still don’t. No idea what I am. Devon just fucked with my head and made me want him.” I shrugged, not sure how to explain it better than that. “Our tension changed,” I added, hoping that cleared it up.

“And you just went with it? Didn’t freak you out or anything?”

I scoffed. “Oh, it freaked me *the fuck* out. Not because he was a guy so much, but because he was Devon. We hated each other, or at least, we thought we did. He was enemy number one since we were kids, and I’d never looked at him like that, so it scared me a bit.” I looked at Tom, squinting. Okay, I was the farthest thing from a role model, barely knew my own sexuality, and wasn’t at all qualified to help him determine his, but I asked, “You gay?”

His cheeks lit up like the cherry of a cigarette and his hands fumbled with the packet of crackers. Being something other than straight wasn’t that big of a deal these days, but it didn’t really have a place in the construction world. There was still a bit of a stigma around it here, so I understood his hesitation.

“I... I’m not... well, you see, I...uh.”

“Yeah, I get it,” I laughed. Basically felt the same a year and a half ago.

Dipshit Devon: *Good. Busy. I miss you. Wanna dirtbike tonight?*

Maddox: *Sure. What time?*

Dipshit Devon: *I’ll be home at 6. Eat and then go?*

Maddox: *Eat, suck my cock, then go.*

Dipshit Devon: *We’ll race. Winner gets a smokie.*

I grinned at my phone and sent him a thumbs up.

“Well, if you ever need someone to hash shit out with, I’m a terrible option, but I’m here.” Look at me being all supportive and shit, talking to the kid who drugged me about a sexuality topic I knew nothing about. I guess I was basically an influencer for messed-up shifts in sexuality.

“Thanks.” He blushed some more. It wasn’t as cute as Devon’s.

An hour later, I was almost done with work, and my phone chimed again.

Dumbass Brother: *Nah. He left. Said he had an appointment at the bank.*

Fucking hell, Devon.



DAMN HIM FOR MAKING me leave work early. Worry wasn't going away, so I went home to check on him, but he wasn't there. I pulled out of our lot, planning to head to the shop to ask Nate where he could be, but as I left Garron Park, I noticed Devon's shitty truck at the Park Office.

What an idiot. This had his dad all over it. My blood burned hot in my veins, pissed at Devon for being dumb enough to get involved in something like this. He had no business being at the office, so I knew he was being sketchy. I parked the truck and waited, wondering if I should go in there and drag him out. Whatever Jim wanted, he could get it himself.

My mind was made for me when I saw Gary walk up to the front door. I hopped out of the truck to run interference, so Devon didn't get caught red-handed doing... whatever he was doing.

Luckily, Gary got stopped by a resident as he entered the building. They stood there inside the door, Gary getting verbally assaulted because mail service had been fucking up a lot lately, and me glancing around to find my boyfriend. I spotted Devon through the glass window of Gary's office, rummaging around his desk drawers.

"Gary!" I called when he turned, heading for his office.

Gary spun in my direction. "Maddox? What're you doing here?" His back stayed to his office, giving Devon time to get out. Devon looked up,

caught in the act, but he knew I was helping him. I'd kick his ass for this later.

"I heard there was some outside interest in our lot," I said, making something up on the fly. "Just wondering if we should be looking for somewhere else?"

"Oh, no," Gary said, waving me off. "There was some interest, uh, in the trail beside your lot. Not the actual lot."

"The trail?" That interested me. Why? And if it was Jim, why the hell would he care about that trail? I kept Gary talking while Devon slipped out the door. I turned, making Gary turn with me so Devon could leave the building.

"A few residents wondered if they could use it or if it was private. I told them they could use it if they didn't access it from your lot. That okay?"

I nodded. "Alright. Thanks. See ya around." I walked out.

Devon's truck had already left, so I hopped in mine and tried to calm down on the two-minute drive through the park. Gary either lied about Jim or my dad had been wrong about Jim asking about our lot. As foreign as the feeling was, I actually trusted my dad more than Gary.

Gonna kill Devon, though.

-DEVON-

I PACED THE TRAILER, wondering how Maddox planned to kill me. Nerves slithered up my spine and upset my stomach. Getting caught hadn't been in the plan, but now that he knew, guilt and shame ate me alive—seemed to be my default setting lately. My hands shook and my palms sweated, and no matter how many times I paced the length of the living room, I couldn't shake the feeling that we were about to have a fight. Not a good fight. One of those that ended with hurt feelings and emotional agony.

And it was all my fault.

The door banged open and an angry, disgusted, pissed off Maddox stepped in with his fists already balled.

“Are you fucking kidding me right now, Devon?”

“Madd, wait.” I raised my hands in defence. I'd fight him if it came to that, but maybe I could diffuse him first. “It was the only time I could do it without Gary being there. I had no other choice!”

He scoffed at me, sick of my shit. “You could have told me, Devon. You could have asked for help. I'm sick of you lying to me about this.”

“Because I’m trying to keep you out of it, Madd. I’m trying to protect you in case anything goes wrong.” I needed him to understand that.

Maddox lowered his fists, but his anger level only increased. “What’d you just steal? Something completely illegal, I’m assuming?” He took a step inside and slammed the door shut. “So, tell me how you’re protecting me by putting yourself at risk? Explain that to me, asshole.”

“Because I’d be the only one who went down if shit went south. You’d have nothing to do with it!” I yelled at him.

He shook his head in disbelief, running his fingers through his dark hair. “In what fucking world does losing you protect me?” he asked, an eerie calm to his voice. “If you go down, I’ll go insane trying to get you out of it. What don’t you get about that?”

“I get it, Madd. I do, but this is the only way to get him out of our lives for good. With him gone, we won’t have to worry about him coming after us anymore.”

“Because that’s what *he said*? And his word holds so much promise, yeah?”

“His word means nothing!”

“Then why do you believe this shit is worth it? Why are you being his bitch boy if you don’t even believe him?” He threw his arms out.

“To protect you!” I screamed, tears burning the corners of my eyes and bile burning my throat. “Do you know how many times you’ve saved me? It’s my turn now, and this is the only way I know how. Let me do it for you!”

“You aren’t protecting me. Stop being stupid about this. I just need you. Not you in jail. Not you under your dad’s thumb. Just you.” Now he looked

close to tears, which made mine burn hotter. “Don’t make me lose you again, Devon.”

That stabbed my heart. I walked up to him, putting my hand on his chest. He bristled, but he didn’t back away. “I’m earning his favour and his trust because I’m trying to set him up. I’m not being stupid. I’m planning. You won’t lose me. I won’t let that happen.”

We were fairly even in height, so his eyes looked straight into mine. He said, “I love you, Devon, but you’re making a big mistake.” He shook his head and pushed past me, closing the bathroom door. When the shower turned on, a tear fell down my cheek.

Well, he hadn’t left me or broken up with me, so that was a win, but I knew I stood on thin ice. Just when I got my priorities straight with time management, I fucked up with something else. But this time I did it for him. For the right reasons. I’d stay three steps ahead of my dad. Now that I had what he wanted, everything was in motion. When he hopped on that boat towards his great escape, he’d actually be heading straight to the authorities. I simply had to tell them the time and place.

I pulled the stolen folder off the kitchen counter. Millions of dollars worth of illegal contraband was coming in on a shipping vessel. I had no idea how my dad knew about it, but I had to assume he’d worked out a deal with the ship’s captain, who knew this contraband would be on his ship. Either that, or he fucked over Patrick Harris to steal this con. If I could get him caught with this, he’d get locked up forever. And forever was a long time.



MADDOX HAD BARELY TALKED to me in a week. He was still at home—a miracle in itself—but he wasn't mine anymore. Not right now. He made me sleep on the couch, didn't spend much time with me, and made me fend for myself with meals and necessities. He was pissed, and I couldn't blame him.

While he hated on me from nearby, I hated on myself from within. I couldn't get a cop on my side because of who I was. A scorned son and a lowlife. It didn't buy me much power with the authorities, and the fact that I had a record made me unreliable. I had all the proof, the shipping slips, my dad's involvement, and the ship's identity, but Garron Police didn't have any faith in someone with the last name Sawyer.

"What's wrong now?" Nate sat down beside me on the dock where Maddox and I had sex after the last time he bailed me out. I hoped he wouldn't have to do that again. "You're miserable, Dev."

I rubbed my tired eyes. The couch wasn't comfortable, but sleeping without Maddox was even more uncomfortable. "Oh, I'm just fucking everything up again."

"Well, stop." Nate nudged me. "Whatever it is clearly isn't worth it, so just stop."

"It is worth it this time."

Nate scowled. "You better not be cheating on him or I'll kick your ass."

"I'm not cheating on him. Jesus." I looked at Nate. "I'm trying to protect him, protect us, but he doesn't agree with it. So it's pretty much the cold

war at our place right now. I'm sleeping on the couch and he's being dark and moody."

"Why do you think he needs protecting?"

Because our dad threatened him. The way Dad let that threat trail off scared me. That man hated me enough to do something to Maddox just to hurt me. He knew where to hit to cause the biggest impact, and that was Nate or Maddox. "If anything ever happens to me, just make sure he doesn't do anything stupid for me."

"What're you talking about? You're scaring me." Nate grabbed my arm. "If this has anything to do with Dad, you better tell me."

"Nothing in particular," I lied. "But Maddox is a protective fucker, and the last time we got locked up, he did something stupid. Just promise me that if it ever happens again, you'll help Xavi keep a leash on him."

Nate glared at me with worry in his eyes. He wanted to ask specifics, but he knew he wouldn't get answers. Not yet. Not until I had to bring him in. "Yeah, whatever. I promise, but you know Madd isn't gonna stay on any leash if you're in trouble. You know that."

I did know that, which was why I had to pull this thing off without a hitch.

"I love him, Nate. Fuck, I love him."

"I know."

I smiled at the water. "I never really thanked you for locking us at the gravel pits that night. If it weren't for you guys, we'd probably still be beating one another just to burn off our feelings."

Nate laughed. "You still do that."

"Not every day, though," I laughed. "Less frequent now." I couldn't wait to get back to that. I needed to end this bullshit with my dad, put Maddox at

ease, and earn his trust back with fist fights and bickering.

“Whatever you’re doing, Dev, just be careful. Bring me in. Stop going at everything alone.”

Maybe. I’d bring Nate in if I had to, but he was high on my protection list, so I’d rather not.

I left the shop with some of my favourite Maddox memories on my mind, heading to my truck. The time had come to give my dad the documents I’d stolen for him. I had numerous copies of them hidden all over the place, and I’d even given one to the cop who had sort of agreed to hear me out.

Tonight, I’d give him the papers and the money for the boat, and hope to hell he’d spill the rest of his plan so I had a bit more to go on. Time to get rid of my dad.

-MADDOX-

WHAT SORT OF CRUEL fate had me falling in love with such a selfish, stupid, irritating asshole? Sure, I understood Devon's logic about wanting to protect us from his dad, but how was he so blind to the fact that he was falling into a trap? His dad was manipulating him, *again*, and Devon fell for it, *again*, like the idiot he was.

Yeah, I made him sleep on the couch hoping it'd knock some sense into him, and I'd been ignoring him mostly, but that didn't mean I wasn't keeping an eye on him. I tried to stay a few steps ahead, and if Jim tried to frame Devon for something again, I had proof of Devon's whereabouts. Tom had taught me how to track Devon's phone, so even though it wasn't concrete evidence, at least I had a time-stamped map of where he was at all times. Not to mention the peace of mind it gave me.

I didn't know if any of it would matter in the end, but having his back while giving him the silent treatment had gotten exhausting. Devon had given him the documents, though, and Jim had promised to be gone in three

days, so I guessed we'd see if he followed through so I could get back to loving my idiot.

Even though my mood was terrible, it was Friday night and I'd made it to my mom's for our regular dinner. Xavi sat next to me, and despite me not liking it, Dad sat at the head of the table. To sit around the table with my whole family felt weird as fuck; I couldn't even remember a time when this happened. I hadn't grown up in a *family dinner* kind of household.

The meal had been yet another terrible casserole made by Mom. This one included a bunch of different canned things thrown together with some cheese, but it wasn't as bad as the tuna spaghetti.

Xavi spent dinner being protective of Mom, giving Dad snippy answers to any questions he asked. I stuck to my typical one word bullshit, and he didn't push me for more. My eyes wandered to the water-stained ceiling, to the wine-stained carpet, and over to the bedroom doors that barely held onto their hinges. This place was a safety hazard, but it had been for years. Looking at it all was easier than looking at the hope in my mom's eyes and the place my dad sat at the table. Didn't know what to make of any of it, so I thought about Devon and all the ways I could protect him from himself.

Xavi helped Mom clean up, and my dad didn't get the hint that I wanted to be alone when he followed me outside. I lit one of Mom's smokes and ignored him as best as I could.

"What's going on with you?" he asked.

"What makes you think you have the right to ask me that?"

"Maddox."

"Nothing. Just butt out. I don't even know why you're here." I inhaled, noticing the nicotine didn't burn as badly as the words I held back.

Dad sighed. "I know you don't have any reason to trust me, or even like me for that matter, but you're still my son."

I snorted. "Been your son all my life. What changed this time?"

Dad flipped a coin between his fingers and held it out to me. "I'm ninety days sober. Clean. That's what changed."

I looked at the sobriety chip, wondering if he'd stolen it from somewhere just to trick me. But seeing him lately, noticing he looked healthier, livelier, and better in general, had some unwanted emotion clogging up my airway. I chased it back down with smoke. Ninety days? Wow, I didn't think he'd ever made it that long.

"I know you won't believe it just because of this." He held up the chip. "So if you want proof, you can meet my sponsor or come to a meeting with me at the community centre."

"I don't care enough to need proof." I looked at the trailer across the street, knowing it was a lie but unable to take it back.

"Right," Dad said, defeated. "Well, this is the first time in your life that I've been... me. So while it lasts, I want to be here for you however I can. I know you don't need me, but I... I need you."

Ignoring the last bit, I asked, "While it lasts?"

"Just in case I don't..."

"You can't think of it like that. Assuming failure." Wasn't qualified to give that advice, but it came out of my mouth anyway.

"I'm not. I know. I just... I know you don't trust me, so I'm trying to seem somewhat unreliable like you expect me to be," he laughed a little. "Setting the expectation low or something. A part of the program is making amends, so that's why I've been here so much lately. I'm trying to do the right thing, even though you don't want me around."

Pathetically, I *did* want him around. This version of him. A dad I could talk to, trust, and rely on, but he'd never been that person to me. That person had always been my brother, and my dad had always been a threat. I couldn't flip that switch too fast.

"But take it from someone who knows trouble, Madd. Something is going on with you, and I'm here to bounce ideas off if you need to." He pocketed the chip and leaned back in his lawn chair, not pressuring me to talk.

I sat in silence for longer than was socially acceptable, but I'd never let social cues influence me before, and I wasn't about to start now. Maybe he had a fresh perspective that could shine a new light on my situation. Maybe. Worth a shot.

"How do I protect someone from digging their own grave when they don't want to listen to reason? How do I keep them out of legal trouble?"

"Records. Proof," Dad said. "Depends what they're doing. Did he do something?" he asked, knowing I spoke of Devon.

"He did, but not like that. He's trying to protect me from..." Fuck, just admit the truth. "Jim's back, and Devon is running his errands on the premise that Jim will keep his promise and disappear forever. He's doing shady shit to protect me, but I don't trust his dad, and I know this is somehow going to turn on Devon. Or Nate."

"Jim's a slimy weasel," Dad said, nodding. "Never met a more selfish man. Devon isn't like that?"

Oh, he was selfish, but without cruel intentions. "No."

Dad cleared his throat. "You love this guy? This guy who you used to hate?"

"I hated him because you told me to."

“Because I hated Jim. Xav never listened, but you took the bait easy enough,” he laughed. “But you love him now?”

I didn’t want to talk about my feelings for Devon with a dad that hadn’t been kind to me about dating a guy. Had that been him or the drugs? “More than anything.”

“And he won’t stop whatever he’s doing?”

“Not unless I lock him up.”

“Well, God knows I’ve made a ton of mistakes in life, but if I had to give any advice, it’d be to let Devon go and do his thing. If you can’t stop the hero, stop the villain, you know?”

“How?”

“If your main concern is that Jim is going to frame Devon, then frame Jim.”

Logical, but was I smart enough to pull that off? My biggest accomplishment in life was dating a dipshit and being a grunt worker. Didn’t exactly have high hopes for myself.

“How?” I asked again.

Dad smiled. “That piece of shit has so many skeletons in his closet, it’s like searching for a needle in a needle stack. Pick one and exploit the hell out of it.”

Pick one.

Step one in protecting Devon from his own idiocy.



AFTER DAD WENT HOME to wherever the hell he stayed these days, I spent a decent night with Xavi and my mom. It felt good. Important. A healing night or some shit.

By the time I got home, it was after eleven and I didn't even know if Devon would be there. I'd purposefully not invited him to dinner because I needed to stop my jaw from ticking every time I looked at him, but by this point, I just needed to see him.

I pulled the door to our trailer open, and Devon stood up from the couch. He stared at me with pain in his eyes and reluctance in his body, not knowing if he could touch me or not. We craved each other, but stubbornness and the determination to always win prevented us from getting what we wanted.

Devon walked around the couch, eyes on mine, questions on the tip of his tongue. He stopped a few feet in front of me and opened his mouth. He closed it. With a sigh, he closed the distance between us, braced for a punch, and hugged me.

My skin came alive and my blood flowed more freely. My mood stabilized and my energy level evened out. Fuck, that felt good. I rested my temple against his hair and gave myself permission to wrap my arms around him. How long had I needed this? How long had I been half of myself because I'd denied his touch? I was mad at him, yeah, but I still loved him. Anger didn't matter in a moment like this.

I breathed him in and hugged him hard, feeling his heartbeat against mine and his breath fanning my neck. Holding him felt just as natural as fighting him these days, and I'd been missing both. I needed to set this shit aside to make myself right again. To make him right again. His chest fluttered with a shaky exhale, making me hug him tighter. His throat made a strange

sound, and I swear to fuck, if he cried, I'd knock him out for making me cry. I still needed to be mad at him for a bit longer. I ran my fingers through his hair and sank into his hug.

"I love you," he whispered.

"I love you," I whispered back.

Because that would never change. No matter how hard we fought or how many different ways we fucked up our relationship, the love would always be stronger than the bullshit.

I pulled back and almost broke when I saw tears glistening. I held the sides of his face, swiping my thumbs across his cheeks, falling in love with him all over again. The blue of his eyes held the apology his lips were too obstinate to speak, and the bloodshot whites held the guilt he clearly felt. I knew he was sorry, but I also knew it wasn't enough to stop him. I leaned forward and kissed him lightly, not lingering too long.

"Let's go to bed," I said, running my hands down his arms until I gripped his hand.

"Together?" he asked.

I pulled him with me as an answer. The emotionally choked breath he let out sounded like a fight against crying, so I clamped my emotions down tight and brought him to bed with me. We stripped in silence, and since he was the one who felt guilty, I swallowed my pride and pulled his back against my body, spooning him and hopefully never letting go. Not for tonight.

-DEVON-

I HAD HIGH HOPES. Today was the day everything would change. My plan sat in place, the traps set and the cops on board—my dad's freedom was about to come to an end. By midday, my fight with Maddox would all be worth it because today was the day I removed the threat to his life.

Maddox slept soundly. I felt the deep, slow expansion of his chest against my back, so I took the opportunity to roll over and admire him. Twisting in his arms without waking him, I brushed his messy dark hair off his forehead to appreciate his skin or some shit like that. *What?* Even his damn skin was pretty to me?

Fuck it. He was beautiful. Nothing in my life had ever been as beautiful as Maddox. Not this bed, the trailer, or the lot we worked so hard to get. Not the shop, the trucks, our dirt bikes, or anything else we managed to own and be proud of. I could lose it all and barely blink, but if I lost Maddox, I'd blink right out of existence. I knew I'd been fucking everything up lately, but I hoped he'd understand it once everything ended today. Dad would go away for life, and Maddox would be mine for life. To fight, fuck, love, and

maybe even marry if he ever forgave me. I'd spend eternity making it up to him if I had to.

I leaned forward and kissed him, whispering adorations against his skin that I hoped he heard but didn't react to. I liked being sweet, but it made me uncomfortable sometimes, too. "I love you, Maddox Kane. So much it hurts. So much it makes me stupid." I breathed him in for a long moment and then climbed out of bed.

I put on my best shit-kickers, wrapped myself in confidence, and took a deep breath. Here we fucking go.



ONE MEASLY COP? THAT'S all they fucking sent me? This asshole wasn't a cop I recognized, and by the looks of him, he was young, inexperienced, and probably only showed up because the task had been pawned off on him. Garron Police thought I was lying, conning them, up to something that wasn't worth their time. Being the son of Jim Sawyer didn't give me enough credit to give the police evidence of an actual crime. They claimed I was out to get my dad for what he did to me and Nate last year. *Reputation strikes again.* Far be it for Devon lowlife Sawyer to actually want to do something good.

"There's a boat out there waiting for him," the cop, Davis, told me. "If he has anything illegal on board, we'll be able to put him away."

I shook my head in a panic. The plan was fucked. "He doesn't have anything illegal yet! I told you guys this. You have to track him *to* the

shipping vessel and then ambush him. Jesus fucking Christ.” I rubbed my eyes, wondering if anything else could go to shit today.

Davis gripped the handle of the gun in his holster, almost looking unsure about carrying it. “Well, if he has the shipping documents with him, then we can at least put him away for intent or something.”

Or something? Was this guy for real? I didn’t get the chance to reevaluate the plan or make something new because my dad’s beat-up car pulled into the empty docking ramp. He hopped out with a duffle bag while Davis stepped out of sight, hiding in the treeline. I ignored the rookie and moved to meet my dad.

“What’re you doing here?” he asked, not pausing his footsteps toward the boat.

“Making sure you actually leave,” I answered, following him. “I want to watch you leave.”

“Such an ungrateful brat,” Dad huffed.

So ungrateful I stole the shipping slips for him, gave him money to rent the boat, and made sure he had a clean getaway. But yeah, I could see how that made me an ungrateful brat. I refrained from rolling my eyes, watching him throw his bag into the small motorboat he’d be leaving in.

“Guess this is it, boy,” he said. “Good knowin’ ya.”

I untied the lines from the dock. “Never come back.”

“This place sucks the life out of ya. You’d be best to get out while you still can, too.” He started the boat and I tossed the lines onboard.

I tried not to let my nerves show, hoping that whatever boat was out there waiting for him would be enough to lock him up for breaking parole. Or intent, as officer douchebag said. Either way, at least it was something and it’d get him out of my life. I wouldn’t miss him, cry for him, or regret the

decision to help him leave. As he pulled away from the dock, nothing but relief and freedom wove through me.

“Hey, boy!” Dad shouted over the sound of the engine. “You gotta learn who to trust!” The smile on his face was distant, but it churned my stomach. Dread set in.

“Don’t move!”

I turned. Davis had that gun from his hip pointed right at my chest. The sound of my dad’s laughter faded into the wind, the leaves rustling in the trees on shore as I stared down the barrel of a gun. Dread made me cold and sweaty, but shame sank my gut. Of course I’d get double-crossed. Who the hell did I think I was? I was Devon Sawyer, the guy who fucked up everything he looked at, and with that gun glinting before my eyes, I knew this was the biggest mistake of my life.

“Let’s go,” Davis said, nodding at the shore.

My legs almost failed me, shaking so hard they barely stepped forward. Genuine fear consumed me, and I hated to admit that my mind wasn’t working fast enough through the terror to come up with an exit strategy. With his gun aimed at me, I walked past him while shaking. He shoved me from behind and pressed the gun to my spine, steering me down the dock and back to the treeline. Through my fear, a familiar friend greeted me. Rage. Fucking furious and sick of always being the loser in my life, I burned up on the inside but didn’t know how to use it to my advantage. Embarrassment cut through my anger, reminding me that once again, everyone else had been right. Maddox had been right. Nate had been right. I did something stupid. I tried to be the hero when I had no right to the role.

Fuck... Maddox.

Depending on how this played out, I'd never see him again. That hurt the most. I fucked up so badly that I'd break Maddox's heart. Instead of protecting him, I failed him. Ruined him. He'd suffer more because of me than he ever would have because of my dad. For that, I deserved the bullet in the chamber, but Maddox didn't deserve the pain and suffering it would cause him. Nate didn't deserve to hurt.

Everything flashed before my mind's eye, mocking me for everything I could have had but would never get. I used to think karma was a bitch, and that fate led me down a life path that held no hope. I was wrong. I was karma. I was fate. I set in motion the downward spiral of my own path in life, and once again, I had no one else to blame but myself.

The gravel lot crunched under my feet and the rustle of leaves grew louder. Davis pushed me to the edge of the forest, stopping me where he planned to kill me.

"Why are you helping him?" I found my voice. "What could he possibly offer you as payment?"

"More than you ever could, so don't even try to negotiate." He shoved me and I fell to my knees. I got right back up, because if this was where I met death, I'd do it standing and facing him. So, I turned around.

"You supposed to kill me?"

Davis glanced around, but he nodded. It didn't look like he took any joy in being my executioner, but he also didn't look morally compromised enough to let me go. He had a job to do, and he'd do it. The unsure look in his eyes was the only thing I could exploit. I had to try.

"You don't have to do it. I'll leave. Disappear forever and never come back. Jim will never know." I'd try anything at this point.

Maddox. My heart stung when I pictured the pain in his eyes. I inhaled through my nose, warding off tears for a tragedy I might still be able to prevent.

“Jim told me you’d say that,” Davis said. “No point in dragging this thing out.” He flicked the safety off.

I didn’t close my eyes, but they blurred with tears. Tears for the life Maddox would live after me. Tears for the hate he’d throw my way and the ‘*I told you so*’ rage he’d have to live in. Tears for him waiting at home every night, alone, knowing I’d never show up again. He deserved so much better than me.

“I love you, Madd,” I whispered to the wind.

Maddox was the real hero of our story. I was nothing but the Joker.

I blinked.

-DEVON-

THE GUN WENT OFF. The forest tilted as I dropped. Pain sparked in my shoulder when I hit the ground, but it wasn't sharp like a bullet. Reality morphed into delusions, and dreams turned into nightmares. Maybe nightmares turned into dreams. I didn't know anymore.

“Devon!”

I blinked. I blinked again. I suffocated under a heavy weight and blinked a third time. Life happened in slow motion—maybe it was death. A blanket of bodyweight crushed me protectively, and on the fourth blink, corporeality assaulted me.

“Stay down, Devon.”

Maddox.

I frantically sat up as he stood in front of me. He came. He was here. He saved me again by pushing me out of the way; the bullet never hit me.

I tried to get up, but Maddox pushed me back down and turned to face Davis. And that’s when the second echo of the gun destroyed my ears and ripped my heart clean out of my chest. His body blocked mine and his

scream of agony made my hair stand up. He fell backwards, landing on top of me in a heap of agony, all his weight crushing me. I screamed louder than he did.

Nate and Xavi shouted somewhere in the distance, and a third male voice rang out as well, but Maddox's rasping breaths became the focal point of my existence. He breathed. *He's still breathing.*

"Maddox!" I shook him, crazed with desperation. "Maddox, get up!" I pushed him off me and onto the ground. "Madd!"

Blood pooled on his abdomen, and his breathing rattled. No. *Nononononono.* My hands went numb and my chest got tight, but I lifted his shirt in a focused daze of alert attention to nothing but him. His hands clutched at his gut, his skin glistening crimson.

"Maddox, please wake up!" I smacked him in the face. "Please!" I pressed my hands to the wound, trying to stop the blood from leaving his body. Trying to keep it inside. Trying to keep him alive. Trying not to die with him. "Maddox! Wake up! Wake up! Please! Someone!"

No. No. No. I couldn't lose him. I couldn't be the cause of his death. I couldn't fail him this fucking badly! I trembled, or maybe he did, but either way, my breathing stuttered as much as his did, and my hands pressed so hard to his wound that they probably sank into his skin. *Don't leave me, baby. Don't leave.*

"Where's the bleeding coming from?" Seth, Madd's dad, slid to the ground on his other side. "Move your hands so I can see. Devon, move your hands."

My teeth chattered and drool mixed with tears. "I can't. I can't. I can't or he'll die." Panic gripped me, but grief won. "Maddox, please wake up. I can't lose you! Please don't die. Don't leave because of me. Don't go

anywhere. Please. Please. Please. I love you. I need you.” I couldn’t look at his face. What if there was nothing there? I couldn’t look at it. I couldn’t. I watched his blood seep through my fingers instead, trying to Tetris it all back into his body.

“Devon, you have to move your hands so I can see.” Seth pried my fingers away. “Hold his hand. Try to wake him up.”

I gripped his hand so hard I probably broke it. For whatever it was worth, I’d be his lifeline to this shitty life we made together, holding him because I refused to let him go. I refused to let him die protecting me. I refused to believe that he wouldn’t survive this. “Open your eyes, Madd. Please. Just wake up and look at me so I can tell you how right you were. You can tell me you told me so and you can beat the shit out of me for fucking up again. Please, just look at me with anger or something. Anything. Hate. I’ll take hate.”

Slobber bubbled from my begging lips, tears mixed in with snot, and the Molotov cocktail they made dripped my heartbreak onto his face. My body rid itself of all the things I wasn’t worthy of as Maddox’s body rid itself of the blood he deserved more than anything. I wasn’t worthy of my blood. That bullet had been meant for me. I should’ve been the one bleeding out on the ground.

“Ambulance is on the way.” Nate slid into my side. “Davis is knocked out and tied up. Fuck, Xavi!”

Xavi knelt at Madd’s head, gripping his cheeks and shaking him. I watched it all, wondering how so much pain could be present in one single moment. How we could even survive it. How one single bullet could cause it. I’d never prayed before, and I didn’t know how, but I offered my soul,

my heart, my life, my servitude, and my submission to any demon or deity who would listen if they only kept Maddox alive.

“Come on, you bastard,” Xavi begged. “You’re Maddox Kane. One fucking bullet won’t take you out.”

I took him out. It was me. And now I’d fight for his life on behalf of him.

I pressed my ear to his chest, listening for signs of life as Seth worked to pack the bullet wound. I closed my eyes, hyperfocused on the sounds of the heart that loved me. I hoped, listened, prayed, and begged for a heartbeat.

Buh-dum.

“Oh my god! He has a heartbeat!” I wailed in relief. “Maddox, open your eyes. Look at me! Look at me, Madd.”

Maddox’s chest rose, and his eyes barely fluttered open. He coughed up blood and stared at me.

“Keep him calm,” Seth demanded.

“Madd.” I gripped his cheeks, getting right in his face. “I’m so sorry. You’re going to be alright. I love you.” I kissed his bloody lips without a shit to give because there wasn’t a chance in hell I’d not do it. I’d give him my air, my blood, and my tether to life if he asked for it—even if he didn’t ask for it.

His voice was weak, raspy, and strained when he said, “Love ‘uo. Told ‘uo so.”

A hysterical laugh wheezed out of me. “Fuck, you told me so. Stay with me so you can tell me that forever. Promise?”

He blinked, but he nodded just a little.



WITH MADDOX UNDER THE care of a team of doctors and the adrenaline of my responsibility and shame making the shock wear off, I broke. *I felt.*

I felt guilt. Guilt for trying to do something I had no right doing. For ignoring his warnings to not be stupid. For lying to him and keeping secrets he obviously knew about anyway because he didn't trust me enough not to check up on me.

I felt fear. Fear of losing him. Fear of losing him, even if he survived. *When* he survived. The fear of missing out on the life we could have lived together if only I'd fucking listened to him. The fear of causing his family so much pain.

I felt weak. I was the weak link in all our lives. I felt ashamed of my weakness.

Dread mixed with shame and churned up regret. I regretted the whole thing. I'd never be able to take on my dad and I had too much pride to believe Maddox when he told me that. I didn't have pride anymore. Didn't have any dignity either. Didn't have anything but hope that he'd get through this and determination to make it up to him forever. To *do* better. To *be* better.

"This is your fucking fault, Devon!" Xavi screamed at me, shoving me from behind. "He wouldn't be in there fighting for his life if you had listened to him!"

Stabbed. Everywhere, all at once.

“Xavi, enough!” Nate barked.

“He’s dying in there because of *you!*” Xavi spat at me.

I took it. I took the blame because it didn’t belong anywhere else. “I know! I fucking know that!” And I’d never forget it. If Maddox lived or died, I’d forever hold this against myself.

Nate pushed me onto a chair, wrapping an arm around my shoulder. I buried my head in my hands and cried harder than I ever had before. I’d die with him if he chose to leave this world. I couldn’t live without him, anyway, so there was no point in staying. Maddox had always been the strongest person I knew, and somehow, he’d fight his way through this and tell death to fuck off. I believed in him even if I didn’t believe in myself.

“He better not fucking die,” Xavi shouted through his tears, kneeling in front of me. He hugged me, pulling me against his chest. “I’m sorry, Dev. I’m just scared. I’m sorry.” He wiped my tears and held my face. “It’s your dad’s fault. Not yours. I’m sorry.”

Nate wrapped us both up, and I wasn’t strong enough to turn away from their comfort. Seth and Naomi sat across from us, crying their own tears. All these tears, caused by me.

I cried myself numb. It wasn’t that numbness that came with a feeling of nothing, though. It was a numbness that prevented me from feeling anything other than the constant state of agony I was in. It kept me here as its prisoner, numbing me to relief, but I knew it was what I deserved. Three more hours of waiting, waiting, waiting for an update, and I stayed numb.

Come on, you strong-willed motherfucker. Don’t you dare give up.

Just when I’d about hit my limit on waiting, the doors pushed open and Maddox’s surgeon walked through. We all stood, our legs unsteady.

“Maddox made it through surgery.”

I fell. Collapsed. Crumpled under the weight of relief and gratitude. Nate and Seth put their hands on me, but my eyes stayed on the surgeon.

“It’ll be a bit before he wakes up, but when he does, you can see him in pairs for now. We don’t want to overwhelm him. The bullet tore through his kidney and damaged his liver a bit, so he lost a fair amount of blood, but we’re confident he’ll make a full recovery. We’ve repaired what we can, and now we’ll see how he heals. He’s looking good.”

He’s looking good.

Thank fucking fuck. Xavi and Nate wrapped their arms around me, hugging me right there on the floor of the waiting room. I was relieved beyond relief, but scared. Scared something might go wrong. Mostly, just scared of having to face him. To apologize. To make up for what I’d done and maybe not have him accept my apology.

Sometime later, we all looked up as a nurse came out. “Is one of you named,” the nurse paused, clearing her throat and looking uncomfortable, “Devon effing Sawyer?” Everyone looked at me. “He’s asking for you. He asked me, no, he *told* me to bring you back and to tell you not to cry like a little... well, you know what he said.”

A nervous burst of laughter escaped my lips. It chewed away at some of my nerves and warmed me up. Such a Maddox thing to say. Everyone laughed, even Seth, and I gave them all a look, knowing I didn’t deserve to get to see him first.

Maddox was alive.

Alive.

Alive.

Was he still mine?

-MADDOX-

DESPITE THE DIRE SITUATION, I'd never been happier. Loopier, maybe. Drugs were good, and I wondered why I didn't partake in them more often. I pumped the drug dispenser a thousand times, staring at the door. Devon was alive, and that little nurse went to fetch that fucker for me. Couldn't wait to show him my morphine pump. So cool!

Come on, dumbass. Get in here and don't be a guilty prick, I thought, laughing at that.

"He's just in here. I'll give you some time." Voices. Outside my door. I pumped the thing again, still staring, straining my eyes to see him. Blue eyes. Blond-ish hair. *Wish I could see his shitty skull tattoo.* Trailer trash in its finest form.

As soon as I saw his body move, my bubbly mood dipped into the gutter, replaced by nerves. I tried to sit up, but I couldn't move. And then my sexy as fuck, red-eyed, completely disgusting and dishevelled boyfriend appeared in the doorway, all broken and shit. There was relief and love in his eyes, but stronger than that was shame and failure. Tears dripped down

his cheeks and his hands wrung together in front of his stomach while his chest heaved too fast. I had a moment of panic at the sight of blood all over him until I remembered it was mine.

“Lock it down,” I growled at him groggily. “Lock that shit down, Devon.”

He swallowed his tears, nodding.

“Come here.” In my head, my voice came out dominating as fuck. Reality laughed at the raspy weakness of my vocal cords, but fuck her.

“Madd, I’m so sorry.”

“Get the fuck over here, Devon.” I dropped the morphine pump, needing to hold him instead. “Please. I need you.” Tears burned my eyes. If he didn’t come to me, I wouldn’t make it through recovery. I needed him more than I needed these machines attached to me. “Please, Devon.”

Devon gasped out a cry, and then his feet moved. Fast. He gripped my hand, and I used whatever meagre bits of strength I had to pull him against my body, wrapping my arms around him and losing complete control of the emotions I sometimes forgot I had. Bubbles were gone and volcanic eruptions set in, my *feelings* spewing all over the fucking place. I buried my face in his filthy neck and cried out all the fear I felt when I first saw Davis pull that gun on him. Devon flashed before my eyes again, and I knew without a single doubt that I’d never let him go. I’d take all the bullets for him. I’d do anything and everything, rise to any highs and sink to any lows to make sure he stayed with me. Devon was mine. Dumbness and all. Because I loved this fucker with every fibre of my being—even my hatred loved to hate him.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, Madd. I love you. I’m sorry,” he rambled through sobs, sounding ridiculous and perfect. Kind of annoying, but I even

loved being annoyed by him.

“Stop apologizing. I love you.” I stroked his hair back and tried to kiss him. I was a bit off, pretty disoriented, so I missed, but he straightened me out.

Devon pulled back, hands framing my face. “It’s my fault you’re in here. That bullet was meant for me.”

I scoffed, which hurt like hell. “And you’re meant for me. I kept fate in play.” I scoffed again, which hurt like hell again. “You really think I’m going to let your dad win and take you from me? Please. You’re mine, Devon. I just have to train you to listen better, like a good dog.”

He laughed and cried and a snot bubble snuck out of his nostril. I tried to pop it, but he snuffed it back in. I showed him my morphine drip, but he didn’t seem impressed. “I fucked up too bad this time, Maddox. You can’t forgive me for this.”

“Yeah, I can. I fuck up all the time. I just hide it from you better.” I smiled with a numb face. “No matter how many times we fuck up, we’re stuck together. Don’t even think about backing away from me, Devon. I don’t want space. I don’t need time. I don’t need to think about anything. I almost lost you, but you’re still here, so can we just skip that stupid part?”

“Madd...”

“I’ll hunt you down if you try to leave me over this.”

“I thought I was doing the right thing,” he cried.

“I know.” I nodded at the morphine pump again. “See?”

He pushed my hand down. “None of it worked. I fucked it all up because the cops don’t trust a Sawyer. No one trusts me.”

“I do.” I trusted him as a person. I trusted his intention. I trusted our relationship.

“You shouldn’t. He got away. He took off on that boat with the documents and then tried to have me killed to tie up his loose ends. Again.” His glossy blue eyes met mine. “You saved my life again.”

“No regrets. Look.” Again, the morphine pump.

“No more taking bullets for me, okay? Promise me.” He sighed, but still didn’t look at my pump.

“No, no promises. If you’d died out there, I’d have died. I knew my chances of surviving a gunshot were better because I’m more badass than you, so I took that chance. Without you, I’d be dead, Devon. Walking around in a body without the person that makes me me.”

Devon swallowed, shook his head, nodded, and blew a drool bubble this time. *So many bubbly things.* “Ditto, you prick! So let’s just both live, okay? I can’t live in a world without your shitty attitude in it.”

“Deal.” I moved my legs so he could sit down. I mustn’t have moved them far enough because he picked them up and slid them over, being more gentle than I’d ever known him to be. “Look.” I lifted the morphine pump and waved it in his face.

Devon looked at it, looked at me, and then sighed. “Cool.”

I clicked the button a million times, grinning.

He wiped his nose and turned it over to show me the writing on the side. “That’s the fucking call button, Madd. You’re annoying the shit out of the nurses.”

Ohhh. No fun. Devon leaned over me, picked up another cylindrical thing, and put it in my hand.

“Try that one,” he laughed.

I hit the button as many times as I could. So much for not being the experimental drug type, but I figured it was practically encouraged under

doctor supervision, so I kept clicking. I knew my voice was slow and strained, but I kept talking. “Can we just move on now? I don’t wanna spend all our time fighting over your dad or watching you be all guilty about this whole thing. It happened. We’re both okay. I love you. We got a life together now, so let’s live it.”

“Madd.”

“Just help me heal and get me home. I just wanna be at home with you.”

Devon bit his lip. “I want at least a week to feel guilty. Preferably two weeks.”

“No.”

“Five days.”

“Today. You can have today, but no more after that.” I reached for him, so he leaned in to help me out. He pressed our foreheads together, and I inhaled the stench of him. “I just wanna go home with you, *babe*.”

He finally laughed. A real one. “Drugged you likes that word.”

“Mhm.”

“Thank you for saving me, Madd.”



THE NURSE BLOCKING MY exit from this shithole kept trying to tell me about the forms I was signing; some hospital forms, some cop forms. I scribbled my signature on everything they put in front of me, ready to get the hell out of here. I didn’t care what they were, but they were the ticket to my freedom.

It'd been eight days of shitty food, restless nights, Devon mothering me, and lame ass flowers. So done with this place. I craved my shitty porch so badly. I wanted to sit there with Devon without a bunch of nurses and doctors watching us.

"Sit in it," Xavi demanded.

"Not a fucking chance." I held my ground.

"It's hospital policy," Xavi said, glaring at me. "You have to get wheeled out."

"I'm not sitting in that thing. I can walk just fine."

"Fine. Then stay here and I'll go stay with Devon." He turned the wheelchair away from me.

Fucking prick. I grabbed the back of it and growled. "I hate you." I sat in the damn thing, hating that they wanted me to sit down on my way out. Did they not realize how long I'd been craving actual movement? I was sick of sitting.

"Selfie!" Xavi screeched, his head appearing right beside mine as a flash blinded me. "Got it! That's a good one." He held his phone for me to see. I scowled. He smiled, so wide I could see all the way down his throat. Jesus. He was so lame. There was a nurse in the background, watching us with a smirk on her face.

"Take it easy, Maddox," she said from behind me. "I gave Devon all the instructions for your meds and care routine. Listen to him. Got it?"

"Not likely, but thanks for everything." I smiled at her. She'd been a good nurse, and helped keep me from going insane with boredom. I wasn't going to miss her, though. Or anyone else in this godforsaken place where they saved my life. Xavi made *vrooming* noises as we squealed outta there.

As soon as we hit the threshold, I got out of the chair and punched him for being ridiculous. He made me lean on him the rest of the way to the truck, but it felt good to get outside and move around. My muscles were weak, but I felt fine otherwise. I sat in the front seat and felt a little guilty about lying to my mom. She'd been coddling me worse than Devon, bringing all her work friends in to see me like it was social hour, and I needed to take a beat from her. Loved her, but fuck off for a bit. She wanted to be there when I got out, but I lied and told her it was later tonight. I'd make my brother tell her the truth later.

"How you feeling?" he asked.

"Fine. Just want to get home."

Xavi nodded and awkward silence set in. We didn't have awkward silences, so my hackles rose.

"What?"

"I gotta admit something to you, Madd." He looked nervous. "I, uh, I got pretty... I was a fucking dick to Devon the day it happened. I told him it was all his fault, and I put all the blame on him. Really lashed out. I was stressed and scared, and I'm sorry."

"Fuck, Xavi. Why?" Poor Devon didn't need any help feeling guilty. "Blame Jim. Not Devon."

"I know! I just needed to take it out on someone and he was there. We made up, but yeah, I definitely made his guilt worse."

Devon had not stuck to my 'one-day-of-guilt' rule. He tried to hide it from me, but I'd always been good at reading him. If I was up to it, I'd knock some literal sense into him to make sure he knew I didn't hold anything against him. I just wanted to get on with life with him by my side.

“He’ll be fine. I’ll make sure of it.” I rolled the window down, desperate for fresh air.

Devon really wasn’t to blame. He did something stupid after all of us told him not to, but like I’d said before, I loved when he tried. And all he’d been doing was trying to protect us. No one had ever tried for me like Devon did. Our hand in life just happened to be shitty, and if it weren’t for Jim, none of this would have happened, so that’s where I put the blame.

We pulled into Garron Park and eventually Lot 62, and Xavi shut the truck off. His grin was wicked when he faced me. “I gotta warn ya about one more thing.”

“Uh oh.”

“Devon went *completely* overboard. He can’t cook worth a shit, so the entire park made meals and shit for you guys. Devon cleaned, sanitized, and became Martha fucking Stewart to make your place sparkle. He wanted it to be clean for you because he’s also been googling infections,” Xav laughed. “Just a fair warning, he’s in full-blown overprotective boyfriend mode.”

What a dipshit. I smiled.

“Come on. Your sexy nurse husband is waiting for ya.” He smacked me. Husband.

-MADDOX-

I WALKED INTO THE trailer and tried not to gag at the overwhelming smell of disinfectant and bleach that'd been hastily covered up with aerosol air fresheners. Devon wore rubber gloves, scrubbing the kitchen sink like it'd somehow come in contact with my healing wound. What did he think, I'd be bathing in there? Jesus, Devon.

