



Letting in the Light

**Fae
Sutherland**

A NOVEL

LETTING IN THE LIGHT

“...A sexy, heartwarming May/December romance featuring two of the strongest, most memorable and intriguing heroes I’ve ever read. You’ll be drawn to Finn as irresistibly as Rowan, and delight along with Rowan in his relentless pursuit of the gruff older man. These men will steal your heart and make you long for more of their story!”

**—Louisa Edwards,
Author of *Can’t Stand The Heat*, St. Martin’s Press**

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almost in relief. "Fine, I apologize. I was rude, now get the hell out!"

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"What do you mean, tomorrow?"

Rowan flashed him another grin. "Grande house blend, no milk, heavy sugar, pecan muffin and a fruit salad. You never ordered from us before, so either you ran out of breakfast food or your cook is out of town for a while, maybe both. Either way, you'll need breakfast again tomorrow. See you then!"

He popped in his ear buds and pedaled away, Jimi Hendrix drowning out the angry shout he sensed echoing behind him.

Now he was in love...

ALSO BY FAE SUTHERLAND
(WITH MARGUERITE LABBE)

629 Miles To Love
Fortunate Son
The Mask He Wears

LETTING IN THE LIGHT

BY

FAE SUTHERLAND

AMBER QUILL PRESS, LLC

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LETTING IN THE LIGHT
AN AMBER QUILL PRESS BOOK

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*For the original Grumpy McGrumpypants.
You are missed and you are forgiven. Thank you for the
immeasurable joy and laughter and pleasure you brought
to myself and so many others. Your Angelboy will
love you for an eternity.*

CHAPTER 1

“Rowan! Got a delivery out on Waterfront Drive.”

Rowan Lee looked up from where he was crouched down restocking the pastry display. “Got it, Marty!” He slid the glass door closed and pushed to his feet, grabbed the bag waiting on the counter, and headed out the back of the shop.

It was a gorgeous day, reminding Rowan why he loved fall the best of all the seasons. The leaves were changing and the air was crisp, but it hadn’t yet reached that icy bite of winter. Grinning to himself, he dropped the bag into the basket on the front of his bike and climbed on, taking off down the alley toward Main Street.

Digging into his jacket pocket with one hand, he managed to unearth one ear bud for his iPod and settled it in his ear without crashing. The hypnotic cacophony of Jimi Hendrix filled his ears

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and he automatically pedaled faster to the frenetic rhythm of the music.

Minutes later, he turned onto Waterfront, glancing down at the ticket on the bag for the house address. When he saw which it was, his heart skipped several beats.

Finnegan Clark. Resident literary genius and notorious recluse. Rowan had never seen him, but he'd heard about him. Who hadn't? Finnegan Clark was a multiple time best-selling author of mystery thrillers and Provincetown's local celebrity. When Rowan had first come to Provincetown three months earlier, some of the first tales locals had regaled him with had been those of Finnegan.

He was supposedly crazy, but Rowan wasn't sure he believed that. After all, people had a tendency to be afraid of things they didn't understand, to demonize them in their mind. But despite reports of being bat-shit insane, the locals seemed oddly proud that he lived there. He was brilliant, gave a lot of money to local charities and never caused any trouble, which made him more like your crazy Aunt Betty who sometimes wore her bra on the outside of her dress but you loved her anyway.

Rowan slowed to a stop in front of the wrought iron gated drive. He peered up at the house, enormous and ornate and probably older than his mom, and wondered if he'd get to see Mr. Clark, or if some servant would answer the door and whisk away the delivery.

No time like the present to find out. Swinging one leg over, he climbed off the bike and pushed it up to the intercom beside the gate, bending down and pushing the button.

"What?" The voice was male, gruff and hostile.

Rowan blinked, startled. "Delivery from Have Your Cake And—"

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“Bring it around to the side entrance.”

A low hum sounded and the gates began to open. Rowan frowned at the intercom, tempted to push the button again and comment on the rudeness, but instead shook his head, adjusted his knit cap and climbed back on his bike to pedal through.

He leaned his bike against the side of the house, grabbed the bag and approached the side door. He couldn't help but admire the place. Ivy grew along the walls, browning now with winter approaching, and the flowerbeds that extended along the front and side walls were perfectly maintained and covered for the coming cold.

Probably has a gardener, he thought as he knocked.

The inane thoughts flew right out of his head when the door swung open and he was face to chest with a giant. A giant with silver hair that fell to his shoulders, shoulders wide enough to give Atlas a run for his money and a scowl that would give little kids nightmares.

Luckily, Rowan wasn't a little kid, and all he could think was, “Yes, please, I'll take one of you to go.” He had the good sense not to say that out loud as he stared up, way up, at the man. Jesus, he had to be six-foot-six if not more. He filled the doorway.

“Hi.” Rowan grinned at the ridiculous sound of that, shaking his head and holding up the bag. “I'm Rowan, I'm from—”

Before he could finish, the bag was taken, replaced with some money and the door shut in his face.

For a moment, he was too shocked to be offended. He frowned, staring first at the money in his hand, then at the door, then back to the money.

If he didn't miss his guess, he'd just met the infamous Finnegan Clark.

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* * *

"I'm in love," Rowan declared.

"You're an idiot." Jake Hanson, Rowan's roommate and coworker, lobbed a grape at his head. "You can't even call that a meeting."

Rowan laughed. "Alright, so maybe in love is a bit much. A lot much. He's hot, though. How come no one told me the hermit was hot?" Rowan glanced around as he squirted whipped cream onto a latte. "You're all aware I do like men, right?"

Jodie snorted as she passed behind him. "How could we miss it? You don't exactly hide your little light under a bush, Rowan."

Rowan turned and threw one hand up in exasperation, while handing the steaming coffee to the customer with the other. "Exactly my point. So why would you *not* tell me that there's a certifiable silver fox roaming the town?"

Jake rolled his eyes. "Certifiable is right. And last I heard he hadn't been out of that house of his for, what, five years?"

Rowan's jaw dropped, turning on his friend. "You're joking."

"Nope." Jodie stepped closer, her voice lowering. "I heard he's all scarred or something. On his face."

Rowan gave her a shove, his look reprimanding. "That's not true. I was just over there and he's definitely not scarred. Now come on, have either of you ever seen him? Met him?" Both his friends shook their heads after a moment. "Then you shouldn't be telling stories you don't know are true or not."

Jake shrugged, going back to making fruit salads. "Whatever. I've lived here three years and haven't ever seen him. It's not exactly a metropolis, Rowan, so you figure it out. He doesn't leave that house."

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Rowan frowned. "Maybe he's got that phobia, the one that makes you stay inside. Or maybe he just doesn't like small town assholes who gossip about people in their spare time."

"You brought him up!"

Rowan sighed. That was true. He wasn't the type to normally listen to gossip, but once he'd gotten over the rudeness Finn had displayed earlier, all he'd been able to think about was the way his stomach had flipped end over end the moment that door had flung open.

He was twenty-four years old, for God's sake, and hadn't gotten laid in over a month. He couldn't help but respond, even while he'd been tempted to burst in after Finn had shut the door in his face and give the man a lesson or two in manners. And blowjobs.

Jake shook his head, giving Rowan's shoulder a nudge. "Forget about it. Besides, even if he wasn't crazy or scarred, he's old. I know because my writing prof last semester was a big fan of his and had us read one of his books. He's forty-nine years old, man. You'd be wasting your time."

Rowan didn't answer, turning his brightest smile on the line of customers waiting. Inside, though, his mind was turning.

When the next delivery call came up, he snatched the bag from Marty with a grin. "I got it!" He ignored the suspicious look his boss gave him, darting out the back and onto his bike.

Ten minutes later, he was again staring at the big house with the wrought iron gates. He pondered jumping the fence, but that was stupid and he didn't like the idea of leaving his bike on the sidewalk, even if this was a really nice neighborhood and Provincetown wasn't exactly a hotbed of criminal activity.

So, instead, he approached the intercom and hit the buzzer,

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swallowing hard and shoving his hands in his jeans pockets.

“What the fuck?” For a writer, Finn sure did have a seemingly limited vocabulary.

“Hi, I’m Rowan, from Have Your—”

“I didn’t order anything.”

Rowan grinned. “I know! No, this is about earlier.”

There was a long pause followed by the hum that set the gates swinging open. Relieved he hadn’t been forced to resort to lying, Rowan grabbed his bike and headed to the house.

As he turned around the corner, he skidded to a halt and nearly collided with the older man, now standing just outside the door, arms crossed, and glowering something fierce. Fuck, he was sexy.

“I counted it twice. It was the right amount. If you’re after a tip—”

Rowan shook his head, breath coming faster as he stared up at Finn. “No. No, that’s not it.”

“Then get the hell off my property, boy.” Finn turned to go back inside, and Rowan barely managed to jump off his bike fast enough to reach the door and catch it before it slammed shut.

“Wait!”

Rowan wasn’t really expecting Finn to stop, so when the big man did, it startled him.

“I’m waiting. You have half a second before I pitch you out of my house.”