"Maddox," he half groaned, half gasped my name. "Your mom stole a shit ton of cleaner from the hospital. The good shit. This place is gonna be a fucking temple. I made a schedule for all your meds and appointments, and I even separated your pills into this little weekly container thing Andrea gave me." He nodded to it on the counter and then got too excited and picked it up to rattle it at me. "And I bought these special pillows from that old lady at the other end of the park. Second hand, but whatever. They help you sleep so you can move without too much pain, and—"

"Devon." I held up a hand and then gripped the clean counter. "Thank you, but fuck off." I tugged on the front of his shirt and kissed him to ensure he shut up.

Xavi laughed behind me. “Alright, I’m out. Good luck dealing with each other.” He closed the door behind him.

Devon’s baby blues tried to make me submit to this, but no. Thanks, but no thanks. I just wanted to move on and accept a little help from him while getting back to ourselves. “I’m just trying to take care of you.”

I appreciated it. We’d finally sorted our relationship problems—I hoped—and now I’d have a whole new problem on my hands. The opposite problem. I went from not enough Devon to too much Devon. I didn’t think I’d complain about it, though; not unless he forgot to treat me like a boyfriend instead of a patient. “Just be my boyfriend like you have been.”

Devon looked down, still struggling with shame.

“Stop feeling guilty for something that wasn’t your fault.” I lifted his chin. “You got your one day and then some. We’re over that now, yeah?”

“I’m trying.”

“Devon, look at me.” He listened. “Did you blackmail us? Did you steal those documents because it was your idea to rob a shipping vessel? Did you hire someone to shoot at us? No? So stop taking the blame for what your dad did. You aren’t him. You didn’t do anything other than try, and you don’t need to feel shitty about it anymore. We’re both fine, and if I have to watch you with those sad eyes for one more day, I’ll fucking move in with my mom. Got it?”

Devon wet his lips, sighed, blinked away that sadness, and nodded. He wrapped his arms around my neck, careful not to touch my side, and whispered against my neck. “Feels good to have you home. This place was too calm without you here.”

I smiled into his hair, the scratch of my unwanted new beard getting all caught up in it. “Good. I’m sexually repressed, so get on your knees and

blow me.”

Devon grinned. “Not while you’re standing. I’ll do it if you sit down.”

I pulled back to look at him. “That easy?”

“As long as you don’t strain your goddamn side, blow a stitch, or get too worked up, yeah. That easy.”

“Remind me to get shot more often.”

“Sit down, asshole.” He scoffed at me, nodding at the couch. It had new blankets all over it, covering the gritty fabric. “What else do you need?”

“Just your mouth, but if you’re offering, feel free to ride me, too.” I sat down.

Devon laughed and shook his head. “Fuck, I missed you, Madd.”

Devon didn’t hesitate to sink to his knees. He helped me lift my ass to get my sweats down, and my eager dick popped up right in front of his face. He licked his lips before licking the tip, and that first touch of his tongue had my abs clenching painfully.

“Settle down,” he warned, fingers wrapped around my shaft. “If you so much as breathe too hard, I’ll stop.”

Well, that’d be impossible, so I’d have to hide it from him. “Suck my dick, Devon.”

He grinned up at me, running his hand up and down as a taunt. “Uh-uh. This isn’t one of those times where you get to be mouthy and dominant. I know how to blow you, Madd. So shut up and let me.”

God, I loved it when he got bossy.

I hadn’t jerked off since I got shot, and I knew this was about to be the quickest orgasm of my life, but that didn’t stop my eyes from getting heavy at the sight of Devon’s tongue licking the length of my cock. Playful and sexy, he built me up with a show that surpassed all the porn I’d ever

watched. With his blue eyes on mine and his hands and mouth working in tandem, I swallowed a moan and sat back to enjoy all the ways he knew my body.

Completely in charge and cocky about it, Devon wrapped his lips around the head of my cock, sucking hard before pulling back to lick the slit.

“Ah, fuck yes.” I pushed back against the couch, my hands at my sides instead of on the back of his head. He wouldn’t let me control him at a time like this. This was his time to be powerful.

He pressed my cock to my abs and licked his way down to my balls, sucking them into his mouth and nuzzling his face right in there. I almost exploded just from that, but he pulled back right as I was about to.

“Damn you, Devon.” I started to breathe harder, so I took deep breaths to settle down.

He smirked, looking hot as hell. “Don’t touch my head, Madd. Let me do this.” That was all the warning I got before he lifted on his knees and fucking swallowed my dick. His head bobbed from base to tip, and my fingers dug into the cushions to refrain from pushing his head. He was right; he knew how to blow me, and I’d never had more faith in him.

Drool leaked down my cock, soaking my groin. Devon gagged a bit, moaning through it until my head fell back in pleasure and my eyes shut without me wanting them to.

“Fuck, I’m gonna come, Dev. Holy shit, swallow it all.”

His hand pumped the base and his mouth sucked the head, and that was it for me. I clenched up so hard my side killed me, but it had nothing on the searing pleasure snaking through my body like bolts of bliss. I filled his mouth, watching it drip out the sides when he couldn’t swallow it all at

once. He slowed his pace, sucking me through the shocks and licking me clean.

When I pulled in a breath, Devon followed the trail of cum down to my thighs, lapping it all up and licking his lips.

“Fuck, you’re sexy with my cum on your lips,” I said, watching them glisten.

Devon saw the desperation in my eyes and delivered what I wanted. Leaning over my lap, he pressed his lips to mine without kissing me. “I know you have a cum kink now, Madd. No point in hiding it.”

I licked his lips, tasting myself. “I do? You’re a fucking cum slut these days, and I am here for it.” I pulled on the back of his head, shoving my tongue into his mouth to prove him right. I did have a bit of a cum kink, but I loved it even more that he did.

Bless his fucking heart for actually blowing me. I’d had a sort-of shower at the hospital, but it’d been eight days of mostly sponge baths, and I appreciated his ignorance about that. I refused to tell him that my orgasm hurt a bit, especially when he helped me shower and shave after. I left some stubble just because I knew he liked it. God, that boy had me whipped. Wrapped in a dusky pink towel that smelled like mothballs, I sat on the edge of the tub and watched Devon change my bandage.

“This feels familiar.”

Devon grinned. “Yeah, my dad trying to kill me seems to bring us closer together.”

“Mm,” I agreed. “We’re bonding.”

“Andrea taught me how to look after you, Madd, but I don’t ever want to bond like this again.”

A-fucking-men.

The blowie and the shower, unfortunately, took a toll on me. Tired, we lay in bed together, holding hands but not touching anywhere else. The fan whirred with a squeak every time it got to the far right, and Devon tapped my knuckles every time it did that.

“What did the cops say?” I asked. Devon had been in interviews all week, but no one really believed his story. It cut him deep and fed his insecurities to basically be brushed off like he was nothing. I hated it.

“Davis, that fucking prick, lost his badge, but he’s at home waiting for trial. He’s claiming... fuck, he’s claiming it was self-defence and that we went at him first.” He squeezed my hand tight, reminding me to calm down.

I ground my molars together instead. Of course he’d say that. We were nobodies from a trailer park that had a reputation for being the home to tons of minor offence criminals, and we both had sketchy records. No real arrests, but time spent in a cell and accusations of charges. Who would believe us over a cop?

“Well, if they had anything concrete, we’d be locked up, right?” I tried to focus on the positive. Devon started on a tangent, so I bent his pinky until I knew it hurt. “I don’t want to talk about all that right now. Tell me something good.”

“Something good,” he mused. “We have enough food to last six months. There wasn’t even enough space for it all, so your mom has some in her freezer and the rest is at the shop.”

That was nice. There were a ton of good people in Garron Park, and it always showed when someone needed help.

“And Gina loves you, so she told me she’s going to bring those pastries you like. And Andrea is going all mother-hen, dropping off medical supplies and offering to check up on you.”

“Pastries are the best news yet.”

“I got the paperwork back from your work, too. Apparently, a lot of your hospital stay is covered through your insurance, so that’s big for us.”

Yeah, whatever. I didn’t care about any of that shit. “What’s good with *you*, Devon?”

“You’re alive. You’re home. You’re safe. That’s it.”

I turned my head to face him, meeting his honest eyes. Sometimes it was hard to forget we used to hate each other because that hate ran so freely. But in times like this, loving him felt more natural than competing with him. It took our rivalry to get us here, and even though we still competed on a too-competitive level, we worked as a team even better. “You wanna marry my ass one day?” I asked.

Devon’s eyes widened and he laughed. “Really? Didn’t take you for the marriage type.”

“I never took myself for the gay type either, but here we are. Come on, would I really be such a bad husband?”

Devon snorted right before he broke out laughing. It drowned out the squeak of the fan and made the bed shake. Best sound ever. “Fuck, you’d be the worst husband!”

“What? Why?”

“You’re bossy as shit, moody, beat on me all the time, abuse me, use me, and piss me off. The world would blow up if we got married.” He smiled at me, so bright.

“Yeah, but the explosion would be pretty.” I squeezed his hand. “Plus, you’re no better. I constantly have to explain away bruises and black eyes.”

He nodded, not denying that. “We’d make a shitty married couple.” He wiped his eyes and kept smiling. “But I think we’d love every second of our

doomed marriage.”

My chest swelled. “Not doomed. Just... rocky.”

“A rocky marriage with Maddox Kane,” he said out loud, tasting the idea of it. “That’s my new dream.” He rolled onto his side and kissed me lightly. “I just want your last name so I don’t have to be a Sawyer anymore.”

“That’s it? Just my name, you prick?”

“Mhm,” he hummed. “Devon Kane. Sounds pretty badass.”

“Not as badass as Maddox Kane,” I countered. “Marry me one day, Devon.”

“Okay,” he whispered.

He kissed me like he'd be my husband someday.

-DEVON-

SOMETHING WASN'T ADDING UP.

There was no record of my dad. None. He left on that boat I paid for and never reappeared. Both him and the boat were missing, but I wasn't stupid enough to think he magically died at sea; that cockroach would survive an apocalypse. He was out there somewhere, getting away with attempted murder and whatever other sketchy shit he was up to.

It was time to turn a leaf on my stupidity and become a new Devon; one who thought shit through a little more. I thought I'd learned my lesson about being dumb when Maddox walked out on me for neglecting him, but I'd definitely learned it after watching him almost die. No more of that shit. The time to do better was here, and I was full steam ahead on that plan.

Maddox wanted to move forward with our lives, and as much as I wanted that too, it became impossible not to fear the shadows. My dad could be lurking in any one of them, ready to finish the job he failed. Honestly, the best outcome I could come up with was that he believed I was dead, but if he still owed Davis for that 'job well done' then he'd be in touch with the

dirty cop and find out I lived through it. Dad was a crafty son of a bitch, and I knew in my gut that it wouldn't end here.

The cops didn't believe my story about my dad hiring Davis to kill me. No. Those fuckers sided with their sweet little rookie cop who had an impeccable record and some sort of gold star bullshit from whatever academy he came from. Garron Police believed his story, that Maddox attacked him and he had to fire his weapon in self-defence. When he was asked what he was doing at the docks, he told the police he'd been given the job of intercepting my dad, which his captain confirmed, and that it was my fault because I was the one who requested a police presence. Little did I know my dad would have a cop in his deep pocket. Davis spun an even more fantastical tale when he told police that me and Maddox had been there to assist my dad in getting away. So, weren't we the guilty assholes, eh?

Seth, Nate, and Xavi got hardcore questioned about why they'd been there and why Davis had been tied up when the police arrived. They showed up to have my back, just like Maddox had, and they told the same story about Davis being the attacker, so they had to restrain him. But their story got brushed off the same as mine did. According to Garron Police, we were five unreliable witnesses who'd conjured up the same story.

This whole thing was a crock of shit. My frustration festered inside me like a living disease, eating away at the good parts of me until all that was left were the pathetic bits. I'd never much minded being a lowlife before, but now it meant I had zero power and no credit when I actually needed help. Now I resented my life for putting me exactly where I was. Stomped on.

“Alright,” Nate said, sitting on the deck with me and handing me a beer. “What are we doing about this shit, Dev? I know Madd and Xavi are trying to move on, but Dad’s still out there.”

At least my brother felt the same way. “I don’t even get his play with the shipping documents. Nothing came of it. The ship wasn’t robbed, so why did he want them so bad?”

Nate shook his head, unsure. This mystery got harder to solve each day. “And why can’t we get anyone to believe us? Dad’s got a longer record than we do.”

“Because we’re Sawyers. Our last name is a death sentence. We’ve never done anything credible.” I took a swig.

“Then we do this shit ourselves.”

Yeah, good try. How were we going to find our dad, unhinge his plan, and lock him up for good if we weren’t even trusted enough to give statements during a deposition for a crooked cop? We had no one on our side, no resources, and no voice. The pressure and responsibility to *do something* about it weighed on me. I wanted to protect my family, but I knew I couldn’t go at it alone this time. Problem was, I didn’t know where to even start.

“Where would he go?” Nate asked, trying to work through this. “Who does he even know who could help him?”

“I don’t know, man. I asked Davis what Dad promised him, and all he said was that it was more than I ever could. Dad has nothing, didn’t rob the ship, so what did he promise?”

“Probably an empty promise.” Nate shrugged. “You think Gary knows anything? Or had something to do with this? He had those documents in his office, after all.”

No idea. "It's a starting point." I set the beer down, not in the mood for it. "But I can't lie to Madd this time. He wants to move on, but he knows we're still in danger, so I just have to talk to him about everything. Honesty this time."

Nate grinned at me, shoving my shoulder. "Aw, you grew up so fast."

A multitude of fuck ups and your boyfriend taking a bullet for you did that to a guy. "He should be back any minute now."

"Unless he convinced Xav to take him to the track. He knows you won't roll over, but his brother probably would."

Maddox was the worst patient in the world. He didn't listen, basically had a death wish, and was going crazy not being able to work, bike, swim or fight. He went from a bullet wound patient to an insane mental patient and I hated him just a little bit.

Knowing he probably conned Xavi into letting him injure himself, I whipped out my phone to bribe him.

Devon: *No dirt biking. Come home and I'll make it worthwhile.*

MFK: *How worthwhile?*

Devon: *Come home and find out.*

"JFK?" Nate snooped.

"M. Maddox Fucking Kane." I smiled at my phone.

"Hey, boys," Seth said, walking across our lawn. "My kids here?"

Nate shook his head. "Madd had a doctor's appointment and Devon needed a break from him."

Ain't that the truth.

"How's he doing?" Seth asked me.

"He's impossible and reckless and I hate him." I put my phone away. "Other than treating me like his slave, he's fine."

Seth smiled, looking a lot like Xavi. “Sounds about right. Listen, for what it’s worth, I’d be willing to help out with... this Jim stuff.”

Nate and I both stared at him, wondering what his angle was. He’d always hated my dad, but he’d never been this supportive of his sons before. Sobriety looked good on him, and I could even admit that I didn’t hate the guy, but trust issues didn’t just disappear.

“No gambling, no drinking, no drugs,” Seth said. “I’m trying to find a new job, but in the meantime, I’m bored. Boredom doesn’t bode well for addicts, and I am trying to make amends with my boys, so I’m here to help if you need it.” He flicked a sobriety chip through his fingers and looked awkward.

“You know Gary?” Nate asked him.

“A bit, yeah.” Seth nodded.

“He have any sort of connection to our dad or Patrick Harris?” I asked.

Seth looked at the sky, thinking. “Come to think of it, Gary’s wife, she passed on, was Patrick Harris’ cousin or something like that.”

“Jim got me to steal those documents from Gary’s office, but he said Gary was only holding them for Harris. We need to find out what he knows about them and why nothing ever came from it.”

“Want me to snoop around a bit?” Seth asked.

“Yeah, and if that doesn’t work, we’ll threaten him,” Nate said. “I’m done playing nice.”

I hoped it didn’t have to come to that, mostly because I didn’t want any of us to get locked up for it. We all needed to be out here, clearing our names and putting my dad down while working towards a life we actually wanted. Together. All of us.

Because, someday, I’d marry that prick.



“SHE SAID I WAS all clear!” Maddox yelled at me.

I looked at Xavi, waiting for him to call Maddox out on the lie. “She said nothing strenuous.”

“For fuck’s sake, Devon, I’m not a fragile little bitch.” He threw his arms in the air, apparently not in a good mood after his doctor’s appointment.

“No, you’re a whiny little bitch because she said you aren’t allowed to fuck.” I rubbed my temples, knowing I’d have to spend the rest of the day fending him off. In all honesty, I was just as pissed as he was about this news. We needed sex to blow off some steam.

“Fuck this,” Maddox huffed. “I’ll go jerk off in the shower.” He slammed the bathroom door behind him.

Xavi tried but failed to suppress a smirk. “He’s moody when he’s cut off.”

He was moody even when he wasn't cut off. Xavi wished me luck before he left with Nate. I stood there for a minute, trying to figure out how to diffuse my boyfriend. When I heard the shower turn on and the curtain close, I sighed out my frustration and came up with a plan. The doctor said nothing strenuous, so maybe I could do the strenuous parts.

Maddox had become so frustrated in his current condition because he had no outlet. No way to get his energy out. He didn’t sit around well, and idle time let his mood dip even lower. He needed something good to happen, something to excite him. He was healing well, and his stitches were all

dissolved now, but he remained on some restrictions to ensure everything continued to heal as it should.

I threw off my shirt and walked into the steamy bathroom. Maddox didn't say anything, but I saw him through the fogged clear curtain. He stood there with his hands on the wall and the water hitting his shoulder blades, not jerking off like he threatened. I undressed and stepped in with him.

"Thought I was a whiny bitch," he barked at me.

"You are." I ran my hands down his back, over his ass, and wrapped them around the front of him. "One of us has to stay in control here, Madd."

He spun, facing me. His green eyes met mine, and he showed me all his pain. Not physical pain from his injury, but mental and emotional pain from not being able to live after surviving all that. Maddox wanted me, and he wanted his vices, and he wanted to take advantage of this second shot at life he'd been gifted.

Pretty sure I sold my soul to get him that gift, but I'd do it ten times over. No regrets.

"I miss you," he said. "The way we are together. I just want you so fucking bad, Dev."

A swoon-bomb went off. Fucking hell, I was getting sick of swooning. *Lie*. "I have an idea, but you have to follow the rules."

His jaw clenched. He already lived by so many rules. "What rules?"

"You listen to everything I say. Everything. Agree or you can jerk it like you said." I tickled his surgery scar with my fingertips, reminding myself what was at stake. Then I grabbed his dick and he gasped. "Do you agree?"

"To do everything you say?" he asked, hissing out a breath when I moved my fist down his shaft.

“Yeah.”

“I’m not submissive,” he reminded me. As if I didn’t know that.

“You will be today or this doesn’t happen.”

“Fine. Only today. Only because I need you.”

I smirked and he rolled his eyes. Pushing him until his back hit the wall, I held a hand to his chest and said, “Don’t move away from this wall.”

He nodded, lips parted.

I kissed my way down his body and ignored the hand on my head trying to push me down faster. He hadn’t gotten off since his welcome home blowie, so I knew he could come twice if I made him. This was the pre-show, and if he played by my rules, I’d give him what he really wanted. I looked up at him, powerful under the weight of his gaze, and licked the tip of his dick.

“Fuck, Devon,” he groaned.

I teased him with my lips, sucked his balls into my mouth, and ran my tongue from base to tip until his legs shook. I didn’t want him falling, so I pushed his hips to cement him to the wall, and finally took him into my mouth. The salty tang of precum sat nicely on my tastebuds, and that eagerness within me craved the fullness of him in my throat. I sucked the head of his cock and pumped the length of him, and then I buried my face against his groin and let him fill my throat.

“Ah, holy fuck.”

Gagging a little, I pulled back. Saliva stretched from my lips and a rush of desperation took over. I sucked him hard and fast. I slowed down and tilted my head, feeling him against my cheeks, my tongue, my throat. I wanted him everywhere. More than that, I wanted to give him exactly what

he wanted. The need to please him swelled up inside me so hard that I whimpered around his cock.

“Devon,” Maddox moaned, low and deep, making me feral. Hungry.

I choked on need and dug my fingers into his hips. With the head of his cock buried deep in my throat, I swallowed. The roll of my throat constricted his cock and made mine leak, but I damn near came when Maddox growled at me. His grip on my hair tightened until it hurt, and the first pulse of cum down my throat was followed by a blinding sting in my scalp that had my breath catching.

“Ah, fuck yes, Devon. Fuuuuck.”

To hear him peak did incredible things to me. All of me. I dropped a hand to my cock, squeezing it to stave off an orgasm, and swallowed the entirety of his. He slid down my throat and took control, thrusting his hips to fuck my mouth. I looked up at him, ready to reprimand him for breaking my rule, but his back was still pressed against the wall like I’d ordered. As a reward, I licked the slit of his dick and made him shiver.

“That goddamn mouth,” he rasped at me, head *thunking* against the wall. “That fucking mouth, Devon.”

I licked my lips, caught between more swooning and crazed desire. Standing, I batted his hand away from my cock and grabbed his jaw instead. “You followed the rules.” Our chests bumped. “I want you to fuck me.”

His tired body gained energy. “Yeah? You’ll... even with what the doctor said?”

“Under my rules, yeah.”

He grinned. It had to be the hottest thing I’d ever seen. Broody angst and puppy dog hope, all conveyed in a simple smirk. My god.

-MADDOX-

MY COCK WAS BURIED deep in his ass, but that didn't stop him from glaring at me. I couldn't find it in me to care, though. I got everything I wanted when he straddled my lap and sank down on my dick to be the dominant one. His rule.

He pushed on my chest, warning me to lean back against the couch cushions or he'd stop riding me. I gripped his hips tighter, but I leaned back, easing the strain on my abs. How was I supposed to focus on avoiding re-injury when his ass had my cock in a chokehold so perfect I lost sense of everything but him?

"Stop trying to top from the bottom," he snapped at me. His knees rested on either side of my legs, and his hips gyrated sinfully on my lap. The gentle and erotic lull of our bodies made my head light and my eyes roll.

I might be physically on the bottom, but my dick was in his ass, so he could pretend he was the top all he wanted as long as he kept fucking me just like that. Sweat and dampness from the shower made us sticky, and his arms kept slipping on the top of my shoulders. I craved the taste of him, so

fucking desperate to lean forward and run my tongue up his throat, marking him for the world to know.

He wouldn't let me.

My fucking style differed from my fighting style. In a fight, I stayed silent until goaded into trash talk. In a fuck, my mouth opened first.

"Fuck, I love it when you ride me like this." I stared at that shitty skull tattoo on his chest. "Your ass feels fucking amazing."

"Then follow the rules and let me fuck you," he said, breathy and gravelly.

Devon had definition and a tan along with that tattoo. When he rocked into me, his abs stood out, and when he pulled back, those rib muscles called all my attention. From the dark blond stubble on his jaw to the danger and insecurity in his blue eyes, Devon was fucking sexy. All the gritty bits of him. His scars and bruises, the scowl that sometimes won out over parted lips, the uneven tan lines from working at the docks, and the hack job of a haircut that made his bed head sexy. Devon was a mess of a man, but I'd never seen a more beautiful canvas.

"Fucking look at you, Devon." I eye-fucked the shit out of him. "I gave you that." I touched a scar under his eye, remembering the night I hit him so hard the skin split. It sat above the scar I patched in the bathroom from that first night.

I leaned forward to kiss him, but his fingers became jewellery around my throat, pushing me back. "No."

"I just wanted to kiss you." I watched him fuck me. I watched his eyes as he fucked me.

"If you don't stop leaning forward, I'll tie you up, Maddox."

I wasn't submissive in the least, but that intrigued me just a little. The idea of watching Devon take full control turned me on. He told me he liked when I was a pushy asshole, but apparently I wasn't allowed to be pushy while injured.

"Kiss me then."

"So needy." He barely grinned before he gave in. His lips met mine at the same time his hand let go of my throat. His fingers wove into my hair and mine pressed on his back, holding him against me. His tongue dominated mine, tasting every part of me he could with rushed desperation and barely any of that control he'd been holding onto. Maybe someday, I actually would let him tie me up.

"Ah, fuck. Just like that." I moaned and Devon rocked on my cock. I squeezed his ass hard, barely holding myself back from thrusting up to fuck him harder.

"Stop," he complained, moving my hands back to his waist to settle me down. "Let me do everything. I know what I'm doing."

Fuck yes he did. I ran my hands up his back instead, tangling them in his hair and pulling his face to mine. Devon set a slow, deep pace, building me up in languid momentum until I closed my eyes and felt. *Just felt*. His chest against mine. The way his heart beat rapidly in his chest and how I could feel it against my lips on his throat. His fingers weaving in my hair and the subtle way he used them to control my head. His lips against mine, slick with saliva and panting ragged breaths that ended in moans. His sweaty forehead and the motion of his muscles contracting as he fucked me.

Magic. The energy he created made me create my own, and when it mingled with his, it became a force to be reckoned with. That's where the true magic happened. Some people called it tension, some called it

chemistry, but I just knew it as *us*. When that magic hit, it struck me in a whole new way this time. My throat clogged with more than just lust.

Finally being able to have him as intimately as I'd wanted him for the whole month I'd been home from the hospital... it all rushed at me; hard and aggressive. It was love. That once-in-a-lifetime kind. Real, raw, and hostile. It came at me, tearing through me like another bullet, assaulting my body and mind with the sensation of getting everything I'd ever wanted after going through hell to get it. I'd been touch starved—connection starved—and Devon finally fed me.

Goddammit, do not cry during sex!

"Maddox," Devon whispered against my lips, his forehead against mine. "I feel you."

I didn't really know what that meant, but I got the sentiment of it. He felt it, too. Tilting my chin, I looked into his eyes and saw the same emotional connection that I felt.

Devon survived.

I survived.

We were home. Together.

Together. Together. Together.

Everything rushed at me at once. The feelings manifested into something physical, and without much warning, I coughed out a moan and came. My eyes burned with tears of strain, blurring my vision to sharpen the feeling of touch.

"Oh, God," I groaned, digging my blunt nails into his skin, holding him down on my cock while I filled his ass with cum and kissed his gaping mouth. Devon's orgasm was silent, but his body trembled on mine and his cock rubbed against my abs, coating me in the best mess.

Rapture and the rising; damnation and all our sins. They mingled for a time, and the intensity of it overwhelmed me blissfully.

We were two fuck ups in a corner of the world we'd probably never get out of, but we found each other here and that's all that mattered. I spent too much time feeling sorry for myself when I should have been counting my blessings. Something had always been on my side because it put Devon in my life during childhood, and as an adult, he turned into the love of my life. That in itself was more of a miracle than I could have ever hoped to accomplish in my shitty time here.

"I love you," I told him with force. "So fucking much."

Devon collapsed against me, putting all his weight exactly where he promised not to. Backwards asshole. I kept myself buried inside him, unwilling to lose the connection after needing it for so long. I held him close and couldn't even stop kissing him long enough for him to say he loved me, too. I knew. He didn't have to say it.

Tonight lost me to a hurricane of feelings that, for once, I didn't resent. Tomorrow, I'd get back to kicking his ass, but for now, I'd live in this feeling we shared. Created.

Love.

True love.



THE MIDDLE OF THE night was a bitch. The bedroom had turned into a hotbox of hell, even with two fans going, and my mind turned into a darker kind of hell. Thoughts and questions and possible scenarios got all jumbled

up in there, and I couldn't untangle them enough to get back to sleep. Not even the sound of Devon's melodic snores could bore me into unconsciousness. So, I stared at the ceiling and tried to figure out what exactly was on my mind.

I mean, things were finally good with Devon. He learned a few lessons and we were over our internal relationship shit. All this time, I thought outside sources would rip us apart, but nope. We did that. Relationships were hard, and I had no fucking idea how hard until we tried to mesh our lives and needs together. We were our own worst enemies, but I had hope that we were over that now. More problems would come, but we were better equipped to handle them now that we had strength and understanding on our side.

Things were fine at work. I would still be on leave for another month, but my boss and a few of the guys had been checking in, and I felt good about going back. Nate and Xavi ran the shop while Devon played househusband. He went in for a few hours every day, but he never stayed for long. I told him a thousand times to get out of my face and go back to work, but he told me to get bent every time I said it, so there was that. Full 180 there. I think he secretly knew I loved being annoyed by him.

Other than work, Devon, and our brothers, my life didn't consist of much, so I had no idea why my mind wouldn't turn off. My dad had been around a lot lately, which was weird as hell, but it'd been going alright. He wasn't leading my mom on, even though I could tell they both wanted to try their relationship out for the billionth time. It was my dad who held back, probably because he didn't fully trust himself or his ability to maintain his sobriety yet. It showed maturity and compassion, which made me feel better

about him. If only my mom, as needy as a fucking dog in heat, would get the memo and give him a bit of space. Jesus.

So other than that shit, the only thing that could possibly be fucking with my head was Jim. Nothing about what he did made sense. Nothing. It didn't add up, and it didn't measure up. Which was precisely why I was a fucking hypocrite and didn't let any of it go like I'd told Devon I wanted to.

Why'd he go through all that trouble to get those documents if he never planned on doing anything with them? Or had something actually happened to him or the boat after he left, thwarting his plans? The captain of the ship had been questioned, and of course, he said everything on board arrived where it was supposed to arrive, and he had no knowledge of any illegal contraband. Claimed he personally checked each shipping container. I called bullshit on that, but I had no way of proving it. What ship captain in on a con would willingly admit to carrying anything illegal?

So, considering all that, only two things could have happened. One, Jim got whatever he'd been gunning for and then went into hiding after making a deal with the captain. Or two, something prevented him from working the job. A possible third scenario could have been that the whole thing was bullshit, and Jim just used it as a way to discredit Devon, but I couldn't figure out how that benefited him. Plus, he tried to have Devon murdered, so it had to be because Devon knew too much. Or maybe Jim was just that spiteful.

The wheels in my mind spun out, not knowing what to focus on or how to puzzle it all together. All I knew for sure was that Jim was still out there somewhere, either rich as fuck or poor as fuck, but either way, he remained a threat to us. To Devon. To Nate. I couldn't rest until I knew he wouldn't pop back up with another gun to take away the only life that had ever meant

anything to me. I didn't know if Devon was collateral damage to him, or if the hit had been personal, and the not knowing fucked me up something fierce.

"Shut up," Devon groaned, his voice muffled by his pillow.

"I didn't say shit."

"Your brain is shouting at me. Tell it to fuck off." He cocked out a leg and hugged the pillow, his sexy body on a nice display.

Okay, shutting up.

I smashed my fist into my pillow, took a deep breath, shuffled around until I got comfortable, and closed my eyes... only to hear the cogs in my mind keep on spinning. Jamming, more like.

Jim would have assumed that Devon told me and Nate about those documents, so that meant we were a risk to his plan. Would he come back to finish us off? Would he send someone like Davis to do it? Should I be expecting a second wave of danger?

Okay, I could fully admit to being a hypocrite. Not a chance in hell was I ready to let this go and move on. Was this how Devon felt when he tried to make that deal with his dad? I'd spent so much time punishing him for being stupid, but now I wanted to be stupid to get to the bottom of it. When the person you loved became endangered, you did crazy shit without seeing the full logic in order to protect them. I understood why he'd done it so much better now. Devon used whatever little bits of power he had to try to keep us safe, but now we had even less of it. I needed to find a way to get some of that power back. I mean, I hadn't hesitated for even a thump of my heart to jump in front of that bullet barrelling towards Devon; it'd been a reaction. An impulse. Maybe that's what he'd been trying to do for me that

whole time, and there I was, shutting him out and making him sleep on the couch for it. Jesus.

“Maddox,” Devon growled. “Shut. The. Fuck. Up.”

I rubbed my hands over my face, bent my knee to rest against the wall, and blew out my confusion in a long breath.

Fucking all the way off now.

Jim’s plan would be impossible to decipher because he probably didn’t even have it all laid out. With no idea where he was or where he planned to go, no clue about that shipping vessel, and no hint at who else he had in his pocket from Garron Police, we were pretty fucked. My dad had said he sniffed around our lot a bit, but had that meant anything? What did our lot or our trailer have to do with any of this? If I had to guess, it had been Jim trying to fuck with our heads. Guess what? Head fucked!

We had all these little bits of intel and no idea what any of them meant. No starting point to even begin looking into them either. Jim just vanished into thin air, tried to have his son murdered, and that was it. End of story. But it didn’t at all feel like the end of the story.

“Holy fuck,” Devon snapped, rolling onto his back. His semi flopped against his thigh before he cupped it in his hand. “You’re pissing me off.”

“Sorry. Fuck.”

“I love you, Madd, but you gotta learn to meditate or some shit. Your brain is buzzing all over the place.” He flitted his hands around to mimic my mind.

“I’ll sleep on the couch.” I sat up and started to crawl over him.

Devon gripped my hips and pushed me back, his dick getting hard. He gave me a look that said to ignore that, and then he pushed up onto his

elbows. “I’m never sleeping without you again, so you might as well just vent so we can talk it out and go back to sleep. What is it?”

I leaned against the side wall, facing him. “I’m a hypocrite and I can’t let this shit go. This stuff with your dad isn’t over.”

Devon sat up, pulled the sheet over his lap, and turned the lamp on. “I know.”

“And I can’t sleep because I’m worried he’s gonna come back to finish the job.” I nodded at him, signalling that he was the job. “And I refuse to lose you, Devon. We’ve spent too much time fighting life and each other that I’m ready to go to fucking war to fight for you. I’m ready for all the...” Oh, God. *Shut up, Madd.*

“The what?” he asked, grinning.

“The happiness part, you know? I wanna be all in love and shit, and like... go stay at a terrible hotel with a jacuzzi or a hot tub. Stupid trips, you know?” Yeah, here I went full sap. Whatever. “I want the fun part and the happiness and the cheesy bullshit, Devon. I just hate worrying about everything all the time.”

“You romantic fuck,” he said, using the same tone of voice he’d used the first time he said it—the night we fucked for the first time. I gave him the finger, but it only made him smile. “Where would we go on a trip? We aren’t hikers and we sure as shit wouldn’t fit in at some ritzy place. We aren’t cultured or edgy or artistic. Where the fuck do blue-collar losers go on vacation?” He smiled at me, honestly asking where I might want to go.

Yeah, I didn’t really give a fuck about Paris and lived in the term *when in Rome* more than I actually wanted to be in Rome, so I had no idea. “Anywhere. Anywhere we don’t have to work, worry, or watch our backs. I just want a weekend with you without anyone fucking it up,” I laughed.

Devon put his legs over mine. “Well, we can do that here until we can afford a hotel. We can skip the track and lock our brothers out and just shut off the world. It might not be fancy, but we can afford that. We can even pretend to order room service if we make someone heat up all our gifted casseroles for us,” he laughed.

“I wanted a hot tub,” I pouted.

“Hot as fuck out, bud. Ocean is basically a hot tub. Jump right in.” He squeezed my knee. “Let’s do it this weekend. No track. Deal?”

It sounded perfect, which meant it wouldn’t be, but I’d love it anyway. “Deal. As long as you don’t go all Nurse Devon on me.”

“It’s Doctor Devon,” he corrected. “I promise.”

At least he’d shut my mind up for a bit. “Come here.” I grabbed him and brought him between my legs. He rested his back against my chest and I wrapped my arms around him, feeling our hearts pump together. I never thought I’d be into this kind of romance, but Devon made me equal parts sappy and aggressive and I liked the mix of it. “I love you.”

-DEVON-

MADDOX WASN'T SHUTTING ME out, and I wasn't lying to him. This time, we did this shit together without any resentment, secrets, or hard feelings.

He sat with his legs hanging over the dock, the water lapping at his ankles, and his shoulders relaxed. He'd gotten so much better. His incision healed nicely, not even swollen anymore, just a bit red, so he was still sorta on my watch list. His doctor said he could resume normal activity minus heavy lifting, so he hadn't been cleared for work just yet. It'd been nearly two months, so he could cool his fucking jets for a bit longer. I'd make sure he did, no matter how much he bitched.

Xavi passed Maddox a beer and sat beside him on the dock while Nate and I sat on the edge of the deck. We were at the shop, and Seth just showed up to tell us what he found out from Gary. My dad was still in the wind, and to be honest, I didn't care what he was doing. All I wanted was to get him out of our lives for good. Even if he'd stuck to his word and left Garron forever, I still wanted to know. I needed to know he couldn't come back

someday and ruin our lives... again. That deadbeat had already ruined my life enough.

I'd have to think of him every time I saw Maddox's scar—my own scars, for that matter. I'd have to attach him to my origin story, to the one and only relationship of my life, and I'd have to see the damage he caused my mom every time I looked at her. That was enough. He didn't get to claim anything else. I needed him gone so we could move into that happiness part like Maddox had said. I wanted the fuck ups, the laughs, the joy, and the love that sometimes led to fistfights. I wanted hot sex and late-night bickering in a trailer that was too small to contain our energy but housed us anyway because we loved living in our chaos. It was time to remove Jim and start focusing on new goals. Preferably ones that changed my last name.

To get all of that, Jim had to go. This time, I had my fucking family at my back. I looked at Maddox at the same time he looked at me, our eyes connecting over our brother's heads. He'd always been tight-lipped, and he still was, but I could read everything he felt just by looking into his eyes these days. Most of his looks came across as angry, but this one... it meant safety. With a look, he told me we'd get through this together. He grinned shyly, hated himself for it, so threw me the middle finger to earn himself a bit of credit.

What a damn sweetheart.

"Alright, so Gary is either lying or he really is as dumb as he seems," Seth said, sitting on the step and trying not to look at our beers. He already told us not to change around him, but I still felt shitty.

"What'd he say?" Xavi asked.

“Claimed he didn’t know what I was talking about. Told me he had no connection to Harris, which was a lie, and said he hadn’t talked to Jim in years, which was also a lie. I saw them talking a few weeks before that day. So, the only thing he might be telling the truth about is not knowing about those shipping slips.”

“He seem scared?” Nate asked. “Being threatened to keep his mouth shut, maybe?”

“Nervous as all fuck,” Seth said. “Sweaty. Shaky.”

Which meant my dad held something over his head. Either that, or Patrick Harris had something on Gary. Maddox had warned Harris not to get involved with my dad again, so were they working together for a bigger score, or had Jim stolen them from Harris?

Nate nudged me in the side, a silent assurance that we’d figure it out. It was hard when nothing made sense.

“So, we fucking Gary up or what?” Maddox asked like an asshole, swigging beer and wiping his wrist across his mouth.

“I say we figure out who the captain of the ship is first,” Xavi suggested.

“Don’t you have friends down at the docks still?” Maddox asked Seth. “Can you talk to a few guys?”

Seth agreed to put some feelers out. I guess it was a place to start, since Gary hadn’t offered up anything useful.

“What about the douchey cop?” Nate asked. “What’re we doing about him?”

I wanted to kill Davis myself. He almost took Maddox from me, and fucking no one could do that. “We can’t touch him,” I scoffed, anger eating me up. “He’s under house arrest and he has cops monitoring his place

because he made them think we might still be a threat. We'd be feeding right into his plan if we went after him."

The fact that Davis spun a lie and everyone believed him grated on every part of me. Once again, we didn't have a voice. We lived in fear and got laughed at while he only temporarily lost his badge and had bodyguards keeping an eye on him. All we could do was fight to have our voices heard, but who wanted to listen to a couple of rednecks like us? Nobody, and it fucking showed.

I looked at Maddox again. I might not have much, but I had him, and that made me the richest man in the world. There was only one Maddox Kane, and he was fucking mine. I'd never take that for granted again.

"I'm gonna head down to the docks right now," Seth said, standing to leave. "Don't do anything stupid." He aimed that one at Maddox and Xavi, mostly. I didn't know why, because I'd been the one to do stupid things.

"Thanks, Seth." I gave him a nod. I had a lot of respect for Seth now. If he hadn't been there that day to take control and make me move, Maddox wouldn't have made it to midnight. "Let us know if you find anything." With another nod, he left.

I learned something about myself that day Seth stepped in to take control. I sucked under pressure. I always figured I'd be able to react to a situation and handle it until the crisis ended, but no. It was Maddox dying on the ground, and I got too swept up in heartbreak, terror, and guilt to be productive. Hated myself a little for that, but I hid it from Maddox because he was sick of dealing with my shame.

Xavi and Nate went inside, so I grabbed a few more beers and sat down beside Maddox. He stayed quiet, lost in his own head. I studied the furrow of his brow, the clench of his jaw, and the blackish-purple circles under his

eyes. The sun made them darker, but the water's reflection made him calmer. He hadn't been sleeping well, and I knew he was stressed out. How did a guy like him deal with stress? Well, usually, he fucked, fought, rode his bike, or swam in the ocean to muffle the world for a bit. His medical restrictions put a damper on all that, and I was left with a volatile boyfriend who couldn't use his vices. There had to be a safe way for him to vent, exert some stress, and lash out at something without hurting himself.

Sex. Sex was probably the safest. I'd seduce the hell out of him later and let him take it all out on me.

"We still having that weekend?" I asked.

He took a sip and watched the horizon. "Yeah."

"Look at me." I waited until he lowered his beer and looked at me without much glare behind it this time. Just tiredness. "You need to sleep if you're going to keep up with what I have planned for our romance weekend."

"Romance weekend," he huffed a laugh. "Tea parties and go-fish?" What a dick. Yeah, we were competitive, and since we hadn't been able to compete in any of our usual ways, we'd resorted to cards, board games, and stupid little challenges around the trailer. He won all the cooking ones, but I didn't mind losing because it made him happy.

"A different kind of game this time, bud."

"Hm," he mused. "Snakes and ladders?"

I took a drink, made sure Nate and Xavi weren't around, and looked right at him. "More like kinks and orgasms." I'd have to get creative with it.

His eyes widened and he licked his lips. "Don't fuck with me, Devon."

"Oh, I'm gonna do so much more than fuck with you. I'm done playing your doctor, Madd. I'm ready to treat you like the submissive little bitch

you are.”

When he grinned, my hairs all stood. Dark, sexy, even a little sinister. “We’ll see about that.”

He might not say much, but when he did, it hit just right. That challenge lit a fire under my ass and amped up my competitive side. It would be a new game, and we hadn’t had a proper rough fuck in two months, but I was more than ready to put him where I wanted him. I just wondered where he wanted to put me.

-MADDOX-

LIKE EVERYTHING ELSE IN our lives, our weekend hadn't started off right. For one, it pissed rain so hard it deafened us inside the trailer, pinging off the steel roof like a thousand hammers. The rain meant the track got flooded out, so Garron Park wasn't near as empty as we hoped it'd be. It left Xavi and Nate bored with nothing better to do than pester us like annoying gossips.

Plus, my mom kept calling or popping over because, apparently, now that she was giving things another go with my dad, she figured I was her best fucking girlfriend. No thanks. Didn't need the details and didn't want to gab with her about it. I tried to tell her ten times I didn't give a fuck what she wore to the tiny ass broken down diner for their first date in years. I just agreed to all her outfit choices, and then she got pissed at me for not taking it seriously.

When you date and break up with the same man for thirty-five years, it's hard to take it seriously, I thought.

On top of that shit, Devon's mom had a bad day. She couldn't remember where she was or what her life entailed, and Mary wasn't qualified to deal with that, so Mary called Nate and Devon and they took her to the hospital. I started to worry Mary would kick her out because her problems were getting too vast for her to handle, and then we'd have to find the money or the time to find a better place for her. It had been pure dumb luck that Mary had the space available in the first place.

So, no card games, no board games, and no kinks and orgasms. I hoped their mom was alright, but I'd been looking forward to this weekend with Devon all week. Every time we tried to do something together, it got fucked up. I wanted to use this weekend to show him he didn't need to be my doctor anymore. I didn't want him taking care of me, babying me, or putting his life on hold for me. I wanted sex like we used to have, rivalry like we thrived on, and to get back to ourselves in general. A confrontation that turned to hot sex sounded pretty perfect.

"Alright, you moody fuck," Xavi said, leaning back in his lawn chair on our front deck. We'd recently gotten an awning, and I'd be pissed if this heavy rain broke it. "I have questions."

Of course he did. He was worse for gossip than my mom. And harder to ignore because she eventually gave up, but Xavi was a persistent asshole.

"You gay?" he bluntly asked.

"Why the fuck is that your question?"

Xavi wobbled his head in some non-committal motion.

"I get fucked in the ass, Xavi. That makes me pretty gay. Can't pretend I'm just a straight boy who likes getting railed."

"But do you just wanna get banged and fuck other guys in the ass or do you still like chicks?" He stretched his legs out like anal sex conversations

were a casual Tuesday.

“Just Devon. No other asses. No other anything. No other people. Why does it matter?” I looked at him, trying to decipher the fucking mess he was. This guy didn’t know what way was up or which direction was down, and he’d gotten by alright like that for most of his life, but something was on his mind now.

“Because I’m trying to figure out my sexuality here, Madd. Don’t bust my balls!” He sighed dramatically. “I thought I was straight, right? But some sexy things have been happening, and now I’m wondering if there’s like a sliding scale or something? Like straight with a little gay? Like just *a dab’ll do ya*, you know? Does that exist?” He stared at me, honestly thinking I had the answers. What the fuck did I know? A dab’ll do ya?

“What sexy things? What happened?”

“Well, I’ve been seeing this girl, right?”

“Yeah.” Had no idea.

“And it’s going pretty good and all that shit. But she’s... like also seeing someone else.” He looked at me, and I knew the punchline was coming. I put it together in my head.