It was about then that Rowan realized that he, in his rush to stop Finn from slamming the door on him again, had actually pushed inside. *Shit*. “Sorry.” He paused, tilting back his head and looking up at the other man. “No, scratch that. I’m not.”

“Not sorry? What the hell are you talking about?” It was pretty apparent Finn was about a hair’s breadth from losing his temper,

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but Rowan was already halfway to losing his own.

“You were rude. Earlier.” Finn’s brows shot up and Rowan rushed to continue before he got cut off. “And maybe other places that would be normal, maybe acceptable, maybe no one would care. But this isn’t most places, and I’m not most people and I *do* care. So in lieu of a tip...I’d like you to apologize.”

Finn’s eyes—eyes Rowan noticed were a steely blue-gray—narrowed and he took a step toward Rowan. Instead of being intimidated, which he kind of was but wasn’t going to show it, Rowan crossed his arms and lifted his own brows expectantly.

“I’m not scared of you, if that’s what you’re going for, so I’d suggest you apologize and that’ll be that.” If Marty ever found out about this, Rowan was going to be fired so fast he’d have skid marks.

Was it too soon to drop to his knees and give Finn that lesson in blowjobs? Yeah, probably was. Rowan’s stomach twisted in awareness, though, the woodsy scent of the older man flooding his senses every time he drew a breath.

For a long moment, Rowan fully expected to be field-goal kicked right out the door. Instead, after what seemed like forever of them glaring at each other, Finn threw his hands out to the sides and sighed. “Fine. I was rude.”

Rowan tilted his head again, smirking. “Yes, you were.”

“So get out now.”

He shook his head. “That wasn’t an apology. It was an acknowledgement, which is appreciated, but not an apology.” Rowan was half-tempted to throw Finn’s “I’m waiting” right back in his face. But that’d be rude and counter-productive and might just get him kicked out, which was not in his plan. A plan he was making up as he went along, sure, but a plan nonetheless.

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“Are you serious?”

Rowan nodded. “Yup. Come on, then I’ll leave and be out of your hair.” And Jesus, it was gorgeous hair. Long, thick, slightly wavy, tumbling to his shoulders and pure silver with just a few tiny sections of dark underneath where it hadn’t completely grayed.

That seemed to be what Finn wanted to hear, because he sighed almost in relief. “Fine, I apologize. I was rude, now get the hell out!”

Rowan grinned, nodding. “You got it. See you tomorrow!” He turned and went outside, climbing on his bike when the doorway suddenly filled with six-foot-six of disgruntled sex walking.

“What do you mean, tomorrow?”

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He popped in his ear buds and pedaled away, Jimi Hendrix drowning out the angry shout he sensed echoing behind him.

Now he was in love.

CHAPTER 2

Finn stomped as he did his morning mile on the treadmill. His orthopedic surgeon would have his hide if she saw him battering her perfectly reconstructed knee like that. He couldn't help it, though. All he'd been able to think about, all day yesterday and all night last night, was that kid from the bakery. It'd disrupted every one of Finn's routines, made him completely unable to write and now he was three thousand words behind on a novel he was supposed to have had back to his editor a month earlier.

Well, he told himself, today would be better. He was sure the young man would *not* be returning, despite his cheeky promise, and Finn had every intention of making up the lost time and lost word count.

Still, it made him fume. What was the kid, twenty-four, twenty-

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five at most? Standing here in *his* kitchen telling him how to behave? Finn snorted, unconsciously stomping faster, working up a good sweat now.

So he'd been a little rude. Since when was it required to simper politely to bakery delivery boys? Bakery delivery boys with huge brown eyes and messy, floppy blond hair and beaming smiles. He shook those thoughts off. No, bakery delivery boys with attitude and who were stubborn and who barged into people's houses uninvited.

Wrapped up in doing his best to demonize the young man, it took a moment or two for Finn to realize the doorbell was ringing upstairs. He frowned, hitting the stop button on the treadmill and peering up at the ceiling. Sure enough, another long melodic chime of the bell sounded.

"Oh, for... It better not be or I will have his pretty hide for breakfast instead of his damn muffin!" Finn muttered, snatching his towel and wiping his face and neck as he took the stairs up from his basement gym to the kitchen.

Striding through the dining room and hall to the front entryway, Finn flung the door open, scowling down at Rowan.

"Good morning!"

Finn scowled. "It was. Look, kid..."

Rowan gave him a sidelong look as he pushed past him. "I'm not a kid. So you can stop telling yourself I am like it'll change anything."

"Like what?"

Rowan just smiled knowingly and held up the paper bag. "Where should I put this?"

"Oh, I have all sorts of creative ideas."

Rowan laughed. "I bet. You're a writer, after all. Kitchen,

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then.” Without waiting for permission, Rowan headed toward the kitchen. Finn had no choice but to shut the door and follow.

“Your gardener let me in the gate, if you’re wondering. Very nice guy. I tried the kitchen door, by the way, knocked and knocked, but you didn’t answer.”

Finn snorted. “I don’t suppose it occurred to you to take that as a clue. I might have been asleep.” *Mental note to fire the damn gardener.*

Rowan shook his head, setting the bag on the counter and beginning to empty it, flashing Finn a smile over his shoulder. “Nope, it’s nearly nine, and you didn’t strike me as the lazy type.” He gestured with a plastic fork in Finn’s direction. “I see I was right. Working out?”

Finn nodded and then Rowan did something Finn wasn’t expecting. Rowan’s dark eyes giving him a slow, lazy once-over had to top the list of what he’d never expected from the kid. For a moment, Finn was actually speechless.

“I brought breakfast. And since I’m not on at the bakery until noon today, I brought enough for both of us.” Rowan offered a bright, beaming smile as he plopped down on one of the stools at the counter. “I figured you wouldn’t mind company for breakfast.”

Finn finally got his power of speech back, jaw dropping. “You figured wrong. What is wrong with you, might I ask, that you think it’s appropriate to show up at a stranger’s house and invite yourself in and to breakfast?”

Rowan popped a bit of orange muffin in his mouth, his eyes softening in a way that made Finn’s insides twist. “You seemed like you could use some company. So could I.”

That got up his defensiveness like the fur on a threatened kitten. Finn’s eyes narrowed sharply and he stalked over, slapping

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his hands down on the counter and leaning in to meet Rowan's eyes on the other side. "I'm not your good deed, little boy, you got me? I'm not your pity party or your charity case and I don't find you sunny and sparkling and fucking charming."

Surprisingly, because Finn was pretty used to most everyone cowering when he fumed like that, Rowan didn't flinch. He just popped another bite of muffin into his mouth and smiled.

"Yes, you do. Now sit and eat before your coffee gets cold. Because unless you brew it yourself after I leave, it's the only coffee you're getting this morning without going out and getting it." He glanced around. "Don't see an industrial brewer in here anywhere, so I'm guessing you won't be brewing it yourself."

The nosy little shit was too perceptive by half. But then he'd probably heard all the stories about the crazy hermit who never left his house and thought he'd get a good laugh and a story to tell his buddies.

The prospect of facing the day without coffee was a daunting one, though, especially after the restless night he'd had, so he grabbed the cup and dropped into one of the kitchen table chairs. "So you know who I am."

Rowan grinned. "Who doesn't?" Rowan shrugged and propped one elbow on the counter top. "To be honest, I knew of you, but I didn't know you...like I haven't read any of your books. I'd heard of you though."

Finn scoffed, looking away as he took a long sip of his coffee. "I'm sure you did."

"Not like that. Well, okay, a little like that, but I'd heard of you before. My dad was a big fan of your Jacob Wilde series. I never read any, though...mysteries and horrors aren't my thing."

Finn glanced back at the young man. "What is?" He cleared his

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throat because that had come out wrong. “I mean, what kind of books do you read?”

Rowan shook his hair back out of his eyes. “I’m more a graphic novel fan myself. Right now, I’m reading some Whedon, but I have lots of comic collections in graphic novel form. *Witchblade*, *The Darkness*, *Dawn*.”

Finn’s brows lifted. He almost told Rowan that he had the entire collection of *Witchblade* comics—in comic book form and with every variant cover, special edition and crossover ever put out—upstairs in his den, but stopped himself. He was *not* going to encourage the presumptuous brat. He’d never get rid of him if he did and he *needed* to get rid of him. Soon, before he lost another day’s work.

Rowan had seemed particularly interested in manners yesterday, so perhaps if Finn was just polite and asked, the kid would leave. He corrected himself in his head. Rowan wasn’t a kid, as he’d so clearly pointed out the day before. But he was annoying.

“Thank you for breakfast and for coffee, but you have to leave now. I have work to do.” *There, that was polite*. He was pretty proud of himself and somewhat surprised.

Rowan, however, didn’t appear moved to cooperate, simply smiling and taking another bite of his muffin. “Do you work every single day?”

Finn’s brows furrowed. “Yes.”

“Every day? Every *single* day?”

“Yes?” Was the brat deaf?

“I thought so.” Rowan sighed as if saddened. “Alright, I’ll let you have your work today. But tomorrow, plan for a day off.”

Finn coughed, hot coffee spilling down his chin as he stared

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across the room at the young man. “Excuse me?”