“Nate?”

“Yeah,” he groaned. “We both know about it. It’s fine. We’re fine. It’s been easy.”

“Okay?”

“But then the other night, I was gonna go to fight night but I forgot something at the shop, and Nate was there with her when I went back. One thing led to another and sexy things happened, Madd.”

“So? You and Nate have done that shit before. What’s the big deal?”

“I looked!” he shrieked, standing, knocking his chair over, throwing his arms to the high heavens. “I looked, Madd. I watched. I *admired*! Oh, good god, I looked.” His panicked eyes begged me to talk him off this ledge. “I think what I’m trying to say is...” he fumbled, so I said it for him.

“You checked him out and got a hard dick from it.”

He slapped both hands over his face and groaned like he was dying. “Yes.”

“Don’t go there. Don’t do it, man. Bad idea. He’s your best friend and friendships don’t survive this shit unless it’s mutual. I mean, I know you two have a solid friendship, but are you sure it could survive if you crossed that line?”

“No, I’m not sure, and I’m not even fucking sure why I looked and didn’t stop looking.”

“Wait, that’s all that happened? You just had a threesome and got a little caught up in watching him?”

“Yeah.”

“That doesn’t make you a dab gay. That’s just a sexy situation.” I shrugged, hoping this bullshit conversation would end.

“It’s the shit that went through my head, Madd.”

“If you tell me you wanna start sucking a Sawyer dick, I’ll deck you. You two are supposed to be besties, not the handies and blowies type. No.”

His embarrassment was evident, but his dramatics were worse. “There was a flash of an image of that chick just vanishing and me and Nate being all... yeah, it’s probably a bad idea, right? It’s totally a bad idea,” he answered himself. “Am I a sliding scale gay?”

“You’re a fuckwit.” I handed him a beer to shut him up. “Sit down and stop being a diva.”

He righted his chair and fell into it, snatching the beer from my grip. “I can be a diva all I want. This shit came out of nowhere. It’s role reversal from last year. Now I’m wondering if I should fight Nate to see whose dick trips up whose ass.” He drank the whole can and tossed it at me. “Fucking Sawyers.”

“Crack for our dicks,” I agreed.

“Yeah, but we don’t get addicted until later in life. The universe set up our stories to fuck with us until at least twenty-five and then we progress to level ten and have to battle our way out of it.”

“I was twenty-five when I fucked my Sawyer, so I’m clearly more badass than you.”

“Won’t argue that,” he laughed. “I’m not fucking him. Won’t. He’s pissed at me because I’m being weird, and I’m over here like, what? Sorry I got hard and imagined your mouth on my cock. God.”

I grinned at the rain. “He’s the one you were talking about before when you asked me how I felt about Devon?”

“No. Her. I like her because of who she is, but I think I like her more because Nate is in there, too.” He shrugged. “And I hate that my mind sometimes wants to cut her out of the picture, so obviously, my feelings have changed. Fuuuck,” he groaned again, tilting his head back. “I had a good thing with her and he fucked it up.”

“You fucked it up,” I laughed. “Just be careful, Xav. If you two screw up your friendship, the apocalypse might happen.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Xavi snipped at me. “When they get back from the hospital, you want us to lock you and Dev at the gravel pits again? Might be the only way to get some time to yourselves.”

That didn't sound half bad, but my mouth said something different. "How the fuck do you marry a guy?"

My brother snapped his head in my direction. "Uh, pretty sure the same way anyone gets married."

"Yeah, but do I have to propose? Does he propose? Does there have to be a proposal?"

"Yes," Xavi scoffed. "And warn me about it so I can video that shit. Either of you can propose, and now that I've said that, I feel like you're going to turn it into a race. You honestly thinking about marriage, Madd?"

Oh, I was thinking about it. I didn't want some fancy ass wedding or any of that shit, but I wanted Devon to be mine in all the ways I could have him. I wanted to tie us together for life, even if they were shackles.

"Hey, Madd?"

I looked at my brother.

"Promise me something. Promise me that no matter what happens with Jim, you won't put yourself on the line again. I can't lose you, man."

I nodded to promise. I'd do whatever it took to protect Devon from his dad, but I had no intention of messing up my own life in the process. "I just want this shit to be over so we can all move on to our boring ass lives where we fight and struggle and have a good time. That's all I want."

"Then I think I have an idea," Xavi said.



WHAT A MOODY FUCK. When Devon got home from the hospital, he spent a full hour venting about the medical system, mental health, his

mom's condition, his dad and his dad's involvement in his mom's condition, the rain, and the fucking fate of the world. He also bitched about our weekend getting ruined.

While he complained, I packed. He was still obviously bitching when I shoved his ass into the truck, and barely stopped to take notice of where we were driving. When I parked in front of our trailer at the track, he finally came to. If no one was going to be here because of the rain, we could be here because of it.

"I don't think I can be all happy and horny right now, Madd," he sighed, flopping onto a lawn chair I basically had to steer him to. "My mind's all fucked up."

We'd see about that. "Then drink enough to turn your head off and let go of some of this stress."

He gave me a blue-eyed look. I knew exactly what it meant. He didn't mind drinking, but not when he was in a foul mood.

"You aren't your dad, Devon. Enough with that shit. Trust yourself." Every time this guy cracked a beer or even smelled whiskey, he thought he was actively turning into an alcoholic. I got it. Understood it. But I hated it because it meant he didn't believe in himself. He'd never get out from under his dad's control if he spent all his energy trying not to be him. I didn't even mean drinking; just everything. Both of his parents were addicts and they said that shit ran in families, so if that was his reason, I'd support it. Unfortunately, it wasn't his reasoning and until he got his head on straight and learned he was better than Jim, I'd keep pushing him to do things he didn't want to do. I'd be here to watch his back the entire time.

"Yeah, until I have one too many drinks and I can't turn it off." He stared at the unopened can.

Okay, that was better reasoning.

“Fine. No drinking.” I took the beer from him. “But you gotta learn to let shit go. What’s the point of stressing about everything if there’s never a happy outcome?”

Devon rubbed his damp hands down his jeans, staring at the mud puddles forming. I knew the weight of the world sat on his shoulders, so for one night, I wanted to alleviate some of that pressure. I wanted to give him a good feeling to hold on to.

“What’re we gonna do if my dad comes back for us?” he asked, looking at me with hope that I might have the answers.

“Get through it.” I shrugged and grabbed his hand. “Look, asshole. We left your dad, your mom, our brothers, and all that bullshit back at Garron Park. We’re at the track now. Just you and me. Don’t make me kick your ass before I pound it.”

He grinned. Then groaned, not falling for my bait yet. “I’m serious, Madd. I fucked up once already for missing the signals. I don’t want to do that again.”

Don’t punch him. “Talk me through it.”

“I’m scared. Of everything. I’m scared for you to go back to work because I can’t protect you there and I’m gonna miss you. Fuck you for that. I’m scared that my mom is in the hospital and we can’t watch her back. I’m scared Mary is gonna kick her out and then we’ll have no idea how to take care of her. It scares me every time Nate and Xavi go out because those twats are irresponsible as shit and never watch their backs. And I’m scared that my dad is going to actually succeed in taking you from me.” He choked. “I’m just scared, Madd.”

This was night one all over again. There he was, the guy I always thought was the strongest person in the world, looking at me with all the vulnerability he had. The fear leaked through his eyes and weighed on his shoulders, and the worry lines on his face didn't match the angry furrow he usually had between his brows. This was vulnerable Devon, and *lord fucking knows* he was my biggest weakness.

Strength.

"He's been gone for two months. I get it, okay. I get all the fears. Whatever happens with your mom, we'll figure it out, but the rest of it? There's nothing we can really do other than what we're already doing. We gotta learn to have a few good days with all our bad ones, no?"

"I know," he agreed, wanting to apologize for being a Devon Downer.

"You know what you need?"

He rolled his eyes. "Tell me."

"You need to remember what the fuck we're living for. For me, it's you, you dumb fuck. You're what I live for. We're twenty-six, not eighty-six. I'm healed, you're alive, and we're in love, yeah? So smarten the fuck up."

He smiled shyly. "How are you so sweet and such a dick at the same time?"

"If we can go from hating each other to loving each other, we can do anything, Devon." There. Sweetness without insult. I was practically Shakespeare.

Devon got stuck staring at me. I watched him transform. The worry in his eyes turned to desire, and the fear in them turned to determination. More than that, I watched the heaviness in his shoulders relax, and in its place, I saw a challenge. He smirked, looking at the forest beside the trailer.

"Remember when we kissed here for the first time?"

I'd never forget it. Mostly that I was too chickenshit to do it and he won that challenge. Best kiss of my life.

He stood up and pointed at the forest where it happened, his eyes on mine. "I'm feeling nostalgic. I want you to fuck me there."

My cock reacted before my mouth did. I stood up, matching his height.

Rising to his challenge.

-DEVON-

THE FIRST TIME WE kissed, Maddox had been drunk, pissed off at some idiot in fancy jeans for gay bashing, and aggressive as hell about it. He had been the one to spur everything into action, but I'd been the one to pull rank and actually kiss him.

But Maddox wasn't hesitating this time. Oh no. My boy had all the confidence in the world when it came to being physical now, and to be on the receiving end of his harsh love and primal assertiveness was the only place I wanted to be.

The rain damn near sizzled off our heated bodies. The tree canopies swayed in the turbulent winds, just like our turbulent desires swirled storms within us. It didn't matter that we'd been fucking for over a year. The heat was still there and the fire only burned hotter. The storm of *us* raged on wilder than ever.

The green in Maddox's eyes flashed with each strike of lightning. The power in his eyes became my own battery supply, charging me up, turning

me all the way on. He amped me to full wattage, and the spark of it tingled everywhere.

“Turn the fuck around, Devon,” he growled at me, jaw clenched impatiently and eyes filled with hostility.

While I absolutely loved his power moves, I loved challenging them even more. Grinning at him, I pulled a move from the Maddox Kane handbook. Silence. The charged kind of silence that spoke louder than words and held its breath in anticipation.

Maddox took a single step forward. Just one calculated step. That’s all he’d allow himself because tonight, his game was submission. Until he got it from me, he’d remain in control of us, the storm, and the situation. Water ran from the dark strands of his hair and dripped off his jawline. Thunder cracked above, all around, beating to the drum of his heart. Everything about Maddox excited me. From the way he emitted daunting energy to the way he looked at me like I was the salvation and the downfall of his life. He loved me. But the way he loved me was savage, finite, and unforgiving.

I loved him right back with the same ferocity.

“Devon,” he seethed, feet squelching in the mud. “Turn around. Right now.”

“You think I don’t know how to defy you, Madd?” I mocked, just to rile him. “Please.”

Two more calculated steps. Those two steps brought us chest to chest, and my head lifted of its own accord when he wrapped a hand around my throat. I met his eyes and didn’t shy away, excited to rise up to him—to rise up to myself.

“Why are you fucking with me? You asked for this. You said you wanted to get fucked here.” Lightning reflected in his eyes and thunder banged to

resonate with his voice. The storm wasn't drowning him out, it amplified him, worked with him, did his dirty work.

Yeah, I wanted that. More than that, I wanted to reminisce about our start. Call me a sensitive fuckwit, but that moment by this tree a year and a half ago changed our lives forever. For better. I wanted to relive that moment, remember the power of it, and rejoice in how far we'd come since. I gained Maddox Kane because of that moment, and with the fires of hell heating his blood and the storm fuelling his energy, I wanted to experience him as he was now. Stronger. Confident. Dangerous. Protective and possessive, and in true love.

I wanted to remember how suggestively unsure he had been that night. He had no idea what he wanted, but he had every instinct to take it. Aggression with a cause and confusion with a purpose.

Maddox's fingers drummed against my neck. "I do," I admitted. "I want you right here in this spot."

He leaned in to kiss me, but I pressed on his chest.

"We might be all in love and shit, Maddox, but you're still my biggest opponent. Our fights have changed and we don't need to hurt each other anymore, but I don't bow down to you naturally."

The small grin that tilted his lips made my cock harden. There he was, my worthy rival. He wasn't trying to be sexy or playful; he was showing me he accepted the challenge. His fingers drummed once more before tightening around my throat.

"Mm," he mused, leaning into my body, making the bark of the tree bite my back. "So you need to be forced?"

Take me.

“You want to defy me just to prove that you have the strength to fight me for the power we both know I already have?”

Overpower me.

“I am going to fuck you, Devon. Right here, like you wanted. But by the time I’m done with you, you won’t have any fight left in you.”

Control me.

“Are you still talking?” I scoffed.

“Are you still fighting?”

I met his eyes just as lightning struck. “Always.”

His grin turned into a taunt, but I didn’t get time to appreciate it. When his hand fisted in my hair and he craned my neck back, I watched his eyes track downward as he took his power back. My knees buckled for him as he kicked at them until they squished into the muddy ground.

Dominate me.

My kryptonite in life, even before our relationship, was his power. The fight to challenge it, but also the desire to submit to it. The electricity from the storm charged the ground I knelt on, but Maddox charged *me*.

“Gag,” he demanded, undoing his pants.

I looked up at him. *Force me.*

With a hand on the back of my head, Maddox pulled my face to his groin. The dampness of his pants cooled my face, but my mouth warmed the material. With greedy fingers, I mouthed him through the fabric, trying to get them undone, and pulled down. I ripped them down his legs, letting his cock slap me in the face as it sprang free, and then my eager mouth lapped at the raindrops that dripped down his dick. My panting breaths fogged the air and the rain mixed with my saliva, creating a sloppy, hot mess that had me inching forward to taste more.

I sucked him into my mouth with a whimpered need for more. I didn't know what was wrong with me, but I couldn't willingly submit. When he forced me, it empowered me so fucking hard that I lost myself to his control and didn't give a damn about it. I gagged, just like he demanded, and then this prick grabbed both sides of my head and fucked my face without remorse. I gagged, spluttered, choked and moaned around him, pulling on his hips as hard as he pulled on my head.

"I don't hear enough gagging," Maddox growled down at me.

My throat burned blissfully, the pain of it causing my dick to leak in my pants. My eyes wept tears that mixed with the rain, and my neck muscles strained harder than my cock.

Make me yours. Take from me what you want. Use me now and love me after.

"I fucking own you, Devon," Maddox's voice became deeper than the thunder. "All of you. Your fucking body, your broken soul, and your whole heart."

Use me now and love me all the while.

"Understand?"

I nodded on his cock, slurping at him so pathetically he pulled me away by my hair. I gasped out in protest, addicted to the way he controlled me.

"Understand?" he asked again. Demonically.

"Yes," I wheezed, eyes on his. "Fuck, yes."

"Yes what?"

Goddamn him. "You own me."

Maddox licked rain off his bottom lip before biting it, dragging it between his teeth. He stood above me, staring down like I was his prized possession, but he wasn't sure if he wanted to show me off or lock me away

for his eyes only. One of his hands rubbed my hair, tickling down my cheek and jaw gently before he pulled on my chin and brought me to my feet.

“And now I’m going to fuck you.” He made my former dream come true, sinking his teeth into my neck. Stinging bliss radiated down to my chest, and my hands latched onto his shirt for balance. He tugged my pants down and ripped my shirt off, switching that bite to a sucking kiss as I kicked my pants off to settle in a puddle. Ripping his shirt off with shaking fingers that worked faster than my mind could keep up with, I scratched at him until he was naked. Tanned, toned, scarred perfection.

His surgery scar stood out purple against the goosebumps on his skin, the rain detouring around the marred imperfection. Pushing my back against the tree we originally kissed at, Maddox spit into his palm and rubbed it onto his cock. He watched me with harsh interest while the storm raged on, and then he grabbed my wrist, separated my fingers, and shoved two of them into my mouth. I sucked until they were dripping, and panted when he shoved them between my legs.

He hooked one of my legs over his hip and silently demanded I finger myself. Hand now on my throat, he forced me to keep eye contact as I finger fucked my ass, wishing it was his dick. When I moaned, he growled. When I shivered, he steadied me. When my legs threatened to refuse my weight, he held me there by sheer force of will. Lightning highlighted the sinful parts of him, and thunder enunciated the beat of his heart, and when I moaned and let my head fall back, the rain cooled my heated forehead.

He ripped my hand from my ass. “And I’ll never stop fucking you. Loving you.” He lined up with my hole, positioning me with ease. “You own me too, Devon.”

My heart swelled and my ass clenched. Maddox buried himself inside me, his forehead resting against mine while I wiggled to adjust to him. I knew him well enough by now to know he felt sentimental, but I'd only allow him a single moment of that softness. He told me I owned him too, and that comment and the time I took to adjust to his dick intruding my ass was all the time we'd get to be gentle.

He promised to fuck the fight out of me.

Follow through.

"I love you," I whispered, holding his shoulders for balance, enjoying the fullness of him filling me.

I knew he loved me; he didn't have to say it. "You're mine," he repeated instead. It was the same as a declaration of love.

With one final aggressive kiss, Maddox pulled out and slammed into me. The bark scratched at my back and Maddox bruised my skin. He fucked me like that until the bark made me bleed and my body got weak, and then he pulled out.

The wind cooled me, and I stood on shaky legs without him holding me up. I knew what came next, and it was me who'd have to do it. He'd fucked the fight out of me, so I lost the game.

When he nodded at the ground, I knelt. *Submitting.* Submitting to him, our relationship, the fucked up life we'd live together, and the love we'd burn in. To Maddox Kane.

He knelt behind me, grabbing my hips with force to position me exactly how he wanted me. Down and dirty in the mud, the storm roared. I cried out in pleasure when he slammed inside me, releasing his own tsunami that rivaled the one the weather set upon us.

The rain cooled our burning skin, but Maddox burned us up.

The thunder echoed through the trees, but Maddox growled louder.

The lightning sizzled in the air, but our chemistry outshone any electrical storm.

The wind whipped at our exposed bodies, but Maddox shielded me from all storms but his own.

He fucked more than the fight out of me. He fucked the life out of me. And when I was half dead in the mud with twigs and leaves stuck to my broken body, he brought me back to life with a second, completely unasked for orgasm.

Holy fuck, Maddox.

-MADDOX-

AFTER SHOWERING UNTIL THE water tank ran empty, and Devon pretty much forcing water up his ass to make sure no mud got in there, he called me a dick and fell asleep against my chest.

He got nostalgic last night. I never realized how much that damn tree meant to me. This whole thing started with that tree, and now that he was asleep beside me, not watching me crumble into my feelings, I let myself be sentimental about it, too. A fucking tree. Jesus.

Lying in the tiny bed with Devon's arm over my chest and his legs damn near forcing mine off the edge, the track was finally quiet. The thunderstorm had ebbed, and despite the morning being grey and gloomy, it was warm and peaceful.

My mind took a trip down memory lane. The night Devon showed up at our trailer with a stab wound and vulnerability in his eyes had been the best and worst night ever. It shook me to see him like that, but I think it shook me even more to realize that it hurt to see him so defeated. I hadn't been expecting a reaction like that, and that's what threw me off guard the most.

He was supposed to be strong, untouchable, and tough, but seeing him weak and at such a low point showed me we weren't so different from one another. It was the first time I really related to him.

From there, we fought this thing with everything we had. It didn't come naturally to us to mesh our lives together and morph from hate to love, and it was especially hard to admit to it. A part of me wondered if we could have ended up here on our own or if we would still be floundering around like useless tits if our brothers hadn't intervened. That night at the gravel pit... *goddamn*. It wasn't graceful, but when we gave in, our lives changed forever. I switched from being an asshole with a vendetta against my enemy to being an asshole with a burning desire for my biggest rival. Devon had always been the focal point of my life, even when I didn't realize it. He was the stitch in my side, the downfall of my mood, and the source of most of my frustrations, but he also became my salvation, my hope, and the love of my life.

Fucked.

I wrapped my arm around him a little tighter, not ready to let him go just yet. Was I some mushy romantic with the need to dote on him all the time? Fuck no. But I wanted to give him the world, treat him like the badass he was, remind him of the dumbass he'd always been, and forever tell him he had my whole damn heart. All of it. No matter how insecure and jealous he got, it'd always belong to him. Devon was it for me.

Despite how often we pissed each other off, messed up our relationship, or used fists instead of words to sort out our problems, I wouldn't want it any other way. A therapist would tell us we thrived on domestic abuse. Maybe we did. Maybe it wasn't healthy. But I didn't see it as abuse. I saw it as a challenge. We were physical people, and our relationship became

physical because of it. Our dynamic was flawed, and if he was a chick, I'd probably be in prison for life, but he wasn't, and I didn't see the point in comparing us to anyone else. We were different. It wasn't about hurting each other; not anymore. It was about letting feelings out in the ways we spoke best, and communicating with one another in conversation types that made sense to us. Why did anyone else need to be in our business? We weren't hurting each other. *Much*.

Perfection bored me, and Devon was the farthest thing from it. Together we didn't resemble anything even close to perfect, and maybe that's why I loved us so much. We were grit and gravel, held together with spit and superglue, fused among all our jagged bits.

Breathing him in, I reminded myself that this shit with Jim would end eventually. Xavi had a plan to lure Jim to Garron Park, and then we'd get rid of him, with or without help from the cops. This time, we had an actual lead. Gary had slipped up. My dad got a little... creative with his questioning, and Gary admitted that the contents from that shipping container really had been stolen, and they were being held in Garron somewhere. So, we planned to find them and offer them to Jim on a silver platter.

We also found a way to get a message to Jim. Patrick fucking Harris, that yellow aviator wearing son of a bitch, had been screwed out of this deal by Jim. The shipping container was supposed to be his con, and now that Jim had fucked it up and hidden the contents from him, he had his own vendetta with that pathetic fuckup who sired my boyfriend. Patrick claimed not to know where the contents were, but I didn't trust him... or his aviators.

I'd find that contraband first, and when I did, I'd find a way to take Jim down with it. Xavi and Nate were out there now, searching for it, talking to

people to see if they'd seen anything, and keeping an eye on Gary. Gary was in on it, we just didn't know how deep yet.

I brushed Devon's overgrown hair off his forehead, running my fingers through the blond strands. This idiot needed a haircut so bad, but I had to admit, it was nice having the extra length to grip. Devon was the only person alive who could make me soft. To everyone else, I was a broody, miserable asshole with anger issues and a bad vibe, but Devon made me warmer, and sure, sometimes I hated when he did that. Especially in public. I needed to remain the asshole for all intents and purposes. Another thing Devon had that no one else did? Power over me. I'd never tell him that, but he fucking owned me, body, blood, and bones. I was pretty sure he already knew. We didn't have anything fairytale about us, but we had a fuck ton of things others didn't.

We had loyalty, despite how flawed it was at times.

We had desire, even though it burned so fiercely it made us dumb sometimes.

We had openness, even if it wounded my pride to admit certain things to him.

We had each other. Love, loyalty, comfort, and a level of respect that outshone all else. I won the motherfucking jackpot with this asshole. *Fucking take me, bud.* Take all of me, because there was no one else I'd ever give a scrap of myself to.

"No," Devon groaned. "Brain. Loud. Stop."

Guess I was a loud thinker. I still hadn't learned to meditate, but I probably put it off because I wanted him to feel me think.

"Let's go get breakfast," I said instead, kissing his hair like a sap.

He huffed a gruff laugh against my chest. "We can't afford breakfast."

He wasn't wrong. Money was tight since we were both basically off work while I healed, but we weren't dire. Not yet, anyway.

"Then let's go home. We have enough that I can make you breakfast."

"Why you being a sweet asshole?" he asked, his fingers tracing my abs and his eyes still closed.

Kill me for saying this, but, "Because I love you and I want to do nice things for you." I should have smacked him for making me admit that. A part of me wanted to throw him off this bed, kick him into gear, and get his ass moving. A different part of me ran a hand down his back to ease him awake gently. What was wrong with me?

Love. Goddammit.

Devon blinked open those blues and looked right at me with a cruel smirk. "Oh, here we go," he laughed. "Take one walk down memory lane and suddenly you're a blushing bride."

"Fuck you, Devon." I shoved him.

He laughed harder, pulling me back. "I love you, too," he said. "And since you fucked the fight out of me last night, let me fuck the life back into you this morning." He straddled me.

Dick hard. Former bad mood gone. Back down memory lane. I sort of had to piss, but I wasn't desperate yet and this felt more important. I admired him again, but it was more than his body this time. It was the way he took charge and knew what he wanted. It was the way he knew what I needed without me ever having to say it.

Kneeling between my legs, he moved the blanket and took my cock into his hand, holding it straight up. I watched his tongue glide over the tip, teasing me and making me shiver. I put my arm behind my head, content to watch him run this show. He licked me from base to tip and back down

again before moving down to suck on my balls. His hand stroked languidly, and his eyes kept shifting from my gaze to my body. He worked me up until I started to sweat with the restraint of not grabbing the hair that needed cutting to slam my cock down his throat. Only this prick would give head without actually giving head. I loved the mindfuck of it. So much that my legs spread wider.

“Lube?” he asked, his voice vibrating my nuts. Jesus.

I toppled cups and cans when I reached for it on the shitty side table, too eager because Devon hadn’t fucked me since before I got shot. It wasn’t until this exact moment that I realized how badly I wanted it.

Lubing his fingers, he massaged my ass and continued to tease the fuck out of my cockhead. When his fingers pumped, my hips rocked on their own. He mouthed my dick but never sucked, and every time I thrust onto his fingers, I tried to slip my dick between his lips, but he held me off every time.

“Devon,” I growled. “Hurry up. No more teasing.”

He pumped three fingers and curled them until I choked on my breath. “Are you begging me, Maddox Kane?”

Damn right I was, but I grit my teeth together and tried to tell him to fuck off with my eyes. He got the message, but was too dumb—persistent—to accept it. “Yes. Fuck me already. God.”

Devon lifted onto his knees, lubing his cock. “If it hurts...”

“It won’t. I’m fine.”

“I know you are,” he said, smiling at me. He tugged on my hips and put my legs over his, his cock nudging my hole. “But I’ll use your injury as an excuse to be gentle.”

“Why?” I looked at his eyes, his abs, his shitty skull tattoo, and the place our bodies were almost joined.

“Because I know you’re all gooey in the centre and you want me to make love to you.” Goddamn him for knowing that. “Don’t worry. Like I said, we can use the injury as an excuse.” He smirked.

Leaning forward, he planted both hands beside my head, and his hair tickled my face. When his lips brushed against mine, he pushed inside me and didn’t stop.

“Fuck,” I whispered against his mouth. The slide of him inside me and the way my body begged for more was what I had missed. The stretch and the friction, the connection and the way he fit above me.

“So romantic,” he whispered, his thighs hitting my ass.

“Greedy,” I corrected. “Holy fuck, I missed this. I missed you inside me.”

Devon moaned, rocking his hips to actually fuck me—make love to me. Soft and slow turned into deep and passionate, and the connection was unheard of. I’d never felt closer to him. I’ve never been so on the edge of orgasm and overwhelming emotion all at once. He kissed my neck, sucking the skin until it marred. Even the caress of his heaving breaths against my jaw tingled with anticipation and satisfaction. My legs spread farther apart, and Devon pushed them back to wrap around his hips, matching me moan for groan.

And when my body was ready to erupt, I grabbed his face instead of my cock and pulled his lips to mine. Devon kept up the rhythm and my eyes closed, my cock throbbing between our abs. Forceful, pulsating, and damn near painful from intensity, I came between our bodies in a wave of pleasure-dripping love. Raw love.

Devon rasped a never-ending moan. “Fuck, Madd. Holy fuck.” He stilled inside me, mouth open against mine. “Not so bad for lovemaking, eh?” he laughed pathetically, collapsing his full weight on my chest.

We were just a couple of in love fools in a trailer, trying not to admit how deeply we loved the softness.



WE HAD NO IDEA what was coming.

When we got back to Garron Park, police cruisers lined the lots and the streets. We looked at each other, unsure of what to do. Did someone die? Was there an attack at the park? Was Jim back?

Devon drove slowly, gawking as much as I was. Unease sprang up in my gut, and I had a sinking suspicion we shouldn't be here. Devon's grip on the wheel turned white, and I knew he felt it too. If we both felt it, it was enough of an indicator that we should leave.

“What do we do, Madd?” He stopped the truck.

Lot 62 came into view, and my throat closed in. It was swarming with cops and cruisers. My first instinct was to worry about my brother, so I pulled out my phone and turned it on. It beeped and pinged immediately, a million messages coming in at once.

Dumbass Brother: *Don't come back to GP. Something isn't right. Hide. Take Dev.*

“Fuck!” I looked at Devon, panicking. “We gotta get—”

“Maddox Kane, you're under arrest for the distribution and possession of illegal substances, weapons, and stolen cash. Use your right hand to open

the passenger door and exit the vehicle with your hands up and your back to us.”

Devon stopped breathing. He looked at me, angry tears blurring with his fearful ones. “No,” he said, shaking his head. “No! No fucking way. I’m not letting this happen.”

“Devon, don’t!” I yelled at him, but he opened the door and stormed out, his hands up but his mouth open.

Every gun in the place pointed right at him, and it felt like déjà vu of the last time I almost lost him to this.

“Devon!”

-DEVON-

STUPIDITY HIT ME HARD. It was my curse, but there was nothing I wouldn't do for Maddox. Nothing. Especially when someone tried to take him from me.

I kept my arms up, but I looked around angrily for whoever was in charge here. "What the fuck is going on?" I demanded to know, walking slowly towards the thirty guns pointed at me.

This had my dad written all over it. He thought I was dead, killed by Davis, so this had to be his way of tidying up his loose ends. Maddox being the priority.

"Devon, fucking stop," Maddox pleaded with me, slamming the truck door and putting his hands up. "Please don't do this, Devon. Don't make me watch you get hurt."

I stopped advancing, struck by the desperation and fear in his voice. When I looked at him, I held his eyes while the cops swarmed and tackled him to the ground, slapping cuffs on his wrists.

“He didn’t do anything! Let him go,” I shouted, staying still. “What the fuck are you even talking about?” No one paid me any mind, so I rushed forward to get to Maddox. Three cops held me back, holding my wrists behind my back. “Someone tell me what is happening!”

My blood scorched my veins, my vision turned red, and my heart broke for the fate that was falling upon Maddox because of me—because of my dad. I couldn’t lose him. Wouldn’t lose him.

“Please!” I shouted, my voice cracking. “You’re making a mistake!”

Maddox, chin in the dirt, looked at me with calm eyes. “Settle down,” he warned me with an even voice. “Don’t make this worse. Just take a breath.” The cops stood him up, pulling on his wrists until he was standing between them. I blocked their path to the cruiser, not letting them take him from me.

“Why is he being arrested?” I begged.

“Devon!” Nate yelled my name, Xavi running up behind him. “What’s going on?”

I had no idea, and I’d never felt more helpless. An officer, one that I’d previously tried to reach out to for help with all of this, tried to usher me backwards, but I didn’t budge.

“Look, son. He’s being arrested with possession and the intent to distribute illegal contraband.” The cop patted my shoulder, trying to calm me down.

“What contraband?”

“He doesn’t have anything illegal!” Xavi screamed. “Madd? You okay?”

Maddox nodded, almost as if he was willing to succumb to this.

“That illegal contraband,” the officer said, nodding at our trailer.

Nate grabbed my arm as I turned. The side yard wasn’t within view, but I saw heavy machinery lined up along the front. A hole had been dug

somewhere. I took a few steps to get a better view, seeing a crater between our trailer and the forest. Inside that hole, open crates with plastic wrapped cash and weapons. Another held blocks of powders and cubes that hadn't been cut open. *No. No fucking way.*

How the actual fuck had someone put that there? We never saw that part of the yard, but surely we would have heard something. Unless it happened last night while we were at the track.

I faced the officer again. "Come on! You know that's not ours!"

"Sorry, son," he said, giving me a sympathetic smile.

Fuck his sympathy. "No you're not! You just want whatever fucking cut you're getting out of—"

"Devon!" Maddox seethed at me. "Please stop." His eyes told me he was terrified, but his tone told me he was more worried about me.

"It's mine," I declared. "All that shit is mine. I put it there." I held out my wrists. "I plead guilty."

"Devon," Maddox cried this time. "Don't."

This time, the police didn't stop me from going to him. "You took a fucking bullet for me, Madd. Let me take one for you."

"No."

"Unfortunately, we have proof that it was Maddox Kane. Shipping documents with his signature, a verbal confession and confirmation from a witness, and his fingerprints on some of the bills. Sorry." The cop grabbed Maddox's cuffed wrists, starting to pull him away.

"What fucking witness?" Xavi shouted.

"Confidential for now," the cop said.

I grabbed Maddox by the neck. "Don't you dare give up, Maddox. Hear me? This wasn't you. Fight!"

Maddox forced the cops to stop. He looked right at me and said, “Fight for me, Devon. Get me a lawyer or something. I need your help. Find Jim.”

“I promise. I will. I won’t let them keep you there.” I held onto him for dear life, starting to panic when they pried him from my fingertips.

“I love you,” he mouthed.

“I love you,” I mouthed back.

My eyes burned as I watched them shove Maddox into the back of a cruiser. Not a fucking chance this would stick. Come hell or high fucking water, I’d get him out of this. Whatever it took.

Xavi argued with a cop, trying to declare his brother’s innocence, and Nate gripped the back of both of our shirts to keep us still. I kept my eyes on Maddox, giving him the determination I felt knowing I’d get to the bottom of this. Somehow.

“He’s right, Devon. You gotta fight his battle out here. He needs you out here proving his innocence,” Nate said, lightening his grip.

Maddox needed me.

As the cruiser pulled away and Maddox turned his head to keep his eyes on mine, I made a vow to myself. We might not be married yet, but for better or worse, we’d be together again.

I was about to become a fucking bounty hunter. I’d find my dad and I’d make him fucking pay for this.

“Where are you taking him?” Xavi asked.

“Bluffs County,” the cop said as I watched the taillights and Madd’s green eyes get farther away. “You can visit him after he’s been moved. He’ll spend a night in Garron holding cells and be moved tomorrow. Don’t do anything stupid in the meantime.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Maddox!” I screamed at the top of my lungs, hoping he’d hear it. “Tomorrow!”

My world imploded when the cruiser drove out of view. My perfect night and blissful morning with Maddox crashed all around me, reminding me I wasn’t someone worthy of living the life dreams were made of. They took him from me. As much as it broke my heart, it darkened my soul.

When I crashed to my knees in that numb sort of pain, I felt my spirit stir. It might be blackening, but it was up for the challenge of rescuing the man we loved.

Fuck the world. There was no world if Maddox wasn’t in it.



MONTH ONE

MADDOX’S BEDROOM AT HIS mom’s trailer was a hot box of hell. Memories swirled amidst the humid air with a lack of movement similar to the stagnant pace my life progressed at. They got stuck in motion, paused while I paused. This closet of a bedroom felt fucking massive without the domineering presence of Maddox in it.

I loved this room. I hated this room.

Lot 62 was a crime scene. I hadn’t been allowed to enter since Maddox was arrested, not even to grab my clothes. It had been taped off and guarded continuously. The contraband they claimed he had was now sitting in a police evidence room, being inspected, counted, and documented. They kept our lot taped off because the more they dug, the more they found. And barely any of it was on our actual lot. Most of it was in the forest beside our

lot, and now I knew why *someone* had asked Gary about the trail that connected there through our property. But no matter how much they dug up in the forest, Maddox's fingerprints remained on some of the cash.

Which was bullshit. Someone was adding more to their so-called evidence, but I wasn't allowed there without being arrested for trespassing and tampering with evidence. Our trailer had been ripped apart and searched, but nothing was ever found inside. And no one from the park had anything to say because no one had seen any of this happen. Not even us, and we lived right fucking there!

Fucking Gary was behind this. Seth had warned us months ago that he saw my dad talking to Gary, buzzing around Lot 62, and now I knew why. He was either planting this evidence back then without us noticing, or he was scoping it out to plant it the night before Maddox got arrested. But why? Just to get Maddox locked up? Jim was a greedy fucker, so you'd think he would have wanted everything in those crates more than he wanted to ruin Maddox's life.

I was fucking useless. Maddox had been sitting in a prison cell for two and a half weeks already, and I'd done little more than annoy the shit out of the guards, cops, and the lead detective on his case. I managed to get a lawyer, but I didn't have the money for a good one, and no one wanted to take a pro bono case for trailer trash. Instead, I got him a community appointed lawyer without much experience. She was nice, but nice wasn't going to win. I needed to find someone else to help her. I'd sell everything I owned to do it.

I stared at the peeling cardboard ceiling tiles of Maddox's old room, feeling tears slip down my cheeks to water the pillow—they'd done nothing but grow despair ever since Maddox was taken from me.

Fuck, I missed him.

I worried about him. Maddox was a hardass, and I knew he'd have all his guards up in there. How long would it take for that hardness to become permanent? How long could he hold on to hope? I was the world's shittiest boyfriend for not even being able to provide him with any hope yet. *Yet.*

A crash from the kitchen startled me. I wiped my tears and walked out there in my boxers like I had every night for the past two weeks. Naomi sat in a heap on the kitchen floor, a pan of uncooked eggs spilled all around her, and a bottle of wine mostly gone on the countertop.

"You okay?" I asked, gripping her arm and pulling her to her feet. She tried. Fuck, did she try. I'd give her that.

She smelled rank, hadn't properly showered in a few days, and her breath was sour with stale wine. I sat her down at the kitchen table and got her a plastic cup of water. She was too unsteady to handle a glass one. She didn't answer me, but I knew she needed to eat something to soak up the alcohol.

"I'll make them. What else do you need?"

Her hands shook as she lit a cigarette. "I need my son home."

I turned my back on her, tears welling in my eyes. I cleaned up her mess and tried not to lose my mind to pain and pathetics. She never outright said she blamed me, but I knew she did. Maddox was in prison because of my dad, and there was no other way to put it. If he hadn't been my boyfriend, he'd be out in the world right now. I was surprised she cared this much; she hadn't been a bad mom, but she hadn't been a good one either. I guess her son in prison was hitting her harder than all the black eyes and bruises she ignored over the years.

The more time I spent lying in his old bed, staring at the water-damaged ceiling, the more I lost hope. The more I realized how much shit I brought

into his life.

He'd been cut, scarred, abused, shot and now arrested all because of his relationship with me. And those were only from my dad. Because of me directly, he'd been neglected, and his confidence and importance had been questioned. What good did I bring him? And not only that, but Naomi, who had been doing really well with her drinking and pill-popping, had slipped right back into the deep end. She drank herself stupid every night, only making it worse with an assortment of random pills. Between me, Xavi, and Seth, we did our best, but she drank her heartbreak from a bottle, and I couldn't even fault her for it.

Seth had a relapse, too. It was the night Maddox got arrested. He was so ashamed of using again, but he did the right thing. He called Xavi for help. So now Seth lived at the shop with them, just until he trusted himself a bit more. Meetings and his sponsor were an important part of his life, but finding a way to help his son was more important. Yes, he wanted Maddox out, but playing detective kept him busy and away from the drugs.

I turned on the stove, cracked new eggs, and finally faced Naomi. "We'll get him home. I promise." If I couldn't prove his innocence, I'd *Shawshank* him out and spend the rest of my life on the run with him.

"I know," she said around the filter of her smoke. She searched the bottom of her purse for any forgotten loose pills, but she came up empty. "I just... I'm worried about him in there!" she cried. "He's too angry for prison."

She wasn't wrong. That was my biggest fear.

Maddox spent so much time being angry at everything that it'd become his default setting. At what point would he not be able to come back to himself? If I didn't find him something to be hopeful for soon, I feared it'd

be sooner than later. In a place like prison, Maddox would be his own worst enemy.

-DEVON-

MONTH TWO

“IT HAD TO HAVE happened in the hospital,” Xavi said. “He signed a shit ton of forms when he was being discharged. I bet some of them were about the shipping container.” He paced the length of the deck behind the shop. “I’m going there to find that nurse.”

“Wait.” Nate held him back with a palm to the chest. “We should get someone else to do it. She knows you.”

“I don’t trust anyone else, Nate! This is my brother’s life we’re talking about!” Xavi was one wrong breeze from a meltdown, and I didn’t know how to soothe him either.

It was a good place to start. The police claimed Maddox’s signature was on the shipping documents, so he would have had to sign them somewhere. The hospital was the last place I could think of him signing anything, so it was worth a shot. I’d check with that sneaky fuck Gary to make sure the signature hadn’t come from our rental agreement a year and a half ago.

How many people did my dad have in on this and how the fuck was he paying them?

“Go,” I told Nate. “She doesn’t know you. You can question her together.”

Xavi stormed out without another look, and Nate groaned a curse at the ocean, hoping for some assistance in keeping his best friend in line. “If he doesn’t stop to think, he’ll end up in the clink with Madd.”

I honestly wished that option for myself so I could make sure Maddox didn’t lose himself in there. Nate wouldn’t let me.

“What’re you going to do?” he asked.

“Go see Gary. Seth is coming with me.” And I’d take it as far as it needed to be taken. No morals this time. “Then I’m going to visit Madd.”

I needed to see him. He told me to stop coming every day because I sucked at hiding my feelings, so I started going every other day. I hated seeing him in an orange jumpsuit, and he told me he didn’t like it when I looked at him like that, so this became a happy medium. I did everything within my power not to look at him like that again, though.



“OKAY!” GARY SHOUTED, BLOOD flying from his lips and tears staining his cheeks. “Okay!”

“Start talking,” I snarled at him.

“I gave him access to Lot 62!” he cried, finally spilling his fucking secrets. “He told me he’d kill my daughter if I didn’t let him know when

you guys left the park. It's Jim, you know!? I believed him," Gary cried harder. "So I started calling him on prepaids every time you guys left."

"So, he's been burying evidence on and around our lot this whole time?" I scoffed, reaching a whole new level of pissed off.

"I don't know! I never asked what he was doing. It might have just started." Gary whimpered, obviously afraid, but I didn't know if he feared us and what we'd do to him, or my dad and what would happen if he found out Gary narked on him.

Seth looked at me, silently asking what I wanted to do about this. I mean, I got it. Gary wanted to protect his daughter, but why the fuck should Maddox have to rot away to nothing but anger and bones in order for her to stay alive? In his eyes, his daughter was more important, and he did what he had to do to protect her. But in my eyes, nothing held more importance than Maddox and I'd do terrible things to get him out of there.

"Confess," I told Gary. "Admit that to the police so I can get Madd out."

"I can't! He'll kill her," he hiccuped through his sobs, looking like a total mess.

Seth grabbed Gary by the back of his head. "Where is Jim? Are you still in touch with him? How do you communicate with him?"

Gary didn't answer, but his eyes shifted to his desk. Seth let him go and searched the drawers, so I kept my attention on Gary. "What other dirty work did you do for my dad?" He better answer me because my fists were rather twitchy.

"I...I..."

"You what?"

"I gave him the cash! The cash that had Maddox's fingerprints on it." Oh, this motherfucker. "I took all the rent money over the past few months and

it was placed on the outside of those stacks. That's how they tied him to the crime. That was the physical proof! I'm sorry."

My twitchy fist made his nose bleed. Then it made his lip split. That's how they got his fingerprints on those bills? There had to be a way to discredit that.

"This?" Seth held up an old cellphone. "This how Jim gets in contact with you?"

Gary hung his head, blood spilling onto his yellow button-down.

"What's the passcode?"

As soon as Gary mumbled it, Seth unlocked the phone. "Only one number in here. It's Jim?"

Gary nodded. "Please... my daughter."

I wasn't heartless. I'd do what I could to protect his daughter. The old me would have assumed it was an empty threat, but the new me who'd almost been murdered because of my dad took it seriously. Maddox remained my priority, and now I not only had a confession from Gary, but a way to communicate with the man who ruined my life.



MONTH THREE

"YOU LOOK GOOD, DEV," Maddox said in a voice that tried to be his but wasn't. His hands were cuffed on top of the table between us, and the hunch of his shoulders hurt to look at. "Eyes are bloodshot, and you generally look like shit, but a good piece of shit."

What he didn't say, because I'd already gotten him in shit for it, was that he thought I looked good enough to get laid. Outside. Without him. It meant he gave up. It meant he was telling me to move on and lose hope because he wasn't getting out of here.

A huge *fuck no* to that.

"If we were married, we could have had conjugal visits," I joked, trying to lighten the mood.

Maddox didn't even grin. "Don't do this, Devon. Don't tie yourself to someone who's going to be locked up for most of their life. Not worth it."

"Would you shut the fuck up about that?" I snapped at him, sick of hearing it. "Stop losing hope, you dumb fuck. Trust me, okay? Put your damn trust in me to get you out of this."

What I didn't say was that we had a few leads to work with, but nothing concrete enough to help him. *Yet*. I wouldn't stop trying until Maddox was home with me—wherever the fuck home ended up being once this nightmare ended.

"I trust you," he said softly. "But you can't keep living for me. You have no life now."

So fucking what? He was my life, so fuck him for thinking this wasn't what I wanted to be doing. I didn't care if it took me another month, a year, or ten years, I wouldn't give up. He would, though, and that scared me the most. Guilt was weird that way. We both felt it from different vantage points; I felt responsible for him being in here, and he felt like he was holding me back in life *because* he was in here. All around, it fucking sucked.

"I am living my own life, and you're going to be in it. So shut the hell up about it and tell me what's new." I put my hands on the table, desperate to

touch him.

“What’s new?” he scoffed, leaning back in disgust. “Oh, okay, let’s see. Some guy got beat half to death yesterday right in front of me. I haven’t had a shower in over a week because of some sewer problem they aren’t fixing. My cellmate jerks off to kill time, so that’s fun. And I’m pretty sure it’s been three months since I took a solid shit. So, there ya go. That’s what’s new with me.”

He did look thinner. The food here wasn’t nutritious, but more importantly, it was hard to stomach, and that was coming from someone who lived off his mom’s shitty casseroles. I’d been trying to fill his commissary with money and snacks, but every penny I had went to lawyers and the case. A few people from the park had been chipping in to a Maddox fund, so that was nice.

“I love you, Maddox. But you have to keep your shit together, okay? I’m working on it. We’re all working on it.” My fingers inched towards his, but I didn’t touch him. The last time I did, I had to watch a guard smack him with a baton. “I’m not giving up, so you can’t either. Got it?”

Maddox sighed. His joined hands came up to slide through his hair. “I’m just tired, Devon. So tired.”

My heart kept on breaking. Seeing him like this was a nightmare. Maddox didn’t belong behind bars. He belonged out in the world, ripping up a motocross track, causing all sorts of shit, and swimming in the ocean with me. He belonged with me, showing me his soft side while being a hardass about it, and there wasn’t a reality in my mind where that didn’t exist. He *would* get out.

“I know.” I smiled at him. “I know, babe.”

He grinned a little at that. “I’m not even drugged.”

“I said it, not you.” I smiled. “We love you, and we won’t ever stop.” I had more news, but sharing it with him would have to wait. I learned the hard way that giving him hope and then having to shut it down was worse than giving him nothing at all. If everything went to plan today, we’d be exposing Davis. “I’m getting you out of here, Madd.”

“Yeah?”

“Fuck yeah. And when I do, we can go anywhere, do anything, and be whoever the fuck we wanna be. Me and you, Madd. That’s our future.”

I saw a tiny-ass spark of hope flicker in the green of his eyes. Barely there, but there. “Alright.”

Alright. I needed a win. I needed to come back here with Maddox’s lawyer and good news. So that’s exactly what I was going to do.



THE OFFICER WHO HAD spoken to me sort of respectfully that day, the very same one who put Maddox in the back of the cruiser and told us not to do anything stupid, crossed his arms and shook his head at me.

“He’s still claiming it was self-defence. Why should I believe otherwise?” Officer Hanes asked.

I wanted to kill him... just a little. “Because! For the hundredth time, why the fuck would Maddox try to kill someone, let alone a cop, for my dad? He hates my dad and always has. You have a handful of witnesses to confirm that.”

“Did that cause relationship issues between the two of you?” Hanes asked. “Were you trying to help your dad get away to protect him, and

Maddox tried to stop you?”

If I had a gun right now, I would probably kill him. “I *was* trying to help my dad get away,” I admitted, calming myself with long breaths. All those times I told Maddox to learn meditation and he hadn’t, but I’d been surviving off that shit for three months now. Being angry didn’t help him, so look at me being a calm bitch with this dick of a cop. “Because he threatened Maddox. I wasn’t protecting my dad, I was protecting my boyfriend.”

“Don’t incriminate yourself, Sawyer. Be careful what you say,” Hanes warned from across his desk.

I’d already mentioned that I’d been the one to steal the shipping slips, and Hanes also pretended not to hear it. “I was just there to make sure he left. To see it with my own eyes, to know we were safe.”

“Then how did Maddox end up there?”

“Because he knew I’d do something stupid and showed up to watch my back.” He always did that, and I’d be dead if he hadn’t. “When my dad left and Davis pulled that gun on me, he told me it was his job to finish me off. That’s when Maddox stepped in front of the bullet. Why do you trust that cop more than me? Why would I make this up?” I pleaded with him, trying not to sound defeated.

“To get your boyfriend out of prison,” he deadpanned.

“That happened months before Maddox even got arrested, and I told the same story then! You’re just a hypocritical piece of shit like the rest of them. Don’t trust the facts just because they’re coming from a Sawyer! Fucking cops, eh? Here to protect? Bullshit.” I stood and knocked the chair over, pacing his office.

“Alright,” Hanes relented. “I’m listening, but I need more than your word. I need proof that an officer, who completed his training, passed all criminal record checks, and is an upstanding citizen of Garron, would lie to his coworkers and commanders and team up with a known criminal like Jim Sawyer.”

“I’m waiting on my brother for that.” I lit a smoke in his office even though he already told me three times not to. *Hurry up, Nate.*

Ten minutes and two cigarettes later, Nate and Xavi finally showed up with the evidence we needed.

“He’s waiting on proof,” I told them.

“Well, here it is,” Xavi set down a folder, a voice recorder, and a cell phone. “Since we had to do your job for you, you don’t have the right to ask us how we got this.”

Hanes shook his head but didn’t comment. I knew the evidence would have to be gathered legally to hold up in court, but we hoped this might be enough to convince him to look into it the right way. So, for the next hour, we laid everything we had on the table.

The recorded confession from Gary, admitting he allowed Jim access to our lot, and that he gave our rent money with Maddox’s fingerprints on it to Jim. Gary also admitted his willingness to hold the shipping slips for Jim, which was another way for them to incriminate us by having me steal them, because he knew Maddox would touch them. Yeah, his fingerprints were on those, too. My dad had never needed those forms; he only got me to steal them to bulk up his evidence against Maddox.

We went back to the hospital and found the nurse who discharged Maddox. She said he signed forms from the hospital but also forms that a plain clothes police officer gave her. She admitted to being new to dealing

with a serious police matter like that, so when the officer told her they were standard protocol for a situation like this, she didn't even check what they were. But she *did* tell Maddox there were police forms in the bundle. She got hospital security to show us the video from the day of Maddox's release, and it clearly showed Davis breaking house arrest and giving her documents. It didn't show what those forms were, but it was enough for Hanes to start questioning everything.

The cellphone that we found in Gary's office showed text conversations setting everything up. Again, we couldn't prove that it was my dad sending the messages, but it showed intent from someone other than Maddox. Hanes took the phone and sent it off to the IT department, but I wanted it back. I had the number, anyway.

"Okay, something is fishy," Hanes agreed. "But explain to me how you didn't know there was digging going on outside your trailer?"

"Because Gary told Jim when we left. They did it when we weren't home, and it was the side lot and the forest, so it's not like we ever saw it. Garron Park doesn't have lush grassy lawns, so it's not like a little dirt would be noticed by us."

Hanes didn't look convinced. "Why would he rob a ship full of contraband, get the captain in on the deal, use it all to set up your boyfriend, and then miss out on the haul?"

Xavi took that one. "Because your boy Davis has access to evidence lockup," he snapped. "When this cools down, you better believe your rookie cop will take everything and distribute it to Jim, the captain, Gary, and himself."

Hanes linked his fingers. "Do you have any other proof that Officer Davis has been in contact with Jim?"

“Yeah,” Nate said, looking at us. “But you aren’t going to like how we got it.”

After a lesson in USB sticks and external hard drives from a buddy in Redding, Nate and Xavi had broken into Davis’ house during his court appointed therapy time. They transferred the contents of his laptop and spare phone to the hard drive and then had to get the lawyer to plug it into her laptop because we didn’t have one. At least they didn’t fuck it up. They acted like black-hat hackers after that.

“I don’t want to know,” Hanes said. “But if the evidence is good enough, I’ll get a warrant and obtain it legally.”

Nate put the lawyer’s laptop on the desk and showed Hanes months’ worth of phone records, calls to the prison my dad was kept in, emails without real names, and the transfer of numbers and new burner phones. The most important part was the layout of their plan. My dad had been in prison when the plan started, so emails and burner texts were their main method of communication, which worked well for us. No, there were no real names attached to anything, but the plan was laid out plain and simple for Hanes to see. Now I just needed him to believe Maddox had no part in it.

“You didn’t make this yourselves?” Hanes asked, doubting us.

“Get a fucking warrant and find it all for yourself,” Xavi scoffed. “My brother has been in jail for three months for a crime he didn’t commit. Do the right thing here, Hanes!”

“And do it fast,” I added. “Maddox has suffered enough. If anything happens to him in there...”

“I know you aren’t stupid enough to threaten an officer,” Hanes said, shooting me a look.

I might be.

The room was tense. My hope barely hung on by a thread, and I desperately needed someone on our side. I needed good news to bring to Maddox, and I needed him back in my life. I needed the green of his eyes to burn with challenge rather than fizzle with defeat, and I needed to breathe some damn life back into Maddox Kane.

“I’ll put a rush order to the judge for a warrant right now,” Hanes said.

The three of us sank in relief.

Finally.

-DEVON-

MONTH FOUR

STUCK IN PERPETUAL AWAKENESS, I couldn't shut my brain off in the middle of the night. The case dragged on, even though it'd been expedited. Madd's lawyer was pretty confident that the new information, now obtained legally because of Hanes, would get him out, or at the very least, let him come home for the duration of the trial.

Davis had been arrested, but because there still wasn't enough evidence to charge him for anything other than breaking house arrest, he wasn't held for long. That meant he got to continue his house arrest, though his phone, laptop, and tablet were being monitored. Didn't stop that bitch from sending an 'it's hot here' message to the number for my dad. That was a warning if I'd ever seen one. Once again, my dad got away with it because no one could find him. I'd never taken him for a smart criminal, but fuck, he continually proved me wrong with this whole clusterfuck.

I swung my legs over the side of Maddox's bed, my hard dick irritating me because I didn't want it to be hard. I grabbed my phone and pulled up a

few photos of Maddox, just like I'd been doing for the past four months. I started to jerk off without much hope.

I missed the taste of him, the feel of his hands on my body, and the entirely dominating way he grabbed me. I missed him calling me out on everything, reminding me I was dumb more often than not, and laughing at me for fucking up dinner. I missed the feel of his eyes on me when he didn't think I was paying attention, and the little scowl he'd give me whenever I caught him.

I stroked my dick. The pleasure was there, but it wasn't enough to get me off.

I missed his t-shirt tan lines and the dark skin on the back of his neck. I missed the way he spread out in bed like he had a right to the whole thing, even if he held me tight to make sure I didn't go anywhere. I even missed his loud-ass mind when he overthought something to the point of waking me up with the whirring of his brain.

The look in his eyes when he came. The way he licked his bottom lip before biting it...

My cock throbbed in my hand.

I missed all of him. His energy and demeanour, the shitty texts he messed up sending, and his presence in my space.

"Fuck!" I seethed, letting go of my dick. Tears sprung up on me instead, and an overflowing agony filled me so much it poured through my eyes just for relief.

I hadn't been able to jerk off for months, and to be honest, I didn't even care. My heart wasn't in it. How could something feel good when Maddox suffered? I hung my head in my hands, not even capable of containing my sobs. For the majority of my life, my day started and ended with Maddox.

At first, he was my childhood friend, and I looked up to him, following his lead. Then he became the enemy, the only rival I ever pitted myself against, and once that started, everything became about messing with him. I'd think of things to do to him when he wasn't even around, and I'd compare myself to him after every competition, on or off the track. I compared my jobs, my life, and myself to everything he did, and while it mostly angered me, it was still all about him.

Then I fell in love with him.

I was lost now.

My mind liked to conjure up the way he used to look months ago to how he looked now. Hollow, hopeless, and unwilling to fight. I hated it. Fucking hated it. He'd always been the one to rise to a challenge, and now he gave up like he had no fight left in him. I needed him to keep fighting, just a little bit longer.

Rubbing my eyes, I stared at the photo of Maddox on his bike, smiling one of those rare smiles that had only ever been meant for me. I saved it as my screensaver a long time ago, but he kept changing it to one of both of us.

Needing to hear it myself, I said, "I fucking promise you, Maddox. I'm getting you out of there."

Because I wasn't the guy who neglected his boyfriend anymore. I wasn't the loser who didn't have his priorities straight. I wasn't dumb and impulsive when it came to Maddox's life, and I wasn't ungrateful for anything I had.

But this was a whole new low for me, and I needed help.

I pressed the phone to my ear and took a deep breath when my brother answered. "Nate, I'm not okay."

Because a very large part of me, a part I'd been fighting and hiding from since I was a teen, wanted to drown this pain in a bottle of anything I could get my hands on and shoot bliss straight into my arm to chase it all away.

"I'm coming," Nate said. "Right now. Hold on, Devon. Just hold on"



IN THE MIDST OF this whole fucking mess, I'd lost pretty much everything. The trailer, our trucks, most of our possessions, Maddox's phone, and our dirt bikes. Before I sold his phone for basically nothing, I sent all the pictures and conversations to my phone so I could look at them whenever I wanted to. Lawyers were expensive, and now that we had a better one, I'd sell whatever organs I didn't need to make sure Maddox won.

Nate and Xavi helped with money whenever they could. Our dream shop suffered for it. Our money went to Maddox's case instead of being reinvested in the shop. We needed so many new tools, a new lift, and the garage doors needed to be fixed, but both Nate and Xavi had assured me that none of that was important. Seth helped where he could, too. He didn't have much money, but he took it upon himself to always be a few steps ahead with the case, and he took care of Naomi when the rest of us couldn't. Xavi had even sold his truck to help pay.

I had no home, no vehicle, no hobby, and barely any clothes. I didn't have Maddox.

"Here," Nate said, handing me a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. "It's not booze, but it might help."

I rolled down the passenger window, lit a smoke, and tried to give myself a little credit that I hadn't swallowed a bottle of whiskey. Nate drove us through the night, not really going anywhere specific, but not heading home either. Soft rock played quietly, but the wind from my window overpowered it.

"What's going on, Dev? Talk to me."

"I'm breaking," I admitted, watching the darkness through the window.

"You're allowed to break, Dev, but you aren't allowed to shatter. Madd needs you."

The half-moon came into view as we cleared a treed area. I watched the reflection of it against the ocean while Nate drove along the coast. Sucking on the cigarette, I tried to put my thoughts in order.

"I failed him. I failed him over and over and over again. So many fucked up things have happened to him because of me." *Here I go, sounding like a broken record again.*

"Stop taking the blame for Dad," Nate snapped.

I knew it was my dad, but indirectly through me, Maddox suffered. "And now he's in fucking prison, Nate. He's rotting away in there, losing hope, giving up, and thinking he deserves it for some reason. Like he'll pay this price if it means I'm safe, and I don't deserve that. I don't want him to pay any price!" Tears sparked. "And now he's telling me to move on and... no, I can't. I can't move on. I won't. I don't even want to think about that." The moon became blurry and too bright through my wet vision. "I won't."

"Fucking right you won't," Nate agreed. "He's just in a dark place right now. Which means you have to be the one to lift him back up. This is just his way of trying not to get his hopes up too high about this new trial."

“How, though? How do I lift him up when I can barely keep myself standing? I can’t promise him anything, and he knows it. This is all a major question mark, and everything is in the hands of the court.”

“Hanes will come through. We’ve got two good lawyers now, and we have *evidence*. Madd is getting out of there, and when he does, you make damn sure he knows how loved he is.”

“Then what? Even if he gets out, Dad is still out there, able to take him away from me anytime he damn well pleases.”

“We can’t worry about that right now. Focus on the trial. One thing at a time.”

I finished the smoke and tossed it out the window, lighting another one just to have something to do with my hands. “I saved the number Gary used to contact him.”

I saved it in my phone and stared at it for months, wondering if I should call it and face off against my dad.

“Devon, don’t. Leave the number alone until this is over. Madd’s trial is in four days. Don’t do anything to fuck it up before then.”

“I won’t,” I promised, meaning it. “I need to sell something else to buy Madd a suit for court.”

“Seth said he found one for him.”

Good, because apart from my soul, I had nothing left to sell. I was broke, homeless, bordering on becoming an alcoholic, and full of vengeful rage. I was heartbroken, suffering, guilty, and weakening by the day. All of that was going to have to be good enough, because it’s all I had left. If this trial didn’t work, I’d have to start making deals with devils to get Maddox out.

“Dev?” Nate said. “I’m proud of you.”

I cried again. As much as I appreciated the sentiment, pride didn't get me anywhere. I needed action, and I needed to thank my brother for picking me up in the middle of the night to keep me from drinking myself stupid and stealing Naomi's pills.

"Four days, Devon. He's coming home in four days."

He better because I didn't think I could live five days without him.

-MADDOX-

MONTH FOUR - TWO DAYS BEFORE TRIAL

SILENCE DIDN'T EXIST IN this place. I welcomed it. Even the clank of bars, the shouting of other inmates, and the constant shuffling sounds of the guards became too quiet. Silence encouraged my mind to wander, and these days, it didn't wander anywhere nice. It sunk into depravity and reminded me that there was a very good chance I'd be living here forever.

A life without Devon.

I settled on my back and stared at the photo of Devon pinned to the bunk above me. I didn't leave it there, afraid someone would mess with it, but whenever I had a moment to myself, I looked at him and tried not to cry.

Seeing him every other day in the visitor's lounge wasn't enough for me. I needed to touch him. Fuck, I'd do anything to touch him. I missed when he used to smile for real, but these days, all he gave me were fake smiles meant to encourage me to keep going. I loved him for trying to give me hope, but how long was I supposed to let this go on for? If things didn't work in my favour in two days, I'd have to let him go.

It'd shatter me, crush my soul into tiny fragments of dust, and turn my heart as black as my mind was becoming. But I'd do it to set him free. Devon didn't deserve to spend the rest of his life pining after a guy in prison. I needed to break his heart in order to set him free, and after a few months of pain, he'd start to get better. What was love without a little sacrifice?

"Kane," the guard shouted, appearing in the open door of my cell. "Visitor."

My cellmate leaned his head over the bunk, grinning at me. "Boyfriend again?"

I ignored him, hating that he even knew I had a boyfriend. I'd never been ashamed of being with a guy, even when the whole thing confused me, but I feared it here. Being gay in a place like this wasn't the easiest thing, but for whatever reason, my cellmate kept my secret. I shoved the photo of Devon under my pillow, hoping this dipshit wouldn't touch it again. He did once, and I punched him in the eye for it. He never ratted me out for that either.

I climbed out of the bunk and put my wrists out in front of me, familiar with the routine now. I could wander all I wanted during certain times, but whenever I had a visitor, the cuffs came out like I was a death risk.

Pushed to walk ahead of the guard, I got taunted as we passed other cells. Some of these guys never got a single visitor, and I pretty much had one every day or every other day. I didn't care about the taunts, because without Devon, my parents, my brother, and Nate, I'd have lost my mind in here during the first month. I thought I was tough. Turned out I wasn't. Maybe trailer park tough and prison tough were two different things.

"Thirty minutes," the guard said when we got to the visitation area. "Forty if I forget to check my watch for another ten." He barely grinned at

me, but he'd been a good guy since I got here.

"Thanks."

The tables mostly sat empty, but a few inmates visited with wives, kids, or parents. I wasn't considered a violent criminal, so I got visits in a communal space with guards all around.

My brother stood, smiling at me with less pain in his eyes than Devon had. "Hey, Madd." He wanted to hug me, but it wasn't allowed. "You look like shit."

"I feel like shit," I admitted, sitting down across from him.

Xavi put his hands on the metal table, looking as guilty as the rest of them. I didn't know why they always looked at me like this was all their fault. It wasn't. But my cellmate had told me it was something like survivor's guilt. They felt bad for being free when I wasn't.

"How are you?" he asked.

The exact same as always, only a little darker now. "Tired." Pissed off, afraid, scared of everything, lonelier than I'd ever been, and depressed as shit.

"Two more days, Madd. Two days."

"Yeah." I hoped he was right, but I didn't let myself go there too often.

"I dropped your suit off with the guards. You're all set for court."

"What'd you have to sell this time?" I asked. "Who the hell can afford a suit?"

I hated that they sold everything for me. If this trial didn't give me a win, it'd all be for nothing, and they'd have to start over from zero.

"Dad had one," Xavi said, brushing that off. His expression turned sombre. "Look, Madd. I gotta tell ya something."

"What happened?" I sat up straighter.

“Devon...”

“Devon, what?” I leaned forward, panic gripping me. “What about Devon, Xavi? Is he okay?” My heart sank to my ankles and my anxiety peaked.

“He’s okay now,” Xavi said, making my throat clog. “He’s just not doing very well.”

“Tell me, Xavi! Please.” I begged him with my eyes so I didn’t end this visit with anger before I got the chance to find out. The guards would pull me from the room if I so much as raised my voice. “Please.”

Xavi ran his fingers through his hair. “He’s okay. He’s just struggling. He’s been doing so well, you know? Trying to stay focused on the trial and getting you out. But...”

“Xavi,” I cried. *Tell me before I fucking break.*

“He got really drunk last night. He took some of Mom’s pills, and he ended up in the hospital.”

I didn’t think it was possible for my heart to break even more. *No.* Devon. That clog in my throat stuttered out in a choppy breath that made my lip wobble. “Is he okay?”

“I’m not even sure if it was an OD or if it was alcohol poisoning, but he’s okay. They pumped his stomach and flushed his system, but he’s okay today. He’s back home, but he’s staying with us now. I don’t want him staying with mom anymore. He wanted to come today, but we wouldn’t let him. He needs to rest before tomorrow.”

Devon was out there hurting, and there was nothing I could do about it. My stomach turned queasy and my eyes burned. I needed to win this court case so I could get the fuck out and bitch slap Devon back into shape. I needed to remind him what we had to live for.

“Why wasn’t anyone watching him? There had to have been signs, no?”

“There was. He called Nate the night before in the middle of the night, asking for help. He told Nate that he wanted to drink, so they drove around for a few hours until Devon felt better. I guess... we fucked up by thinking he’d reach out again. I’m sorry, Madd.”

He had nothing to be sorry for.

“I’m telling you this because you need to stay hopeful. Devon is hurting, and he needs you out there, Madd. Don’t give up yet. Promise me you won’t give up on him.” Xavi caught my eye, wanting me to promise.

I couldn’t make that promise. No part of me wanted to give up on Devon, but if he kept reverting to drugs and alcohol, I’d have to free him as soon as I could if I didn’t get out. Devon was the best person I knew, well, for me. I wouldn’t be the one to ruin him. If I had to stay here, I wouldn’t drag him down this dark hole with me. I’d hurt him, hurt myself, and free him from our relationship and his responsibility to get me out. I’d find a gentle way to ease Devon into a life that didn’t include me.

“I love him, Xavi. I love him enough to do whatever it takes to make sure he doesn’t suffer.”

Xavi shook his head. “That’s not the same thing and you know it. None of this is right. You shouldn’t even be in here, and if you break his fucking heart, he’s never going to stop hurting because of this. Whether you’re in or out. Stop thinking about that. Just focus on the trial because you’re getting out in two days. Hear me?”

Those burning tears dripped down my cheeks, and I nodded at my brother. I had to have hope for at least two more days. Two more days and I might be able to hug him, kiss his lips, and lock him away so he could never hurt himself again.

“I don’t want him alone right now, okay? Stay with him until the trial.”

“He’s under constant watch. It’s pissing him off, but he’s succumbing to it. He’s a feisty fucker, but he’s fighting so damn hard for you, Madd.”

I knew he was. I was half surprised he didn’t go hold up a bank just to get locked up in here with me.

“Make sure he knows I love him. Tell him for me.”

For two more days, I’d fight for this as hard as Devon had been fighting for me the past four months.

He was my home, and I’d do anything to get back to him.

-DEVON-

DAY OF TRIAL

I FUCKED UP SO bad.

Not only did I miss an opportunity to visit Maddox, but I let him down in the process. What the hell had I been thinking? I knew! I fucking knew that bottle would get me nowhere, and I knew the pills I took after wouldn't help. I knew that, so why the fuck had I done it? The numbness hadn't even been worth it, and today, the stress was still there, but now it was amplified with a lingering hangover, shame, and even more guilt piled on top of my never-ending supply of it. Maddox didn't need to worry about anything other than the trial, but I'd gone and made him worry about me.

Devon fucks up again, ladies and gentlemen. Surprise, surprise.

"One mistake doesn't define you," Seth said, handing me an already knotted tie because I had no clue how to tie one. "Let it go and move on."

I wrapped the tie around my neck but made no move to tighten it. I leaned against the reception desk at the shop, feeling like shit. I didn't know

if it was nerves or lingering sickness from my mistake, but either way, my stomach sat heavy in my gut.

“What if they... What if today doesn’t go...”

“Don’t go in thinking like that,” Seth said, flipping my collar up and straightening the tie. “You keep telling him to have hope. Take your own damn advice.” He smiled at me.

The lawyers were confident. Hanes was prepared to put down all the evidence that proved Maddox was set up. Even the ship captain was going to testify in Maddox’s favour, confessing to his side deal with Jim. It was a bargain he struck with Hanes for no jail time; only the loss of his captain’s license and meeting with a parole officer in his hometown. Gary’s daughter had guards for the day, but it gave Gary the peace of mind to come to court and tell the truth. We had enough to at least prove reasonable doubt, and that’d be enough to get Maddox out of there.

The only two people working against us were Davis and my dad. The lawyers told us our chances of proving Maddox innocent were good, but good wasn’t a sure thing. All I needed was for it to prove Maddox had been set up. Then I could get him home and figure out the rest with him. *With him.*

“I’m trying,” I told Seth as he flipped my collar down and snugged up the tie. “I just want him back.”

Seth dropped his hands. He sighed and took a step back. “Look, Devon, I’ve gotta apologize for how I... treated you in the beginning.”

Now wasn’t the time for that. I nodded to accept it, but waved him off to say I didn’t care right now. Yeah, he made a snide comment about him fucking a guy, but he had more than proven himself since then.

“I just want you to know that as his father, albeit a shitty one, it makes me proud to see how well my son has done with you. He deserves someone to love him the way you do, and I’m glad he has you.” He rubbed the back of his neck while my stomach tightened. “I’m just trying to say... thanks for being so good to him.”

Instead of making a guilty remark about how badly I’d fucked up his life, I simply said, “Always.”

I’d never worn a suit before, and I felt weird as hell in it, but I was ready to go. Time to get my boyfriend back.



THIS FUCKING TIE CHOKED me. I loosened it, wiping sweat from my forehead, trying to calm down as Maddox was escorted into the courtroom.

Damn, he looked good in a suit. I mean, he looked like shit, but he was hot shit.

I watched him scan the room, knowing he was searching for me. My heart fumbled four beats when he looked at me, stopping to peer straight into my soul like it was the only thing tethering him to this room. No one else existed at that moment, just him and I and our desire to get back to one another. Maddox sucked in a shaky breath that made his throat wobble, and I gave him every ounce of strength I had through our eye contact.

“I love you,” I mouthed to him.

“Love you,” he mouthed back.

Maddox sat in a chair next to his lawyer, right in front of us. My fingers twitched with the need to reach out and touch him, but I was too afraid to

make a mistake and mess this up for him. Nate squeezed my shoulder on one side, and Xavi leaned into me on the other. United. Seth and Naomi sat on the other side of Xavi, and Andrea from the park sat beside Nate. A few other park residents had come to show support, but most hadn't been able to make the drive into the city from Garron.

This was it. This was the day we had been fighting for. Maddox would either have his dreams answered or his nightmares confirmed, and no matter the outcome, I'd be by his side to carry the burden. Dream or nightmare, I'd live through either for the sake of my man.

"Madd," I whispered, leaning forward. He leaned back but kept his face ahead. "I tried the thing you said that night you got drugged. The mattress and box spring thing."

To my utter fucking relief, Maddox actually stifled a laugh. Holy fuck. My skin broke out in goosebumps to hear that sound.

He turned to the side, glancing at me out of the corner of his eye. "You don't wanna know what I've had to do inside."

"Kinky." I winked at him. I'd never winked before, and I felt stupid for doing it, but it made him laugh again, so it wasn't all bad.

I felt so much better seeing him grin. It was a lie. I hadn't fucked anything, not even my fist, in four months, but the comment had worked to settle us both down. Until...

"All rise."

A herd of hellhounds galloped in my chest.



NATE SHOVED MY HEAD between my knees and told me to breathe like the night he stopped my panic attack when Maddox walked out on me.

Court was too intense. The case had been laid out bare, and I sweated through every fucking part of it. Now I hyperventilated in the hallway, remembering the set of Maddox's shoulders as he pleaded not guilty.

Gary did his part. The ship captain did his part. The hospital nurse told the truth. Hanes laid everything out, and the lawyers delivered the evidence with confidence. Everything went well until Davis took the stand, showing proof that he had a confirmed doctor's appointment that gave him a reason to be in the hospital that day. That was the part my mind snagged on. What if one doctor's appointment threw our whole case?

Maddox's lawyer had been quick on her feet, questioning Davis' reasoning for being on the surgical outpatient floor to give the nurse documents. Davis stumbled over his words for a few seconds before sticking to the story that he got lost in the hospital, asked her for directions and only gave her documents that he thought he saw her drop. He'd 'never seen them before', the lying fuck. Wasn't even a good lie because security footage could probably discredit it.

Nate smacked my back, bringing my head up now that my breathing had regulated a little. "You're okay," he assured me.

I scrubbed at my eyes, trying to clear them. To say I was nervous was the understatement of the fucking decade. Maddox was back there right now, awaiting his fate. Guilty or not guilty.

Xavi pulled me to my feet, but my legs shook. He gripped the sides of my face and met my eyes. "Whatever the fuck happens in there, we stick together and get through it."

I nodded, eyes blurring.

“Promise me, Devon.”

I nodded again, barely breathing. “I promise. We stick together.”

“I love you, man. I can never thank you enough for everything you’ve done for my brother. No matter what, you’ll always be my brother, too.” He pulled me into a hug, and I fell against him.

I hugged him back, holding onto him with the hope that we’d both get him back today. Maybe I just held onto him for the sake of my sanity.

“Love you,” I mumbled into his jacket.

Nate joined the hug, and the three of us stood there, holding on for strength, support, and comfort while a jury of strangers decided the fate of our lives. Maddox’s life. The seconds ticked by and my anxiety grew more intense with each one that passed.

This was it. This was the moment I’d been waiting for since the day Maddox was taken away. Would I get my boyfriend back, or would I be making deals with new kinds of devils? Because if Maddox got denied his freedom today, he’d give up. And if he gave up, I’d get arrested just to be with him.

A life in prison with Maddox was a thousand times better than a free life without him. Nate told me that wasn’t a healthy way of thinking, but our relationship wasn’t healthy in general, so I didn’t care.

The doors opened.

I took my first step towards whatever future awaited me on the other side of this verdict.

-MADDOX-

DARKNESS.

I was consumed by it, emitting it, living in it. My mind had gone dark, my soul blackened, my hope clouded by despair and desolation, and my heart inked over with anger and hatred. The tiny speck of light tethering me to this reality was Devon. His bright blue eyes and his blond hair, holding me here so darkness couldn't completely carry me away just yet.

Guided by two guards into the courtroom, my stomach churned with nerves and my mind ran through every possible outcome. There were only two immediate ones, but they led to vastly different futures.

If deemed guilty, I'd go back to prison to live out whatever sentence they gave me for my crime of possession with the intent to distribute over half a million dollars worth of illegal contraband. From there, I'd lose my life, my love, and myself. I'd shut him out, turn myself off, and wither into a man who never knew love again, becoming a shell of the person I used to be.

If proven innocent, I'd get to go home to my home—to Devon. I'd get a chance to fight for the life I wanted. I'd get the opportunity to hold the man

I loved with all my force while making promises to myself to never lose him again. I'd get Devon... forever. We'd still have to deal with the fallout of the trial and his dad, but we'd be able to do it together. If I made it out of here today, I'd marry him the first chance I got.

But... darkness. It crowded in on me from everywhere. Even as I sat down beside my lawyers with the jury and judge in place, ready to fate my life, that darkness blotted out my hope. I refused to get too hopeful, too excited. False hope could be the demise of my life, and I didn't want to get ahead of myself.

I looked behind me. Devon looked absolutely wrecked and absolutely beautiful. He breathed too hard, sweat too much, and kept tugging on the collar of his suit like it was choking him. When he met my eyes, he settled somewhat, but not by much. He looked on the verge of either passing out, throwing up, bombing the place, or crying. I smiled at him, trying to calm him down even more so he didn't die of a heart attack before the verdict could be read.

He smiled back, his blue eyes full of all that hope I tried not to feel. There he was, my light amid the darkness, beaming blue at me in the middle of all this doom and gloom. I held on to that speck of light as I turned to face the judge.

"Maddox Kane, you are being tried in a court of law. Two separate charges await sentencing. The first charge, possession of illegal contraband equalling a sum of over six-hundred-thousand dollars. You have pleaded not guilty."

My chest tightened, but I made my head rise, acting more confident than I felt.

“For the charge of intent to distribute illegal contraband equalling a sum of over six-hundred-thousand dollars, you pleaded not guilty.”

I swallowed.

My mouth salivated and my throat dried. The time had come. My body shook violently, my hands barely able to stay still at my sides.

To the jury, the judge asked, “On the first charge, count of possession, do you find the defendant guilty or not guilty?”

My pulse quickened. My head got light. I closed my eyes, listening to fate.

“Not guilty.”

A breath wobbled out of me, and Devon sobbed behind me.

“On the second charge, intent to distribute, do you find the defendant guilty or not guilty?”

My life flashed before my eyes. Every memory I had of Devon swam behind my closed lids, pulling forward an array of emotions that were too vast and too powerful for one moment’s attention. Memories switched to hopes and dreams. Dreams of marrying the man I love. Hopes of building a shitty but perfect life with him. The gift of sleeping in the same bed, watching him eat my mom’s casseroles, challenges and fights and bickering until we laughed it off or doused the flames with sex. The smiling, meddling faces of our brothers as they planned every detail of a wedding we never asked them to plan, and their complete disrespect of our wishes when we told them not to. A dream. A life. A future with Devon.

My lungs seized when the juror opened their mouth. I squeezed my eyes closed tighter, unable to watch the moment that would make or break me. My hands balled into sweat-slicked fists, my nails cut into my palms, and my feet went numb as my legs threatened to give out.

That darkness circled, creeping in, reminding me I wasn't worthy of many favours in life. Showing me that guys like me, we didn't get to hope and dream like normal people.

Breathe.

Darkness.

Breathe.

Darkness.

Breathe.

"Not guilty."

Light.

My legs gave out, and my knees sang in pain as they crashed to the courtroom floor. Then my darkness was obliterated by the light of Devon's sobbing, red splotchy face showing up right in front of me. He fell into me, or I fell into him, and nothing else fucking mattered because he was back in my arms, getting snot all over me, filling me with renewed hope. I felt him for the first time in months, and with that touch, reality crashed back into focus. I didn't waste another second. I held him so tight he couldn't breathe, but I didn't think he was breathing anyway. The sounds of the courtroom were drowned out by the love coming straight from Devon Sawyer, like he'd been bottling it up all this time and unleashed it on me all at once.

Xavi hugged me from behind, but I couldn't pull away from Devon. He cried in my ear and said a whole bunch of shit I couldn't understand through the mess of him, but I understood the sentiment.

"Marry me, Devon." It was the first thing that came out of my mouth.

"I will, you dumb fuck," he half laughed, half cried, not letting go of me. "Fuck, I will. I love you, Madd."

"I love you." With everything I had to give. "Thank you for everything."

Did we still have a bunch of bullshit coming our way? Hell yeah. But I was innocent of these crimes and I'd make damn sure it stayed that way.

I had come so close to letting depression consume me, and now I needed to hold on to Devon for as long as I had him. In return, I'd learn how to light him up so he stopped hating himself. I'd learned that there was no vulnerability in relying on others. I used to think it meant I was weak, but now I knew I wouldn't be here without the help, love, and support of everyone close in my life.

I kept my hands on Devon, but I pulled back enough to actually look at him. He'd never looked like more of a mess, but the smile on his face was bigger than anything I'd ever seen. In his red-rimmed eyes, I saw everything I loved about him. His stubbornness and his passion, his worries and fears, and all the love and loyalty he possessed. I saw his hopes and dreams for the future that was finally within our grasp, and I saw the raw honesty in how badly he wanted it. This asshole had become my entire world, and I'd never let another day go by where I didn't tell him that, show him that, and remind him of that.

"You need a fucking haircut," he laughed, almost hysterical with relief. Maybe nerves.

"So do you," I snipped back, sniffing. "But you look hot as hell, Devon. Take me home."

Wherever home was these days.

-MADDOX-

RELIEF FILLED ME SO fully I felt high. The constant fear and depression that had overwhelmed me for four months started to ease away and lighten.

Not guilty.

Not guilty.

I exhaled a long breath, having felt like I'd been holding it since the moment I got cuffed and put into the back of that police cruiser. My lungs emptied of desolation and depression, and they breathed in something like a fresh new start with a fresh new outlook. My second shot at life. Okay... maybe my third.

The courtroom buzzed around me as it emptied. I thanked my lawyers once, even though I should have thanked them a million times, and I kept my hand in Devon's the whole time. Would I ever be able to drop it? No matter who pulled me in what direction, I dragged Devon with me for all of it.

Devon cried the hardest out of everyone. His tears came freely and without shame, shedding that pressure he'd been living under for months.

His soul brightened, his anger and fear dripped down his cheeks, and shame and guilt swelled in his eyes, finally dissipating as it dripped off his chin to fall on the courtroom floor. My boy was hurting, but this time, it was a good kind of pain. The pain of healing.

My mom hugged me, crying against my shoulder. My dad hugged me, holding back his tears and settling for silence instead. Nate hugged me, thanking me for never giving up on his brother, and Xavi hugged me for so long I trembled. He called me a dipshit for making him worry so much, and I hugged him harder for it. When I looked at him, I silently thanked him for watching over Devon the whole time, making sure his heart never shattered.

“Devon,” I called, tugging on his hand. “Don’t you dare back away from me.” I wiped his cheeks with the pads of my thumbs, smiling at him before pressing my lips to his.

Ignited. A surge of too many things—gratitude, power, contentment, love—washed through my lips and settled in my chest. To finally kiss him again breathed a new sense of life into my weathered soul. The caress of his tongue against mine burned with that chemistry we’d always contained but spent too long ignoring. Even after all we’d been through, we still had it, and one kiss from this prick was enough to fill my tanks, top up my reserves, and charge my batteries. What would a lifetime with him do?

“Home, Devon. Wherever the fuck that is, let’s go. Now.”

He grinned against my mouth. “Glad to see you’re still a pushy asshole, Madd.”



EVEN THOUGH IT HAD only been four months since I stepped foot in Garron Park, it felt like everything had changed. Lot 62 was still taped off, our trucks were no longer parked there, and the trailer that usually held our dirt bikes was gone. There were ‘welcome home, Maddox’ signs hanging on the front porches of a lot of trailers, and my mom’s trailer had paper streamers hanging from the awning.

I’d miss our dirt bikes the most, but I wouldn’t spend any time mourning them when I had Devon right in front of me. I’d just have to hope we could get them back someday. Nate and Xavi dropped us off at Mom’s and then left to give us some time to be alone. Mom was with Dad somewhere, planning a welcome home cookout for later. I really did want to spend time with everyone, but my attention focused only on my boyfriend for the time being.

“You okay, Madd?” Devon asked as we stood on my mom’s brown front lawn.

“If you ask me that again, I’ll beat your ass,” I told him. Truthfully, though, I wasn’t okay. Going inside the trailer scared me. That’s where Devon overdosed and had to be taken to the hospital. Would it feel different to go in there? Would the mental images I’d conjured of that happening haunt me forever?

“Look at me,” Devon insisted, stepping in front of me. “I fucked up, Madd. But I’m not gonna fuck up again, okay? I finally have you back, and I’m not going to do anything to ruin that. Trust me on this, okay?”

“I do trust you,” I said, meaning it. I had a right to worry about him, though. “Why’d you do it?”

“Because I was scared,” he said. “Because I missed you. Because it all got so heavy and I didn’t know how to carry it anymore. Because I was so

fucking terrified that I'd never be able to touch you again, and because I was weak. I picked the wrong coping mechanism. I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. Lean on me now."

Devon nodded. "You can kick my ass for it later. Kind of eager to see how weak you are now that you've leaned down." He smirked. "But can we just... touch right now?"

I licked my lips and pulled him against my chest. "I'm proud of you, and I do trust you, but I'm definitely kicking your ass later. No matter how much bulk I lost, I can still take you."

"I know," he laughed. "Come on. I'm sick of everyone watching us."

Walking inside so the peeping Toms couldn't spy on us, I took in the place that had been my home for most of my life. It was mostly tidy, but there were empty wine bottles on the counter, dirty dishes in the sink, and half-empty packs of smokes littered around the place, reminding me that life carried on here while mine paused.

The adrenaline of the trial wore off, and fatigue set in. Months' worth. As much as I wanted to be intimate with Devon, it didn't feel like the right time. The dark circles under his eyes told me he was as tired as me, and his awkwardness made me hide a grin. Yeah, we were back to square one. Our relationship started with a bang, fuelled by anger and tension, but this time, we were choked up in the softness, unsure how to get back to those people when we were different now. We'd changed. We didn't know how to be together sexually with this new dynamic, and it turned us both into shy idiots.

"Are you hungry?" he asked, kicking the carpet.

Starving and eager for a real meal. "I'm just tired." I watched him shuffle.

He nodded and grabbed my wrist, bringing me to my bedroom. Slowly, Devon loosened my tie and undid the buttons of my dress shirt, trying to hide his shock at how different my body looked. I'd lost some weight, and I'd lost a lot of muscle mass. He pulled the belt from the loops and tossed it on the floor, leaving my shirt open. While he undressed, I stepped out of my pants and shoes, toed off my socks, and watched him silently.

I'd tried so hard to recall a perfect image of his body while I was on the inside, but I'd never done it justice. He'd lost some weight, too, but he was fucking beautiful. Harshly beautiful. To see him in his boxers gave me pause.

"Fuck, Devon, you're..." I swallowed, not sure what word to use. Just perfect. Just mine.

A flash of desire ignited in his eyes, but it wasn't heated enough to act on. His tan had paled and his shitty skull tattoo stood out more because of it. I vowed to keep him at the beach for as long as I could to darken his skin, sun-bleach his hair, and put more warmth back into him.

We fell into our old positions, my arm around him, his head in the crook of my shoulder, and our legs all jumbled together, the closest thing to cuddling we'd ever had. Bliss. His skin warmed mine, his calloused hands scratched at my abs, his overgrown hair tickled my chin, and his stubble pricked against my shoulder. I loved it.

"I missed you," I told him, trying not to cry. The reality of being here, settled in the bed our relationship had started in, with him in my arms and safety all around us, overwhelmed me. All I'd wished for those four months was this. This moment. I'd finally gotten it, and it felt so good it hurt.

I did cry. I tried not to, but the tears came and they didn't stop. My chest heaved, relief spilled over into happiness and gratitude, and Devon held me

through it all, crying with me. He didn't say anything and neither did I, because there wasn't anything to say. It was about feeling, not speaking.

When the emotions got to be too much, I turned to face him and tilted his chin up. Kissing him with salty tears mixing on our tongues, our chests heaving together, and our bodies meshing like they knew exactly what to do felt too good to be true. Devon's hands pulled me closer and mine ended up in his hair, holding him against me to deepen our kiss. My dick didn't get hard and neither did his, but our heartbeats synced and our tears dried. We lay there in my tiny ass bed, kissing until we were exhausted, but still not stopping.

"Go to sleep," he whispered, lips on mine before pulling back.

I hated being cheesy, but I did it anyway. "I can't close my eyes."

He couldn't even help his satisfied smile. "You'll be sick of looking at me soon. I'm all you have now," he laughed.

I watched him, completely in love.

"We have no home, no money, no trucks, no dirt bikes, and literally nothing to our names. You don't even have a job, Madd. I'm all you've got. Sorry about your luck." He smirked.

I smiled, letting my eyes close. Yeah, we had a lot of reality to catch up with and face, but that shit could wait until tomorrow. For today, Devon was the only thing I needed.

"I love you."

Devon kissed my cheek and touched my eyes to force them closed again. "I love you. Now sleep, asshole."

I turned onto my back, grabbed his hand between our bodies, and finally slept.

-MADDOX-

I SLEPT FOR HOURS, and I swear to fuck I hadn't rested like that in forever. The first thing I did when I woke up was kiss Devon's hair, then I had a shower. Devon, that sensitive, cute fucker, sat on the toilet lid and talked my ear off the whole time I washed the prison off my skin. He lent me a pair of mostly clean boxers, because apparently I didn't own any anymore, and then we laid in bed to... talk.

"She's doing okay, Madd," Devon said when I asked him about my mom. "Fell off track a bit, but she's trying. I'll give her that."

"It's kind of fucked up that my dad, a recovering addict and alcoholic, is the one caring for my current addict and alcoholic mom. Hope he's handling it okay."

"Unfortunately, that's not too different from a lot of couples here," Devon said. "He's doing good. I think it gives him something to strive for. Makes him proud of his sobriety."

I wanted to ask him about his own mistake. I knew he said he was scared and overwhelmed, but I needed to know where his head was at now. At the

same time, I didn't want to ask because I didn't want him to think I doubted him. Devon was the strongest motherfucker I knew, and I didn't want him to second-guess his strength in all of this. If he ever did, I wanted him to know he could always come to me.

"How're you feeling about what happened?" I asked, hoping it came off as supportive rather than accusatory. "Are you worried?"

Devon sighed, draping an arm over his face like I usually did. "I feel fucking stupid about it, Maddox. Like, what the fuck was I thinking? You know? I spent all this time trying not to be like my dad, and then I went and did something like that? It's fucking embarrassing."