Rowan laughed. “A day off, Finnegan. Everyone takes one occasionally.”

“Not me.” Why was he even discussing this? For that matter, why was Rowan even still in his house? He couldn’t be more than five-seven, maybe a hundred-forty pounds soaking wet. Finn could pitch him out the door without breaking a sweat. One-handed.

Rowan slid off the stool, gathering up his trash. “Yes, you. We’ll go out. The leaves are changing...we can go for a walk or something.”

Finn stiffened. “No, we won’t.” He pushed to his feet, gesturing impatiently to the door. “You need to leave. Now.”

Something in his tone must have alerted Rowan to a problem because, when the other man looked back at him, his dark brown eyes were concerned. That just irritated Finn even further. He didn’t need this kid’s pity.

“Finnegan, I didn’t mean to upset...”

Finn’s glare was icy. “Get out, Rowan. You’re not welcome here. You never were.”

Rowan stilled, straightening and his eyes turning sad. “Fine. I was just trying to... Never mind. I’ll go.” He moved stiffly to the side door, pausing to glance back at Finn. “Goodbye, Finnegan.”

Finn didn’t respond, jaw clenched, exhaling heavily when he heard the soft click of the door closing behind him. He sat down, scrubbing a hand over his face. He was *not* going to feel guilty. He hadn’t asked a complete stranger to come barging into his life, into his house, turning his routines upside down and forcing his company on him.

:You’re an ass. He was being kind. What’s wrong with that?:

Finn sighed again, heavier this time. A lecture from a muse,

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yeah, that was all he needed. “I didn’t ask him to come here. I asked him to leave.”

:: Well, congratu-fucking-lations, asshole. He did.::

Finn didn’t feel nearly as triumphant as he thought he should, scowling at the leftover coffee and untouched muffin on the table. Turning on his heel, he stalked out of the kitchen, stomping his way up the stairs to his office and the waiting novel that’d been taunting him for weeks now. And just his luck, now his muse was pissed at him. It was going to be a lovely day, he could just tell.

* * *

Rowan sighed as he stood under the shower, letting the water sheet over him. He always thought too much in the shower, but what else was there for his mind to do, really? Naturally for the last forty-eight hours, his mind kept returning to Finnegan. More specifically, what had happened that morning.

The blunt dismissal had stung, he’d admit it, but mostly it’d bothered him because it made him think how lonely Finn was. How long had it been since anyone had been nice to him just for the sake of being nice?

Alright, so maybe Rowan’s motives weren’t exactly pure. He was attracted to the man beyond belief. Not just physically—there was something about him, under the gruffness and rudeness—that called to Rowan. Finnegan was lonely as hell, and Rowan had the thought he was a bit like a schoolyard bully. He was mean and nasty and pushed people away so he didn’t get too close and end up being hurt.

Or maybe that was just his hippie-loving nature talking and Finnegan was just a plain old asshole.

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Jake would say he was just an asshole, had said as much when Rowan had shared the encounter with him. Of course, Jake also said Paris Hilton was more than just a pretty face, so Rowan wouldn't exactly take his friend's opinions to the bank.

After shutting off the water, Rowan stepped out and wrapped a towel around his hips, a second scrubbing at his hair as he tugged open the bathroom door and stepped out into the hall.

"Rowan!" Jake's voice called from the living room. "Phone's for you. I left it on the kitchen counter. Some guy." There was a teasing tone that said Jake thought Rowan was getting a booty call. Understandable, considering it was nearly midnight on a weekday.

Rowan padded into the kitchen, glancing through the archway into the living room. "Thanks, Jake." He grabbed the cordless and hurried back to his room, shutting the door and leaning back against it. "Hello?" How long had whoever it was been waiting while he showered?

"Rowan."

His knees knocked together a little. He couldn't mistake that voice. Deep, gruff, it was the kind of voice that pretty much defined the word "gravelly." "Finnegan? How did you get my number?"

"Called the bakery and your friend Jodie gave it to me. No one calls me that, you know. Everyone calls me Finn."

Rowan smiled, pushing away from the door and walking over to his messy bed to sit down. "I'm not everyone." There was a heavy pause and Rowan tilted his head. "Hello?"

"Would... That is, are you busy?"

"No. I just got out of the shower...why?" For some reason he didn't understand, Rowan's heart began to thump hard in his chest.

"You could come over now. If you want. I was rude this

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morning. Again. My cook *is* out of town, actually.”

Rowan wasn't sure whether to be speechless or laugh. He was coming to the conclusion Finn didn't apologize very well. He'd acknowledge his mistake and that was sort of his way of saying he was sorry. Rowan could accept that.

“I'm fresh out of coffee, Finnegan.”

“I don't want your coffee.”

Rowan couldn't help himself. He had to ask. “Then what do you want?”

Another of those heavy pauses. “You.”

CHAPTER 3

There was dead silence on the phone. Like that old commercial, Finn was sure he could hear a pin drop. His anxiety that he'd misread Rowan, that he wasn't interested in that way after all reared up with full force.

"I should say no."

Finn was so relieved Rowan hadn't just hung up that he let out a noisy breath and the light sound of the other man's laughter filled his ear. "Maybe you should." Finn paused, brows lifting. "Are you going to?"

Rowan laughed again. "No. I'll be over in about fifteen minutes."

Finn swallowed hard, nodding, even though Rowan couldn't see it. "Alright." That done, he hung up abruptly, leaning back in

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his office chair.

::That's your idea of an indecent proposal?::

Finn would have glared if muses were visible to glare at. "He's coming, isn't he?" That was what counted. The other man had forgiven him for being rude and was coming.

::I don't know...think you can make him?::

"Make him what?" Finn scowled.

::Come, you idiot. Are you wearing that?::

The problem with having a ladies' man detective for a main character living in one's head was the constant threat of being mocked for one's romantic techniques.

::You don't have any romantic techniques. At least light a few candles....Jesus.::

Finn pushed to his feet and stomped out of the office, slamming the door behind him. Back in his bedroom, he glanced around. Alright, so perhaps a little attempt at seduction would be good. Not that Finn thought he'd be very good at it, and certainly not up to the standards of a gorgeous young man like Rowan, but he could try.

So the autopsy books on his nightstand got tucked under the bed, the wrappers from a dozen Little Debbie snack cakes were scrounged out from under the covers and pillows of his bed and thrown away. And, yes, he lit a candle. It was a candle shaped like a bat that had sat on his dresser for four years, but it was the best he had.

::Classy. You'll bowl him over.::

"And I'll bowl you right into a serial killer's path if you don't disappear." The buzzer for the gate chimed and Finn crossed the bedroom to hit the entry button on the access panel beside the door. "Now."

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For once, Jacob Wilde, nineteenth-century detective extraordinaire and star of over a dozen bestsellers so far, took an order and found someplace else to be besides Finn's head. That was good because it got awfully crowded in there all of a sudden as every doubt and anxiety he'd ever had came racing in and clamored for his attention.

He was too old. He was too crass. He was an asshole. He had scars on his knees from surgeries and gray hair on his chest. Rowan was going to change his mind before Finn ever got down the stairs. All those things and more had Finn getting more worked up with every step down the staircase.

When he opened the front door, though, and Rowan smiled up at him with his hair still damp from a shower and his cheeks flushed from the chilly October air, Finn decided he didn't give a damn what he was afraid of. He had a beautiful man half his age looking at him like he wanted to eat him for dinner. Fear was for another day.

Finn took a step back. "Come inside. Your hair's wet."

Rowan grinned, stepping in and shrugging out of his jacket. "Yeah. No time to blow-dry it. Something urgent came up."

Finn's mouth went dry. "Ah. I see."

Rowan chuckled and took a step closer, tilting his head back to look up at Finn. Finn could hardly remember the last time he'd been this close to anyone so breathtakingly gorgeous, with the devil in his dark eyes and a smile that'd make an angel fall on his lips. Never, maybe.

"Are you going to invite me up, Finnegan? Or are we going to stand here and make small talk all night?"

Finn reached down and wrapped one arm around Rowan's waist, lifting him off his feet against his chest, their faces so close

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he could feel the other man's breath, warm and minty, against his mouth.

"I meant upstairs, but this'll do, too." Rowan gave him a sensual smile before winding his arms around Finn's neck, and the next thing he knew, the softest lips he'd ever experienced were against his own and thank God natural instinct kicked in. Finn kissed him back, his other hand coming up to cup Rowan's ass to support him. He turned, pressing the other man back against the foyer wall and tilting his head to deepen the kiss. His ego got a good shot of adrenaline when Rowan let out a sexy, rough moan and melted against him.

It turned out he hadn't forgotten how it worked because Rowan was shifting against him, kissing him back and groaning. Finn was hard inside the track pants he wore and all he could think of was getting Rowan upstairs, into his bed and naked. That thought foremost in his mind, he turned and headed for the stairs. Rowan weighed hardly anything, but for all that he was slim, and he was strong, gripping Finn tightly with his long legs, his fingers curling into Finn's shoulders.