I pulled his arm off his face and made him look at me. "Don't feel stupid." He *was* stupid, but we were all stupid sometimes. Him just more than most. "Just talk to me about it, okay? Wherever shit gets hard, come to me. Always."

Devon nodded and followed it with a smirk. "You turn into some sort of preacher while you were inside, Madd?"

I rolled my eyes and put my arm behind my head, staring at the ceiling and tracking the water damage with my eyes. "No, but my cellmate was even more of a dumbass than you are, so I spent a lot of time listening to his bullshit." I linked our fingers on my chest.

"Was he a good guy?"

"No, but he wasn't terrible either. Kept his mouth shut about things he knew about me."

Devon didn't say anything, but I knew he wanted to ask. I knew his insecurities by this point. He didn't ask, though. Maybe he had... grown. But just to reassure him, I said, "Never. Didn't touch him. Didn't look at him. Didn't touch or look at anyone."

I felt him smile against my shoulder. “So, when are you proposing?”

“I already asked three times.” I fought a smile.

“I want a real one. With a ring and shit.”

“Oh, I have to do it?”

“Mhm,” he mused, being all cute.

I really did want to do it properly. With a ring and a bullshit speech and all the knee bends my creaky knees could handle. A flare of resentment burned up my chest, reminding me how much control this guy had over me. Fuck him for turning me into this traditionally romantic fuckwit.



“BEER?” XAVI HELD A can in front of my face.

I looked across the yard behind Andrea’s trailer, trying to see what Devon drank. “What’s he having?”

“Uh, I think iced tea.”

I didn’t give too many fucks about drinking, so I shook my head at the beer and asked for a lemonade. If my man wanted to dry out, I’d dry out with him. I was already dried out from prison, anyway.

“Happy to be home?” Xavi asked.

“Don’t have a home,” I laughed. “But fuck yes. You have no idea.” I sat in a lawn chair next to Xavi while everyone in the park hung around to drink and eat and shoot the shit. Andrea hosted, but everyone chipped in with different foods and even a few little gifts. Someone gave me a package of white t-shirts, so that helped, and another lady gave me her son’s old

boots. Everything else I owned stayed locked up on Lot 62, and we hadn't gone back to get it. Couldn't. Maybe some other time.

I kept my eyes on Devon. "I have no idea how I'm going to live, find a job, and make Devon happy, but I never wanna be somewhere he isn't ever again."

"So sappy," Xavi mocked. He wrapped his arm around my shoulder and smacked a pathetically loud kiss against the side of my head. "Come to the flea market with me this weekend."

"Why?" That wasn't typically something we did together.

"Because. Just come." He grinned like he had a plan. Always meddling.

"Fine, but only if you tell me if anything happened with you and Nate after you admitted all that shit to me."

Xavi groaned. "Not yet. Life kind of paused while we worked on your prison break."

"You still thinking about it? About him?" I asked Xavi but watched Devon. Rugged, laughing, poor, wearing hand-me-downs and mismatched slides. Actually, I was pretty sure the t-shirt he wore used to be Xavi's from one of those t-shirt cannons at a concert, but the more I looked at it, the more I thought I was the one who used to own it.

"Maybe. I don't know. Don't push me." Xavi smacked me on the side of the head. "He ain't gonna disappear. Do I get none of your attention?"

"You don't look as good as him," I laughed.

"He's wearing my shirt."

"I think it was my shirt."

"It was," Xavi laughed. "From that shitty rock concert with no known bands you snuck into when you were like twenty."

Knew it.

“How was the first post-prison fuck?”

“Hasn’t happened yet.”

“What?” Xavi laughed. “You two were always so hot and heavy. Something change?”

No. Nothing changed. I wanted him just as much as I always had, but... “It’s like the first time all over again. I think we’re both nervous or some shit. I just...”

“Don’t want him to think the sex is all you missed,” Xavi filled in for me. I looked at him. “You some wise bitch now?”

“Yep.” He pointed a pinky and sipped his beer. “Which is why you’re coming to the flea market with me on Saturday.”

I didn’t have a home or a closet to buy things for, but whatever. If he wanted to go to the flea market, I’d go just to spend time with him.

“Alright, go get him instead of eye-fucking him from across the lawn. You’re making us all uncomfortable.” He nudged me.

Yeah, probably didn’t have to tell me that twice. I liked the party and felt grateful for it, but I’d had enough. “Thanks for everything, Xav.” I pulled him in for a hug. “Love you.”

“Love ya, brother.” He smacked my back. “Glad to have you back.”

I walked up to Devon, my intention apparently clear on my face. “Don’t give me that look, Madd,” he warned. “I haven’t seen that look in four months, and I have no stamina anymore.”

I apologized to the group around him by offering a stilted smile. Steering him away, I wrapped my arm around his neck and whispered, “Then let’s come in ten seconds and then finally get to the real fucking.”

“This party is for you,” he reminded me.

“I showed up. I talked. I ate a bit. Now I’m done. I want you.”

He met my eyes, and just like that, an old flame of challenge and competitiveness sparked between us.

Fucking finally.

-DEVON-

TWO COMPLETELY DIFFERENT FEELINGS consumed me—pleasure as I orgasmed, and embarrassment that I hadn’t even taken my boxers off yet.

Cum leaked through the black material of the last clean pair of boxers I had, but the sight of it did anything but make me regret it. I tried to stop it by clenching my muscles and getting my mind off the sexiness of the scenario by staring at the kitchen around us, but it’d been too late. I was touched by the man I love for the first time in months, and my body reacted. Hard.

“Fuck,” I groaned through the tremors. “Fuck, I’m sorry.”

Maddox grinned, but his hand didn’t stop massaging my throbbing cock through the material, spreading my cum around. If I had to guess, I’d say he was pretty damn smug that he’d basically caused me to prematurely ejaculate in my damn underwear.

“I...haven’t... I couldn’t come while... fuck you, Maddox!”

He laughed, kissing my lips. “Just shut up while you’re ahead. This is the hottest thing I’ve seen in months. The fact that you couldn’t even hold out? Yeah, so hot.” He bit my bottom lip playfully, and to my even greater embarrassment, my dick hardened right back up.

My hips moved and my cock rubbed against his hand shamelessly, even though my mind felt ashamed. This wasn’t how I wanted the night to go. I wanted it to be special, to spend every second lost with him, wrapped up in him, fucking him like we used to. I wanted the full Maddox Kane experience, and now I’d cut the show short before the previews even finished.

“This isn’t over,” he warned in that dangerous tone I loved so much. Shit, I’d missed that. “We’re fucking. You can come again.”

I could probably get off six more times. I’d been unwillingly edging myself for four months, and now I had permission to finish. But as the intensity of the orgasm ebbed, a new sort of challenge rose in its place.

“Like you’d do any better, asshole,” I snapped at him, my spine straightening. “Did you jerk off thirteen times a day like your roommate?”

“Cellmate,” he corrected. “No.” A spark of defiance lit in his green eyes. Oh, hell no. I wouldn’t stand for that. He wanted to see himself as all-powerful just because he made me blow my load in my boxers? Fuck him. He was powerful, but so was I.

I moved his hand away, took a few seconds to admire the cum seeping through my boxers, and then pushed him until he hit the opposite counter. Maddox grinned at me while I undid his jeans, acting like he’d already won something. His shirt already sat at our feet, and I wanted to punch him for how good he looked, even this lean.

“You worked out in there,” I commented.

“Mhm. But didn’t eat right.”

It showed. Tone without mass. I liked it, but I liked him a bit more filled out even better. “You think you’re tough, Madd?”

He started humming his confirmation, but it cut off when I sank to my knees and swallowed his dick without hesitation. He restored himself pretty damn fast, pulling on the back of my head to fuck my mouth.

“Ah, Devon,” he groaned, all low and throaty. He wasn’t usually much of a talker, but he kept going. “Do you know how many times I thought about this in there?”

Shut up, Maddox. This was supposed to be my show. I swirled my tongue around the head of his cock before taking him deep into my throat. Been a while since I choked on a dick, and fuck me, I missed it. I missed the way he gripped my hair and tried to be dominant even more. Reminding myself I was down here to prove a point, I cupped his balls, made him suck in a harsh breath, and swallowed around his cock.

“*Fuuuuck*,” he gasped, his hips thrusting. “Don’t make me...oh, fuck.”

I knew it. He was as pent-up and out of control as I was. His dick hardened even more, his balls tightened in my hand, and I opened my throat muscles, cum hungry and eager to taste him. Maddox’s fingers gripped me tight, holding my head in place as he came hard, fast, and with force. He moaned my name, praised me, and made all sorts of sexy sounds while my eyes watered and my throat spasmed. Swallowing him down, I pulled on the back of his knees until they gave out and he crashed to the floor in front of me. His mouth was on mine a second later, panting and sloppy.

“Fucking hate you,” he complained through ragged breaths. “Fuck, I... fuck you for that.”

My point had been proved. I grinned. “Well, think before being a douchebag next time.” He acted all tough and in control, but at the end of the day, we were nothing more than eager idiots with no chill. Jesus, the level of our challenges had changed.

“I won’t. Think first, I mean,” he laughed. “If that’s punishment, I’ll take it.”

I shoved him away with a scoff, trying to stand. He pulled me back down, but I smacked his hands away. “These are my only clean boxers. I need to sink-wash them before this dries into a crusty clusterfuck.”

He stayed on the floor like a loser, but he reached up and filled a glass of water from the tap. “Reboot, because I’m fucking you.”

I closed the bathroom door behind me and fished through the cabinets for something we’d left here a year ago. A douche. If Maddox wanted to fuck me for the first time all over again, I wanted to be ready, clean, prepped, and primed for it. I might have already gotten off, but my dick was far from done for the night, and my ass clenched in anticipation.



THE FIRST TIME WE had sex, it’d been an impulsive decision that had been brewing to a boiling point for weeks. We knew things were leading there, but we had no plan when it came to actually fucking. We hadn’t talked about roles or positions, but somehow, it all worked out with some concoction of eager need, nervousness, a lack of actual knowledge about it, and shock that it felt so good.

That happened again tonight.

It became our second first time, and we both got aggressive with needy energy and impatience while remaining slightly hesitant because of nerves. Maddox was between my legs, pushing into me at a tormentingly slow pace. I didn't know if it was nerves or if he was teasing me, but I appreciated it a little. It'd been a hot bit since I took a dick up the ass.

"Fuck, Madd," I complained anyway, reverting to my default. "I'm not a virgin."

"You sure?" he rasped above me. "You came in your boxers out—"

I smacked him right on the jaw. "Shut this mouth and fuck me."

He growled at me, increasing the strength of his thrusts until I gasped and groaned. "If you hit me again, I'll hit you right back."

That didn't sound half bad, but kinks could come later. This was a rejoining, and I needed it like I needed the blood in my veins. I wrapped my legs around his hips and practically forced him to fuck me deeper.

Well, Maddox wouldn't have that. He pinned my legs, spreading them so wide it hurt, and he used my body as leverage to fuck me exactly how I wanted him to. The glide of his dick in my ass felt good simply because it felt intimate. The dominance he radiated and the flare of aggressive passion in the green of his eyes heightened the whole mood.

"More," I begged, unashamed. "Deeper."

The thing I loved about Maddox was that he knew the difference between deeper and faster. He kept the same pace, but the slap of his thighs on my ass increased, and the depth at which he fucked me rocked me on the bed. When he leaned forward, bringing my legs with him, I moaned. Unhinged, basically folded in half, and being fucked senseless by my man, I let my eyes close to *feel* everything.

His breaths on my neck as a harsh caress.

His fingers digging into my skin possessively.

His chest heaving against mine, our heartbeats as erratic and wild as our type of love.

His hips punching into me, thrusting with all the force of our energy combined.

This. This was what I thrived on. Our bodies doing what they did best, competing in a race to the finish line that we both slowed down for so we could enjoy the ride. This wasn't hard and fast; it was a deep and melodious trip back to ourselves.

"Goddammit, Devon," Maddox's gritty voice snapped my eyes open. "How the fuck did we go four months without this?"

By force. I inhaled pleasure and exhaled tension with each thrust, feeling the depth of him buried so deep in my ass, dragging against that perfect spot with each stroke of his thick cock. "Never again," I promised.

Hesitations slipped away pretty fast, but I wouldn't say we fell into old patterns because this was something new. Our connection had changed, and with that change came a new understanding, a respect, and a level of love and acceptance that hadn't fully been there before. We lived through our own hell, and we fucking made it.

Maybe this was what it felt like to get out from under the shadow and live in the light.

Sweating and panting like a criminal, Maddox's fingers wrapped around my jaw. Eyes connected and breaths mingling, he demanded me to come with nothing more than his energy. Adjusting his hips, he slowed his pace, fucked me deep and slow at the perfect angle, and barely held himself up as pleasure flooded him. It did me in. All of it. The whole fucking experience. Him coming in my ass, his cock stilling, his breath catching, and his fingers

tightening on my jaw. A switch flipped inside me and my brain shut off to make room for pure euphoria.

When the sun came up, Maddox fucked me harder. By mid-morning, my ass was so sore he blew me until I came down his throat. To even the score and get a selfish taste of him, I jerked him off until he came a third time, and then I licked it off his abs and swallowed it like it was that wine in churches. Wasn't religious. Didn't know the term.

Then we talked. Forever.

"My hope fucking died, Devon," he said. "It killed me to be in there. I... I went dark."

I saw it. I saw that darkness inside him. He'd always had a bit of it, but it was more prominent now, lingering closer to the surface like he was afraid to let it go. It protected him, and anything that made him feel safer was okay in my books. I'd always be there to pull him back to the light.

"I saw it sitting there," I told him about the night of my overdose. "The bottle. Full and promising a bit of relief, even if I knew I'd regret it. I... I just got in this frame of mind where I regretted everything else that had happened, so why not one more thing?" I looked at him and saw only understanding.

"But it wasn't enough?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Xavi said you took pills from my mom."

I looked away in shame, but Maddox forced my face back to his. "It wasn't enough," I agreed, admitting the truth. "I didn't want to die or anything. I just... needed to be numb, even for a fucking minute. I know it makes me weak."

"It doesn't."

“It does, Madd. I think if you had been found guilty, I... I would have done something worse.”

He leaned over then, pressing his lips to mine and his hand to my heart. “I’m fucking here, Devon.” I didn’t know if he meant physically or if he meant in my heart, but it didn’t matter. He was both. “And I’m not going anywhere. I love you.”

That confession felt more powerful than the rest. “I love you. And whenever you need to get dark, just... don’t hide it from me. I can take it.”

“I know you can,” he said, kissing me again.

They said love consumes you. I used to think that was a load of bullshit. The way Maddox’s love consumed me was anything but healthy, and I’d never felt more safe in something. We found something together that no one would understand. How could you love someone so wholly and want to beat on them as a form of connection? It didn’t make sense, but it made all the sense. I didn’t want to hurt him, and he didn’t want to hurt me, but we’d always done our best communicating with physical acts, and I didn’t see that changing for us anytime soon. We got each other, which meant no one else needed to get us. It was none of their damn business.

We had that kind of love most people pined for, and I’d never, fucking ever, take it for granted. Our souls were bared, our truths were out in the open, and our slate had been reset. Not clean, but fresh.

-MADDOX-

“WHAT ARE WE EVEN doing here?” I asked Xavi as he led me through the vendors at the flea market. “I don’t have any money.”

“Would you shut up?” he complained again. “I’m not making you buy shit. I just want you to meet someone.”

“This chick you and Nate are both dating?” I asked, hopeful.

“Hardly,” he scoffed. “That’s cooled off a bit anyway.”

“Why?” Better not have been because of me.

“If you shut up, I’ll buy you lunch.”

I didn’t know how he’d afford lunch, but I shut up. He and Nate had been working a lot in the five days since I got out, so maybe things would get better soon.

Devon hadn’t gone back to work yet. That idiot was obsessed with spending every second of the day with me. I mean, I wasn’t complaining, but we needed some damn money to get to whatever came next. It’d be hard to spend days without him come Monday when he went back, but it was for the best. Finding myself a job would be priority number one, and no matter

how nervous I was about the prison stigma attached to a job application, I had to do it. Who the fuck wanted to hire a guy straight out of prison? It's not like I could hide it. This was Garron. Everyone knew everyone's business. I hadn't been convicted of anything, and the charges had been dropped, but still. Prison attached itself to a guy's reputation, and I had to get used to that.

We talked a bit about where we were going to live. For now, we'd stay at my mom's, but it wouldn't work long term. Lot 62 was being cleared and cleaned after being contained for so long, and then we'd be allowed back. After everything that had happened there, I didn't know how I felt about moving in again. We needed somewhere new, somewhere we could start over without that black cloud hanging over our heads. Every time I looked at that place, I saw the panicked look in Devon's eyes when I was shoved into the back of the cruiser. It scarred me.

My dad, being a completely new kind of opportunist since he got clean and sober, had been hired to be the new park manager. Gary got the boot, and my dad didn't hesitate to step in and apply. He'd be starting in a few weeks, and he was pretty sure a trailer home came with the job. He'd been feeding us information about which lots would be coming available, but I hadn't put much thought into it.

What if I didn't want to live in Garron Park anymore? Could we actually get out? Could we afford somewhere else?

I followed Xavi through the rows, barely glancing at any of the knick-knacks. It was a farmers' market, so there were tons of produce booths and people selling shit like honey and syrup, but there were crafters and antique peddlers, too. It all looked nice, but it all cost cash.

“Didn’t know you were into this shit, Xav.” I tried to figure out where he was leading me.

“I just know a guy who has a booth here,” Xavi said. “Told him I’d come check it out sometime.”

And he picked today of all days?

He read my mind. “Figured your unemployed ass would have nothing better to do.”

I’d be doing Devon if Xavi hadn’t dragged me out of bed at seven on a Saturday morning.

Xavi led me to a corner booth with a random assortment of shit. Real nice looking fruits and vegetables, canned goods, and some flowers filled one side, and the other side had old things and horse stuff. Trinkets spilled out from everywhere. What looked like homemade woodworking projects lined the top, and painted birdhouses and signs hung from the awning.

Xavi said he’d be right back, so I fumbled through some of this guy’s shit to kill time. I sorted through stacks of baseball cards, little toy cars, and unpolished old jewellery, trying to decide where I wanted Xavi to take me for lunch. Good food hadn’t ever been a part of my life, but the shit I ate in the past five days felt like fine dining compared to what I’d eaten for four months. Even my mom’s casserole.

I opened random drawers of decorative wooden boxes, wondering what Devon and Nate were up to. Maybe they’d meet us for lunch. Strings of fake pearls filled most of the drawers, but I kept opening them anyway, addicted to the hide-and-seek game. I sifted through plastic pearls until I found something that really piqued my interest.

“Madd!” Xavi shouted, walking up to me. He motioned to the guy behind the table, the owner of all this shit. “This is Pete, a customer of mine. Pete,

this is my brother Maddox.”

I wiped my hand on my shirt and shook his. “Nice to meet ya.” I had no idea why I was meeting him, but he looked like a decent old prick. That prickly sort of gruff old man that took no shit but was honest about it. Probably what I’d be like if I lived that long.

He gripped my hand and shook it, skipping the pleasantries. “Heard you might be lookin’ for work,” he said instead.

“What?” My jaw dropped. I looked at Xavi, who just shrugged with a smirk on his face.

“You want a job or not?” Pete cut straight to the point.

“Here?” I asked. I mean, I’d take it, but I needed more than just Saturday mornings.

“I got a farm outside Garron. Just so happens I need a farmhand. Yeah?” Pete pursed his lips together, not one for smiling.

I looked between him and Xavi, trying not to get my hopes up too high. No fucking way this was happening. I had expected to struggle in the work department for months, staring at those little check boxes that asked if I’d ever been charged with a felony. I was Maddox Kane; I didn’t get this lucky.

“I’ve, uh, got a record.” Better to get it out there. This charge might be getting erased from my permanent record, but I still had one, and I still spent four months inside.

“I have a tv,” Pete said like I was dumb. “I saw the news. Plus, your brother told me.”

“And you aren’t gonna get weird about it? You trust me at your farm?” I glared at him, wanting the truth.

“Don’t be a dick, Madd,” Xavi snapped at me.

“Heck no,” Pete admitted, again like I was dumb for even asking. “But I trust your brother’s word enough to hire ya. *You* gotta earn my trust after that.” He wiped his nose. “Look, boy, the work ain’t easy, the hours are shit, and the pay’s not great either, but it’s yours if ya want it.”

A fresh start as a fucking farmhand. “Yes, sir. Thank you.”

He scoffed at my formality I didn’t even know why I called him that. “Up there by the Bluffs forest. You know the place?”

Knew it well. I nodded.

“Monday morning, five o’clock. Don’t be late.” Pete gave me a stern look.

I nodded again, even though I had no idea how I’d get there. I’d have to get up at midnight to start walking. Maybe I could borrow a bicycle or something.

“You work for free the first week and you can have them.” He nodded to the items still clasped in my fist. “They’re made of tungsten, so they’re tough shit. No idea what the inscription says.”

I did. After rubbing them sort of clean, it’s what made me hold on to them so tightly. “A week for free and I can have them?”

“Deal, boy.” He held out his right hand and I shook it. “Take ‘em now. You’re good for it.” He gave me a tight-lipped smile, nodded at Xavi, and went back to being a vendor.

Holy fucking shit.

Xavi wrapped his arm around my shoulders and kissed my cheek like an asshole as we walked away. “When are you gonna—”

“Were you pimping me out for jobs when I was still locked up?”

“Damn right I was,” he laughed. “Almost got you on at the sewer department, and that place has benefits, but it didn’t work out.”

Farmhand sounded better than sewer rat anyway. “Thank you, Xav.”

“Love you.” He held up his phone and snapped a random selfie of us. “To show Devon the look on your face right after you got those.” He nodded at my hand.

I shoved them in my pocket protectively.

It wasn’t even noon yet and I’d gotten a job and rings. It was time to force that blond piece of shit to marry me.

-DEVON-

SUNDAY NIGHT HAD COME, and with it, the Sunday night blues. We'd been living in a bubble with each other, but tomorrow, reality would set in. I had to go back to the shop to start earning some pay again, and Maddox was set to start his new job.

It scared me. Would this feeling ever wear off? I didn't want to let him out of my sight while my dad was still out there somewhere, but if I kept holding onto him this tight, I'd smother the fuck out of him. Things changed, though. While he was in prison, I had a job to do, a purpose, a goal to strive towards, which kept my mind satisfied that I was protecting him in the only way I could. But now that he was out and life carried on, I had no idea how to protect him and move on at the same time. It'd take some getting used to.

With the place to ourselves for the night, because Seth and Naomi were checking out the new trailer that came with his new job, I sat on the couch and tried to get my head right.

Maddox walked out of the bathroom in a shitty green towel, holding up two different pairs of work pants he'd borrowed from his dad. All our clothing went untouched in the trailer on Lot 62, but with the tape around the place and a weird reluctance to go there, we made do with what we could steal, borrow, or share.

"You staying up?" he asked me. "I have to get up at four to catch that bus early so I can do the rest of the walk before five." It was the early bus that took riggers out to the boats for transport.

I couldn't let him go to bed just yet. I had a surprise coming for him, but Nate and Xavi were late delivering it, so I needed to distract him until they showed up.

"Come here." I patted the couch.

"No." He held his position. "Don't try to distract me with sex. I need to sleep."

"You're such a little bitch these days, Madd. I thought prison made you tough?" I grinned at him, knowing a taunt would be the best way to keep him up. "Now you wanna go to bed at ten like some old fuck? Jesus."

"If I fuck up this job, I won't find another one. Lay off." He threw the pants on the back of a chair, glaring at me.

He had a point, but I still needed him to wait. "Then come kiss me goodnight."

He took one step forward and stopped. I tried to hide my grin. He wasn't stupid. He knew one kiss would turn into more, and he didn't know if he could allow the time commitment of a good fuck when it was past his self-proclaimed bedtime. Come on, Madd, *take the bait*.

He took another step. "Don't touch me, Devon."

"Why not?" I pouted.

“I’m...”

“A slave to your dick?” I laughed.

“A slave to you, dumbass.” He bent over, pressing his lips to mine.

I kept to his rule and didn’t touch him, but I licked his bottom lip and bit it lightly to goad him. The kiss deepened and the towel tented in front of my face.

“Ah, fuck you, Devon,” he groaned, running his fingers through my hair. “Just let me go to bed.”

“Okay,” I agreed against his lips, but Maddox had already hiked up the towel to straddle my legs. His weight settled on my lap and my lips smiled against his. “Go to bed, Madd.” I dug my fingers into his hips, pulling him closer. His body was hot from the shower, and his dick was hard and pressing against my stomach.

“Yeah,” he breathed. He pulled back for half a second then sucked on my bottom lip, his hips rocking. “I’m going.”

“Okay.” I squeezed his thighs and helped him rock on my lap. “Goodnight. I love you.”

“Love you,” he panted, tugging on my hair. “Night.”

I loved it when he fought himself and lost. The responsible part of his mind told him to go to bed, but his body told him to get laid first. He probably rationalized it as a way to relax to better his sleep, and I wouldn’t argue with that.

When he kept gyrating on my lap, tugging on my hair to kiss me deeper, I tore the towel from his waist and gripped his dick between our bodies.

“Fucking hell, Devon,” he complained pathetically. “Fuck you. I should be sleeping.”

“I’ll be quick. I know how to get you off in five minutes,” I teased, biting his lip again.

I had to make this quick so that Nate and Xavi didn’t walk in on a show. I wrapped my hand around him and stroked his smooth cock, swiping my thumb over the head on every upstroke. When he shivered at that and started fucking my fist, I kept my hand still and let him do all the work. Fucking loved it when he took charge. I kissed his neck, licking my way down the column of his throat to suck a mark into his pec. The heat of his body mingled with the heat of our chemistry, burning me up under the weight of him. I didn’t give a shit about getting off. This was about Maddox, admiring him, distracting him, pleasing him.

He lifted my shirt up a bit, angling his body so his cockhead rubbed against my abs every time he thrust upward. Brows furrowed, lips parted, green eyes watching me as intently as I watched him. Hot fucking damn.

“So sexy, Madd. Jesus. Look at you.” *And all mine.*

Maddox’s head fell forward, and his body jerked with the force of his orgasm. His cum hit my stomach and his hips kept moving, slow-fucking my fist through his pleasure. He kissed me, but it was sloppy and full of panting breaths, and I didn’t care because I loved it when he did that.

“Fucking hell, boys,” Nate complained, opening and then closing the front door. “Hurry up!” he shouted through it.

Maddox took a beat, looking at me differently. “You were distracting me.”

“Mhm. So put on some pants.” I kissed him before pushing him off me.

“But... bed,” he pouted.

“You’re gonna like this. I promise. Then you can go to bed.” I got up to clean his mess off my stomach. When he just stood there completely naked

with the towel in his hand, I shouted, “Pants!”

He brooded about it, complained by huffing, and glared at me a few times, so I grabbed his hand and pushed him towards the door. “It’s for tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” he asked. “You get me a new lunch pail or something?”

“Yeah, or something,” I laughed. “You suck at surprises. Let’s go.”

I pushed open the door, and Maddox stopped dead in his tracks as soon as he saw what we got him. My chest hit his back and my arms went around him, but I walked around to the front of him to admire his expression. Shock, awe, gratitude, and those child-like eyes that lit up whenever something miraculous happened.

“Congrats on your new job, Madd,” I whispered, smiling at him.

“You...” he paused to swallow. “You got me a shitty dirt bike?”

“Hell yeah!” Nate laughed. “The shittiest!” This dirt bike had nothing on his old one, but it was a bike, and he was grateful.

“Now you have your own way to work, Madd. No buses. No walking.” Xavi smiled at him.

“Someday, we’ll get you a better one, but for now—”

“Thank you,” he said to all of us. “I... it’s so fucking shitty!” he laughed like an asshole. “I love it.” I knew he battled a hundred emotions he wouldn’t want anyone witnessing, so he blinked them away.

“She’ll get ya to work,” Xavi said.

“Do I wanna know how you paid for this?” he asked.

Nope. While Seth was cleaning out Gary’s old office, he found a decent-sized baggie of coke. I sold that shit to Patrick Harris for enough to buy this bike. I shook my head at Maddox, telling him not to ask.

“Fuck it. I don’t even care. I’m taking it for a ride!” The smile on his face was worth everything. *Everything.*

“But... bed,” I quoted him.

He flipped me off. In a pair of blue sweats and nothing else, he swung his leg over the saddle and climbed on. “I’ll sleep when I’m dead. It’s been way too long since I rode.” He started it, and I even got chills at the sound. Fuck, it really had been too long since we got to ride. Someday, we’d get new bikes and be able to get back into motocross. Might die without it.

Maddox took off on the bike, heading down the gravel road of Garron Park for a bit of a pleasure cruise that half the park residents would complain about tomorrow.

“Ya did good, Dev,” Nate said, wrapping his arm around my shoulder to watch Maddox ride off. “Real good.”

I smiled.



IT WAS THE END of the workday on Monday, but I hadn’t gone back to the park yet. Maddox didn’t know what time he’d get off, but he said sometime in the evening. Long ass day for his first day there, and since I had to pawn his phone off, I had no way to reach him. He called me from the landline at lunch to tell me he liked the place, but it made him realize how out of shape he was. I missed him already and it’d only been one day.

I sat on the deck outside the shop, smoking a cigarette and staring at the number on my phone that led to my dad. I’d debated calling it so many times, just to see if he’d answer. Did he even have the phone attached to this

number still? I mean, Davis had sent him a warning to this number, but other than that, I had no idea if my dad still sat at the other end of it. He might have ditched it, but I had no doubt he'd somehow heard about Maddox getting out. Jim Sawyer was a wanted man, so how the fuck had he been evading the cops for this long?

Nate handed me a coffee, looking over my shoulder. "You better have a plan if you reach out, Dev," he scolded, sitting down with me. "You got your boy back. Don't fuck it up now."

I wouldn't. I'd never make that mistake again. "But how do you know we're safe while he's still out there?"

"We don't know that."

I took a sip of the coffee and pocketed my phone. "What would you do?" I asked my brother. I did that shit now. I asked for advice and help because I knew I wasn't capable of handling it all on my own. So fucking mature.

Nate shook his head, sighing out a long breath. "Fuck if I know, man. I don't even understand how he hasn't been found yet. He's not that resourceful."

"Would it hurt to try? It's not like he can track us or anything. He knows exactly where we are. Probably has eyes on us. Maybe his sons are the only two who can bring him out of hiding."

"He has always had a fucking issue with us. He'd come back to make sure we were beneath him if nothing else," Nate agreed. "But if he does? What if he comes back on some murder warpath this time?"

"What if he already plans to?" I countered. "What if he's been using all this time to plan something even more fucking elaborate than the setup on Madd? He won't settle for that failure, and it makes me think something

else is coming. Maddox wasn't the only loose end, Nate. I'm worried you'll be next."

Nate looked out at the water. "I know. We could call the number and hope he picks up out of spite. Might be easier to know something is coming than to sit around wondering."

I took another sip of the coffee. It was bitter, shitty, and lukewarm, but it was better than a beer. "I just need some sort of conclusion, you know? Nothing feels finished. Yeah, I'm grateful as fuck to have Madd back, but everything else feels up in the air, and it's stressing me out. What if he takes you next?"

"Well, my boyfriend will have my back if something happens to me," he joked. "You aren't the only one with a Kane in your pocket."

"You and Xavi dating now?" I scoffed.

Nate's face flushed and he turned away from me way too fast.

I hit him. "What the fuck, Nate!? No way!"

"No! Fuck no. Of course not." He glared at me, but his cheeks remained red. "He's my best friend."

"But?" I knew there had to be a but.

"But... shit's been sexy for a bit. That's all."

"That's all? Shit's been sexy? What the fuck does that mean?"

"It doesn't mean anything. We've just been... you know, with the same girl, so things happen sometimes. No big deal."

"Uh, yeah big deal. What things? You better not fuck up your friendship."

"I won't. Jeez, give me some credit. Our friendship survived you and Madd's bullshit for twenty years."

"What things happened?"

Nate rubbed the back of his neck and lit a cigarette, stalling. "You know, like the odd accidental cock touch... that doesn't really put me off."

I spilled my coffee in shock. "You wanna fuck around with him?"

Nate shook his head and bit his lip at the same time. If that wasn't enough, he also added, "No, I don't think so. But I kind of wanna fuck around with her while *with* him, you know? Like maybe more than just putting all the attention on her. Make sense?"

Yeah, it made sense, but those two were treading a pretty blurred line. "Be careful, man. You know what happens if you fuck a Kane."

"What?" he laughed. "You all worried we're gonna be real brothers and brothers-in-law at the same time? Please," he scoffed.

"Their dicks have superpowers," I admitted. "Don't knock it till you try it. And just to be clear, I'm not suggesting you try it. Xavi is your best friend."

"I know," he sighed. "It's just that things aren't as sexy with her if he's not there. That's all."

"Don't use her like me and Madd used Julie. We were dicks. You're supposed to be better than us."

He wobbled his head with uncertainty.

We sat in a beat of silence, taking time to think about the Kane boys. Mine was my enemy turned lover... but still my rival, and Nate's was his best friend turned... fuck buddy? I didn't know, but we were both fucked in the head. This better just be a sexy situation, because I wasn't sure I wanted what he said to be real. Brothers and brothers-in-law. That was weird, right? All I knew for sure was that Nate and I were persistent when it came to protecting those two Kanes, and for now, that was perfect.

“You think Mary is gonna throw Mom out now that her care is getting harder?” I asked Nate.

“Maybe. Heidi is still going every day, but Mary won’t be able to take care of her forever. I swear we just got some random stroke of luck that Mary offered in the first place.”

“So, what’re we gonna do about it? We can’t afford more than Heidi, and we can’t afford a care facility yet. There’s that one in Redding, but... it seems sketchy.” And that was saying something. If we thought it was more sketchy than our mom living with a woman who just wanted to be a mother hen to someone ever since her daughter moved out, it must be sketchy.

“I don’t know, Dev. Keep trying, I guess.” He looked at me. “Fuck it. Text that number. If you don’t, we’re gonna keep overthinking it.”

“What should I say?”

“Dad?” Nate laughed. “That’s it. Just let him know it’s one of us, and leave it in his hands.”

Without thinking too hard about it, I sent the text. We both watched the screen to see if he’d reply, but after twenty minutes, Xavi showed up and told me to go home. Maddox was home.

They dropped me off at the entrance to Garron Park, and I gave my brother a look before they left, reminding him to mind his cock.

He grinned.

-DEVON-

“ARE YOU FUCKING SHITTING me?” I snapped at Maddox, pissed off, but also trying not to laugh at his ridiculousness.

“No, I’m not shitting you, Devon,” he groaned, sprawled out on the lawn like a twat. “I can’t move.”

Jesus. One day of farm labour and this asshole was man-down? “Get up.” I kicked him with the toe of my flip-flop.

“Carry me,” he whined.

We were trying, but failing, to get to the beach. Maddox wanted a swim to ease his sore muscles and stretch him out, but he hadn’t made it past the lawn yet.

“Just throw me in a wheelbarrow because I’m fucking dead.” He tried to roll over but winced before getting very far. “That old bastard is trying to kill me.” Not usually one for dramatics, I hid my grin as he moaned and groaned on the lawn, jostling around like he was stuck there.

Good grief. I grabbed his arms and pulled him to his feet. “It’s been one day, Madd. You better shape up.”

He complained as I got him to his feet, and I'm pretty sure he over-exaggerated his unstable legs because he kept leaning on me, and accidentally grabbing my ass every few seconds.

"Just leave me behind, Devon. Save yourself."

What a dipshit. I turned my back to him and dragged his arms over my shoulders. "Get on." He did, laughing the whole time he struggled to get into the piggyback position. "If you drown out there, it ain't my fault." I heaved his heavy ass up and hooked my arms under his legs.

As I carried this prick to the beach, tripping over my sandals, I thought about how our relationship had come full circle in a sense. I spent so much time neglecting Maddox when we first got the shop. So much so that he was pissed at me all the time, hiding his hurt feelings. I lost myself in some goal to be better than my dad, and in the process, I fucked over my boyfriend, made him feel invisible, and hurt him real bad. Once I lost him, I smartened the fuck up, but now we were back to having the same issue.

Maddox got a job that had long, gruelling, shitty hours that obviously left him exhausted and sore. But unlike how I handled it, here he was, making the world's biggest effort to take me to the beach just to spend time with me. He was here, dead tired, hurting like a bitch, and physically drained, but making such an effort to do something with me. I loved him so much for it. So much that I carried his lazy ass down the path through the forest.

We tried not to look at all the spots that had upturned soil from the police.

"Stop walking so bumpy," he bitched at me.

"You smell like shit," I retorted.

"I shovelled it all day," he laughed. "Horses shit a lot."

"You need separate work clothes. Just leave them there and don't bring that shit back home." I hiked him up because he was slipping, and he

groaned in pain. His dick got hard, too.

“Let’s break into Lot 62 and steal our shit back.” He tightened his hold around my neck, pretty much choking me. “I bought you motocross gloves a long time ago and hid them in the kitchen pantry where you’d never look. They’re purple.”

Not that I had much use for them now, but I loved that he did it.

That was a good idea. The place was still blocked off, but I was pretty sure that was mostly because we hadn’t been fighting for access back. Everything we owned remained locked away there like a tomb of our past. I didn’t wanna go back there, but it was hard living without all that shit. I’d never take a supply of underwear for granted again.

“Deal. Tomorrow night?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he laughed, in a really giggly mood tonight. Probably from exhaustion. “You can carry me in there just like this, steal all our shit back, and carry me out. My legs will be fully busted by tomorrow.”

He’d get used to the labour of the job eventually. His body would adapt, grow, adjust and strengthen so that he wasn’t a complaining piece of shit forever.

“I think my mom is going to move in with my dad when he gets the new trailer,” Maddox said. “What do you think of that?”

That was his way of asking if I wanted to stay in his mom’s trailer and make it ours. While it was a good temporary place, it wasn’t what I wanted long-term. Our whole fucked up relationship started at the front door of that trailer the night I showed up half-dead. We had great memories in his tiny bedroom, even the bathroom and the kitchen, and we had so many firsts there. But it was also the place I overdosed, the place Maddox went to when

he left me that night, and the place I stayed with so much agony and heartbreak while he was in prison.

“I don’t want to live in Garron Park,” I blurted out.

“Oh, thank fuck,” he breathed against the side of my neck. “I think I’d rather live in tent city than Garron Park.”

I smiled as we got to the beach. I dropped this bitch to the sand and sat down with him. “Let’s live on a houseboat.”

Maddox laughed again, looking up at the moon. “Oh, hell yeah. I love a houseboat, and you have a dock, but how the fuck are we gonna afford a houseboat?”

“Maybe cheaper than a trailer. How well does your new gig pay?”

“Nothing this week,” he said.

“What?” I looked at him. “Why?”

“Shit, I mean... it’s pretty much minimum wage. Well, at least for the first few months. He said if I did good, he’d up my pay and give me perks, whatever the fuck that means.” Maddox played with the sand between us. He was hiding something from me, but it didn’t feel like a bad thing. “I learned I don’t have to bring lunch, though. That old fuck tried to kill me all morning with manual labour, and then he fed me one of the best meals of my life.”

“Why aren't you getting paid this week?”

Maddox smirked. “Trial period.”

Liar. I knew that shady smirk.

“Get naked,” he changed the subject, distracting me by being cute. “And then help me get naked. I can’t lift my arms.”

“Where the fuck would you be without me?” I smiled.

“In the darkest pits of hell,” he deadpanned.

Aww.



MADDOX HID SOMETHING FROM me all week. He sang like a goddamn canary about his sore body, but he shut the hell up whenever I brought up his pay. I was just trying to make a damn budget, because fuck, we needed to start putting money aside for whatever future we planned to have, but he wouldn't talk about it.

"What's Madd up to?" I asked Xavi, trying to get the answers out of him. He had his head buried in an engine, but maybe it was best to ask while he was distracted. "He's being all weird and stupid."

"Weird and stupid are new indicators of sketchy behaviour?" Xavi laughed.

"No, but this brand of bullshit is new."

"Speaking of stupid and weird," Nate walked in carrying a box of boat parts. "You ever get a reply from Jim?" He refused to call him Dad anymore; I respected the decision.

"No, but it's marked as read, so someone saw it."

"Could have been anyone. Who knows who has that phone now," Nate huffed.

Jim could have pawned the phone off, sold it, or thrown it away to be picked up by someone random. Who knew? But if he was still out there, how was he surviving? He hadn't gotten his intended winnings from the theft of that shipping container because Davis was still under surveillance and hadn't been able to spring it free from the evidence room. Hell, it might

have been moved to a different facility for all we knew. So, what was my dad doing for money? All he had was that boat rental I paid for. Did he have some sort of contingency plan in place? Were there other people involved?

My biggest question was a constant worry about what came next. I wanted to know what that cockroach had planned and if it involved any of us. I needed that motherfucker dead or locked up.

“Don’t do anything stupid, Dev,” Nate warned again, and I wondered if I’d ever stop being pegged as the dumb one. Probably not. I had some epic failures under my belt. “Remember how good you have it.”

I would remember. I’d remember, and I’d do everything within my power to make sure things stayed this good. Madd was finally out and becoming happy, and the shop was starting to bounce back from the time we slowed down to work on the case. Things needed to keep moving forward, but Jim also needed to be dealt with. I wasn’t losing my brother, my mother, or my boyfriend in any of this.

Maddox was mine, and the next time someone tried to take him from me, I’d blow up the fucking world and watch it burn just to keep him at my side.

-MADDOX-

MY HANDS BLED. BUT I liked it. There was something about the blisters and the calluses, the ache in my muscles, and the fatigue that plagued me that felt important. Because I'd earned it. Not the pain, but the fucking rings. I'd done my week of free labour, and now these things were mine. Two rings with the most ideal inscription, almost like cheesy fate, glinted back at me from the palm of my hand.

I studied the words that spanned both rings, wondering if they were too lame to use as wedding rings. Which one belonged to me and which one belonged to Devon?

Without light, there is no darkness.

Devon used to be the darkness that clouded my life before I fell in love with him. He could be dark, but ever since our relationship grew to include love, he'd always been the light that pulled me out of my own dark mind.

Without light.

I stared at the ring that had that half of the saying etched into the metal. Devon really was my light. He was light-haired, happier than I was, and

always had a disposition about him that sparked the fire burning within me.

There is no darkness.

I was the darkness, and without Devon, I sometimes felt like I couldn't exist. This phrase felt like it described me to a T. Without Devon, there was no me.

Xavi thought they were lame. He told me that engagement rings and wedding bands should be classy instead of containing a lame ass phrase that we hadn't even put there ourselves. But since when had Devon and I ever been classy? Yeah, we might not have put the words on the rings, but they fit. I was eighty percent sure Devon would understand the saying and agree with me. That twenty percent of doubt really fucked with my confidence, though.

"What they say?" Pete asked, handing me a glass of lemonade on our lunch break. We sat on his front wrap-around porch, trying to stay out of the sun.

"Without light, there is no darkness."

"Mm," he mused, coughing. "Without darkness, there is no light," he reversed the phrase.

"Stupid?" I asked. "To use as engagement rings?"

"Not stupid," he said. This prick was almost as tight-lipped as I was. One or two-word answers were our style, so we got on pretty well. He drank half his lemonade in one gulp, wiped his mouth with the back of his dirty wrist, and coughed again. "Sometimes ya gotta know the dark to appreciate the light."

Well... that was fucking profound. And perfect. I shoved the rings back into my pocket, wondering if I should try to clean them somehow before dropping to one knee.

“You earned ‘em,” Pete said. “When are you proposing?”

I shrugged. I had no idea. I wanted it to be special, but I wasn’t the best at grand romantic gestures. How did one go about proposing to the man of their dreams while keeping a competitive edge to it? But then my mind got all caught up, wondering if this was the worst time to propose. Should I at least wait until after the shit with Jim was over and the case fully closed? Would Devon be able to be happy about the proposal while stressing about his dad? Should I hold off a bit?

“Life is short,” Pete said. “Don’t wait on the things that make your heart beat too hard.”

Devon made my heart beat so hard that half the time I felt like it’d pound right out of my chest and kill me. That blond fuck was a safety risk every time he was near me.

“I know. There’s just... some shit.”

He waved that off. “There’s always some shit. You want a big wedding?”

“No,” I scoffed. “We can’t afford a big wedding. We’ll probably get married at the courthouse or something.”

Which fucking sucked. The nearest courthouse already held all the worst memories of my life. I didn’t want my trial to overpower what should essentially be one of the happiest days of my life.

Pete pointed across the yard, way out in the distance. “You see that Willow?” he asked, and I nodded. “I married my wife there. You can have it.”

“The Willow?” I laughed.

“The spot, boy,” he gruffed. “You can get married there.”

“I’m marrying a man. Problem with that?” There were a lot of homophobic fucks in Garron, so now was the time to clear the air.

“I married a woman. Problem with that?” He downed the rest of his lemonade and wiped his mouth again.

I grinned. I liked Pete even though he worked me like a slave driver.

“Them horses ain’t gonna bring themselves in,” he said. “Get.”

I chugged the drink. “Thanks,” I said, more about the offer of the wedding spot than the lemonade. “For everything.” I guess I owed a lot to this guy—the rings, the job, the advice and encouragement, and now the Willow.