Finn was forced to break the kiss on the third step to keep from stumbling. As soon as the kiss broke, Rowan bent his head and went after Finn's neck with his soft, damp lips and rough velvet tongue. It was enough to make a man come in his pants and if he didn't get the other man naked and on a flat surface soon, Finn just might.

Gratefully, his bedroom was right at the top of the stairs and within moments they were tumbling back on the bed, Rowan pinned beneath him. Now his shifting became writhing, tight and needy, arching against him as Rowan lifted his lips to be kissed.

Finn took them, the taste of the other man exploding with spice

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and heat on his tongue. He'd expected seduction, but what he got was fire and it was intoxicating on a level he hadn't experienced in years. Maybe ever. Flames licked him as they tugged at each other's clothes, hands greedy for bare skin, and rough groans matching when they found flesh.

Finally, naked and hard between Rowan's thighs, Finn broke the kiss, shoving up to his knees. Rowan began to lift up to follow him, but Finn placed one hand on the other man's chest and pushed him back against the mattress, shaking his head.

"What's wrong?" Rowan asked breathlessly, panting.

"Nothing. I haven't seen you, though. I want to see you."

Rowan smiled slowly, seductively, pure lust burning behind his dark, dilated eyes. He lay back against the pillows and brought his arms up under his head, lifting his brows. "You want to look? Go on, then, Finnegan. Look."

Oh, he was. He couldn't look away, in fact. Rowan was everything Finn had fantasized about over the years—slender and wiry with lean, strong muscles under golden smooth skin. No wilting flower, the other man was hard and eager and even laying there letting Finn look his fill, Rowan was demanding, his hips shifting, one leg stretching up to rest his ankle against Finn's shoulder.

"Now touch, damn it, Finnegan. Put your hands on me." It was a rough, growled demand, and Finn could only obey, his fingers itching to do just that.

He started with the leg stretched up against his chest and resting on his shoulder. One hand closed around Rowan's ankle, sliding down over his calf and to his thigh. The muscles played smoothly under his skin, crisp dark blond hair tickling his palm as he touched.

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He leaned forward, marveling at the way Rowan easily adjusted to what must be a burning stretch in his leg muscles as Finn bent over him. Good God, the other man could bend in ways Finn could only imagine. Luckily, he had a hell of an imagination.

Their difference in height made it impossible for their bodies to meet in the usual places. Rowan's groin and hard cock pressed against Finn's abdomen, his leg against Finn's shoulder forced to slip down and against his hip when Finn bent too close to him. Neither seemed to care as their mouths met, clashed, tongues tangling. Soon it wasn't Finn touching Rowan or Rowan touching Finn; it was skin against skin, bodies and hands straining and searching for the next spot, an unexplored bit of flesh and another moan from his lover.

Rowan tore his mouth away after what might have been forever, but was likely mere minutes. "Fuck me. Damn it, Finnegan, I'm going to come before you ever get inside me if you don't hurry."

It was Finn's turn for a seductive, wicked grin down at his lover. "I like the sound of that," he whispered huskily, big hands sliding under Rowan. In a quick movement, he maneuvered between those legs, hands cupping the other man's ass, and lifted him to his mouth. He took Rowan deep and was grateful that, too, seemed to be something you never forgot, because the moment his lips closed around Rowan's cock, his lover cried out and bucked his hips upward.

The scent of him was heady and flooded Finn's senses. Hot and musky, it was the scent of pure arousal and it made Finn weak to know it was because of him that Rowan felt that way. His ego took another boost when Rowan's hands came down and slim fingers tangled hard in his hair, fisting tight as Rowan groaned and twisted

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against the sheets.

“Oh fuck...fuck, Finnegan, evil bastard!”

Finn chuckled in his throat and sucked harder, bobbing his head. His hands tightened on Rowan's ass, one blunt fingertip slipping inwards to delve into the warm cleft of his ass, finding his entrance and rubbing that spot firmly. He was going to fuck that little hole until the man beneath him lost his goddamn mind. Rowan's sharp cry echoed off the bedroom walls, and Finn decided he wasn't going to settle for anything less than screams before all was said and done. Desperate, needy, pure ecstasy screams. If he'd doubted before he could do it, Rowan made a liar of him with every breathtaking response.

It wasn't long before Finn wasn't bobbing his head anymore, because there wasn't any need. Rowan had his hands fisted in Finn's hair, his hips bucking and thrusting, and it was so fucking sexy looking up the length of Rowan's body and watching the pleasure overtake his beautiful face.

“Fi—Finnegan...fuck, fuck...” Rowan tugged sharply on Finn's hair, and Finn took the cue to lift his head, his hand coming up instead to finish the job. He began stroking, tight and fast. He slid up to take a kiss from those gasping, panting lips as he continued to stroke.

“Come on, Rowan...come for me...and then I'm going to fuck you until you scream for me,” he whispered in dark, needy promise, his cock aching hard against the other man's thigh.

Rowan didn't get the chance to respond because in the next instant he was arching, his arms coming out to wind tightly around Finn's shoulders and cling as he came, a hard, shuddering, sweaty climax that left them both panting for breath and their bodies slick with cum and sweat.

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It was intense and powerful and Finn had the first true niggling in his mind that what was happening just might go well beyond sex. Good God, what had he gotten himself into?

He didn't have an opportunity to worry about that, though, because then Rowan was wrapped around him, pulling him down and kissing him like his life depended on it. Finn could do nothing but kiss him back, heart pounding, body aching. Rowan gave his shoulders a shove, and Finn found himself flat on his back with Rowan rising up over him, straddling his thighs and so gorgeous in the dim light from the lamp and the single candle it stole Finn's breath.

"Now it's my turn," Rowan murmured, his smile pure and utter wicked sin.

Finn swallowed hard, breath coming in harsh pants as his hands settled on the other man's hips. "Turn for what?"

"To blow your mind."

Too late, already done, Finn wanted to say, but Rowan was stretching across him to the nightstand where, courtesy of a short affair a year prior, Finn had a box of condoms and a bottle of barely used lube. Thank God for that because he hadn't even considered it when he'd called Rowan. All he'd been able to think was that he might never see the other man again and his mouthy muse had railed at him for being such an idiot.

Finn didn't want to know where Rowan got the expertise he showed as he slid down a bit and rolled the condom on. The touch of his hands was electric, and Finn gritted his teeth, breath hissing fast through them as the shudders of pleasure rocketed through him.

When Rowan would have popped the cap on the lube, Finn reached up to snatch it away, shaking his head. "Let me."

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Rowan gave him a knowing grin and nodded, settling for watching with hot, half-closed eyes as Finn squeezed the lube onto his cock and gave a few light strokes to spread it.

His hands were trembling as he set aside the lube and met Rowan's eyes. The other man didn't say a word, just leaned low over him, hands braced on the bed and rocked his hips, letting Finn feel that he was hard again.

"Fuck me, Finnegan."

He didn't need to be told twice. He reached down and grasped his cock at the base, the other hand on Rowan's sleek hip to steady him. The feel of him was scorching hot and contracting against the head of his cock. He paused suddenly, breath catching.

"Do...do you need me to...prep?"

Rowan shook his head frantically. "I just had a mind-blowing orgasm and I want you so bad I can taste it. I'm fine, Finnegan, Christ...if you don't fuck me I'll scream."

Finn laughed, voice rough, and lifted his hips a bit, beginning to push against Rowan's entrance. "You might anyway," he groaned.

His fingers tightened on Rowan's hip, and in the midst of the mind-bending pleasure of sinking into his snug heat, Finn had the thought that if he had a fucking heart attack from the strain on his forty-nine-year-old heart, it'd be so worth it and he'd die a happy man.

As it turned out, his heart had no intention of letting him miss the absolute ecstasy waiting for him in Rowan. In the next moment he was buried to the hilt and then Rowan began to move, not giving either of them a chance to catch their breaths. Hard, fast, tight circles of his hips, tightening his muscles and gripping Finn like a velvet vise.

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“Oh, God...” Finn moaned, free hand sliding up Rowan’s back to sink into the shaggy tangle of his golden hair, lifting his own head to bend up as best he could and meet Rowan’s lips. The kiss was messy and every bit as erotic as their fucking. Crazy, beautiful madness and just on the verge of being too much. Instead, it was just enough. Perfect. He was ruined for anyone else and he knew it. Didn’t care, though.

Amidst the kiss, Rowan couldn’t stop moaning, mumbling against his lips, demanding more, taking everything Finn had to give with pure sensual ease. Like he was made to be fucked by Finn and no one else.

That was a dangerous thought that Finn’s mind skittered away from until it was lost to the gasping shadows and cobwebs of a mind engrossed in the most incredible sex it’d ever known.

The orgasm, when it started to build, was like his favorite symphony. It swelled and ebbed, swelled and ebbed, each time rising higher and higher until the pleasure took on an almost pain-like quality. Their hands became rougher, their voices more growl than words, feral and needy and primitive. Base need overtook evolution and all that mattered was coming, coming together or not at all.

Rowan’s face was drawn tight, his features angular and sharply beautiful above him, so close to Finn’s own. He barely noticed or cared about the way the other man was digging his fingers into his flesh, the other hand into his hair. He’d happily let Rowan tear it all out if he’d just stay right there on the edge with him and never let it end.

But it had to, and before he could even register the thought in his short-circuiting brain, it was there. The silent moment of pure blackness before a supernova flash that blotted out everything but a

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pair of dark eyes locked to his own and flung into the madness with him.

If Rowan screamed as Finn had promised, he didn't hear it. All he could hear was the sound of his whole world folding in on itself and narrowing down to the two of them and the pleasure that sucked them under like a riptide.

When it was over, there was a tangle of limbs, the dirty, sexy slick of cum on sweaty flesh and the harsh, echoing pants of breath being dragged into broken lungs. There was nothing that could have prepared him for that, and as Rowan shifted to the side, collapsing against him and curling there, Finn turned into him and held on. He'd let go when he was forced to, not a moment before.

CHAPTER 4

Rowan awoke to an empty bed. Sitting up, he glanced around, but other than the dent in the pillows and the cool space beside him, there was no indication Finn had ever been there. A quick look at the clock told him it was just past seven.

Well, since Finn didn't seem eager to be rid of him, Rowan smiled to himself and decided to take his time. He tossed the tangled covers aside, hissing a little at the cold floorboards under his bare feet.

The bedroom was very much what he would have expected—masculine, dark, with heavy furniture to accommodate a man a good half-foot taller than average and at least fifty pounds of muscle heavier.

Rowan had gotten the full exposé on that big, beautiful body

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last night and he had to say, he never would have guessed from it, even with the silver hair and the faint lines around Finn's eyes and lips, that the man was nearly fifty. He obviously took great care of himself and it showed.

Thinking about the night before made Rowan grin, a slight shiver running down his spine remembering how it had felt during the madness and absolute pleasure of their frantic coupling. Finn could fuck, there was no doubt about that.

He trotted into the massive bathroom to clean up and dress. Rowan ran damp fingers through his hair after his shower to tame the knots somewhat and then went in search of his lover. He was hungry, and not for breakfast.

Following the sound of classical music, Rowan ended up at the far end of the hall. He knocked lightly and pushed the heavy wooden door open to peer in. A smile broke at the sight of Finn hunched over a keyboard, Vivaldi playing some swelling, string-heavy symphony on the stereo.

"Hey," he murmured, not wanting to disturb.

He didn't, though, or if he did, Finn showed no sign of it. The other man didn't so much as blink, tapping away at the keyboard without looking up. Rowan frowned, clearing his throat.

"Finnegan? I'm sorry to interrupt—"

"Then don't!" Finn snapped, head lifting. Rowan was surprised at the annoyance on his face. "I'm working, Rowan. I'm sure you can find your own way out?"

"Out?" Rowan's voice was incredulous. "You son of a bitch, are you kicking me out? 'Great fuck last night, see you later, trick'? You're kidding?" *He damn well better be kidding.*

Finn lifted a brow, and the expression said it all. He wasn't kidding; he was dead serious, and Rowan was furious now. He

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stalked forward, glaring at the other man, who appeared somewhat surprised but unperturbed.

“You’re a fucking ass, Finnegan. And if you think you’re so fucking rich and famous that you can get away with it, you’re wrong.” Rowan gave him a disgusted look. “You don’t treat people like that. You’re old enough to know that.”

Shaking his head, wondering why he’d ever bothered, Rowan turned on his heel and stalked toward the door, shaking he was so angry.

“You shouldn’t ride around on your silly bicycle in the cold without a hat.”

Rowan stilled, turning and lifting his brows in flabbergasted shock. “What?” *That* was all Finn had to say? He’d kicked Rowan out after a night of the best sex ever and all he had to say was to nag that Rowan wasn’t dressed warmly enough?

“Your hair was wet last night when you got here. You could get sick. I have spares in the entryway closet. Take one.” Finn shrugged and bent back over his computer, long, blunt fingers clacking away at the keys again.

Rowan could only stare, unable to think of a single intelligent thing to say. He turned again to toss open the door and as he stormed out, heard behind him, “Return it whenever.”

It wasn’t until halfway down the stairs that it occurred to Rowan what Finn had meant. He hadn’t said it, but that was an invitation to come back. Finn wanted to see him again. In his own anti-social, completely fucked-up way, Finn was asking Rowan to come back.

Rowan couldn’t help it, he was grinning like a loon when he climbed on his bike and rode his way down Finn’s drive, a knit cap far too big for him on his head.

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Finn glanced up at the sound of the intercom, his heart leaping into his throat. He'd wondered if Rowan would come back. He'd hoped. But it was eight-thirty on the nose and that ought to be his breakfast and his company buzzing.

::Keep pushing him away and he's going to go, you know? Eventually he will go for good.::

Finn knew that and he was torn between whether he wanted it or not. Part of him did, the part of him that liked his routines, liked his life just the way it was even if he was lonely sometimes. The rest of him was drawn to Rowan and his... Finn didn't even know the word. Rowan was alive in a way Finn had never been or didn't remember being.

Rowan looked at the sky and saw brilliant blue and powdery white and birds zipping across it, while Finn looked at the sky and wondered whether it would rain or snow and then went back inside. Rowan breathed and laughed and...reveled. That was the best word for it. Rowan reveled in the world around him and a part of Finn envied him and craved to experience it through him.

He reached over and hit the button to open the front gate, rising to his feet.

::He's not going to be satisfied with you living vicariously, Finnegan. He's going to insist you live it with him or not at all. You realize that.::

This time the voice wasn't mocking or taunting or sarcastic. It was pitying almost, and sad.

Shoving the bothersome thoughts aside, Finn hurried as fast as his reconstructed knees would allow him down the stairs to the front door. When he opened it, Rowan wasn't there. *Huh?*

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Turning, he rushed through the kitchen and tugged open that door, but no Rowan there either.

He was just starting to be concerned he'd accidentally buzzed in a crazy fan or something when he heard humming coming from the back patio. He frowned, stepping outside and over a few yards to the gate leading to a path through the back bushes to the patio.

"Good morning!"

Finn sighed, leaning against the fence and giving Rowan, seated at the patio table, an arch look. "What are you doing?"

Rowan held up two cups of coffee and nodded to the bag on the table. "Having breakfast. Come on."

Finn shook his head, gesturing to the door. "I'll come unlock that. Come inside. It's cold out here."

Rowan rolled his eyes at him. "For such a big man, you sure can be a prissy bitch. It's fifty degrees this morning, and the coffee's hot. Muffins won't be, though, if you don't get over here soon."

There was something in Rowan's eyes when he looked up, a certain look that said he knew what he was asking of Finn, that he knew how hard it was for him to let anyone in. It grated on Finn's pride that the other man could seem to read him so damn easily.

"You're the one being an ass now," he snapped.

Rowan shrugged, his brows lifting. "Come have breakfast, Finnegan. It's the least you can do, after the way you treated me. You owe me."

Finn wanted to protest, his defensive hackles raising, but damn it, Rowan was right. He didn't know why he'd kicked Rowan out so abruptly the morning before. No, scratch that. He did know. It was because when he woke up with Rowan curled in his arms, sound asleep and as beautiful as anything in the hazy morning

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light, Finn had actually thought about what it would be like to wake up to that every morning.

The next thing he knew, he'd been dressed and holed up in his office pounding out the bloodiest murder scene in his novel, Vivaldi erupting from the stereo.

So maybe it was just guilt or maybe it was that he couldn't help thinking his muse was right that Rowan would eventually stop pushing back if Finn didn't give a little. Either way, whatever it was, he found himself sighing and pushing the gate open, joining Rowan on the patio.

"What kind of muffins did you bring today?"

Rowan smiled, slowly at first, spreading into a beaming grin. He averted his eyes for a moment, chuckling, and then nodded to the bag. "Pecan praline crumb and espresso walnut. You pick...I like both."

The tension was gone, and Finn relaxed in the patio chair. "Pecan."

Rowan nodded and dug the muffin out, handing it to him. Finn glanced around. He couldn't recall the last time he'd been outside in the morning. He didn't go outside very often at all, and then it was only on his own property, never outside the gates.

His eyes wandered back to Rowan and found the other man watching him. Finn blinked and glanced away again. Those dark eyes were penetrating, like Rowan could see into his soul and know all the fears and pride, guilt and joy that lived there. It was ridiculous because no one could do that, but he couldn't shake the feeling Rowan saw him, and not just in a physical sense.

"Tell me about yourself, Finnegan."

Finn's brows lifted as he took a bite of the muffin. *Good God, that was good.* "Don't believe in the power of Google?"

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Rowan laughed, shaking his head and tucking one leg up against his chest. “Too impersonal. I don’t want to know when your birthday is, I want to know what’s your favorite birthday ever. I don’t want to know how many books you’ve written, I want to know what made you decide to write down the stories inside you. I don’t want cold information, Finnegan, I want to know *you*.”

Finn frowned, peering at him across the table for a long moment. Rowan didn’t flinch, tilting his head expectantly, his dark eyes curious and open, and, damn, all Finn could think was how much he wanted to take him upstairs and have a repeat of the other night.