He made a grunting sound when I walked away. “That glass ain’t gonna wash itself either.”

Laughing, I went back to grab both and took them inside to wash them. Bossy hardass.



“YOU’RE AN ASSHOLE,” DEVON complained half-heartedly, smacking my ass. “It’s been a week. How’d you already get an ass like that?”

Manual labour and a lot of pain. I grinned, hoping he’d smack me again. Jesus. Instead of a spanking, I got hit in the shoulder.

“Fuck,” I groaned. “Not the reaction I was going for.”

“Can you behave for five minutes?” he asked, pushing the grocery cart. Okay, maybe the baking aisle wasn’t the best place to get spanked.

“What’re we even doing down here? You don’t bake. Last I checked, you couldn’t even make toast.”

Devon straight-up growled at me. Fuck my life. We went from enduro races at the track every weekend to hitting the grocery store with pockets

full of coupons. Not complaining, but shit. I hoped we'd be able to get back to motocross someday, at least. I'd get annihilated out there on the shitty bike the boys got me, but I loved it anyway. It'd been getting me to and from work like a dream.

"Gina is going to show me how to bake those things you like," Devon said, his cheeks pinkening right up. "Fuck off about it. I'm trying to do something nice!"

Once again, I loved the effort he put in. "Then spank me again," I laughed.

Devon stopped with his hand on a bag of sugar. He raised a brow at me, dead serious. "You really liked that?"

"Mhm," I hummed, grinning. I took the cart from him, leaning over the handle while he shopped. "I think I remember you mentioning something about tying me up?"

"Fuck the baking aisle." He put the sugar back. "Let's go."

I huffed a laugh. "Get your Martha Stewart shit first." I grabbed the sugar and put it in the cart. "Then we'll go."

"Not that one." He put it back, exchanging it for a different one. "We don't have a coupon for that one."

I made a gesture to promise I'd keep my hands inside the cart from now on. "Can you also learn how to cook dinners? Does Gina work that sort of magic?"

"Fuck you, Maddox."

Shit, this was actually fun. Never been happy in a grocery store before, but I kind of liked watching him be all domestic and shit. Real husband material right there. I was still half laughing as we walked into the next

aisle and ran right into Julie, the girl we both hooked up with and sort of dated.

“Oh, hey,” Julie said, looking surprised to see us. “Hey, guys.”

I nodded, ready to move on and leave this place, but Devon wasn’t as awkward as I was. “Hey, Julie. How are ya?”

“Yeah, good.” She tucked her hair and shuffled.

Okay, that should be enough of a social obligation by now. I moved the cart past her, but she spoke up again.

“Hey, Maddox?”

I turned to face her, glad she hadn’t called me Maddy like she used to. I felt a bit shit about how Devon and I played tug-of-war with her back in the day, but there was nothing I could do about it now. I smiled, to the best of my ability, but Devon elbowed me in the ribs, so I showed some teeth.

“I just wanted to say that I’m sorry for what happened to you,” Julie said.

Well, that was nice. “Thanks. At least it’s mostly over now.”

Julie nodded awkwardly again. What was her damn deal? She’d never been shy before. She looked nervous, which made me nervous.

“You okay?” Devon asked her, glancing around.

“Something wrong?” I asked at the same time.

“I’m fine,” she said with a smile. A fake smile. Then she looked behind us, and her face dropped.

I shared a concerned look with Devon before turning to see what she was looking at. And I met eyes with the man who shot me.

-MADDOX-

OH, FUCK NO!

Automatically, my fists balled, my blood rushed, and my face got hot. That goddamn rookie cop. It hadn't happened in a long time, but my vision turned red like it used to do when I looked at Devon. To see this guy out, walking around the fucking grocery store, living his life like he hadn't tried to kill us, hit me so hard all rationality left me.

But Devon acted first. "You fucking fuck!" Devon snapped at Davis, taking a step in his direction. "How fucking dare you?"

My whole disposition changed. As much as I wanted to confront Davis, I had a different priority now. Devon. As soon as he got protective, he became my one and only focus. Protecting him from himself. Some things never changed.

"Who the fuck do you think you are?" Devon spat at him, seething like a rabid dog.

I turned my back on Davis and put a hand on Devon's chest, stepping right in front of him to block his path to the cop. If he did something stupid

and got arrested, we'd never talk our way out of that one, and Davis was slimy enough to set us up like this.

"Devon," I said calmly. "Look at me."

He didn't. "You lying sack of shit! Do you know the shit we've been through because of you? You better get your ass outta Garron before I—"

"Devon!" I yelled at him, grabbing his chin with one hand and keeping the other on his chest. "Look at me. Only me."

I had no idea what Davis was doing behind my back, but Devon's blue eyes met mine before shifting back to Davis. They darted back and forth while his chest heaved, and when his glare finally settled on mine, we had a wordless conversation. With a look, I told him to smarten the fuck up. I just got out of prison, the case was still ongoing, and Davis was a part of it. Meddling in it, which included confronting Davis in a grocery store, was a criminal offence. With a glare, Devon told me he watched me almost die because of this asshole and now he wanted to kill him for it. Not gonna lie, the purely lethal look in his eyes made me do a double-take, noting how good murder looked on him.

Devon hated that Davis was allowed to be out in town. He was supposed to be under house arrest, but being a cop granted him certain advantages that people like us would never get. Life wasn't fair, but we'd been learning that lesson since childhood.

My hand rose and fell with the force of his breathing. Our eyes stayed connected, finishing our conversation without words, and when he blinked, I knew he'd be okay. Later. That was the promise we made to each other. Davis would get his fucking due... later. We'd find a way to make sure of it, but this, in a public place, wasn't the way.

“Fuck,” Devon muttered under his breath, the fight falling from his shoulders. “Fuck.”

Davis snorted a mocking laugh behind me, and it took everything in my power not to spin around and knock him out. Devon tensed, so I firmed up my grip on his jaw and pressed my hand to his chest. A reminder to keep his shit together.

“We’re together,” I whispered to him, reminding him of what was important. “Don’t forget that.” We’d been granted a second chance at having a life together, and this moment wasn’t going to fuck it up.

Devon’s jaw clenched again, but he nodded, looking at me instead of Davis.

“Let’s go.” I shoved him in the chest, pushing him backwards and away from the prick cop. Devon kept facing me until I shoved him a third time, and then he finally turned around to walk on his own. Julie was still standing there, looking almost scared, so I tilted my head at her to invite her to leave with us.

“Run away like a little bitch again, Sawyer,” Davis mocked as we left. “Your dad would be so proud.”

Devon whirled around, ready to charge at Davis like a bull. “Fuck you, you—”

I blocked his path and he bounced off my chest. “Get outside, you dumb fuck,” I snarled at him, giving him yet another shove. Jesus, this guy was a hothead.

I damn near wrestled him the whole way out, and he didn’t stop fighting me until the doors closed behind us. He shoved me away and threw a string of insults, directed at Davis, at me. I’d take the brunt of them, letting him vent so he didn’t murder Nate’s truck or the row of shopping carts near it.

While he spouted off, I checked in on Julie. “Did you know he was there?”

She had a guilty look on her face, and if she had anything to do with him, I’d throw her on her ass and not give a single fuck about it. “I saw him in the aisle,” she said, defending herself. “And he gave me the creeps, so I left that aisle and ran into you guys. I swear.”

It better have been a coincidence, and I guess that explained why she’d seemed awkward in the store. She probably tried to distract us from him. Or she was a bigger bitch than I ever gave her credit for and wanted to get back at us for the way we treated her. Come to think of it, I had no idea why she was even here. Wasn’t she supposed to be off at some community college or something?

“—kill him and his fucking goat!” I caught the tail end of Devon’s rant. Then he turned into a dick and spun that anger on Julie. “Were you with that fuckstick?”

Jesus, he needed to calm down. I opened the door of Nate’s truck and pushed him inside it. He fought me, so I gave him the death glare and didn’t back down.

“Fuck you, Maddox.” He huffed himself into the truck, but wouldn’t let me close the door. He sat with his legs half out, still waiting for Julie to answer.

“No, I swear. I was just picking up a few things before I saw you guys.” Yet, we’d all abandoned our shopping carts in there. “I promise.”

“We believe you,” I told her right before Devon tried to get out again. “Get in the fucking truck before I knock you out and put you in the back.”

Devon rolled his eyes and sat back down. Julie tried to hide a smile.

“You need a ride or something?” I asked her, wanting to leave before Davis came out and started Devon off all over again.

“No, I drove here. I’m sorry, Madd. I didn’t... I’m just sorry for everything you’ve gone through. Both of you.” She looked past me, giving Devon a small smile.

“Sorry for all the shit we put you through,” Devon laughed, finally calmer. “We were assholes.”

Julie laughed, agreeing with that. “Anyway. It was nice to see you guys. Maybe we can get together sometime.”

Yeah, probably not, but I nodded like I gave a fuck. We watched her climb into her car, noticing a guy sitting in the passenger seat. At least she found someone better than us. When she drove away, I slammed the door in Devon’s face and climbed in the other side.

I turned the key. The truck didn’t start. “You’re such a dipshit, Devon. You know what would have happened if you hit him or something?” I turned the key again. It rumbled but didn’t start.

He groaned out a sigh. “I know. Fuck. I know. That guy just...”

“Yeah, no shit.” I turned the key again, and the truck finally started. “But we gotta expect that shit. He’s gonna try to get us caught in something, and we can’t react to it. Beating the shit out of a cop in a grocery store after he already claimed he had to shoot me in self-defence... how do you think that’s gonna go over?”

“I fucking get it, okay? Stop treating me like I’m stupid.”

“A little stupid,” I muttered.

“Well, fuck! How would you react if you had to face the guy who almost...” His anger switched to grief. “I almost lost you because of him, Maddox.”

I pulled out of the parking lot and gripped his hand in the middle of our seats. "I know. So let's not mess it up now."

"Hanes better bring that fucker down," he grumbled at the window, linking his fingers with mine.

Devon needed something good to happen.

It was time.



"CALM DOWN, MADD," XAVI scoffed at me like I was being ridiculous. He held his hand out for the rings and didn't drop it. "You'll fuck this whole thing up if you don't relax."

I'd grown attached to these lame rings, and I didn't want to hand them over to my brother. I also knew he was right, and I needed to let them go. Devon was already getting suspicious, and if I didn't get them out of the house, that snoopy bastard would find them and ruin the surprise. Then we'd fight about it until one of us was bloody and still bleeding, either tapped out or knocked out. Then we'd probably fuck. But still, I didn't want him to see this coming.

"Are your hands clean?" I glared at his dirty paws, pulling my hand back.

"Jesus Christ, Madd. My hands are cleaner than yours, you fussy bitch." He snatched the newly polished rings from my hand and shoved them back into the box. "I'll guard them with my life." He shoved the box in his pocket and then held his hands up in case a punch was coming.

He'd better.

"You have a plan yet?" Xavi asked, offering me a beer.

I took it, stressed as shit, and free to drink it without Devon here. “Sort of,” I admitted. “But knowing Devon, he’ll fuck it up for me.”

I’d thought of a thousand different ways to propose to Devon.

I could lock him in the cabin at the gravel pits and recreate our first night there. We faced so much shit there that night, and it seemed like a good place to face the rest of it together. I could have done it at the track, making it into a metaphor about always competing and now being on the same side. But being at the track without dirt bikes was fucking bummy, so I nixed that plan. I considered doing it at the beach where we spent a lot of time talking, fighting, sorting through our problems, and finding all our best resolutions. It fit the theme, so a part of my plan was going to happen there.

But when I thought back on everything that made us who we were, there was only one viable option that checked all the boxes.

Aggressive. Fucked up. Angry. Competitive. A rivalry.

I grinned, knowing exactly when and where I planned to propose. I just had to keep Devon’s nose out of it until then.

“I’m gonna need them back on Saturday,” I told Xavi.

“Saturday? What’s on Sat... oh, fuck.” He barked a laugh. “Seriously? You’re so fucked up, Madd.”

We might not want to live in Garron Park anymore, but there was still one great thing about that place, and it’d fit perfectly into my proposal plan.

-DEVON-

NATE OFFERED ME A beer, but I refused, still not trusting myself to drink. Maybe I just didn't have the desire. In my heart, I knew I could casually have a few, but in my mind, I doubted myself like a motherfucker. That alcohol poisoning and overdose scared the shit out of me. Not because I'd almost died, but because I'd resorted to that kind of coping mechanism like it was the only one I had. I needed to learn to do better, handle my shit better, and ask for help when I needed it. Life had been pretty damn good since Maddox got home, and as long as I had him by my side, I knew he'd keep me in check even if I wanted to indulge every once in a while.

"What are we even doing here?" I asked Nate.

"What? You used to love this shit," he laughed.

"Yeah, back when I used it as an excuse to beat the shit out of Madd." Maybe that wasn't such a bad idea for tonight after all.

The main beach at Garron Park had been cleared and ringed with old vehicles, shining their headlights at the makeshift fighting ring. Garron Park Fight Night was crowded tonight, but the vibe of it was good and

wholesome. Currently, two chicks were battling it out over who got to keep the curling iron they'd split on.

I really did love fight night. It was the perfect place to let out aggression, blow off some steam, and shed some frustrations in a safe-ish, controlled environment. To the people here, fight night was therapy, and that shit worked wonders. It only took me this long to realize that all those times we'd fought, Maddox had been my therapist on nights just like this. We'd beat the shit out of each other until neither of us could stand, and even though my body would be in pain, I always felt better after. I hadn't known why at the time, but I understood it now.

"You telling me you don't love the thrill of this anymore?" Nate asked, edging closer to the front of the circle to get a better view.

People cheered for the girls fighting, egging them on, and amping them up. "Nah, I love it. Where's Madd and Xavi?" I scanned the crowd, looking for a pair of tall, dark-haired idiots. One of them would be laughing and the other would be brooding.

"They're here somewhere," Nate said. "Finish her, Karen! Get that straightener!"

"Curling iron," I corrected.

"Curling iron! It's yours, babe!" His beer sloshed all over the place.

I had no idea where Maddox was, but once Karen won the curling iron, two older fucks hopped into the ring; they had a BBQ on the line. Shit, I could have used a BBQ.

"Everyone's betting big tonight," I laughed.

"What're we betting?" Maddox asked, showing up at my side like a dark shadow. His thick, deep tone did something sinister to me.

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Please,” I scoffed. “We don’t have shit to put on the line.”

“Alright,” Maddox shrugged. “So the winner gets to pick his prize after the fight. Deal?”

I studied him, trying to figure out his deal. His face was stern, his smirk was honest, and his green eyes weren’t shying away from mine. “Shit, you’re serious?” I laughed. “No. Hell no. We aren’t fighting each other, Madd.” I backed away from him.

“Why not?”

“Because. Because you got fucking shot and—”

“That was half a year ago. I’m fine. Fight me.”

“No.”

“Pussy.”

“Fuck you!” I shoved him in the chest. “You’re a little bitch about your job, Madd. You seriously think you can hold your own in there? I had to pick you up off the lawn last week.”

“Fight me and find out. Let’s go.” He wasn’t even joking. “I already know what I want when I win.”

“*When* you... Oh, fuck no. Don’t make me beat your ass just to put you in your place. We’re supposed to be past this.”

“But we aren’t.” He grinned at me. “Where’s my place, Devon?” he purred seductively, bumping his chest against mine. “Hmm?”

“On your fucking knees in front of me,” I snapped at him.

“Then fight me for it.” He tapped my cock. “Unless you’re afraid to look like a bitch in front of all these people.” He tilted his head.

I glared at him, hating that he knew what buttons to push. Maddox had a direct path to three parts of me—my dick, my heart, and my

competitiveness.

“Lloyd!” I shouted at the guy who ran this shit show. “We’re next!” I pointed between me and Maddox.

Lloyd beamed a smile and word spread throughout the crowd. It’d been over a year since we’d fought at fight night, and apparently, the park had missed it. Side bets and bullshit taunts flew, but I zeroed in on the boyfriend who just goaded me into a fight.

“Happy?”

“Very.” He grinned.



DESPITE THE COPPERY TANG of my blood in my mouth, all I could taste was adrenaline. What fuelled me? Passion or rage? Fury or desire? Simply rivalry with my best competitor? Probably that.

Maddox, the smug fuck, had his fists raised and a cocky, bloody smirk on his face. His teeth were etched in red, his knuckles busted, and his hair jutted up all over the place. What a sexy, sweaty, bloody mess. He might have been mine, but I still wanted to beat him. Bragging rights and prizes were on the line. I told myself not to get distracted by the trail of blood that dripped off his chin to decorate his tanned chest, and I told myself even harder not to let this sexy gladiator thwart my goals.

I intended to win and put him on his knees where he belonged, just like I’d said.

My head swam with dizziness, my leg muscles burned, and my eye swelled shut a bit, but the way my blood buzzed through my system made

me feel more alive than I had in a long time. Fuck, I'd missed this.

"Don't tell me you're done," Maddox chirped. "I know I'm not dating a quitter." He pulled his black swim shorts up his thighs to give himself more freedom of movement, crouching down in a fighting stance.

I smiled at him, loving the rush this gave me. "I won't be done until I knock you the fuck out. You never used to talk this much, and I'm dying to shut you up." I hiked up my white shorts, matching his stance—his energy.

"I've got plenty more to say tonight," he goaded, baiting me.

Well, no time like the present. I lunged at him, and the gathered crowd roared with the buzz of our fight. I aimed my first right at his shit-talking mouth. My punch landed, and Maddox either bit his tongue or his cheek because fresh blood dribbled over his lower lip and down his chin, making him feral.

Stars sparkled in the periphery of my vision, and I stumbled back a few steps. I hadn't even seen that hit coming. Maddox didn't stop. He landed a punch to my gut, my ribs, and then he kneed me right in the thigh. Pain weaved through my muscles, locking them up so hard I doubled forward, buckling in anguish. But from my lower point of view, I saw the perfect opportunity present itself. I wound up and landed a hard uppercut to the underside of his jaw.

He fell. Hard.

And he didn't get back up.

"Fuck," he groaned, sprawled out on the sand. "That was a cheap shot, you prick!" He tried to get to his feet, but he flopped right back down.

I bounced on the balls of my feet, not ready to let go of the fight in me until I knew for sure this fucker wouldn't get back up. "You getting up, Madd?" I shouted down at him, tuning out the crowd. "Get up!"

Maddox tried two more times, rubbing his jaw and trying to shake away the faintness in his head. Dizzy and wobbly, he crashed to the sand on his back, laughing and shaking his head. “Fuck you for this.”

I raised my fists in the air and the crowd cheered for my victory! I left Maddox lying in a heap, doing a victory lap, because I earned that shit. You know what else I earned? Bragging rights! I crouched down and laughed right in his bloody face.

“See?” I knelt beside him. “Sometimes you need to be put in your place, Madd.” I grinned at him, grabbing his hand to yank him into a sitting position.

He swayed a bit, but it levelled out after a minute. He groaned, wiping blood from his mouth, getting sand everywhere. “I’m sure you’ll never stop putting me there.”

“Never,” I agreed. “Get up, loser. I’ve got a prize to collect.” I heaved him to his feet, steadying him while he found his footing. He might have lost, but there was a smile on his face, and if I wasn’t mistaken, there was something else there, too. Nerves, maybe? Smugness, definitely. What the hell did he have to be cocky about?

What a difference. We used to fight at these fight nights, but no matter who won in the end, we’d still be pissed off at each other after the fight. Now, Maddox actually smiled at me, proud of my win and willing to celebrate it with me. Kind of loved how much our dynamic had changed while holding onto some of the parts we weren’t ready to let go of. Fighting? Check. Actual anger? Good riddance.

I ran my thumb over his bottom lip, smearing the blood. “You need to wash all this off before it makes me too rowdy and I pop a woody in front

of all these people,” I laughed, eye-fucking him. Goddamn, Maddox. “Swim?”

“Carry me,” he whined, smirking.

I shook my head. “Your pride couldn’t take it after losing. You can walk your own ass to the water, and then you can give me my winnings.”

Maddox gave me an almost shy smirk, able to mix the two expressions seamlessly. I didn’t get the time to dwell on it. Nate and Xavi rushed us, yammering on about the fight.

“You disgraced the family name,” Xavi scolded Maddox. He probably shamed the family name the first time he kissed a Sawyer, but whatever.

“Glad to see you can still beat his ass with more than just your dick,” Nate laughed in my face.

I grinned at that.

“We’re going out. You guys good?” he asked.

“Yeah. I’ll take this bitch to the beach and then patch him up at home.” I nodded to Maddox, who was deep in a hushed conversation with Xavi.

“Where are you guys going?”

Nate rubbed the back of his neck. “Uh, to a party thing.”

“With this chick you’re sharing?”

“Not sharing. Just... both loving on,” he laughed. “Physically loving. Not emotionally. Shut up.”

I cleared my throat, but Nate cut me off before I could say anything else.

“I don’t need any cock-minding advice tonight, asshole. Fuck off about it.”

Yeah, right. “Be careful,” I said anyway. “See you tomorrow?”

Nate nodded, his smile lingering a few extra seconds. “Okay, have fun. Just, uh, have fun.” He handed me my cell and I shoved it in the tiny pocket

of my swim shorts.

What a weirdo. I watched him take off with Xavi, the two of them looking back at us for a second. I ignored them and hooked Maddox's arm over my shoulder, stumbling down the beach and carrying all his weight.

"Use your damn legs, Madd."

"I can't," he laughed. "You kicked me in the hammy and now I can't walk."

Yes he could. He was just being a mopey bastard because he knew I'd help him. We got so far down the beach that the lights and noise from the fights faded, leaving only the waves and the moon to orchestrate the rest of our night.

I brought him to the water's edge and unhooked his arm from my shoulder. Facing the water and breathing it in, I felt the thrill of the night wash over me. "Alright, Madd. Time to collect my prize."

My lips were pulled in a wide smile as I turned to face him, but it turned into an unattractive O when I found him crouched in the sand.

"You wanted me on my knee, right?"

"Both knees."

"One knee," he countered.

Holy fuck. Fucking hell. Fucking fuck a fucking duck. Was this really happening?

My vision blurred with unwanted tears and my body bristled with way more adrenaline and energy than it had during the fight. I couldn't breathe. *I couldn't fucking breathe.*

"Maddox..."

"Devon," he started...

-DEVON-

I COULDN'T TELL IF I was choking on air or breathing too much of it. My chest pounded with the force of my heart, and my knuckles burned with gritted sand between them, clenching around it all just to keep myself together and not cover my mouth like a blushing bride.

“Devon,” Maddox started, and my throat got thick. “I told you once that I wanted to hate you, have you, fuck you, and fight with you.”

I swallowed the lump in my throat and recalled the night he said that. It was after a race at the track, and it was his definition of what we were. I loved it.

“And now? Now I want to hate you, have you, fuck you, fight with you, love you forever, and marry you.” Maddox pulled open the velcro on his swim shorts’ pocket. His bloody hand held out a silver-toned ring, and I swear to actual fuck my heart straight-up ceased beating. Paused. Waited for the question. “Marry me, Devon.”

Okay, not a question. A demand.

My internal voice had already screamed yes at him a fuck ton of times, but my tongue glued itself to the roof of my mouth. I swallowed sandpaper and choked on love, not even embarrassed that tears rained down my cheeks like the emotional mess of a man I was.

I coughed. “Yes. Fuck, yes. Holy shit, Maddox. Yes!”

Before he could stand, I crashed to my knees in front of him. I ignored the ring and pulled his face to mine, kissing his bloody lips with everything I possibly had. It was the worst kiss ever because I couldn’t stop crying, and that just made me want to hit him again. Or laugh. Or hug him or some shit. I had no idea. I just knew that he was everything to me.

“I love you,” I whimpered against his cheek, hanging onto him for dear life. “I hate that you made me beat the shit out of you first.”

“No you don’t,” he laughed. He ran his fingers through my hair and kissed me again. Pulling back, he met my eyes. “You’ll marry me?”

“I’d marry you right now if we had someone to do it,” I said, meaning it. “I just want you forever, Madd.”

His shyness turned to cockiness, and he smiled wider than I’d ever seen him smile. His bloody teeth reflected the moonlight, and his eyes glistened with tears he hadn’t let fall. “Give me your hand.”

I leaned back on my heels and held out my left hand. My knuckles were bloody, but luckily, I was a righty, so my left hand wasn’t too swollen. Maddox slid the ring on my finger, and I studied the words on it.

“Without light?”

He cringed a bit. “Lame, I know.” He held my hand in his. “I found a set that says, ‘without light, there is no darkness.’ They just fit or some shit, you know? You’re my light, Devon.”

More tears brimmed my eyes. Maddox sucked at romance sometimes, but holy hell, this lame bullshit did it for me. “I am?”

“I don’t need you to light up my world or anything like that. Just... sit with me in the dark and remind me that light exists.”

I coughed to cover a cry. Oh, sweet Jesus. “You’re the shadiest fucker I’ve ever met, Madd, but we light each other up, yeah?”

“Stop trying to out-lame me,” he scoffed.

“Fuck you! Where’s the other ring? I want to put it on you.” I shoved my hand into his pocket and pulled it out. I read the other half of the inscription, felt the honesty and the meaning behind the phrase, and didn’t give a single fuck if it was cheesy. It was us. We were allowed to be cheesy. Light and dark, that’s what our world consisted of sometimes. We took turns being the consuming dark and the hopeful light, and I wouldn’t want it any other way. “You’ll be mine forever?” I asked.

“I already proposed. You can’t out-propose me, too, you dumbass.”

I grinned, grabbing his left hand. “I own you, bud.” I slid the ring on. It got stuck on his swollen finger, but he didn’t want to take it off. “I love you, Madd.”

“Love you, Dev.” Our eyes locked.

I wrapped my arms around him and breathed him in. Bloody, sandy, sweaty, and sort of snotty, but he was perfect. My man. My fiancé. I didn’t know what sort of karma was at play, but I’d obviously done something right in another life to win this prick. I was going to marry the asshole of my dreams, and shit, this was the happiest night of my life.

“Wait.” I pulled back to look at him. “Did you plan this shit with the fight?”

“Mhm,” he hummed. “You’re so fucking predictable, I knew you’d want me on my knees,” he laughed.

Dick. “Don’t even try to use this as an excuse for you losing our fight, Madd. I beat your ass fair and square. What would you have done if I knocked you out?”

He smirked but said nothing in response. Such a Maddox reaction. I loved the bullshit that came from his mouth, but I loved his silence, too. Sometimes, when he said nothing, the message was louder.

“Okay, you got to be all lame and cheesy. Now it’s my turn.” I pulled my phone out. “We’re taking selfies.”

Maddox scoffed. “I won’t marry a guy who uses words like selfies.”

“Yes you will.” I leaned into him. Maddox wrapped his arms around my middle and kissed my cheek. I took a selfie of us, changed the angle, and took a hundred more. “Smile, you dumb fuck.”

He smiled. His teeth were bloody, my eye was swollen, I had blood on my cheek and he had it on his chin, but fuck me, we smiled. Best engagement photos ever.

I kept snapping photos and Maddox didn’t even complain about it. Then the camera screen switched to an incoming call screen.

My blood turned to ice, my smile dropped, and my body went taut. I’d memorized that number.

“Who is that?” Maddox asked.

I let out a shaky breath. “My dad.”



I HAD TO IGNORE the call. There wasn't a chance in hell I'd let my fuck up of a father ruin the best night of my life. This was our night, and my dad had nothing to do with it.

I went to put the phone back in my pocket, but Maddox grabbed my wrist to stop me. "You can't ignore it," he said. "What if it's the only chance we get to confront him?"

He had a point, but it was our goddamn engagement night. "Madd..."

"No matter what he says, it won't ruin our night. I promise." He touched my cheek with surprising gentleness.

He could drop clues, give us some sort of expectation, or taunt us in a way that let us know what came next, and any advantage at this point was welcomed. Nate and Xavi were somewhere without us, Mom was at Mary's unguarded, and I needed to know they were all safe.

I answered the call on speakerphone without saying anything. We sat in the sand with blood on our faces and engagement rings on our fingers, listening to static on the other end of the line. He breathed, and the sound of it grated on every nerve. Jim had no fucking right to breathe. I must have tensed, because Maddox leaned into me for support—offering it or taking it, I didn't know.

The waves kept lapping, the moon kept shining, and we kept waiting. There was an intake of breath like someone was going to speak, but no words came. I didn't want to say anything, and I knew Maddox wouldn't, so if Jim didn't say something within the next minute, I'd hang up the phone, check on my family, and spend the rest of the night fucking my fiancé.

There were so many things I'd learned over the past year and a half, and the most important one was that nothing trumped Maddox and my brother.

But because of my dad, we lived in constant fear, looking over our shoulders every day just to make sure he didn't spring up on us and take something else.

I was done.

Done letting my dad dictate my life. Ready to take charge of our lives and take the power back.

My thumb hovered over the red button to end the call. Maddox kissed my neck, showing support while leaning into me.

Just as I was about to press the button, my dad spoke.

"I see congratulations are in order."

Ice coated my sweaty body, and Maddox jumped to his feet so fast I fell forward. We scanned the beach together, looking around frantically, fighting for the position of protector even though we didn't know where the threat came from.

And then my dad laughed through the line. It was sick, maniacal, and twisted.

-MADDOX-

I HAD NO IDEA what I expected Jim to say, but it hadn't been that. How the fuck did he know about our engagement when it *just* happened?

We'd been through the damn ringer, and this engagement was supposed to be the start of something new, something good and exciting for us after so much turmoil. Like always, Jim fucking Sawyer found a way to wedge himself into it, and I was so pissed, I felt like burning the fucking trailer park down.

I paced the length of my mom's trailer, trying to calm down so I didn't *actually* burn anything, but this rage stewed and threatened to overwhelm me. The only thing that kept me calm was Devon and my need to check in on him. Nate and Xavi came over after Devon called them to come back. We'd discreetly checked on Mary and their mom just in case Jim went after her, and my parents were here. Andrea called to say she'd stay at Mary's for the night and let us know if anything happened. That lady was a saint.

I wanted one thing in life: Devon. Why the fuck someone constantly thought they could threaten that and get away with it was beyond me, but if

Jim thought we'd roll over and take it from him, he had another thing coming. He ruined my fucking life there for a bit, more than once, and he ruined Devon's whole life, so fuck him, fuck the boat he rode in on, and fuck his goddamn game. I didn't want to be a coward anymore. Avoidance wasn't the answer here.

To be honest, I felt pretty damn murderous at the moment.

"Go celebrate," my dad said. "We'll handle Jim. This is your night."

Oh, I planned to spend the rest of my life celebrating, but tonight, I wouldn't move a damn inch until I had some plan of attack. Devon looked at me, his blue eyes calculating mine, but when he nodded, I knew we were on the same page. Couldn't wait to marry that prick.

"We will," Devon said. "But first, we need to figure out how Jim knew where we were."

My mom sat at the table and patched up Devon's busted knuckles. I loved her for it, but I got a bit jealous too. Patching him up was my job, and I didn't appreciate anyone else doing it. But it made my furious rage turn into smug pride when he smacked her hand away after she tried to take off his ring to clean beneath it.

"He had to have been on a boat," Nate said. "If he was out on the water, no one would have noticed him. He had binoculars or something."

"Because no one saw shit," Xavi agreed. "And if he was onshore, someone would have seen him."

"Unless they covered for him," Devon spat the words. "That piece of shit seems to have unlimited means to pay people off."

He was pissed; I got it. But the people of Garron Park were mostly good, and they were just as sick of Jim's shit as we were. They didn't fear him as much as they used to, and now they were ready to take our side.

“There’s only one reason he’d be back,” I said, bringing this conversation in a different direction.

“The contraband,” my dad filled in.

“Yeah, and he’ll do whatever it takes to get it.” I rubbed the tender bruise under my jaw. Damn, Devon could throw a punch. And it turned me on. “Including fuck with any of us. He wants us rattled so we’re watching our backs instead of watching him.”

“We need eyes on Davis,” Xavi said. “If anyone can get that shit out of evidence lock up, it’s him.”

“Should we call Officer Hanes?” Nate asked. “He got Madd out, and he believed us enough to help us out. Can we trust him with this?”

“I vote yes,” Devon said. “He’s at the station and has the best lookout point. We need him.”

When a knock sounded at the front door, we all tensed, expecting it to be Jim. Xavi opened the door despite everyone telling him not to, and then my protective instincts kicked in because of who stood there. It wasn’t Jim. I rushed to Devon and brought him into the kitchen with me, trying to shove him behind my body.

“I’m not a fucking princess, Maddox,” he whisper-hissed at me, trying to push me behind him instead. We ended up behind the counter, jostling each other for the protection position. Good enough.

“The fuck do you want?” Nate barked at Patrick Harris.

“Ma’am,” Harris said to my mom respectfully. “Gentlemen,” he added to the rest of us.

“Why are you here?” Devon barked, all bite.

“I’m here in peace,” Harris said, stepping inside and closing the door behind him. He lifted his jacket to show us he was unarmed, and it struck

me as weird that I lived a life that required that sort of bullshit. Jesus. Devon relaxed a fraction, but I didn't. My thumb tried to spin the ring on my finger, but it was too swollen, so I just touched it for comfort. "Actually, I'm here with a business proposition."

"I told you to forget I existed," I snapped at him.

"And I did, until now," he said. Dressed like a thrifty thug, baggy pants and all. He at least lacked the yellow aviators this time.

I kept my mouth shut, and so did my dad. While our mouths weren't running, our eyes assessed the scene. Harris didn't seem nervous or sketchy, well, any more than he usually did, but he had a subtle smile on his face that meant he knew something we didn't. Information was gold right now, so I'd hear him out for that alone.

"Get on with it," Nate said, on edge, but not enough to prevent him from sinking onto the couch like he couldn't possibly stand up any longer.

"Jim Sawyer set me up, stole from me, and blackmailed me," Harris started, and for some fucked up reason, Devon leaned back and rubbed his ass against my dick. I suppressed a groan and tried to focus on Harris. "I'd like to make him pay for that."

Get in line, bud.

"Thought you and Gary were in on it together?" Dad asked.

"Gary used to be a part of my life, but he's a spineless fool and had nothing to do with this other than trying to protect his daughter." Harris smoothed his baggy pants.

"What's the proposition?" Devon asked, still grinding on my dick like it wasn't obvious. His harsh tone completely contradicted the sensual slow-rock of his hips.

Harris smiled one of those sinister, sick sorts of smiles, but instead of putting me off, it gave me some skewed sense of hope. This loan shark was almost as vengeful as we were. "I know where he is."

Devon went rigid, his ass no longer grinding. I wrapped my arm around his waist and rubbed his hardening cock. He relaxed. I grinned.

"Where? Tell us." Nate stood again.

"What for?" Harris asked Nate. "Are you going to help him disappear again?"

"I'm going to fucking kill him," Nate retorted.

Xavi shot Nate a stern look. Those old biddies were as protective of each other as Devon and I were.

"Where's the business part come in?" my dad asked, apparently the only smart one here. My mom muttered something and refilled her wine glass. Drained it. Refilled it again.

"I want something in return for the information," Harris said. Of course he did.

I fondled the fuck out of Devon, rejoicing in sweet satisfaction that his cheeks were flushed and he hadn't said anything in a few minutes. So easily distracted. "The contraband," I guessed. I pressed my dick against Devon's ass, grinding against him.

"How do you expect us to get it?" Xavi asked. "We aren't stealing shit for you."

I leaned into Devon, my lips brushing his neck. "Keep rubbing your ass against me like that and I'll bend you over this fucking counter."

A throaty grunt left Devon, and I smiled against his neck. He didn't stop moving his ass, though.

“I don’t expect you to get it,” Harris said. “All I ask is that you let Jim and Davis work their plan. They’ll get it for me.”

My dad glared at Harris. “You’re working with them?”

“Against them,” Harris said.

“What do we get out of this?” Nate asked. “You want us to back off our dad so he can do your dirty work? No. Hard no. I want him dead.”

“My bargain is this,” Harris started, taking a step into the trailer. “I have eyes on Jim right now.” He held up his phone to show us a live feed. Jim was on it, sitting on a boat, docked somewhere I didn’t recognize. It was dark, and there weren’t many markers to identify his location. We all tensed, and I rubbed Devon’s dick again to settle him down. “I’ll keep eyes on him at all times, playing security for you until this is done. He’ll never be out of sight of one of my men, so any incoming danger will be known in advance. That’s my promise. I also promise to alert you if he is up to anything, on the move, or conversing with anyone you might know. When I get what I want from those crates, I’ll give you both Jim and Davis and then I’ll help you with whatever form of... justice you decide to mete out.”

Devon thrust his dick against my hand, and then he cleared his throat. “Fine. Agreed.”

“What?” Nate barked at him, noticing how flushed he was.

“We agree. I want access to that live footage, though. If Jim disappears from it, the deal is over. As long as we always know where he is, you have a deal. But it won’t last long. It’s not unlimited. If it takes you too long to get the crates, we’re not stopping ourselves from dealing with Jim.”

Well, look who was finally smartening the fuck up. Engagement looked good on him.

“Once you get the contents and Jim has served his purpose, we get him and you hold up your end of the bargain,” I added. “And then you really do forget about us. All of us.”

Everyone took a long moment to think about it. Xavi agreed first, then my mom, even though she had no idea what was going on. Nate rubbed the back of his neck before nodding, and my dad looked at me. A concerned look passed over his face, a little skepticism for Harris, but eventually, he nodded, hopeful this might be our best bet.

“Deal,” I told Harris. Since he was the only one who knew where Jim was, we sort of needed him.

As soon as the word left my mouth, Devon spun around, wrapped his hand around my throat, and fucking glared at me. “Outside. Now.”

Engagement night was back on.

-DEVON-

HE THOUGHT HE COULD get me worked up while we were dealing with a goddamn crisis? What a dick. It worked. And I *may* have started it, but whatever.

I shoved him out the front door, manhandling him like I knew I could. He still had a smug grin on his face, and it turned me on as much as it pissed me off. I hated that we didn't have anywhere private to go, but I pushed him, and I didn't stop pushing him until we were around the side of the trailer. It was the middle of the night, and luckily, most of the neighbours would either be sleeping or still down at fight night. Wouldn't be too many peeping Toms.

"You think you can distract me like that?" I growled, shoving him until his back hit the side of the trailer—the only spot no windows faced.

"You started it," he said, licking his lips. "But yeah, I do think I can distract you like that. Look how hard your dick is, bud."

Oh, I hated him. "And you think I'm just gonna bend over and take it?" I pressed my chest to his, loving him as much as I just declared to hate him.

“Mhm,” he hummed, his fingers already undoing my swim shorts. I let him, and as soon as they were undone, I wrapped my hand around his throat and got right in his face.

“Not a fucking chance, Madd.”

“Devon,” he complained.

I ripped his shorts open with my free hand and gave him my own version of a victorious grin. “Pretty sure I won our fight tonight. You’ll be the one bending over to take it.”

When his green eyes flared with a challenge, I knew I had him beat. He might want to play the game of fighting me for top position, but he’d said so long ago that he liked fighting to be the bottom more. Just being under his searing glare was like staring at an eclipse—it burned, his silhouette scorched my retinas, and I couldn’t look away. Maddox Kane was a force of nature all on his own.

The fight was there, the rivalry intact, the tension high, and our dicks hard. But we hesitated. Because...

Fuck. Looking around, standing at the side of his mom’s trailer, on the night we fought at fight night and got engaged at the beach... it was still the same night my fucking Dad ruined. This wasn’t how it was supposed to go. We were supposed to be holed up on Lot 62, or at least in a bedroom or a private space, living for each other and the vibes we generated. Instead, we were losing our hard-ons because we were overthinking.

My eyes fell to the ground, but Maddox tilted my chin, forcing me to look at him. He understood. “Don’t.”

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t let him ruin our night. We don’t have to fuck, but don’t go dark on me, baby.”

“Baby?” I smiled for real. “You’re not drugged, are you?”

“Just thought I’d try it on for size, see how it fits now that we’re engaged.” Maddox smirked.

“And? How’d it fit?”

He leaned forward, pressing his lips to mine. “Dumbass still fits better.”

“Fuck you,” I mumbled against his lips. “Sorry we’re broken tonight.”

“We’re not broken.” He leaned back, tucking us both back into our shorts. “We’re thinking.”

“I hate thinking.” I pouted at him. “I wanted sexy engagement sex.”

Maddox pulled me back inside, ignored everyone who asked us anything, and closed the bedroom door. We sulked ourselves into bed, but it felt nice when Maddox pulled my back to his chest and held me tight.

Still the best night of my life, falling asleep in the arms of my fiancé.

Fucking fiancé.



MADDOX WAS BEING STOIC. And a dick.

“What the hell, Madd?” I scoffed at him as we parked the dirt bike. “You made me ride bitch the whole way here and won’t even tell me why?”

“Just shut your goddamn mouth and come with me.” He tugged on my hand, probably rolling his eyes at the same time.

It was mid-morning, I’d barely had a coffee, and Maddox had forced me from bed by kicking me out of it. Literally. Now he led me through the property he worked on, going around pastures and barns and not telling me where we were going or why we were at his workplace. I didn’t like secrets,

so naturally, I made him feel like shit about it. I guess I should've thanked him for parking the bike back there instead of driving it over all these rocks and roots, which meant he was at least a little considerate of me possibly flying off the back.

I'd never ridden on the back of a dirt bike in my life. Didn't love it. I was a driver, a motocross rider, and I hated not having my own bike.

Maddox led us along the bush for a bit until a clearing came into view. Maddox headed straight for the picture-perfect Willow that sat in the centre of the clearing, outlined by the forest, some nice-ass grass, and a pond.

"What do you think?" he asked me impatiently. Was he embarrassed about something? Jesus.

"Of what?" I looked around the area. Yeah, it was a nice spot. So what? "Don't tell me you're some tree-hugging granola bitch now." I eyed him warily.

"Of the tree, dumbass. To get married here." He looked angry because he didn't want to be bashful. Aww. Married here?

I looked around again, taking it in with a new point of view. The Willow was epically perfect, which was weird. Usually, Willow trees were all angled and gnarled, but this one was pristine, well-proportioned, drooping perfectly, and even the fronds hung down to a perfect, even length. The damn thing looked groomed like a Pomeranian. It was a happy, healthy, peaceful tree in all its beauty.

"Pete offered us this spot. He got married here." Maddox rubbed the back of his neck when I didn't immediately jump all over the opportunity.

I walked around the trunk of the tree, looking up at the canopy. "What was his marriage like?"

"Why?"

“I don’t want a doomed spot, Madd. Were they happy? Did they get divorced or anything?” I touched the bark, feeling the age of the thing.

“We don’t sit around gossiping all day,” he scoffed. “They were happy then she died. Satisfied? Because that’s how our marriage is going to go. Happy and then we die.”

I smiled at that. Damn right. The spot really was beautiful, and it made all those picture-perfect wedding shots people loved to post on their social media look like bullshit in comparison. I liked the peaceful vibe of the tree, the way the grass billowed around it, the birds chirped from within it, and the frogs croaked in the pond nearby. We’d be hard up to find a place nicer than this.

My eyes drifted past Maddox to the forest line. I found another tree that stood out, and hope sparked in my chest.

“How about there?” I asked Maddox, pointing at the other tree.

Maddox looked, and then he raised a brow at me. “Really? That half-dead, raggedy as fuck old Oak?”

“Yeah.” I nodded. Pointing at the Willow, I said, “This tree says happiness and serenity. It says we work hard all day, come home, spend the evening eating dinner and talking about our days, and then fall happily into bed.” I pointed to the Oak, and said, “That tree says I’ve seen some shit, I’m still standing, and I ain’t fucking going anywhere. That’s more us, right? Like, it says, I’ll try to make dinner but I’ll fuck it up, you’ll get pissed at me as you fix all my mistakes, and then we’ll glare at each other while eating the half-ass salvaged meal, and end up hate fucking in a broken bed.” I looked at Maddox, wondering what he thought. “It’s more our style.”

To his credit, he actually studied the Oak, trying to decipher if it said all that. There were crows on the branches, and I couldn't remember if they were a good omen or a bad one, but they looked nice, so I took it as a win. The grass surrounding the tree was all brown and dry, like the Oak had greedily sucked all the water away like a selfish old goat, and even the other trees sort of leaned away from it like it was an outcast. I liked it. Maddox stared at it for so long that I shoved my hands into my pockets to let him drink it all in.

"It says, you're a dumb fuck who can't read trees, but I'll marry you anywhere because clearly, I'm equally as dumb." Maddox stood next to me. "Yeah?"

"Yeah," I agreed. I leaned into his side and slid my arm around his waist. "I hope you like it, Madd, because this shitty tree, me, and a marriage certificate are about all that our wedding will have. We'll be fishing in that pond for our wedding meal."

Maddox laughed. "I never minded frog legs." He kissed the side of my head. "I bought our rings with a week of free labour. That's why I didn't get paid the first week."

My mouth fell open. "You shady fuck! I knew something was up." I punched him in the shoulder. "I love you for it. Thank you."

"Alright, well, since I've done all the hard work, the marriage certificate shit is on you."

What an asshole, but he had a point. I kissed him by the tree that would be our wedding spot, feeling pretty damn good despite all the shit that happened with my dad last night.