Instead, he decided it couldn’t hurt to answer the man’s questions. He got the feeling Rowan wasn’t just bullshitting him; he genuinely wanted to know about him. Finn could smell bullshit a mile away. What he couldn’t figure out was why Rowan cared. Finn hadn’t given him a single reason to.

“I broke my arm on my twelfth birthday.”

Rowan’s brows shot up and he grinned. “That’s your favorite birthday memory?”

Finn nodded, glancing down and back up with a shrug. “It used to be my least favorite for a lot of years, but as I got older I started cherishing it...really. It was the last time I saw my father. He came to the hospital from work, even though he didn’t get the day off or anything, and when he was going back to the job site to finish the day once he’d made sure I was okay, he was in a car crash. Died instantly.”

Rowan stilled, his eyes widening slightly. “Oh, Finnegan, I’m sorry...”

Finn shook his head with a smile. “No, it’s a good memory. I know that sounds strange, but it was right around my thirtieth

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birthday I stopped hating the occasion and stopped blaming myself. I realized my dad didn't die because I broke my arm, he died being a great father. The last time I saw him he was doing what he did best, making sure his family was taken care of, giving me a lecture about being more careful climbing trees, and then he hugged me and told me he loved me, he kissed my mom and he left." He shrugged and broke off another piece of the muffin, meeting Rowan's eyes. "I know if he could say so, he'd have told me if he had to die, he'd rather it be because he was a good dad than because he got old and broken down."

Rowan glanced down and nodded, smiling when he finally looked back up. "I think that's pretty much the best way to look at a situation like that I've ever heard. Your father must've been a wonderful man because you sure did turn out pretty wise."

Finn laughed, shaking his head. "That's my age, not my upbringing that makes me wise. I'm an old man, Rowan, in case you haven't noticed."

Rowan gave him a pointed, reprimanding look. "You're not old." He laughed when Finn snorted. "You're not! You're older, sure, but old is John McCain. Old is George 'not Dubya' Bush. You're not old. You're...well, damn, Finnegan, you're too sexy for my own good, that's what you are."

Finn wasn't prepared for that blunt statement and choked slightly on his muffin. Rowan chuckled and reached over to pat his back. Finn rolled his eyes and brushed his hand away with a snort. "Cut it out. I'm fine. Warn me next time you're going to say something so ridiculous, would you?"

"What's ridiculous about it? It's true. Do you think I came back the first day because you were so damn charming?"

Finn snorted again. "Touché."

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Rowan shifted, sliding into the seat beside Finn instead of across from him, his eyes heating, and Finn's heart accelerated in direct proportion. "You made my heart stop and my fucking knees weak. Like a bad chick flick, for Christ's sake, Finnegan."

Finn was a little embarrassed by how hard he got and how fast. One second he was almost forgetting he and Rowan had been lovers the other night, and now he was bombarded with vivid, crystal clear images flooding his mind of Rowan naked, twisting beneath him in pleasure, crying out his name and riding him hard.

He didn't know what to say. How did one respond to something like that? So he didn't say anything. He reached up and curled his hand at Rowan's nape and tugged him close to capture his lips in a hot, thorough kiss.

He didn't know what the hell they were doing, not really, but whatever it was, he, for damn sure, wasn't ready for it to stop.

CHAPTER 5

Rowan wished fervently that it wasn't so damn chilly already this year. He was dying to simply climb into Finn's lap and get nice and fucked right here on the patio. Somehow, though, even if it was warm, he didn't think Finn would go for it. Yet. Rowan grinned inwardly. He'd have to loosen Finn up by spring.

That thought startled him somewhat and he broke the kiss, panting softly and staring at Finn. Was he really planning to be around that long? If he was honest with himself, what had begun as intrigue, a bit of pity and a good dash of sexual chemistry was evolving into more. He liked Finn, and despite the gruff exterior, there was a good man underneath who simply didn't know how to be with people. Rowan wanted to teach him and knew he'd learn a few things himself along the way.

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Finn frowned at him, his breath unsteady from the kiss. “What’s wrong?”

Rowan shook his head, smiling. “Nothing. Just thinking I never expected to be here, but I’m glad I am.” He’d worry about the ramifications of his growing feelings for Finn later, when he could think straight and not when he was hard and wishing Finn would hurry and get him naked. He knew of one surefire way to get Finn inside and in the bedroom. “Wanna fuck out here on the patio?”

Rowan laughed when Finn’s brows shot up and the next thing he knew the other man had risen, had grabbed him by the hand and was pulling him inside, grumbling about inappropriate kids and kinky ideas.

“I’m not a kid, Finnegan, lucky for you,” Rowan chimed in, only to get himself a glare on the stairs for it. He snickered and dutifully allowed Finn to pull him along behind him. By the time Finn shut the bedroom door behind them, Rowan was panting a little. “Jesus, is there a timer going somewhere that I don’t know about?”

Finn snorted, releasing Rowan’s hand and crossing the room. Rowan watched, breathless as Finn threw back the heavy curtains on the floor to ceiling windows and the sunshine spilled in, glinting off his gorgeous silver hair, now a bit messy from Rowan’s fingers. Breath was a forgotten function when next Finn reached up and began unbuttoning his crisp white shirt, letting it fall open to reveal that surprisingly muscular chest and stomach. He wasn’t ripped, but, good God, he was solid and so damn big.

Unable to resist, Rowan approached, hands coming up to run over the solid expanse of bared skin, shaking his head with a soft groan. “Finnegan, I swear...you make me want to climb you like my own personal Mount Everest.”

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Finn laughed out loud and Rowan had the thought that he would love to be able to keep that expression on his face all the time. His steel blue eyes lit up, the laugh lines around them crinkled and the way his lips curved and he tossed his head back just... He stopped looking like a shell and looked like a man who was whole and alive.

Reaching up on tiptoes, Rowan did just as he'd said, arms twining around Finn's neck and using the leverage to lift himself up. Finn helped, his big hands coming down to hoist him under the ass and when they were eye to eye, Rowan's legs wrapped around Finn's waist, he grinned. "Told ya I'd do it."

Finn shook his head, eyes darkening. "I have a feeling you could do damn near anything you put your mind to, Rowan. Why are you here?"

Rowan tilted his head, reaching one hand up to thread his fingers into Finn's hair. "Because I think you need me. And I want to be. Maybe we need each other."

Finn's laugh wasn't the same kind of laugh this time. Instead, it was cynical, jaded, and it made Rowan sad. "Why would you need me? For what?"

Rowan shook his head. "I don't know. But I feel it and I intend to find out. I follow my instincts, Finnegan, and I always have. Right now, they're telling me to be right here, with you. So until that changes, sorry to say you're stuck with me."

Finn either didn't like that answer and wanted to change the subject, or he liked it too much and wanted to change the subject. Either way, the next thing Rowan knew, Finn turned him to press him against the glass, then kissed him breathless.

Lord, for a man who Rowan was willing to bet didn't do this very often, he, for damn sure, knew how to do it. Finn kissed like

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the devil, sweeping all thoughts of fate and instincts and emotion out of Rowan's mind and throwing him right into pure sensation, feeling, experiencing the wanton need that took his breath away and stole his sanity until he was hanging by a thread and ready to beg.

He was just sinking into that "I'm gonna get laid and it's gonna be so good" mindset, body tingling in anticipation, when Beethoven began a tinny performance of his fifth overture in Finn's pocket.

Rowan broke the kiss, on the verge of whispering to him to shut the damn thing off, but the look on Finn's face, regretful and impatient, told Rowan he was going to have no such luck. With a sigh, he unwound himself from his lover and stepped back. "Go ahead."

"It's my editor," Finn explained, his tone apologetic even if he didn't actually apologize.

Rowan was beginning to wonder, of all the words a man like Finn knew, if he knew the words "I'm sorry."

Rowan nodded, dropping down on the edge of the bed and leaning back on his hands as Finn dug in his pocket for his cell phone and took his call. If he weren't so turned on, Rowan would find the conversation interesting. Finn's tone changed when he answered and spoke with the person on the other end. He got, if possible, surlier than ever and, while Rowan would have expected an author to be a bit more acquiescent, instead Finn was arguing and making demands for an extension and arguing some more. When you'd ridden the number one spot of the bestseller list as many times and as consistently as Finn did, Rowan supposed you could get away with being an ass.

Ten minutes into the conversation, and Finn gesturing in an

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agitated fashion every five seconds, Rowan came to the conclusion there was going to be no morning, up-against-the-window sex. He sighed and gave Finn a sympathetic look when he finally hung up.

“Work calls, huh?”

Finn nodded distractedly, tucking the cell phone back in his pocket and haphazardly beginning to button his shirt. “I’m working on revisions for my next book. They’re late. Very late. I have to get some work done today. I can’t keep losing focus.” He frowned and shook his head, not looking at Rowan.

Rowan’s brows lifted. “Is that supposed to mean I’m the cause of that?”

Finn shrugged, finally meeting his eyes. “Doesn’t matter. I have work to do, Rowan, so can you see yourself out?”

Rowan was tempted to throw something at the man’s head. Instead, he nodded. “Sure.” He’d already come to the conclusion that battering down Finn’s walls to get through the ridiculously thick layer of asshole he wore like a coat wasn’t going to work. His mom had always told him, “Kill them with kindness. Love even when people are unlovable.” He didn’t think Finn was unlovable, but the man sure did try his best to make himself seem that way.

So, instead of arguing, Rowan stood and approached Finn, reaching up to brush a kiss against his cheek. The startled look on the other man’s face was reward enough for following his mother’s advice. “I’ll see you later. Call me.”

Finn nodded silently, watching him as if he was expecting him to grow a second head. Rowan grinned and gave him a wink before turning on his heel and heading downstairs.

He fully expected to be getting a call before the day was over.

* * *

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As it turned out, he was wrong. Three days later, Rowan sprawled on the couch, chin propped on the arm of it, glaring at his cell phone.

“Did your phone kick a puppy or something?” Jake teased, dropping into the recliner.

Rowan gave him a baleful glare. “Bite me, asshat.”

Jake tsked, stirring his soup and grinning. “Whatever happened to all that hippy love and peace and one with the universe crap?”

Rowan pushed up to sit and tuck his legs under him. “I’m waiting for a call, that’s all.”

“I know.” Jake set his cup of soup on the end table and sighed, giving Rowan the look that said he was going to try and lecture, even though Jake was a whopping ten months older. “I warned you. Rowan, I know you’re all ‘Let’s look at the silver lining and believe the best in everyone’ sunshine and roses, but in the real world, guys like Finnegan Clark don’t turn into a handsome prince at the end. They stay beasts.”

Rowan scowled at his friend. “Did you know that’s not even his name?”

Jake blinked, looking as surprised as Rowan had been. “It’s not?”

“Nope. Finnegan Clark is his pen name. I Googled and found out his real name is John Finnegan. How do you like that? He didn’t even tell me his real name.” Rowan sighed, rubbing his hand over his face. “Despite what you think about my upbringing and my parents, Jake, I’m not naïve and I’m not an idiot. I know falling for Finnegan is a bad idea. I don’t plan to let it happen. But...”

Jake shrugged. “But what? If you’re not looking to date him or whatever, why are you wasting your time sitting here hating on your cell phone?”

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Rowan had asked himself the same thing. He didn't want to fall in love with Finn and he didn't have any illusions Finn would be falling for him. He just... "I don't know. I really don't. He's hot, the sex was great, but that's not it." He shook his head with another shrug. "I don't know."

Jake nodded determinedly, leaving his soup on the table and pushing to his feet. "Come on, then."

"What? Come on where?"

"Out. You're moping, and it's completely un-hot. He's obviously an idiot who'd prefer to stay holed up in his mansion than have you climbing all over him. So fuck it. Fuck him."

Rowan laughed. Nobody was better at pulling him out of his rare slumps than Jake, even though they'd only known each other a few months. He nodded, grabbing his cell phone—just in case, he told himself—and darting for his room. "Give me fifteen minutes."

This was just what he needed, he thought. A night out, not thinking about grumpy old men who made him weak in the knees.

An hour later, he was leaned over a pool table, eyeing the balls with intense concentration.

"Eight in the side pocket," he called, drawing the cue stick back and releasing it with a firm pop against the cue ball. It sailed across the green felt, completely missing every ball on the table, to land neatly in the corner pocket.

Jake laughed uproariously, leaning against his own stick. "Fail!"

Rowan rolled his eyes and grabbed his White Russian, gesturing to the table. "Go on, then Mr. Color of Money. Do better."

Jake circled the table with a snicker. "Not hard to do, when you're failing so epically."

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“Have I mentioned bite me?”

“Several times. Keep offering and I might take you up on it,” Jake retorted dryly.

Rowan rested his hip against the table they’d claimed. “You would not. It’d ruin our friendship.” He snorted, finishing off his drink and waving the empty glass in Jake’s direction. “Well, that and you’re straight.”

Jake glanced over at him with amusement. “How is it possible for someone to get drunk on one White Russian?”

Rowan laughed, shrugging. “To quote Carrie Bradshaw, ‘I didn’t eat breakfast and I’m a size two.’ Except make it one hundred and forty pounds on a good day.” He turned and gestured to the bar. “I’m gonna go get another. Want something?”

Jake shook his head. “I’m good.”

Nodding, Rowan wound his way through the Friday night patrons to the bar, leaning against the counter. He was mid-order with a very cute bartender when his cell phone began vibrating in his pocket. He dug it out as the bartender moved away to fix his drink, one hand covering his ear to drown out the very bad country music blaring from the jukebox in the corner.

“Hello?” There was a pause of silence and Rowan frowned, pressing the heel of his hand to his ear thinking he wasn’t hearing whoever it was. “Hello?” he repeated, pulling the phone from his ear to glance at the number and his heart skipped a beat as he brought it back. “Finnegan?”

“Where are you?”

Rowan’s breath let out in a rush and he held up a finger to the bartender and hurried to the door of the bar, dipping outside so he could hear. “Hey! Me and Jake are playing bad pool and drinking White Russians. Want to come meet us?”

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There was another pause followed by a soft chuckle. “How many have you had?”

“One!”

“One? Mental note that you can be gotten drunk cheaply.”

Rowan tsked and leaned against the wall of the building. “Are you calling me a cheap date? You’d have to actually take me on a date to do that, you know.”

“Who’s Jake?”

Rowan shivered a little. He should have grabbed his jacket from the table. “My roommate...he works with me at the bakery. You’d like him, so you should come meet us.” He wondered if it was really true that Finn never left his house. What would make someone lock himself away like that?

“I can’t. I was just calling— Well, I think you know why I was calling.” The rough timbre of Finn’s voice lowered a bit, and Rowan shivered again, for very different reasons this time.

“You hurry me out of your house, for the second time might I add, don’t call for three days and now expect me to happily zip over and let you get dirty with me?” Rowan snorted. “Finnegan, babe, you have a lot to learn about romancing, you know that?”

Finn sighed heavily. “So that’s a no.”

“Yes, that’s a no. Are you sure you don’t want to come meet us at the bar. We’re playing pool and there’s George Strait on the jukebox.” Not that he thought either would be an incentive to Finn, with his symphonies and chess tables.

“I really can’t.”

Rowan decided that was his next step. He couldn’t break Finn out of this hermit thing he had going if he didn’t know why he was the way he was in the first place. “So what have you been having for breakfast without me and my muffins?” As if a man with that

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much money somehow couldn't find a way to get himself breakfast and coffee without Rowan's help.

"Starbucks. Did you know they deliver with enough cash incentive?"

Rowan wrinkled his nose. "No more of that. I'll be by in the morning with the good stuff."

Finn laughed. "Coffee and breakfast, too?"

Rowan grinned. "Look at you with the flirting. Very nice. Alright, I have to go. It's freezing out here and I didn't bring your hat with me. See you in the morning, then?"

"Sure. Be careful, Rowan."

That soft admonishment, not mocking, curt or gruff, made Rowan's heart stutter. Almost like Finn really cared. He tucked his phone back in his pocket, feeling a hundred times better as he slipped back inside with an extra bounce in his step that had nothing to do with White Russians and everything to do with silver foxes.

CHAPTER 6

Finn reached for the remote, flicking off the stereo and leaning back in his office chair. It was nine A.M. and no sign of Rowan. He'd said he'd be by with breakfast. Finn had the inane thought that perhaps the other man was trying to teach him a lesson for his behavior and the very poor idea of calling him to come over the night before, but dismissed that. Rowan wasn't the type to play games, at least not that he'd shown so far. He'd charm and manipulate to get his way, yes, but not play games.

He was just about to pick up the phone and swallow his pride to call and see if Rowan was still coming when the intercom to the gate went off. Relieved despite himself, Finn reached to hit the button to open them and then pushed away from his desk. Part of him said he shouldn't seem so eager, meeting him downstairs like

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he did, but the rest of him hadn't seen Rowan in going on four days now and he'd...well, damn it he'd missed him.

Not that he intended to tell the young man any such thing. By the time he made it downstairs and to the kitchen door, his stomach was turning flips in anticipation. When he opened the door and found, instead, a tall, lanky young man with dark hair and narrowed blue eyes, he was both startled and disappointed.

"I don't need any magazines," he growled and made to slam the door shut.

Just like Rowan had that first day, the young man stopped him just in time and pushed the door open again. "I'm not selling magazines. I'm here about Rowan."

Finn froze, his heart chilling, and he turned slowly, eyes pinning his visitor. "What about him?" Had something happened? Was he sick or hurt or— Finn cut off the string of options before he could get any farther, not wanting to think about what could be worse than Rowan being hurt. "Is he alright?"

"I'm Jake, by the way." Jake crossed his arms over his chest and gave Finn such a challenging look that if he hadn't been so concerned about Rowan, he would have found amusing. Tall he might be, but Finn was still taller and outweighed him by at least fifty pounds.

"That's nice...what about Rowan?" Finn snarled, impatient and frustrated now.

"Leave him alone."

That stopped Finn's thoughts dead in their tracks. His face remained expressionless for a moment and then he took a step back. "Why don't you come in, Jake?"