We had eyes on my dad now thanks to Patrick Harris, but the waiting game killed me. I wanted to take him out now, get rid of him, and get

married without his shadow casting down on us. Hanes was in on everything, but he said he wouldn't act until he had video evidence that my dad was doing something illegal. We'd have to wait until he did and then get him the footage without involving Harris with the cops at all. Hanes even set up additional security around the evidence room—that Davis wouldn't know about. I guessed all we could do was wait for it to all start happening. We were set up, so... waiting fucking sucked.

“Hey, Madd?”

“Mm?”

“Time for you to bend over.”

“Yeah, I don't think so, Devon.” He whirled on me, pressing my back into the trunk of the Oak. “I'm starting this marriage off on the right foot.”

“What foot is that?”

“Your knees.” He shoved me to them, but the way he looked down at me made me feel bigger than him.

“Don't worry, Madd,” I said, repeating words from the gravel pit so long ago as I undid his pants. “I'll bring you to yours, too.”

-MADDOX-

LIKE AN IDIOT, I ran out of gas. Sitting on the steps of Pete's front porch, I waited for my brother to show up with a tank of fuel for me. I mean, Pete had a fuel tank for the farm equipment, but I didn't want to push my luck by using some when he wasn't home. I needed this damn job, and to be honest, I liked it well enough, too.

Xavi pulled up twenty minutes later, already laughing at me.

I told him to fuck off as a greeting. "Did you bring it?" I stood, dusting my ass off.

Xavi chuckled. "Yeah, you twat." He pulled the can out of the back of the truck and handed it to me. "Hurry up, though. Something is going down with Davis."

I poured faster. "What?"

Xavi shrugged. "I don't know yet, but Hanes called to say he's up to something and that he's being monitored."

"That's vague. Something with Jim?"

I couldn't wait for this whole thing to be over. We'd been dealing with Jim so long he was like a lingering smell. I was sick of thinking about him, talking about him, and plotting against him. I just wanted to marry Devon and get the fuck on with our shitty lives.

Xavi handed me the cap. "Something at the station. Hanes said he showed up there for a meeting with the sergeant, or whoever the fuck he answers to, but he's snooping around a bit."

Of course that prick would find a reason to be at the station. The evidence was all still there, even though a score that big should have been moved a long time ago. The officers above Hanes were keeping an eye on it to see if anyone would make a move on the contraband, but if it didn't happen soon, they were going to move it to a more secure location. We needed Jim and Davis to do something stupid before then. That was how we'd catch them, and Hanes monitored it all.

I screwed the cap on the tank and handed the can back to Xavi. "Hanes has eyes on Davis?"

"Yeah, and Harris still has Jim on the feed, so we're covered." Xavi put the can in the truck bed. "That the tree?" He pointed at the Willow.

I scoffed. "No. According to Devon, that tree is too wholesome. It's that one." I pointed at the shitty Oak. "It says we're dumb fucks who live a shit life but have strong survival skills. Or some shit like that." We had a thing with trees.

Xavi laughed. "Seems about right. Can't wait. I'm invited, right?"

"Hell no." I turned away from the tree. "Where's Devon? Someone better be watching him to make sure he doesn't do anything stupid."

"Nate is babysitting him. Meet you at the shop?"

I nodded, swinging my leg over the bike's saddle. Fuck, I loved this little piece of shit. Felt good to ride again, even if it was just on the gravel roads.

As I followed Xavi to the shop, I thought about everything that was yet to come. I trusted Devon, but he was so full of guilt over all that had happened, I was a little afraid he'd try to be the hero and end up fucking up the plan like he fucked everything else up. Devon was the loose cannon in our plan, but I enjoyed tying him down, so it wasn't too much of a burden.

I didn't blame him for any of it, but in his head, he had my gunshot wound, my prison time, our initial relationship problems, and our current homelessness to feel guilty for. On top of that, the constant state of fear we all lived in, the threat at our backs, my criminal record, although it was being expunged, and our money struggles sat heavily on his shoulders. Guys under that much guilt rarely made the best decisions, and Devon certainly wasn't an exception to that rule. He was my dumbass, that was for sure. The neglect had been his fault, but none of the rest of it. It was mostly his stupidity's fault, but that shit was genetic. Nate was dumb as fuck, too.

Life felt paused on a bated breath. We had things set up, a plan in place, had teamed up and made a deal with a shady loan shark, and finally had a good cop on our side. Things were ready, but the unease of not knowing if it'd all work out made us all a bit crazy. I guess we'd see.

And then we'd have to figure out what to actually do with Jim. Were we murderers?

I knew one thing for sure: I wouldn't let Devon kill his own dad. No matter how much he hated the guy, that'd mess him up for life.



OH, DEVON WAS IN *fine* form. He was out of control, but not at all in the ways I'd been expecting. I thought he'd be chomping at the bit to do something about Davis, but instead, he chomped at a different bit.

"Maddox, shut up and get in the bathroom," he snapped at me for the third time. "We have no home, no privacy, and no time. We're taking advantage of this."

By this, he meant our brothers and my dad being distracted out on the deck, and we finally had a bit of time alone. I let him shove me into the bathroom, but it wasn't a nice place. "Clearly, we have no standards either." The shop bathroom was dingy, small, and messy. "Seriously? You wanna fuck in here?"

"Since when did you get classy?" He shoved me again. "Pants off. Now."

"Alright. Damn." I undid my pants—maybe they were his pants. "You randomly carry lube around with you, too?"

"No, but Nate and Xavi have some, and I really don't want to think about what they do with it." He undid his jeans—maybe they were my jeans.

"Who do you think this chick—"

"Maddox," Devon seethed at me. "My dick is hard, our engagement night got fucked, and I just wanna fuck you. Stop talking." He shook his head, stepping out of his pants. "Jesus. Half the time I can't get you to say shit, but when I want you quiet, you run your damn mouth."

I rolled my eyes, and then I rolled them harder when he set out a towel that was the worst shade of brown.

Sitting my ass on it, the vanity groaned under my weight, but Devon ignored it. He leaned in and crushed his mouth to mine, stealing my voice, my breath, and my heart with one kiss. He was a damn thief, but he was the best kind of thief. *Take it all from me, babe, it's yours.*

I took the lube from him, shoving my fingers inside myself to help this impatient bastard out. With my other hand, I lubed up his dick and tried not to fall off the vanity.

“Guys!” Nate shouted through the door and Devon straight-up growled. “Davis stole the evidence lock-up key! Hanes just called.”

I fingered my ass quickly, knowing Devon wasn't leaving this bathroom until he got what he was after.

“Fuck off, Nate!”

I laughed at the same time Nate did, and Devon took that as a challenge. He pushed on my chest, spread my legs open, and hooked his arms under my knees.

“Need a warm-up?” he asked impatiently.

I liked him like this. “I'm not a virgin.”

“Good.” He lined himself up, nudged my hole with the head of his cock, and glared straight into my eyes as he pushed inside me in one powerful thrust. Jesus. I groaned. Okay, I could have used a bit of a warm-up. Too late now. “Fuck, I've missed this,” Devon breathed.

I tensed up and held his hips to steady myself while I adjusted to his intrusion. It hurt, but I kind of liked the force of it. I liked that he took what he wanted. Authority was hot when it wasn't coming from an actual authority figure.

“I thought you weren't a virgin,” he mocked.

“I'm not, but you're—”

“Thank you,” he laughed, smug as fuck. He reached between our bodies and grabbed my cock, jerking it nice and slow as he fucked me nice and slow. I loved this pace—unhurried, deep, and continual. It was the perfect build-up. “I got hard today,” he said randomly. “But I didn’t do anything about it. I wanted to wait for you.” He thrust into me, making my head hit the wall.

I watched his blue eyes, his shitty skull tattoo, the way his abs contracted with each rock of his hips. “Yeah?”

“I had another dream. One where I tied you up and had my way with you.”

I moaned when he pushed into me hard, angling his hips to hit just right. My cock throbbed in his hand, and my body got hot. “Yeah?” I asked again, basically begging him to keep talking.

“Mhm.” His hand moved with the motion of his hips, and goddamn. “Now I have this fantasy. I wanna watch you fight me for control while you have none. I want to take it from you, and when I win, you’ll just give in and let me take it and use it however the fuck I want. You submit.”

“I’m not submissive,” I panted, close to coming already.

“Yeah, you are. Look how invested in this fantasy you are.” He nodded at me, on the verge of blowing my load just from his words alone. When he hooked his arm under my knee again, tilting me up even more, I moaned and choked on it. “Admit it.”

Okay, shit, maybe. “Maybe once. I’ll try it once.”

“You’ll let me tie you up like I said before?”

“Once.”

“You’ll give me control?”

“If you take it by force.” Oh, fucking hell. *Keep fucking me just like that, Devon.*

“Can I blindfold you?”

“No. Hard no. I like looking at you.”

Devon grinned, thrusting his hips. His cock filled my ass, the motion perfect, and the friction insane. Forgot how hot a bathroom fuck could be. “Fine, but once I win control, I get to do whatever the hell I want to you. Fuck you, use you, have you, pleasure you, and take everything from you.”

Anticipation sparked in my nerves, and my head fell back against the wall. “Fine. One time.”

He squeezed my dick in his fist, slowly stroking it before dropping it all together. Leaning over me, making the vanity groan as loud as I did, he fucked me faster, his abs sliding over my dick. “Have fun riding home full of my cum,” he groaned.

When he came, his mouth opened and his fingers dug into my skin. With his abs massaging my dick, I came in heavy spurts between our bodies. My fingers wrapped around the edge of the counter, holding on for dear life, hoping this thing didn’t crash down and kill me mid-orgasm.

“Fuck, Devon,” I groaned.

He kissed me, dragging his teeth over my bottom lip until I was spent and way too sweaty.

“Maybe we need another night at the gravel pit,” he panted. “For this fantasy to play out, since we don’t have a bedroom big enough for everything I want to do.”

On fucking board.



TWO WEEKS HAD PASSED since Davis stole the key to the evidence lock-up room. He took it, made a copy, and returned it all within the same day. He hadn't done a damn thing with it since then.

Hanes said there was talk of the evidence being moved to a more secure facility, and I started to wonder if that had been Jim's plan all along. Get Davis to steal the key to make us think they'd hit it in Garron, but actually wait until it was en route. Or maybe he had a connection or an accomplice at the next warehouse. I had no idea what he was waiting for, but I knew it was calculated.

"Deep in thought, honey?" Mom asked, bringing me back to the present and out of the *what-ifs* in my head.

I threw some of her shit in a box and taped it up. "No. Not really. What else do you need packed?"

Mom had decided to move in with my dad in the new trailer that came with his new job. I didn't know if they were together fully or not, but at least my dad had his shit together this time and was capable of taking care of my mom. It was sort of a weird feeling because, for the first time in my life, I didn't have to parent my parents. I had no obligations other than Devon and my job, and it was weird. Good weird.

"Just those clothes in that bag," Mom said, pointing at a pile on the bed. "Are you sure you're okay with this?"

Hell yeah. I couldn't wait until she moved so Devon and I could have privacy. We didn't want to live here, but we'd take over the rent until we

found somewhere else to move. It was fine for now, and since we both had jobs, even though mine paid like shit, we could afford it and still put a tiny bit away on top of that.

Look at us being all mature and shit.

“Yep. Happy for ya.” I smiled at her, honestly happy she was happy. “Just don’t put Dad through hell. He worked hard to get where he is.” And familiar patterns were easy to fall back into. Two junkies living in one place was never easy, but I had faith that my dad had finally turned a corner in his sobriety. If I really broke things down, I’d say my parents were mostly addicted to each other. Devon and I might be obsessive and insanely unhealthy in our relationship, but I couldn’t imagine either of us putting the other through the shit my parents had.

I mean, yeah, we fought, used violence as a vice, didn’t have the best relationship dynamic, and were constantly at each other’s throats, fucking everything up as we went, but we had respect. We had love. That had to count for more than all our mistakes. It might have been wrong in the eyes of society to act the way we acted, but it worked, and I’d learned a long time ago to just go with what worked. I didn’t have good role models and barely knew anything in the way of healthy relationships, but to me, what I had with Devon was as close to perfect as I’d ever hoped to get. Healthy or not, I loved him, he loved me, and we’d figure the rest out as we went.

Maybe I could try tamping down my aggression. Like, just a bit.

“Madd? You here?” Devon shouted, walking in the front door and slamming it shut behind him. “Turns out, I need your signature for this marriage certificate thing, so get your ass in gear.”

I rolled my eyes, and Mom laughed. I left her to pack and smiled at Devon picking through the cabinets for something to eat.

“Hey,” I said, grinning at him. “How was your day?”

He gave me a weird look. “Fine. Why?”

“People ask that sometimes when their partner comes home.” I shrugged.

He gave me another weird look. “Are you ready to go?”

I wrapped my arms around him from behind while he munched on stale crackers. He tensed, but he settled into my hug eventually.

“What is this shit?” he asked.

“Kindness, I think.”

“Ew,” he laughed. “It’s almost as weird as you calling me babe.” He turned, grinning at me. I knew he secretly liked it when I called him that. It didn’t happen often, and it didn’t feel natural, but sometimes, it just rolled off the tongue. “The town hall closes in half an hour. Let’s go.” He pushed me away and shouted goodbye to my mom.

Okay, so maybe kindness could happen sometimes, but competitiveness would never go anywhere. That was our love language. So, with that in mind, I raced him to Nate’s truck, shoved him into the side of it, and stole the keys from him. Devon groaned, holding his elbow that had hit the mirror.

“That’s more like it,” he laughed. He climbed into the passenger side. “Compete with me forever, Madd, but I *am* ready for all that happiness shit you talked about before.”

“Yeah?” I laughed, turning the ignition. Nothing happened.

“Yeah. Even though we’re shitty people, we still deserve a happy ending, right?” He smiled at nothing.

I turned the key two more times before the truck started. “Yeah, but we aren’t anywhere close to our happy ending, asshole.” I put the truck in reverse. “We’ve barely fucking started.”

I saw him smile at nothing again. He might not know how to accept gentle kindness at all times, but that didn't mean he didn't crave romance sometimes. I'd remember that.

-DEVON-

MY PENMANSHIP WAS UTTER shit, but I tried anyway. Crumpling my latest piece of paper, I pulled out a fresh sheet and tried again.

Maddox,

You've always been an asshole, but that night we kissed at the track was the first time I learned you were also a pussy. Like always, I had to take the reins when you backed out, not ballsy enough to actually kiss me first.

Thank fuck for me or we'd still be beating the shit out of each other because of some hate feud between our dads when we were kids. I'm not saying I don't hate you anymore, because I still do a little bit. I just love you now, too.

Nope. I crumpled that shit and tossed it in the bin. Maddox would probably counter all those points with a not-very-subtle, 'Thank fuck for me punching Name Brand Jeans Guy.' I sucked at writing vows. I wish I trusted myself to get a bit drunk; maybe the words would flow more freely.

Maddox,

I hate how much control you have over me. You're a smug fucking asshole, but—

Shit. Scratch that. I kind of liked his control and didn't want to lie in my vows.

Maddox,

I promise that I'll take the next bullet, do the next prison sentence, and learn to cook an actual meal.

Fuck! My pastries. I hopped off the couch, papers scattered everywhere, and checked the oven. Gina had finally taught me how to bake those pastries Maddox loved, but when I opened the door, they were... ruined. Melted, flat, falling apart, and smelled like failure.

"What the hell?" I groaned, pulling out the ruined pan and trying to wave away the smell. "I followed her goddamn recipe. Fuck you, recipe!"

"Jesus, Dev," Nate complained as soon as he invited himself inside. "What's that smell?"

I scratched my head, trying to figure out where I went wrong. "I suck at everything. That's what that smell is," I huffed, shoving the pan away and turning off the oven. Maddox would never let me live this down, so I'd have to get rid of the evidence and hope the birds would at least eat it.

Nate laughed, grabbing a scrunched-up piece of paper. "Maddox, you're my favourite fuck-up." He grinned at me. "That's your vow?"

I snatched it away from him. "Clearly, I didn't keep that one. Fuck off about it. You some sort of poet?"

"Shit no," he laughed. "But neither is Madd. Stop trying so hard and just say what you mean."

But how? How was I supposed to convey the way I felt about Maddox into some lame speech—er, vow? There wasn't a word that had come to me

yet that encapsulated the feeling. And of course, Maddox had already finished his. I'd searched his pants, all the drawers, the saddlebag on his bike, and the shop to find where he'd written them down, but I came up blank every time. I just needed a clue, something to work off of.

"I'm about to divorce his ass before we even get married," I complained.

"Why?"

"Because he's a dick, man. He stole my only clean pair of boxers this morning, wore the jeans I was going to wear, even though I was the one who did the laundry late last night, and he stole the last muffin when he knows I can't make breakfast to save my life. And he did it all just to piss me off." And here I was trying to be some stay-at-home husband, baking him treats and failing at it.

"Well, good thing you two thrive on that shit. You'll find a way to get him back. Wanna order pizza?" Nate sat down at the table.

"If you're buying. I can't afford pizza because, apparently, a marriage license costs money." And Maddox wouldn't let me touch the savings account. Which pissed me off because I was the one who set it up and started it, and he took control of it like the whole thing had been his idea. If money were up to him, we'd be as broke as a joke with no way out of the hole.

"I'll buy, but it'll be from Pizza Construction," Nate said.

I groaned. That was the shittiest pizza place, but whatever. Food was food when you couldn't cook. Nate ordered, and then we sat on the front porch to wait. The lawn chairs belonged to Maddox's mom, and I was pretty sure they were older than me. They were falling apart, but they still stood, so we sat in them.

“Distract me with some of your shit, Nate. What’s up with you and Xav lately?”

“Nothing. I’ll mind my cock, you mind yours.” He waved that off. “We have other shit to talk about.”

I waved my hand, telling him to get on with it.

“Hanes said the contraband is being moved in three days to a new facility. So, if shit is gonna go down that day, we need to talk about what we want to do with... Jim.”

Well, that sullied my already terrible mood. “Like get him arrested or kill him?”

“Yeah, like that.”

Good question.

I might’ve been able to kill my dad if the situation called for it. Like if it was a life or death thing, or if I didn’t do something, someone else I cared about would die, but I didn’t think I could kill him point blank without a dire situation. Maddox told me he’d kill me if I even tried, so there was that, too. He thought it’d mess with my head, and maybe he was right. Patrick Harris all but offered to have him offed and help with the cover-up, so was that something I could stomach? Hire a sketchy hitman and hope it went off without a hitch?

“What do you think?” I asked Nate.

He rubbed his brows and buried his face in his hands as he answered. “Sometimes I think I could do it, you know? It’s the thought of living with it after that fucks me up. I wouldn’t be the same.”

“Then we let the cops deal with him, yeah?”

“Ideally, yeah, but we’re still Sawyers, man. Cops don’t like us, so are you sure we can rely on them?”

There was a chance we'd get played again, but I believed Hanes was truly on our side. There was the risk of the charges not being severe enough, running the chance that Jim would get out in a few years and start this shitshow all over again.

"Let's maim him. Take out his kneecaps or something. Permanently damage him so that if he gets away or gets out, he won't be fast enough to come after us." I grinned, liking that idea. "I might not be able to kill that asshole, but I could sure as shit shoot out his kneecaps."

"Knowing you, you'd fuck it up and kill him by accident. Madd would never allow it," Nate laughed. "But I like this plan. He needs some brain damage too, just to really make sure he can't come at us again. You blow out his knees and I'll swing that old bat he used to use on us right at his thick head. Sound good?"

"Deal," I laughed, almost wishing it'd happen like that.

"Whatever way this goes, Dev. We're gonna be okay. We've got each other and the Kane boys."

"I know." And I did. I knew we were stronger together, and somehow, we'd make it all work out.

"Soon, you'll be one of those Kane boys," Nate laughed.

"I'm not actually taking his last name," I scoffed.

"What? Why?"

"Because I'm too lazy to legally change all my documents, and besides, I wouldn't leave you as the only Sawyer in Garron." I looked at my brother. "We'll be fucking up as Sawyers until the day we die."

"Alright, if you wanna doom yourself like that." Nate grinned.

"It hasn't been so bad."

“No, it hasn’t. And Mom is still a Sawyer. Though she probably doesn’t even know she is.”

“Lucky bitch,” I laughed.

Fuck the vows. Fuck the pastries. Nate made me feel better.

-MADDOX-

EVERYTHING WENT TO SHIT. Again.

Davis was dead.

Not that I gave a fuck about that lying piece of shit, but he was an essential part of our plan, and now everything was up in the air again. The evidence was being moved tonight, and the only guy with a tie to Jim and this crime was dead? That couldn't be a coincidence.

"What's happening?" Devon paced lines on the living room floor, his hands pulling at his freshly cut hair. Andrea cut it in her front yard, and it looked like it, but he was still hot. "Where's Jim?"

Davis' body was found in the same sketchy park Devon met Jim in all that time ago. Suspicious, but we had no proof Jim had anything to do with the death. I didn't trust any of this, and I hated not knowing what to do next.

"He's not on the camera!" Nate shouted, holding up his phone to show the live feed we had access to thanks to Harris. "Harris fucked us!"

Either Jim slipped Harris or Harris let Jim go because he had his own agenda. Never make a deal with a shady criminal. Lesson learned.

“What do we do?” Xavi asked, looking between me and our dad. “Hanes is dealing with Davis’ body, so who the fuck is going to be monitoring the evidence trucks when they roll out?”

“Someone will,” Nate said. “They aren’t stupid enough to think this is over. Jim and Harris are both going for the trucks.”

“Fuck it,” Devon snapped, grabbing the truck keys. “I’ll follow the trucks.”

I grabbed Devon by the back of his t-shirt. “No.” I threw him behind me and turned to face him, blocking his path to the door.

“Maddox, move,” he snarled at me. “I’m not letting Jim get away after everything we’ve been through.”

“You’re not going anywhere, Devon.” I stood my ground. “What’re you going to do, huh? Kill him? You aren’t a cop with the ability to arrest him.”

“No, but I can hold him there until a cop shows up.” He tried to struggle out of my grip, but fuck him. “Maddox!”

“Think about it, dumbass! Jim will throw you under the bus and get your ass thrown in jail, claiming you helped him hit the trucks. You’re staying here, so sit the fuck down.”

“No!”

God, stupid was his main personality choice at the worst times. “Devon,” I warned when he tried to shove me out of his way again.

“I’m going.” He broke free and rushed for the door.

I had one more tool in my belt, and I used it. Keeping my tone level, I said, “Don’t make me lose you before I marry you, Devon.”

He stopped in the doorway, his back to me. He was tense all over, anger rolling off him, but he stopped to think about it. To give himself a reality check. Shaking his head, he took another step outside the door. Then

stopped again. This could go two ways: he'd either get pissed enough at me for using that against him and go just to spite me, or he'd back down and apologize. I didn't care what he did, I wouldn't let him go. Protecting him from himself was my main job, and I didn't mind doing it. Nate and Xavi stared between the two of us, Devon tense and me waiting.

Finally, Devon hung his head, and I figured he'd go with the apology option, but he turned around and glared at me. The keys flew across the living room, barely missing my head. "Fuck you, Maddox."

All was right in our world. I tried really hard to suppress my grin, but he noticed, and it earned me a hard hit to the jaw.

"Don't be a dick about it. I'm stressed!" He turned away from me, needing some space. "Someone get Hanes on the phone before I lose my shit and kill my fiancé!" His eyes landed on a bottle of whiskey, and I fought myself not to grab it. I trusted him.

I glared at that bottle as hard as he did, but in the end, he turned his back on it, too, probably telling it to fuck off as well. I stood in the kitchen to give him space while Nate and Xavi tried to get in contact with Hanes. Needing to do something to make Devon feel better, I picked up a pastry and took a bite. Or tried to. The things were harder than rocks, but they were his third attempt, and I needed him to know I appreciated the effort. When Devon noticed me chewing on it, he almost looked grateful that it was damn near busting my teeth.

"The trucks are being hit!" Hanes' voice shouted through the speakerphone. "Right now. I have to go." He hung up.

"Where's Jim?" Nate tried shouting into the phone, but Hanes was already gone.

If this night didn't end with Jim being caught, Devon would completely lose his mind to the darkness he usually saved me from. It'd be my turn to save him.



IT WAS THREE IN the morning, and we were all dead tired but way too wired to actually sleep. Hanes had called and told us they arrested two guys for hitting the evidence trucks, but neither of them had been Jim. One truck was still missing, but it hadn't been taken by Jim. We knew this because Jim was back on that boat, filling our screen with the security footage. And he looked absolutely irate. Something fucked up his plan tonight, and none of us knew what.

"I'm too tired to be angry at you anymore, Madd," Devon said, sinking down next to me on the couch and resting his temple against my shoulder. "And I won't thank you for stopping me from making a big mistake. Let's just leave it at that."

"I'm sorry this shit won't end, but I can't lose you, Devon." I brought his legs over my lap, rubbing them.

"I know," he sighed.

We all sat around like zombies, waiting, waiting, waiting to hear something. Anything. The air was gloomy as hell as the reality of the night settled in. We missed our one opportunity to catch Jim in a criminal act. Now the evidence was gone—one truck made it to the secure warehouse, and the other was missing—and we had no way of tying it to him in the first place. Plus, we had a back-stabbing Harris to watch out for.

Like I'd said, everything went to shit.

But I still had Devon. I wrapped my arm around him and held on tight. Priorities, right?

Silence stretched like a bad omen, but still, we all stayed awake and together. Sometime later, a quick knock sounded at the door, and then my dad walked in.

"It's not over yet, boys," he said, almost looking hopeful.

What did that mean? We all sat up, wondering what the hell was going on. Devon tensed and stood tall when Patrick Harris walked in after my dad.

"Gentleman," Harris said.

All that anger that Devon housed finally came out of his mouth. "You fucked us!" Three words that came out like a death sentence. Goddamn.

"I did," Harris agreed, hands up. "But I didn't have time to discuss it with you first."

"Discuss what? Did you steal that truck?" Xavi stood.

Harris nodded, and my dad gave me a look, telling me to listen up. "I hired two fall guys," Harris said. "They're the two who got arrested for the first truck. The second truck? Well, it will never be found and it will never be tied back to me, even if you decide to rat me out." He stared at us, waiting to see if we were going to call it in. When we did nothing, he moved on. "I got what I was after, and our deal still stands. Now I have something for you, but only if we can agree to part ways and never speak of this once all is said and done." He waited.

"What is it? What could you possibly have for us?" I asked.

"I gave it to Seth in good faith, but believe me when I say I will rescind my offer if you decide to double-cross me." Harris nodded at my dad. "Go

on.”

Dad pulled a new phone out of his pocket, pulling up a video. Hope reignited and shock set in as we watched the video.

“I got this from having a security detail on Jim. I was going to tell you about it, but then everything with the trucks moving kept me busy and I had to act fast. I didn’t have the chance to show you first.” He looked at all of us. “I hope this is enough to call it even?”

Devon nodded. “It’s enough. We own this copy?”

Harris nodded. “And it’s backed up if anything happens to it. Pleasure doing business with you, boys. Get in touch if you need assistance with... him. If not, I hope we never meet again.” With that, Harris walked out the front door, and hopefully, out of our lives.

Dad cleared his throat, smiling. “We have him. This will put him away for longer than that contraband would have, anyway. We have him, boys.”

Survival instincts were a hard thing to let go of, but as that fact settled between the five of us, we all relaxed marginally.

Harris had video footage of Jim Sawyer, clear as fucking day, shooting Davis point-blank between the eyes. Even had footage of where he dropped the gun.

Jim would go away for first-degree murder. *For life*. First-degree murder was the best possible outcome we could have hoped for, and it didn’t hurt that it took care of our Davis problem, too.

“That fucking scumbag,” Nate scoffed. “He’s done. Done.”

Devon swallowed, gripping my hand. “Yeah, now we just need to catch him.”

-DEVON-

USUALLY, MY MIND RAN because of my dad, but tonight, it ran because of marriage. I tossed and turned in the small bed, trying not to jostle Maddox, but also not caring if I did. It was his fault I couldn't sleep.

I sighed, trying to force sleep to come. It never worked.

Maddox groaned, sitting up. "Come here." He leaned against the wall.

"I'm too tired for sex," I snapped at him for no other reason than he was there.

"You sound like a grandpa," he scoffed. "Come here."

I rolled my eyes, but sat between his legs with my back to his chest. He rubbed my shoulders, and I decided I wasn't so mad at him after all. His hands were rough and calloused, and he pressed too hard, but I wouldn't look a gift horse in the snout. Mouth. Whatever that saying was.

"If you're going to start withholding sex, tell me now so I don't tether myself to your celibate ass for life," Maddox said, and I was pretty sure he wasn't even joking.

"I'm stressed, pissed off, and freaking out. Sue me."

“About what?”

“My fucking dad ruining our wedding. You marrying a Sawyer. Me not being good enough for you.” I sighed, sinking against him. “Are you sure you don’t want to push the wedding back? We’re getting married in two weeks, and Jim is still out there like a dark ghost. I can almost guarantee he’s going to fuck it up for us.” It’d be his style. I mean, the cops were on the lookout now that they had hard evidence he murdered Davis, but still. He evaded them this long, and I hated that he could ruin our day. “So? Wanna push it back?”

“Do you want to?” he asked.

“No,” I answered honestly. “I just want to be married to you, Madd, but I’m worried.”

Worried about all sorts of shit. Most of it had to do with the unknown of my dad, but also, a huge heaping pile of self-doubt sat heavy in my gut and I didn’t like it.

“Are you sure you wanna marry me?” I turned to face him.

“Cold feet?” he asked, no expression on his face.

“I don’t want you to regret it, Madd. I’m a nobody. I make more mistakes than anyone, and I do stupid shit that almost gets you killed. I’m shit at everything, and I’m afraid you’re gonna get sick of putting up with me eventually.”

“If you doubt me one more time, I’ll be wheeling you to that shitty Oak on our wedding day. Stop thinking you know what the future holds.”

“I bring nothing to this relationship!”

“Neither do I!” he shouted back. “And you want me to do ya one better?” he asked, turning this into a competition over who was the biggest piece of shit. “You want kids someday, Dev?”

Okay, not where I thought he was going with that. "I'd be a shit dad."

"No you wouldn't," he said. "But I've got a criminal record, so if you want kids someday, we're going to have to steal one because no adoption agency is going to let me adopt a kid. So, maybe you should be the one to think long and hard about if you wanna marry me."

His charges were dropped, but he had a record because his case went to trial, so I understood what he meant. "Cold feet?"

"I'm serious, Devon. Because of that prison time, I'll be fucked for shit like that, and I don't want to hold you back from the things you want. I don't want to get five years down the road and have you resent me for it."

"We're so backwards," I laughed, leaning against him again. "We probably should have talked about this far sooner than two weeks before the wedding." I tilted my head back to look at him, and the honest vulnerability in his eyes broke something inside me. "You aren't the only one with a record. You might have done four months hard time, but I've got a laundry list of petty crimes attached to my name, too. We're even on that one, *babe*."

He scoffed. "Stop trying to be like me."

"Madd, I just want you. We can barely take care of ourselves half the time, so I'm not even thinking about kids. I'd get a squirrel or something. A fucking iguana or some shit before I ever tried to have a kid. Like as a test, you know?" He didn't answer, so I moved on. "You know how many people look for what we have?" I asked him.

"A half-cocked relationship fuelled by aggression and bullshit?" he asked.

"Love. Real love. And we aren't half-cocked. We're full throttle, even if we go too fast for our own good sometimes. We might be shit at most

things, but I honestly think we're..." I hesitated.

"Oh, God. Please do not say what I think you're about to say," he groaned.

"Fuck you. I'm saying it anyway. We're soulmates, Madd."

"Pathetic," he groaned, laughing.

"Yeah, I'm pathetically in love with you, and I can hate you for it all I want. So, rich or poor, kids or no kids, a home or homeless, we're destined for the same bleak future. Live with it."

"Wasn't I supposed to be the one pumping your tires and easing your self-doubt?" he asked sarcastically.

"Yeah, but now I'm fluffing your pillow, so deal with it. We're fate."

"Mm," he mused. "That's why I didn't die when I got shot, eh? I was fighting to get back to my fated soulmate. You held my soul hostage and didn't let me go to the light."

I knew he was being a dick and making fun of me, but I laughed anyway. "Damn right. Not even death can rip us apart, soulmate."

"Don't call me that."

"Yeah, asshole still fits better," I agreed.

"Thanks for saving me, Devon. That time, all the times, when we met, just in general. I love you, and no matter what doubts you have about our marriage, we'll prove them all wrong. Somehow."

"Who's lame now?" I turned around, wrapping my arms around his neck and straddling his lap. "I love you."

"You turned me into this pathetic version of myself," he blamed me. "But I love you, and I want to marry you, so let's just be happy about it, okay?"

"Okay," I agreed.

Hopefully, our wedding didn't turn into a murder scene if my dad decided to show up.



“WHAT THE HELL, NATE? No. I’m not wearing that,” I said to my brother and the suit he held up. “Suits are for court and funerals. This is a wedding.”

He hung it back on the rack. “What does one wear to marry a dipshit Kane under a dead tree?”

I had no idea. We decided to just dress clean—literally clean, like laundered and shit—but otherwise, we hadn’t nailed anything down more than that. I just knew I wasn’t a suit guy. The one and only time I’d worn one was for Maddox’s trial, and I didn’t want to relive that again. I walked down the aisle of the thrift shop, looking for anything that stood out. Something that felt right.

“Xavi said that Madd talked you into going through with this even if Dad was still out there?” Nate asked.

“Yeah, he said we shouldn’t wait because life is short. He’s starting to sound like a philosopher, and I don’t appreciate it, but he has a point. I wanna marry him, so there’s no point in putting it off. I’m marrying that asshole in nine days.”

“Good,” Nate said. “What do you want as a wedding gift?”

“Privacy.”

Nate smirked, but didn’t push the subject. “What about this?” Nate held up one of those t-shirts that looked like a tux.

“No.”

“What’s Madd wearing?”

“No idea. He won’t tell me anything. Won’t let me see his vows.” Which pissed me off because I was still struggling with mine.

“They’re supposed to be a surprise,” Nate said. “Oh, fuck! This one.” He held up a t-shirt.

“That’s the one.” I nodded at it, knowing it felt right. “It’s perfect.” I’d have to hide it from Maddox. Knowing him, he’d find it, wait until I washed it, and then steal it for himself like he did with all my other clean laundry.

I paid for the shirt, bought a pair of previously owned jeans, and called it a day on wedding clothes shopping. Done. Sorted. Over with. We walked down to the docks to grab a cheap lunch.

“You think Mom will be able to come to the wedding?” I asked. “Half the time I don’t think she knows who I am.”

“She knows. She just doesn’t know what to do about it.” He shrugged. “I guess we’ll just have to see how she is that day.”

“It’s been a long time since she had a lucid day, eh? She used to get them every now and then, but it’s been, what, months?”

Drugs and mental abuse put her where she is, and early-onset dementia didn’t help. She’d been like this for a few years, but it kept getting worse. I’d always be grateful to my mom because she sacrificed her own health in order to take the brunt of Dad’s wrath, protecting us from having to deal with it. She did what she could to help us, and now it was our turn to do what we could to help her. We were trying.

“For what it’s worth, I’m proud of ya, Dev.” He smiled at me, getting all sentimental. “You’re a lucky bastard to have what you guys have.”

I debated mentioning the soulmate thing, but I kept it to myself, not wanting to be made fun of again. I put my arms on top of the rickety picnic table and smiled. "I know. Maddox is an asshole with a god complex and too much attitude, but he's mine." I picked at my fries. "What about this girl you and Xavi are both with?"

Nate shrugged. "I dunno. That shit's still up in the air, and I don't think either of us is the serious type to actually think it through."

"Shit still good between you and Xav?"

"Oh, fuck yeah. We haven't crossed any lines." He left out the *yet*. "But I'll tell you if we do." He smirked.

"If? You're actually thinking about it?"

"I'm not really the type to think things through, man. Shit just happens when it happens, and I'm telling you it hasn't happened. That's all."

I shook my head at him. "Be careful. That's all I'm saying."

"Give our friendship some credit. We lived through the worst of you and Madd, and we're stronger than ever. Stop worrying about my Kane and worry about your own. Madd is going to kick your ass when he sees what you're wearing to your wedding."

Probably, but the thrill of it excited me. A fight on our wedding day? Didn't seem unlikely.

"Oh, also," Nate said, reaching into his pocket. "I got the keys for you."

I grinned, taking the keyring from him. "Thanks."

I had plans. Plans to hold Maddox to his promise. One night of submission at the gravel pit. Most people got engagement photos and had engagement parties. Maddox and I were going to have engagement kinks.

-MADDOX-

WHEN WE WERE KIDS, Devon used to grab my throat to threaten me in a fight. When we were teens, his throat grabs were so hard I thought he might choke the life out of me. That first night we kissed at the track, he'd wrapped his fingers around my throat to put me in place and take control.

Now?

Now I craved his hand necklaces. Goddamn. The entirety of my body hummed to life when he wrapped his hand around my throat. Devon knew how to confuse my emotions enough to excite them. His palm pressed against my windpipe, his fingers curled around the side of my neck, drumming once before tightening, and his thumb pushed up on my chin, forcing my gaze. His blue eyes saw straight through me, reading my thoughts like he had every right to them.

"You like this," he declared, with no room for negotiation.

Yeah, I fucking liked it. I liked it because all of his attention was on me. He wasn't being self-conscious or worrying about his dad, homelessness, our pathetic lives, the wedding, or how our plan got fucked up and his dad

was on the loose again. Devon was unabashedly mine right now, and I didn't care that it took him tying me up to get all his attention. He was mine and I was his, and this moment proved it.

"You like giving me control," he went on.

"I like your attention," I countered, my throat bobbing against his palm.

"You like it when I'm in charge."

"I like it when you *take* charge." I grinned at him, loving this.

After a fight for control that I didn't really fight too hard during, Devon almost looked disappointed when he won. The cabin blurred around the outside of my vision, black and white spots dancing where it used to be, but Devon let up his grip before I blacked out. My hands were held hostage, tied to the chair the same way my ankles were. I'd never been restrained before, other than being cuffed, and I still didn't know what I thought about it.

"This isn't what I thought you'd do when you got the power," I admitted to him. "But I'm happy it turned out this way."

Yeah, I thought he'd try to dominate the hell out of me by being the top, but instead, he rode my dick and used my neck as the reins. He was still in charge here, no matter what role he took, and he damn well knew it.

"I just like that you can't take control. I won that shit," he said, sinking onto my dick and staying still. His hips rocked, and I groaned, but that groan turned into a whine of complaint when he broke my only rule.

"Devon! I said no to this."

"Yeah, well, tough shit."

"Does consent mean nothing to you?" I scoffed, my vision being taken from me.

He put the blindfold over my eyes and snapped the elastic strap at the back of my head. “Not right now. I need to say some shit, and I don’t want you to see me while I say it.”

“Seriously?” I complained, staring at nothing but glaring at him through the material. “You use your one and only chance at dominance to confess secrets while I can’t see you?”

“Yes,” he moaned, still rocking on my cock. “So shut your mouth and let me say this shit.”

I tugged on the binds around my wrists, wishing I could rip this blindfold off my face. “Hurry up and say it then. I hate not seeing you.” Despite my anger at him for disregarding my rule, I got a bit nervous about what he needed to say. Was it about the wedding? Did he change his mind? We were getting married in a week. I hoped.

“Stop freaking out. It’s nothing bad, but I know you’re going to mock the shit out of me for it, so I’d rather you not see me blush.”

I pouted. “I love it when you blush.” How dare he rob me of the chance to see it.

“I love fighting with you, Madd.” Okay, not the direction I thought this was going to go. “I love it when you challenge me, and I like it when we fight for control.”

I clamped my jaw shut and tried to focus on his body as much as his words. He wasn’t moving anymore. He just sat on my dick and played with my hair, his voice almost nervous.

“One of my favourite things about you is that you never let me win. You don’t half-ass your effort, you know? You’re either an egotistical asshole or you see me as an equal.”

Both.

Devon shifted a bit, his ass squeezing my dick. “I want to fight with you forever. I want days when I win, days when you win, and days when we’re too stubborn to declare a winner. I want our competitiveness to fuel us forever, and I don’t want you to ever look at me like I’m less than you.”

“Why can’t I look at you when you say this?” I asked, desperate to see the look in his eyes and figure out what he was trying to say.

“Jesus, Madd. You never say shit when I want you to, but you don’t shut up when I ask you to. Just let me confess!”

I sighed, nodding.

“The point is that I love our challenges, and if you ever stop competing with me, I’ll divorce you.” His fingers played with my hair, and then they went still. “I like it when you... win.”

“Okay? What does that mean?”

He cursed himself under his breath, getting shy. “I like the fight, Maddox! But I like it when you win! I like it when you’re the one in control, okay? I knew you’d mock me for admitting that I like being submissive, so I covered your judgmental eyes! I should have gagged you, too.” He scoffed. “I like it when you dominate me. There.”

That’s it? I already knew that. What was the big deal in that confession? “I know. Why are you saying this now? What are you trying—”

“I’m trying to say you’re stupid!” he seethed at me. Clearly, I hadn’t grasped that message. “I’m saying that I dropped all these hints about tying you up because I wanted you to fight me on it... and win! I wanted to be where you are! God. I hate you for making me admit this.”

My ankles kicked, my wrists twisted, and my hips bucked. A swell of power riddled me, and I needed to get the fuck out of this chair and put him in it. How had I missed that message? Jesus, I hated myself for not getting it

right. “Untie me.” My cock got harder, dominance flooded my energy, my muscles all tightened, and that fine line between love and hate taunted me. “Un-fucking-tie me. *Now*, Devon.”

Devon sighed, and it honestly sounded tired. He kissed my jaw, then my lips, and whispered, “Untie yourself, asshole. Then come find me.”

He left.

He left me tied, bound, and fucking blindfolded. Out of spite!



I HAD NO IDEA how long it took me to get free of the ropes, but when I did, my wrists were chafed, my body glistened with sweat, and a murderous demon rose straight out of my soul. I thought I could read Devon like a book, but I’d misread him this time, and I craved the ability to rectify it.

With the length of rope clutched in my hand, my dick still shiny with lube, and a determination to fight Devon for the control he wanted to lose, I stormed through the cabin door. The sun had almost set, but I saw Devon in a pair of boxers, sitting on that rock wall we sat on the last time we were here. He smoked a cigarette and didn’t even look at me when I walked out.

“Took you long enough,” he scoffed. Always a dick. Loved it.

I didn’t say a thing, but I grabbed a fistful of his hair, kneed him in the hammy, and spun him the fuck around. The cigarette went flying, and his hands landed on the rock wall for support.

“Maddox,” he groaned.

Holding him in place with my body, I let go of his hair and pulled his arms behind his back. One perk of working at the docks for years was

knowing how to tie knots, so I double-knotted that shit and snugged it up tight. With his wrists bound behind his back, I yanked his boxers down, bent him over, and smacked his perfect ass. Hard.

“Fuck,” he moaned.

I pushed his legs apart, smacked his ass again, and then lined up with his hole. With one more hard smack, Devon buckled forward, and I used the momentum of it to grab his hips and pull him back. Right onto my cock. I slammed inside him in one thrust, and then his knees buckled, too. A string of profanities left his lips, but his moans overpowered them.

“Stand up, Devon,” I growled at him, fucking him harder.

He tried. Shit, did he try. He forced his knees to straighten, and then he just took it. He took my brutal fuck, and he revelled in the thrill of it. I took out my failure on him, telling him how sorry I was for getting it all wrong by fucking him the way he wanted to be fucked. I might not be kinky enough to know how to hogtie him like in those pornos, but I’d learn. For now, my boy wanted to be bound and dominated, and I’d gladly follow through.

“You blindfolded me when I told you not to.” Smack. Whimper. “You told me a secret while I couldn’t see you.” Smack. Whine. “You hid your blush from me!” Crack. Cry.

“Fuck, Maddox,” he panted, barely standing. The only things keeping him upright were my cock in his ass and my hands on his hips.

It was a no-mercy fuck because he pissed me off by hiding from me. It was a no-holds-barred version of a fight because he outsmarted me and I got it wrong. I smacked his ass until it turned red, and then I smacked him again. I’d never spanked anyone in my life, but the sting in my palm made

it addicting, and I wouldn't mind adding this to the regular routine. Like, not at all.

"Madd," he panted. "Oh, God." He was close, that much I knew. Never again would I miss his signals.

I buried myself inside him, pushed on his lower back, and smacked him one more time.

Devon cried out, coming all over the rock wall hands-free. He cursed me, praised me, scolded me, and told me he loved me just as much as he hated me. His ass clenched around my cock and he shivered in bliss. When he started to settle, I smacked him one more time to extend all of it—the pain, the pleasure, the connection, and the new feeling—and then I stilled, spilling my load inside my soon-to-be husband.

"The next load," I panted, "you're swallowing." I pulled out and turned him around.

He winced at the movement and had tears down his cheeks, but his blue eyes were bright and full of adrenaline. He spit, swallowed, licked his lips, and then nodded, still panting.

"Never hide from me again, got it?"

"Then don't judge me."

"Does it look like I'm judging you, you dumb fuck?" I grabbed his wrists and untied them. "No more secrets."

"Fine." He rubbed his wrists, but I smacked his hands away so I could do it. "I'm feeding you food, feeding you cum, and then making you my bitch for the rest of the night. Fight me on it all you want, *babe*. You won't win."

He smirked, blushed, and then looked at the ground. "Love you."

I pushed him back to the cabin, happy that all was right again. I fucked up a bit, but I'd spend the rest of the night making sure he got to be

submissive like he wanted to be. Tomorrow, he could go back to being the alpha. “Love you. I think I always have.”

The weight of our love settled in my chest like a blanket. Devon really did love me. Me. Maddox Kane. Lowlife from Garron Park who worked on a farm for minimum wage. I was enough for him, and that made me feel like I could be enough for anything that came our way.

“I don’t think we knew the difference between love and hate back then,” he said.

“Do we now?” I asked.

“Probably not,” he laughed, opening the door to the cabin, naked as the day he was born. “But it’ll be fun trying to figure it out together for the rest of our lives.”

-DEVON-

ALL THE STARS WERE aligned or some shit. She was six days early, because we weren't getting married until Saturday, but who cared? My mom was here, and she was lucid for the first time in over half a year.

"Devon, hands off. Stop touching everything." Maddox smacked my wrist to prevent me from messing up the food on the tray. "Just leave it be and go be with her." He didn't even try to hide that insult. He jerked his chin at the door and that was my hint to leave and go spend time with my mom.

I threw my hands in the air and walked outside to the backyard of Seth and Naomi's new trailer. It had a deck and everything. My mom laughed at something, talking animatedly with Nate, and nerves grew in my stomach. It'd been a long time since I had a conversation with my mom, and not knowing when I'd get to do it again made me all weird about talking to her. Her eyes were clear and focused, and her attention was on Nate. Her legs were weak and she couldn't really walk that well, but otherwise, she was

the same old mom I used to know. As soon as I sat down, she reached for my hand and just... held it.

I needed Maddox to insult me again so I had a different emotion to focus on.

“Stay in the moment, hun,” Naomi whispered to me with a smile, and then she got up to help Maddox and Xavi cook. Why was she allowed in the kitchen? She sucked at cooking as much as I did.

Okay, stay in the moment. Nate rambled on about the shop, the apartment out back, and the ridiculous details of his friendship with Xavi.

“You two were always like brothers,” Mom said, and I watched Nate straight-up cringe at that. Okay, yeah, something had changed between them. “And you!” Mom turned to face me. “Marrying your sworn enemy?” Her smile lit up my damn world and she played with the purse on her lap.

“Yeah, weird as shit, eh?” God, when did I become this awkward? Had I always been this awkward? Maddox and I had no real reason to be enemies when we were younger. Our dad’s just hated each other, told us to hate each other, and that was that. The rest we did on our own, growing the feud into a lifestyle that somehow ended in marriage. “Do you approve?”

Mom brushed her knuckles down my cheek, leaving one hand in her purse. What if she said no? Ah, she’d probably forget the next time she woke up. “I approve of you being happy, and if he makes you happy, then yes. I hope I get to be there.”

“Me too,” I said, swallowing the fact that she probably wouldn’t be. Six days of lucidity? Would that happen? I didn’t want to get my hopes up, but it was okay to dream for a second. “Did you know about our lives? Did you... were you able to hear us talk all those times you weren't really yourself?”

Mom nodded, wiping her eyes after she wiped mine. “I heard. I just didn’t know how to process or respond to it, but I guess I absorbed it. You boys swear too much,” she laughed.

Nate glared at me for asking that question. He was right. We needed to enjoy the moment.

So, we told her everything we could cram in. Nate blurted out all sorts of weird shit, and I did the same. I think we were both a little worried that our time with her was limited, so we talked so fast we forgot to take breaths in between words. It felt like a confessional. We told her things we’d never tell anyone else, knowing that she’d hold on to them and never betray our secrets because she couldn’t. Maybe she just wouldn’t. I told her I was scared I would be a terrible husband, and Nate told her he was afraid to move on in life because he liked it how it was. Minus the dad shit.

Maddox sat next to me after a bit, keeping his mouth shut to let me do all the talking. But he held my hand the whole time, reminding me to slow down, focus on something else, or enjoy it instead of letting it all blur together.

“Food’s ready,” Xavi said, carrying out plates with Seth behind him.

Mom’s lucid state sprang up on us, so we hadn’t had time to make a real meal. This spread was a shitshow of whatever people had in their freezers. A bunch of people from the park threw in whatever they could. Chicken fingers, mozza sticks, pizza bites, a few meatballs that had freezer burn, a half-eaten dip with some chips, and a casserole that looked like baked spaghetti. Gina made treats and dropped them off, and Mary made a salad that had colourful marshmallows in it. Fucked assortment, but whatever. This was my wedding meal with my mom.

We all sat around the crooked table, wedged in with mismatched chairs so we could act like a real family. It felt good. Really good.

Heidi, the care worker who took care of Mom, walked up with a ceramic pot in her hands. “Hey, guys! Good to officially meet you, Deb,” she said to my mom. “I brought something to contribute.” She set the pot down, and it smelled like the best thing here.

“Chilli?” Xavi asked. “Smells fucking good.”

“Family recipe,” Heidi said.

I stood up to thank her, but I ended up pulling her aside for a quick minute. “What are the chances this is permanent?” I asked. I knew she wasn’t a doctor, but she’d know more about these things than I would.

Heidi gave me a kind smile. “Not likely, Devon. Lucid days are rare, but they do come around every now and then. Chances are, she’ll revert back to her former state soon.”

“Can we prolong it? Like... until my wedding?”

She smiled again. “Probably not, but you never know. Stressful events can be a trigger, so steer clear of those, but it could be something as simple as sleep. If she falls asleep, her mind might reset and she’ll be different when she wakes up.” Heidi shrugged. “My advice? Just enjoy the time you have.”

I sighed. “Alright. Thanks for everything, Heidi. You wanna stay for dinner?”

“Can’t. I have some patients to go see. But thanks. It’s nice to see her smile.” She squeezed my shoulder, gave everyone a wave, and headed out.

I sat down with my family. Holy shit, my family. This was surreal. I had my fiancé, our brothers, the parents we had left, and myself. I didn’t want to

take a single second of this for granted, so I sat back like a goon and admired everything around me while Maddox watched me.

Happy. Genuinely happy.

“Don’t tell me my invite got lost in the mail?”

My blood turned hotter than it ever had before, and my jaw clenched so hard it ached. My survival instincts kicked in, but my protective side kicked in harder. Standing in front of my mom, I glared at the intruder interrupting our one night with her.

“What do you want, Jim?”

Of course he’d show up now. Of fucking course. Maddox stood with me, one hand clamped around my wrist to keep me within arm’s reach and the other on my mom’s shoulder, ready to throw her back if my dad tried anything. I’d never seethed so hard. I’d never been so angry and so afraid at the same time. Not like this.

He stepped onto the deck, a gun in his hand and a crazed look in his eyes. There was a general weariness about him I’d never seen before, not even when he was at his lowest. I didn’t trust that dire look because it meant he failed, and this was his unthought-out backup plan. This was a revenge mission because we won something over him.

“Stay back!” Dad shouted when Nate tried to take a step forward. “Sit down!” His voice shook as hard as his hand. It made him twitchy, and I didn’t trust twitchy with a trigger.

“What do you want, Jim?” Seth asked, positioning Naomi behind him.

When Dad waved the gun around again, Nate moved to Mom’s other side and Maddox moved to mine. We all sat back down, waiting to see how this would go. How were we going to get out of this? We outnumbered him, but he had a damn gun and nothing to lose.

“I want what’s mine,” my dad seethed. “I know Harris has it and I want it back. Get it for me or I’ll kill your brother.” He looked at me, pointing the gun at Nate.

Why did our dad hate us so much? We were his sons. Nate always assumed it was something prideful, like he was the father and he was supposed to be more than us. Well, we were nothing, but we had friends and family, and maybe that’s what hit him hardest. His pride couldn’t take it that we were loved and he wasn’t. I didn’t know—probably never would—but this day would not end with me or my brother dying. That much I knew for sure.

“We don’t have any pull with Harris,” Nate told him, trying to diffuse the situation. “We don’t even know if he has it.”

“He has it,” Dad said, shaking. “And you’re going to get it for me.”

“Okay,” Seth agreed. “We’ll get it if you leave right now.” Naomi was shell-shocked and crying, but my mom hadn’t said a damn thing. Was she still here or had she checked out?

Dad’s gun waved around in the humid air and he let out a manic laugh. “Leave? This looks like a family celebration. I asked where my invite was, didn’t I?”

Oh, he’d finally lost it. All of it. His mind, his marbles, his sanity, his tether to humanity. If I thought my dad had been a monster all my life, this was him completely unhinged. He had one Hail Mary chance to get what he wanted, and this was it. I glanced at Maddox, but his eyes were on my dad with an unwavering level of focus. I knew he’d jump in front of me if my dad fired that gun, so I needed to make sure it didn’t go off. Nate trembled, red-faced and angrier than I thought him capable.

“Am I not invited to the wedding?”

“We’ll get you the shit from Harris,” Nate said. “Just go.”

“I ain’t going anywhere until I get what’s mine!” Dad pointed the gun at Nate again, cocking it.

I stood at the same time Maddox did. He tried to pull me behind him, but I stood my ground, needing to be the one to save him this time. Xavi protected my brother for me, shifting closer to Nate to be yet another Kane to block a bullet for a Sawyer.

“If I go, I’m taking you with me as collateral, boy,” Dad spat at Nate.

“Don’t. Touch. Him.” Xavi’s chest heaved.

Naomi and Mom were the only two left sitting. I didn’t know how to protect everyone.

“Okay,” Nate said, trying to break free of the hold Xavi had on him. “I’ll go with you. Now. Let’s go.”

“Nate!” Maddox, Xavi, and I all shouted at the same time.

A gun fired.

50

-DEVON-

I WAS DEAF IN one ear. *Why* was I deaf in one ear?

Everything happened in slow motion. The gun went off, my hearing went away, and my body crouched, trying to cover both my mom and Maddox. When I blinked, Maddox had his hand around the back of my neck over the top of my mom's seated body, but my eyes swept the length of Nate. Maddox was fine, but was Nate?

Nate looked shocked, and Xavi's hands were all over him, feeling for wounds, trying to figure out what the fuck just happened. And then my dad crumpled to his knees, the gun still in his hand and a bloom of red spreading over the material of his grey shirt.

"You always were a bitch," Dad coughed.

What?

I looked behind me. My mom, who'd had her hand in that damn purse all evening, had a gun in her grip, and her purse was opened to reveal candy wrappers and old lipsticks. My brain tried to tie it all together, but *what the actual fuck just happened?*

“Devon,” Maddox shouted, stealing my dazed attention. “Are you okay?” He spun me, palming my cheeks and checking me over. “Just tell me you’re okay.”

“I’m okay,” I whispered, my eyes asking him the same question.

Maddox nodded, and relief brought back a bit of my clarity.

Seth took the gun from my dad as he fell to the deck in a puddle of his own blood. I looked between my dying dad and my murdering mom, but when I met her eyes, she wasn’t a murderer. She was blank. Confused. Still holding a smoking gun.

“Mom?” Nate asked, taking the gun from her hand. “Mom?”

No light of recognition or spark of understanding. No smile on her face or tears in her eyes. She was gone. Her lucid state fled because of a stressful situation, just like Heidi had said. A traumatic event ruptured our moment because, once again, my dad had his timing down to an art.

I stood, not wanting to look at her so empty. Rounding the table with Maddox hot on my heels, I walked over to my dad. Then the anger came.

“How fucking dare you!” I snarled at my dad. “You took her from me. Again!” I gripped the bloody fabric of his shirt and shook the bastard, demanding that he acknowledge me as an adult, a man. But just like my mom’s face, there was nothing on my dad’s either.

I stared at him long and hard, not believing what I was seeing. Nate knelt beside me, smacking my hands out of the way so he could look closer.

Dead. Dead. Dead.

“He’s gone, boys,” Seth said. “I’m... sorry?”

A terrifying huff of crazed laughter came from somewhere. Me. It came from me. Another one bubbled up my throat and joined the first, surprising me and scaring me and making me insane. Dead? After all this? After

everything he put us through, all it took was one lucid day on our mom's part, a purse with candy, lipsticks, and a gun, and she finished a job we couldn't do ourselves?

Another crazed laugh filled the air, but it came from Nate. He leaned back on his heels, looking as diabolical as I probably did. Then he laughed harder. I didn't know what we were laughing at, but I had no control over my body. I laughed with him. We laughed so hard it became impossible to stop—not even when the sirens sounded in the distance.

“She did it,” Nate said, wiping tears of laughter from his eyes. “She really fucking did it.”

“She shot the bastard,” I laughed with my brother, trying to calm down and feel something for real. Relief and hysteria were a weird combination, but they were all I had at the moment. Maybe it was shock.

“She saved our asses again. In the only way she knew how,” Nate huffed another laugh. Turning to face our blank-eyed mom, he said, “Thank you.”

She didn't react.

Looking at my dad on the deck, knowing he was actually dead, I stopped laughing.

No more living in fear.

No more running.

No more threats to the people I loved.

No more panic and pain.

Life could finally move on.

Mom had given me the best wedding gift I could have ever asked for. Even though she'd given up her lucidity to do it, I had a feeling she would be okay with that. I left that bastard to turn cool on the deck and knelt in front of my mom.

“Thank you, Mom. I love you.” I kissed her cheek and smoothed out her hair.

All the people my dad bribed, the people like Harris he fucked over, the deals he made, the crimes he committed to pull off this job... and here he was, dead on a deck.

The backyard filled with park residents, and soon after, the cops showed up. I stood with Maddox and our brothers, watching my dad’s body get tagged, bagged, and carted away. I didn’t feel sadness. I didn’t feel grief. I felt something, but I didn’t know how to name it.

We all gave our statements to the police, and after singing like canaries about it being self-defence on our mom’s part, Hanes shoved me and Nate to the side with an angry huff.

“What the fuck, Hanes? We need to be with her right now,” Nate snapped at the officer.

Hanes glanced around all sketchy-like. “Look, I’ll be blunt here, but I have an idea.” He leaned in to speak softer. “Does your mother have a medical diagnosis for her condition?”

Nate looked confused. I mean, she did, but we never knew if it was the right diagnosis or not. “Drug-induced hysteria and early onset dementia.”

Hanes rubbed the back of his neck, nodding. “Then shut up about it being self-defence. If she has a doctor who can provide her medical records to the court, she won’t go to a traditional prison. She’ll go to a mental health facility for criminals.”

“How’s that any better?” I asked, annoyed by this conversation.

“She’ll be in a private room, locked yes, but she’ll be provided with care, medications, medical staff, food, and support.” Hanes gave us each a look. “Doesn’t she... need all that?”

I reared back, wondering if he was saying what I thought he was saying. “Wait, let me get this straight. You’re saying that if she’s charged with murder, she’ll get all the care we’ve been trying to get her for years... for free?”

“Yes. As long as a doctor can provide the right medical diagnosis.”

Nate laughed again. He slapped a hand over his mouth to shut it up, but it was no use. “Are you shitting me? She just solved our dad problem, our money problem, and her own medical care problem with one lucid evening?” He barked another laugh. “Fuck, that woman knows how to get shit done.”

I laughed, too. Maddox looked at me, and whatever he saw, I was sure it was something worse than shock. Lunacy, maybe.

“Can we visit her there?” Nate asked.

“The facility is in Arbour, so it’s a bit of a drive, but yes. They have visiting hours just like a regular prison or a regular hospital.” He pulled his phone from his pocket. “Let me make some calls to confirm everything, but in the meantime, keep your mouths shut about this.” He walked away with his phone to his ear.

I stood beside my brother, watching everything unfold. Maddox spoke to a cop, but his eyes were on me, and I liked the way he looked at me with love and worry all swirled together. Naomi drank wine straight from a bottle while Seth consoled her, and my mom still sat in her chair at the table with the mismatched foods we hadn’t had the chance to eat yet.

“This is so fucked,” Nate finally said. “But I feel... something.”

“Free.”

For the first time in our adult lives, we didn’t have to worry about our parents. Dad was gone, and he’d never come for us again. Mom would go

to the kind of place she'd needed for years. One gunshot solved all our problems, and I didn't know how to fully appreciate that yet.

"You think she knew?" Nate asked. "About Dad and all he's been doing, and this was her way of taking care of us?"

I nodded because I wanted to believe that. It made the whole thing poetic. I mean, she turned to drugs and fried her brain to endure Dad's wrath so we didn't have to, which was the only way she ever knew how to protect us. She couldn't leave him, or she at least believed she couldn't, but she'd done everything she could to keep us as far out of his path as possible. It hadn't always worked, but she tried. In her lucid state, she shot Dad, not us; that gun never pointed in our direction, which meant she loved us. She protected us when it counted, and in the process, she freed us from having to care for her. She knew she was a burden, but I hated that she knew. I saw it in her eyes all evening, so this had been her final act of motherhood. Truthfully, she gave us everything we'd ever wanted.

"Nate and Devon Sawyer?" The coroner walked up to us with a clipboard. "Any requests for the deceased's body?"

"Burn it," Nate said.

"Dump it in a mass grave," I added.

Nate looked at me. "You sure you don't want a grave to piss on?"

"Nah, I'll piss on yours when you eventually shit the bed."

What a fucked up, perfect little family dinner. Thanks for the wedding gift, Mom.



“YOU THINK SHE LEFT you any money behind?” Maddox asked, handing me a beer later that night.

I looked at it but didn’t take it.

“Drink a beer, Devon. I trust you, and if you fuck up, I’ll knock some sense into you. You have to start trusting yourself with something, even if it isn’t drinking.”

I took the beer. Just one. “Maybe I can pawn off all her old lipsticks,” I laughed. “Maybe Pete will let me set up at his booth on Saturday. I’ve always wanted to do a farmer’s market.”

Maddox smacked me on the cheek. “Our wedding is Saturday. You backing out now?”

“Hell no. You’re stuck with me for life.”

“Good.” He looked at me and got all weird and secretive.

“What?”

“Nothing. I just love you.”

I knew that wasn’t what he wanted to say, but I didn’t have the mental space left to push him on it. This day had been messed up enough. “Love you, too.”

I drank the one beer, and when Maddox fell asleep on the other end of the couch, his feet on my lap, I pulled out the ninety-eighth piece of paper and gave this another shot. I needed to focus on something important, and my vows were the most important thing.

Maddox,

I give you my fucked up soul, my half-beating heart, and my lack of any life skills as a sign of my love. It might not be much, but it’s all I’ve fucking got, so you better be happy with it.

I can't promise that shit is going to be easy, but I can promise I'll be there every step of the way to bust your balls and love you.

Nah, that sounded too sappy. Not my style. He was the sappy one. I leaned my head back and pictured all the best scenes of our relationship like some damaged highlight reel. We had competitiveness like we always had, and I knew it wouldn't go anywhere. I thought back on all our fights, and how they morphed over the years from actually wanting to hurt each other to just being about connection and a way to blow off steam together. We had comfort and honesty, which allowed us to be ourselves without shame. We had anger issues, trust issues, parent problems, a lack of money, a lack of a home, and no real life goals, but we covered all that in love and smothered the fuck out of it.

I guess all we really wanted was to survive this life together.

With that thought, something clicked in my mind. I thought of the tree we'd be getting married under, the look on Maddox's face when he saw it, and some sort of motto came to me. I set the pen down, smiling at him sleeping.

I had my vows.

-MADDOX-

XAVI SMACKED ME UPSIDE my head. “You should be calm. Why aren’t you calm?”

I ignored him and turned to face the prick who’d be officiating our wedding. “Are you even legit? I swear to fuck if you are some con artist Devon was too stupid to realize he hired, I will burn your house down.”

This idiot, a young guy with the scraggliest beard I’d ever seen, tucked his little binder under his arm and wasn’t even put off by my accusation. “Here’s my license.” He showed it to me. “I’m legit. And I don’t have a house to burn down, so good luck with that.”

I snatched the paper certificate out of his hand and read it. It said his name and claimed him as legit, but it didn’t make me any less suspicious of him. What was a young buck like him doing marrying gay guys under shitty trees?

“Madd, relax.” Xavi took the paper from my grip and handed it back to Scraggly. “You’re marrying your enemy today. Aren’t you happy?”

Elated. So happy. Just pissed about it because Devon was late. “If they show up on time,” I scoffed. “Devon is such a dick.”

Nate and Devon were visiting their mom in her new criminally fancy facility. They left super early, visited for a bit, and were supposed to be back by now. Did he run off? Ride into the motherfucking sunset without me so that he and Nate could escape the Kanes now that they didn’t have to worry about their dad? I knew I didn’t bring a whole lot to this relationship, but I thought we had love. Right?

Xavi smacked me again. “Stop questioning everything. He loves you. You love him. You’ll be married by three. End of story.”

“Not end of story,” I snipped at him. “Beginning of story.”

Xavi grinned. “I wish I got that on video. Fuck, you’re cute, Madd.”

I decked him. He laughed it off and handed me the shirt I’d picked to wear.

Scraggly was chatting with my parents, so I pulled my dirty shirt off, slicked on some deodorant, and put on my wedding shirt. It was just a black t-shirt that said, ‘making bad decisions is my superpower,’ but it fit the theme. I didn’t know why I cared, but I even made Devon wash my best jeans. The socks were clean, too, and my shoes were scuffed but tidy. Good enough.

“Madd.” Xavi grabbed my shoulders. “You’re getting married today.”

“I know that,” I scoffed.

“You, Maddox Kane, bullshit prick from Garron Park, are getting married today.” He acted like it was some monumental feat. It was. I never saw my life going in this direction. I honestly thought I’d accidentally knock a chick up and spend the rest of my life paying child support while trying to get my

kid to love me despite his mom always shit-talking me. Marrying Devon? Yeah, never on my radar.

“Fucked, eh?” I asked Xavi, smiling.

“So fucked,” he agreed. “So proud. You got your vows ready?”

I rolled my eyes. “I’ll say something that will make Devon swoon, he’ll say something that will piss me off, then we’ll be married. All good.” I smiled at that thought. I’d read every single one of the crumpled-up pieces of paper he tried to hide in the trash can. Devon was going to love my shirt.



DEVON SHOOK HIS HEAD at me in warning, telling me to back off. “Lay off, Maddox.” He hopped out of the truck in a pair of jeans that weren’t as clean as mine, and a shirt that said, ‘I’m with stupid.’ Fuck him for outdoing me on the shirt! “The truck broke down. We had to get a boost, and then shit went south, but I’m here now. Can you not be a dick about it?” he asked, but didn’t let me answer. “Just shut up and marry me.” He shoved me in the chest, aiming to walk right by me.

I grabbed his wrist and yanked him back. “You’re a dick.” I nodded at his shirt.

“So are you.” He nodded at mine. “What’s your point?”

The point was that our shirts were wrong. He should have been wearing mine because his superpower really was making bad decisions, and I should have worn his because I really was with stupid.

Bickering with him on our wedding day felt right. “Last chance to back out.”

We were at the farm. Nate and Devon were late, but Scraggly Beard didn't look like he had anything better to do, and Pete hadn't moved off his front porch, so he didn't seem rushed to get us off his property. Everything would be fine. Except I was nervous, and I hated being nervous.

I studied his blue eyes, searching for any second-guesses, last-minute doubts, reservations, and hesitations.

“Look all you want, Madd. You won't find anything. If you make me wait another minute to marry you, I will drag you to that tree.” He palmed my cheeks with his dirty hands, pulling my mouth to his for a quick kiss. He tasted like mint, but he smelled like a mechanic from the broken-down truck. “I love you. Let's get married.”

“You could have showered,” I grumbled.

Devon rolled his eyes. “You get me in shit for being late, but you wish I was later so I could have showered? Take me or leave me, Madd. What'll it be?”

Take him. Always.

I pushed him towards the shitty Oak he'd picked as our wedding spot. Pete raised his glass from the front porch, which was pretty far away, but I saw it and appreciated it. Our family heckled us as we walked across the dead grass this greedy tree had killed.

My heart thundered in my chest the whole time. This was it. After everything we'd been through, we were finally getting married. Devon was committing to me for life and I was tying myself to him for eternity. I spent most of my life hating him, but fuck it, maybe that was just a part of our flawed destiny. All I knew was that I loved this dumbass, and I'd do everything within my power to make sure he always knew that.

“Can’t believe you’re marrying a Sawyer,” Xavi mocked, hugging me. “Doesn’t get any lower than that.”

“I’m aware.” I grinned.

“Fuck you, Maddox,” Devon sassed at me, but Nate pulled him into a hug.

My mom was already crying. She had a tetra-pack of wine with a straw in it, but whatever. It was a wedding. She could drink if she wanted to. “I love you, honey. I’m so happy for you.” She hiccuped.

“Thanks, Mom.” I wanted to hug her or something, but we’d never really been close like that, so I squeezed her hand and smiled at her.

My dad wasn’t a man of many words, but he said, “Never thought I’d get invited to your wedding. Honoured to be here, son. You picked a good one.”

I nodded, not really sure what else to say, but that was good enough for him. Nate hugged me and threatened my life if I ever hurt his brother. Then he promised me rewards if I fucked with him forever, so I made that deal with no problems. Sold.

“Ready?” Scraggly Beard asked.

I read his name on his certificate, but my brain had no more room for remembering things on a day like this.

Ready. So fucking ready. The tree looked like it came straight from Hell, the clouds threatened rain, crow caws overpowered the sound of our voices, and my mom was already drunk. Nate and Xavi were in fine form, gossiping and snapping photos like a couple of tourists, but what else was new?

We nodded at Scraggly.

Devon’s breath whooshed out of him in a shaky exhale as soon as he took my hands. I fucking *knew* he’d get emotional. He needed to cut that shit out

because I didn't feel like crying today.

"Stop it," I whisper-shouted at Devon as Scraggly started droning on about what marriage meant.

Devon glared at me, but at least it snapped him back into shape. We half-ass listened while this asshole talked, but I think we had an entirely different conversation with our eyes. Devon told me it didn't matter that we were poor and homeless because our love was enough. I told him he was a twat who needed to get his priorities straight, but that I loved him anyway.

"I said no showy shit!" Devon barked at Scraggly. "Just get to the part where we say our shit and kiss."

Again, Scraggly wasn't bothered by our bluntness. "Maddox, go ahead."

I didn't have much of a declaration because Devon already knew how I felt. I'd been taunting him with my vows being done for weeks, so he probably expected something grand and bullshit. Nope. That wasn't me. I was more of a one-liner kind of guy. I'd told him I wanted to hate him, have him, fuck him, fight with him, and marry him. But now I had something new to add to that list.

"Devon," I started, feeling those emotions creep up my throat—the very same ones I just reprimanded him for. I rubbed my thumb over the ring on his left finger, looking at his eyes and only his eyes. "I promise to never let you sit alone in the dark."

Devon, that fucking bitch, blinked, and a whole-ass tear dripped down his cheek.

"Fuck you, Devon. Lock that shit up." I seethed at him, trying to stop the burning in my own eyes.

He nodded, blinking away the tears. The breath he let out was wobbly as fuck.

“Devon?” Scraggly prompted.

Devon nodded a hundred more times, and then he looked up at the tree we stood under. The old, haggard, half-dead Oak that stood on the edge of the forest and refused to give up on life like the beacon of strength it was. It was weathered from taking the brunt of all storms, but it was wise for living through them. It was solid because it refused to be weak. Guess I was a tree-hugging granola bitch now.

“Maddox,” Devon started, looking at me now. “I’m right here, and I’m not fucking going anywhere.”

Well, god-fucking-dammit. Just like the tree. I widened my eyes, refusing to blink. If I blinked, it would happen. I stared at him with a high level of intensity, unflinching, but trying to will away the overwhelming sense of love. He winced when I squeezed his hands too hard, and then he squeezed mine back. This feeling ripped up my sense of composure just like all the ripped-up vows Devon had tossed.

“*You* lock it up,” Devon hissed at me. But he busted into tears, and fuck him for it!

A single tear fell down my cheek, and I choked on fucking love. “Get on with it,” I ordered Scraggly.

He started saying something about the power vested in him, but Devon got impatient. With tears still on his cheeks, he grabbed me by my damn throat like the asshole he was and kissed me.

“I now pronounce you husband and husband. You may... fuck it.”

This kiss differed from all the rest. It sealed fate and made it eternal. It promised things our mouths failed to say, reminded us of memories our hearts still carried, and offered hopes we were hesitant to wish for. Devon’s fingers pressed into my pulse point, feeling exactly how hard he gave me

life. When our family started to hoot and holler, Devon didn't let go. He kept his hand on my throat, rested his forehead against mine, and breathed.

"I fucking love you, Maddox Kane."

I bitch slapped my emotions into check, breathed deeply, and swallowed my pride. "I don't deserve you, but I'll spend forever earning you, Devon. I love you."

I kissed him one more time, and then Devon grabbed my hand and raised it above our heads as we turned to face our family. The crows all cawed and the wind picked up like our marriage was an omen—good or bad. "I bagged me a Kane!"

I laughed. And smiled. Real ones. Like the kind full of joy and all that humble gratitude bullshit. Pete raised his glass from the porch again, and I nodded at him before he went inside. I think I found my home here at his farm.

We were congratulated, mocked, made fun of, and pushed around by our brothers, and my mom ended up sharing her tetra-pack of wine with Scraggly. We didn't exchange rings because we already had those, but when my dad pulled out his phone to take pictures of us and our brothers, Devon made sure the arrow on his shirt pointed at me. Xavi and Nate directed the photos like runway directors, but it was all in good fun. They were annoying, but not any more so than usual, so we took it. They even got one with us holding Scraggly in a headlock.

I had no idea what regular weddings were like, but ours was fucking perfect. Literally could not be happier.

"Okay!" Nate shouted, getting everyone's attention now that we were back at our vehicles. He pointed at the barn and wrapped an arm around Xavi's neck. "We have a wedding gift."

“What? How?” Devon scoffed.

“It better not be a goat,” I said, knowing new kids had been born in that barn last week.

“It’s not a goat,” Xavi laughed.

“I kind of want a goat,” Devon said. “They’d be cheaper than a lawn mower.”

“We don’t have a lawn.”

“How’d you afford a gift?” Devon asked, apparently unable to let the money thing go.

“Harris,” Xavi said. “He felt like he owed us one.” That seemed shady, but I let it slide. “Stay here.” They ran off together.

Devon snaked an arm around my waist while we waited. My dad walked up to us, holding up an envelope. “While they’re getting that, I wanted to give you guys this.” He handed me the envelope. “It’s not much, but I hope it gets you started together.”

I opened the envelope to see a wad of cash. Maybe two grand. I closed it. “No. I can’t take this.”

Dad smiled. “I owe you a hell of a lot more than that from over the years. I’m doing fine now. Easier to save when you aren’t snorting, gambling, and drinking all your cash. Take it. Maybe it can help you guys get into a new home.” The look in his eyes said he wanted to do this for us.

“Thank you, Seth,” Devon said. “Thank you.”

I nodded at my dad, grateful. Mom still sipped wine through her straw, unaware of what was going on with us. Jesus.

Then Devon smacked me on the shoulder. “What the actual fuck!” he gasped. “What the fuck?!”

I echoed his sentiments in my head, seeing Nate and Xavi come out of the barn.

“So much better than a goat!”

“Happy wedding day, motherfuckers!”

They pushed dirt bikes. Our dirt bikes. Our old motocross bikes.

Holy fuck. This really was the best day of my life.

“I know I should be all happy and shit that we’re married, Madd, but...”

“Yeah,” I agreed, drooling with him over our bikes. “Ride?”

“Double meaning?” he asked, grinning at me.

“Fuck yes.”

We ran towards the bikes that started our feud in the first place. Fitting to get them back on our wedding day. I had no idea what Harris did to get these for us, but I’d forever be grateful to Nate and Xavi for bringing us back the one healthy vice we had.

We straddled our bikes, basically came at the sound of their engines, and ripped out of our wedding on two wheels and an adrenaline high.

EPILOGUE

-DEVON-

I cursed under my breath when Maddox scared the shit out of me. The back of my head banged off the underside of the sink, and I dropped my wrench into a dirty bucket of water.

“What?” I barked at him for interrupting me. Again.

“Have you seen this shit?” he asked, thrusting a wad of papers at me.

I climbed out from under the busted sink and looked at the papers he held out. “Uh, yeah.”

“What the hell is this charge? Who pays that much for something?”

I wiped my hands on a towel and refrained from rolling my eyes. “It’s called house insurance, Madd. We pay that shit now.”

“No,” he scoffed. “No fucking way. Return it.”

Okay, couldn’t hold back the eye-roll any longer. “You’re the one who wanted to buy this piece of shit house. This is the price we have to pay.”

“But this much?” He jabbed his finger against the monthly amount before raising his hand to show off our place. “For this shit shack?”

I grabbed a can of lemonade from the fridge—at least it worked—handed him his own, and then went outside. He followed. Like a puppy.

“You know we pay truck insurance too, right?”

“What? Since when?” He grabbed my shoulder. “Where are you getting all this money from?”

Maddox was stupid. I mean, I spent so long being the dumb one in our relationship that it felt damn good to be the smart one now. He could work on a farm and repair things outside just fine, but when it came to money, running a house, budgeting, or any basic adult responsibility, he failed. Hard. He even bought name-brand things at the grocery store without a coupon, and now he wanted to bitch at me about insurance? Fuck him.

“We work, dipshit,” I reminded him, sitting on the slanted front porch.

“You’re telling me we work this hard just to pay insurance we’ll probably never need? That’s rookie league, Devon. Take it back. Cancel it.”

Idiot. “We can’t have a mortgage without house insurance. Get over it or sell this hunk of junk.”

Maddox sat down on the step of our front porch. It broke, and he landed on his ass one step down. He uttered a million curses, but he didn’t get up.

We moved into this shithole a few months ago. It was small, barely standing, decrepit, and half-rotted in most places, but goddammit, it was ours. We had the mortgage and the insurance to prove it. Maddox had fixed up some of the outside things, and I’d been working on the inside things—a deal we made once we realized we sucked at working on the same projects together—and it was sort of coming around. Our water heater didn’t work, so cold showers were the new norm. The sink leaked, the shower drain was clogged, the roof leaked in three different places, and the septic tank needed pumping, but look at the view!

Maddox had originally wanted to live on a houseboat, but we ended up doing so much better. This hovel might sink over time, but at least it wouldn't drown us in anything but debt. We bought a shitty little shack on the beach a few minutes outside Garron. We were real citizens of the community now. We had no neighbours, no streetlights, and no power half the time, but it was home.

"Dogs cost money, too," I reminded him.

Maddox glared at me, and my skin goosebumped at the intensity of it. "I'm getting a dog, Devon. If you get insurance, I get a dog."

I grinned, sipping my drink. Maddox still worked on the farm with Pete, and the two of them had found out one of the farm dogs was pregnant. She gave birth a few months ago, and Maddox fell in love with one of the pups, so I guess it was ours now. He was a mutt, but all the best ones were. *We were mutts.*

"When do we get him?" I asked.

"Next week. He'll be ten weeks then. He's so fucking chill, Dev."

Maddox bragged about this dog non-stop. He'd take him to work during the day and bring him home at night so he never had to be alone out here. If this dog was going to be our baby, Maddox was already the world's best dad.

"Do you want an actual kid?" I asked him, not really hoping for one answer over the other.

Maddox shrugged. Typical. "Learn to cook something and I'll think about it."

"Learn to pay a bill and I'll learn to cook, asshole," I countered.

Maddox finished his drink and tossed the can on the porch. "Fine, but you better learn to cook something fast because I'm fighting for a BBQ at

fight night tomorrow.”

Of course he was. He’d been gunning for one ever since someone put up a BBQ over a year ago. “We can’t afford meat.”

Maddox pointed to the ocean. “Fuck ton of food in there. Get fishing.”

I shoved him off the step and kicked him while he was down. “Fuck you.”

Maddox groaned on the lawn, not moving. “Get me a beer.”

Funny how there was always money for beer, but he bitched about paying insurance. To be fair, Maddox got a raise at the farm. He earned just as much, if not more, than I did, and his job came with a lot of nice perks. Pete had cattle, so we got beef every time he sent them to the butcher. We got canned goods, vegetables and produce that didn’t make the cut to go to the farmer’s markets, fresh eggs, and even a lot of tools and shit to help out around here. Every time Maddox came home from work, it was like he’d been to the store. I’d forever be grateful to Pete for that.

“Wait.” I stopped myself from getting him another beer. “Tomorrow night? You’re fighting tomorrow night?”

“Yeah.”

“No. We have plans.” It was our first wedding anniversary. “I thought we were doing something together.”

“Yeah, fighting,” he laughed. “Full circle, right? We’ll win a BBQ as an anniversary gift and get to bloody each other up in the process. Win, win.”

I shook my head at him and went inside to tackle the sink. I mean, it wasn’t the worst plan; a BBQ would be nice. But I’d been hoping for something a little more *moving forward* than *stuck in the past* when it came to our anniversary. I wasn’t going to fight him.

I didn't get him another beer. I left him on the lawn and crawled under the sink, ready to make it my bitch.



-MADDOX-

Devon needed to get over his mood and cheer up. I took him to the track this morning and we competed in the enduro race. He won second place and I only finished fourth, so I didn't know why he was being all moody when he should have been happy. Well, I knew exactly why. It was our one year, and he thought I actually wanted to fight him.

I did want to fight him, but not on the beach. A new kind of fight.

Xavi ran out of the store with a bottle of wine in one hand and an empty box in the other. He climbed in the passenger seat of my new-but-old truck, grinning at me like a dipshit.

"I said no booze," I complained. "It's Devon."

"The wine is for me." He unscrewed the top and took a swig. "The empty box is for you. I'm celebrating today too, you know."

"Celebrating what?" Had something progressed with this new girl Nate and Xavi were both sort of seeing? Again. She was the third one.

"Your life," Xavi laughed. "A whole year married to Devon and you're still alive, Madd. That's a cause for celebration. Plus, Nate owes me a hundred bucks."

I didn't even want to ask, but I did. "For?"

"Just a bet."

Yeah, a bet that probably had something to do with my marriage. If he didn't tell me soon, I'd beat the answer out of him. I put the truck in drive and pulled onto the main road of Garron, heading to my next stop.

We weren't floating in money, but we actually had some now. Enough not to stress about it all the time, anyway. Yes, those insurance payments pissed me off because they were basically criminal and I didn't understand why we had to pay that much for something we'd probably never even have to use. Maybe I'd throw a tree branch through some windows to take advantage of it. We needed new windows. Despite that, there was one thing we both wanted to do but could never afford before now. It just so happened that I could tie it in with our anniversary.

I parked on the street, told Xavi not to touch anything, and picked up the rest of my gift. When I got back, Xavi had drunk half the bottle, but he helped me put all my shit in the empty box.

"You sure he's going to like this?" he asked.

He'd probably hate me for it, tell me it wasn't in our budget, and then hit me, but fuck it. We deserved it. "Nope. I'm just guessing." Devon knew I was up to something, but I hadn't breathed a word of it to anyone but Nate and Xavi.

"Nate bet that Devon would tie you up after the track so you couldn't leave the house and go to fight night," Xavi said, telling me about the hundred bucks he won. "And I bet that you'd sneak out like a little bitch and avoid all his calls." He nodded to my phone going off every minute, *Dipshit Devon* flashing across the screen. "I won."

Assholes. Both of them.



“WHAT THE FUCK, MADD?” Devon came up to me as soon as I parked the truck in front of our house. “You really did win a BBQ?” He looked in the back, took in my bloody eyebrow, and then shook his head at me. “It better be a good one.”

“We’ll need it for the anniversary dinner I’m throwing.”

“It’s ten.”

“Tomorrow.” I pulled on the front of his shirt and kissed him. “I love you. Aren’t you going to thank me?”

“No, you made me stay at home like a child while you went off to fight night,” he complained, wrapping his arms around me.

That’s because I fought Fancy Jeans guy, and I didn’t want Devon anywhere near that loser. He was surprisingly easy to goad into a BBQ fight, and he was even easier to win against. The bloody brow came from my brother, and that was only because he was so drunk he tripped and knocked me into the side of my own truck. I wiped the spot of blood off before Devon could see it.

“You didn’t want to fight me,” I blamed him, wrapping my arm around his shoulders to steer him inside. “I got you something else, though.”

“What?”

“I’m gonna shower first.” I kissed him and left him in the kitchen.

I took a cold shower—no hot water heater—and then kept the towel around my waist to meet him in the kitchen. He had his glare focused on the

sink like it was some war he was personally fighting, but I loved his commitment to making our place better.

Goddamn, he was sexy. He had a tan from working at the shop and spending a lot of time on the docks. His blond hair was lighter than usual from the sun, and the tops of his shoulders were just a touch sunburned. Fair-haired fucker. My husband. We made it a whole year.

“Devon,” I called, getting his attention.

He turned around, crossed his arms, and leaned against the counter, eyeing me with equal parts admiration and skepticism. “What’d you do?” he asked, doubting me already.

“I spent money you’re going to claim we don’t have,” I said, walking up to him. “But I’m ready to fight with you about it all night, so don’t hold back.” I grinned.

I leaned against the front of him, trapping his stubbornly crossed arms between our chests. His blue eyes watched me carefully, trying to figure out what I could have spent so much money on.

“You got two dogs, didn’t you?”

“Nope.” I laughed. “Just one.”

“Don’t tell me you legitimately bought that BBQ because I wouldn’t believe it for a second.”

I laughed again. “No.”

“Tell me,” he demanded.

“Kiss me.”

He licked his lips, teasing me. “Tell me first.”

I leaned in until our noses brushed, but I didn’t kiss him. I’d make this asshole succumb first. Just to say I could.

To his credit, he tried really hard to fight it, but when I leaned against his body and popped my hands on the counter on either side of him, he buckled.

“Ah, fuck you, Maddox.” His lips pressed to mine and his hands weaselled their way up to my neck.

I didn’t know how it was possible, but kissing him now was even more intoxicating than it had been that first time at the track. I’d been fucking this guy for years and I still couldn’t get enough of him. It was our storm. The storm we created together when our competing energies thrashed to produce the most intense concoction of love, respect, and desire. Devon became my counterpoint, my fulcrum, and the axis that my life swivelled on, and somehow, I’d made him mine.

He dropped his hands down to my chest and pushed me away while fighting not to pull me closer. He wanted his answer, but he wanted to get laid just as badly. Always a competition.

I tightened the faded blue towel around my waist and slid a box across the counter. Devon looked at it, then at me, then regarded us both with weariness.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Open it, fight me about it, and then hate fuck me for messing up our finances. I don’t care. But you *will* go to bed happy tonight, Devon.” That was a promise.

He shook his head, shoved me out of his way, and tore the box open. Inside, he found two winter jackets that had been hard to find in this climate, some hats and mitts I’d found at the thrift store, boots, and an envelope.

“What is all this? Where’d you even find winter clothes around here?”
He looked at me. “Why do we need these?”

“Would you shut up and open the envelope?”

He glared at me, ripping it open. His glare turned into shock, then awe, then anger. Oh, there he was.

“No!” he barked at me, slamming the envelope onto the counter. “No. No fucking way, Maddox. We can’t afford shit like this!”

“Too late. Unlike you, I don’t buy insurance.” The travel company had offered it, and I’d turned it down without a second thought. Whoops.

“Maddox!” he screamed at me. “Why the fuck would you do this?”

“Because I love you and they have a hot tub like we talked about.” I ignored his anger and saw through it, knowing he was happy. I pulled him close. “Happy anniversary, Devon. I love you.”

We were finally taking that trip we once talked about. That one with a hot tub where we got to be all alone and happy and shit. Maybe it was a late honeymoon, or maybe it was just a chance to see some other part of the world. Who knew? All I knew was that Devon wanted to go somewhere, and now we were. Alaska called our names, and if he put up too much of a fight, I’d drag his ass there if I had to.

“Are we fighting about it?” I asked when he said nothing.

His blue eyes burned into my green ones. “We can’t afford this.”

Yeah, well, life wasn’t always fair, but that’s what made it so fucking fun.
“I know.”

Inhaling through his nose, Devon said, “I think I’ll skip that part and go straight to hate-fucking you for messing up our finances.” He pulled the towel off my waist, grabbed my throat like he always did, and added, “Fuck knows why I love you, Maddox, but holy shit, I do.”

I told him he'd go to bed happy. Every night for the rest of our shitty lives.

THE FINISH LINE.

NORDIKA NIGHT

Canadian.

Coffee Obsessed.

Terrible Internet.

Lover of MM books.

Living life with my dog, Waylon!



IG: nordikanightauthor

FB readers group: Nordika's Nightmares

TikTok: nordikanight

Website: coming soon!

WHAT'S NEXT?

Nate and Xavi are getting a book! It will be book 3 in the From Nothing series. Obviously a friends to... something ;) something like lovers.

I have lots more to come in the MM realm, so make sure you follow me on social media (mostly Instagram or my FB group – Nordika's Nightmares) to keep up to date with new releases and news.

ALTER ARLO – a dark MM dystopian vibe of a novel with two couples, a twist, and a cast of characters that all connect. A poetic stalker, a germaphobe learning to touch, and a madman with bloody hands – plus the two frenemies with ties to them all. Find it here —> [Alter Arlo](#)

NATE & XAVI BONUS – JUST FOR FUN! NOT STEAMY

Want a little bonus scene about Nate & Xavi? Click [here](#) to sign up for my newsletter and get a short scene about 'what happened that night they shared a bed' to tide you over until book 3!



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