Jake shook his head. "No, thanks, I'd rather not. I just came to tell you to leave him alone."

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Finn's brows lifted. He was doing his best to keep a rein on his temper because Jake was Rowan's friend and he had a feeling if he put a boot in his face, Rowan wouldn't like it much. "Well, if you've been following the story at all, you'd know Rowan is the one who won't leave me alone, not vice versa." That wasn't entirely true because Finn didn't know what he'd do if Rowan stopped coming around. Yes, he did. He'd call, like he had the night before.

Jake scowled at him, his handsome, youthful face twisting in dislike. "Yeah, and you and I both know it's because you said or did something to make him think you're not some crazy old man, and I want you to leave him alone. You're not any good for him, and we both know it."

Finn drew in a breath, jaw tightening. "Is that so? I don't believe you know me at all, Jake."

"I know you only call him when you want to get laid, like last night. I know you won't even take him on a date when someone like Rowan deserves respect! And I know you're just using him because he's a good person who wants to help everybody and make a difference and he's, for some reason, decided you're his pity case for the month!"

Finn's insides went colder than before, he clenched his teeth and shook his head. "Get off my property. If Rowan wants to see me, he's welcome to see me. He's a grown man, not a child, and I doubt he'd appreciate knowing you were here telling me what I should and should not do with him." Even if inside he knew it was probably true. He'd known all along that Rowan was...special. Way too good for him. But to push him away, make him think Finn never wanted to see him again? Finn didn't think he had it in him to be that selfless.

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Jake took a step back, his blue eyes burning with anger. “You won’t tell him. You won’t because I’m right. And if you care about him at all, even a little, you won’t tell him. You’ll just send him home.”

The light bulb finally went on and Finn’s lips curved in a hard smile. “Home to you, isn’t that what you mean, Jake? You think if I tell him to leave that he’ll go running to you and you can soothe him, just like you did last night, hmm?” Finn’s eyes narrowed and he leaned forward, one hand on the doorknob. “Go home, Jake. If he comes here, I’ll let him, for as long as he likes. That’s his choice, not mine and for damn sure not yours.”

He slammed the door then, stalking away and back up the stairs. Inside he was fuming, but under the anger was guilt. Along with the knowledge Jake was most likely right.

What was he going to do—fall in love and it’d be sunshine and rainbows? Rowan was half his age, he was bright and clever and kind, where Finn was dark, surly and jaded. They had nothing in common. Well, besides comics. And coffee. And sex. And maybe a lot of other things, but they’d never really talked about that, had they?

Maybe they should. Maybe Jake was right, but for the first time in a long time, Finn let himself wonder what it might be like to allow someone to be his friend. Companion even. Lover.

He was going to find out.

* * *

Rowan pedaled as fast as he could, dodging a pedestrian and a stray cat before finally turning the corner and skidding to a halt in front of Finn’s gate. Damn Jake, he’d pleaded with Rowan to do a

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whole round of deliveries first thing this morning because Jodie had called in sick. He hadn't been able to leave his friend high and dry like that, but damn it he also hadn't been able to find his cell phone at all this morning and couldn't call Finn to tell him he'd be late. There'd been no time between deliveries to find a pay phone.

So he was a good two hours past the normal time he visited Finn and he was worried Finn was going to think he'd bailed on him, or at least be mad. That wouldn't do, not with his decision last night that today was the start of his plan to get Finn to open up and find out why the other man holed himself away from the world like he did.

He hit the buzzer with a shaking finger, partly from exertion from his ride and partly from nerves wondering just what was going to be greeting him when and if Finn answered.

"Rowan?"

Rowan let out a breath of relief because Finn didn't sound mad at all. Just his normal, gruff, gravelly voice. "Yep. Sorry I'm late, I—" He was cut off by the now-familiar hum of the gate opening and blinked. *Okay then.* He grabbed his bike by the handles and climbed back on, riding around and leaving it against the side of the house and grabbing the bag out of the basket.

The door was open and Finn filled the doorway by the time he hit the flagstone walk. He grinned apologetically. "Sorry, sorry, I know I'm late and I'd have called but—"

"No problem, come on in."

Rowan halted, staring at Finn and then glancing around. "Huh?" He peered at the other man, giving him a long once-over. "Alright, who are you and what have you done with Finnegan?"

Finn snorted and reached out to take the bag from him. "Smart ass. Very funny."

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Rowan watched him curiously, following Finn inside. What was going on? He wasn't snapping, he wasn't growling and he wasn't pissed that Rowan had made him wait an extra two hours for his coffee and muffins. Which...weren't muffins today.

"I decided to see if you liked bagels instead. Blueberry or peach?" He waited for the glare, but it didn't come.

"Blueberry," Finn answered, his expression calm.

That did it. Rowan snatched the bag from Finn's hand and dropped it on the counter, turning the other man around to face him. "What's going on? You haven't snapped at me once. And you're being all...agreeable."

Finn lifted his brows as if he had no idea what Rowan was talking about. "And that's bad?"

"Well...well, no, but it's not like you. Is everything alright?"

Finn nodded, then sighed and sat on the stool. "Here's the thing. I'm an asshole—we've established that—and for some reason you keep coming around, so I don't know, maybe you like assholes."

Rowan climbed up on the stool next to him, grabbing the bag and beginning to unload it. "Not particularly, no."

"See? I didn't think so. Instead, I thought since I..."

Rowan stilled, tilting his head. "Since you what?"

Finn glared at him, and Rowan burst out laughing. Maybe he did like assholes. At least assholes like Finn. He held up his hands. "Sorry, sorry, go ahead. You were saying?"

"I was *saying* that since I like you coming around, which I'd prefer you not to go all gooey-eyed over, I'd try not being so...me." Finn cleared his throat, shrugging uncomfortably. "Asshole-ish, you know."

That had to be the strangest thing Rowan had ever heard. Finn

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was going to try not to be an asshole and he liked Rowan coming around. The second part wasn't so strange, in fact it made him kind of glow inside, though he did his best not to "go all gooey-eyed." "Well, while I appreciate the effort, Finnegan, I have to say it's unnecessary. Maybe I don't like assholes, but I like you. I don't want you to pretend to be someone you're not. Maybe just...I don't know, go for friendly taps not full out punches to the gut, huh?"

Finn appeared to think about that, looking caught off-guard. Finally, steel blue eyes met Rowan's and the other man frowned, in an "I don't get it" way, not a "Get off my planet" way. "Why do you like me, Rowan?"

What was kind of sad was Finn sounded genuinely curious. Like he had no idea. Rowan's heart tripped over itself trying to fall at Finn's feet, but he managed to pull it back from the edge.

He finally sighed thoughtfully. "You're smart. You use it for evil, but you're funny, too. Clever and dry, I like that."

Finn's lips quirked. "I use it for evil?"

Rowan grinned. "Well, you turn it on me often enough I want to smack you on a regular basis, which sounds evil to me." He handed Finn his coffee and continued. "I like that you let me come over and humor me. I like that you cared whether I had a warm hat or got sick. And I like that even though you must've really fought yourself on it, you called me last night and did your version of an apology."

Now Finn looked offended. "I did apologize!"

Rowan laughed, shaking his head and breaking off a bite of bagel. "No, you didn't. You don't apologize, Finnegan, you acknowledge. You say stuff like 'I was an ass,' or 'I was rude,' but you don't really say you're sorry, even though I know that's what

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you mean.”

“How do you know?” Finn had a strange look in his eyes that made Rowan’s stomach suddenly flip.

“I can hear it. You don’t say it, but I can hear the ‘I’m sorry’ you put on the end of it.”

Finn looked down at his coffee cup, a small smile curving his lips before he looked back up. “That’s pretty good. I do, you know, mean to apologize. I never realized I don’t do it all the way.”

Rowan shrugged. “I don’t mind. The intent is there and that’s what matters to me.”

Finn leaned in a bit. “What else matters to you, Rowan?”

The intensity of Finn’s stare was a little disconcerting, and Rowan automatically leaned back a bit. “What do you mean?”

“I mean what matters to you, what do you like, care about, enjoy? If you’re going to keep coming around, which I think you are, then we’re going to have to do more than have sex and talk about what kind of breakfast pastry you’ll be bringing the next day.”

Rowan grinned, relaxing. “Oh!” Wow, he’d been all set to get Finn opened up enough to talk by having hot, mind-blowing sex with him, but apparently that plan was null and void now. Which kind of sucked because it’d been a good plan. “Well, I like Jimi Hendrix, I like all 60s and 70s music actually. I like living here. I just moved here three months ago because I wanted to experience a New England winter.”

Finn’s brows lifted. “You moved here because of the winter? Where were you living before?”

Rowan pursed his lips, glancing up at the ceiling in thought. “Well, let’s see, before here was San Antonio, and before that was Miami and then there was Seattle, but I didn’t like it there. It was

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too wet and cloudy all the time. I like sunshine and seasons that change and wearing things other than raincoats.”

“You just wander around all these places? Why?”

Rowan smiled, shrugging. “Why not? I mean, there’re fifty states and a million towns and cities and countries, and I really don’t think we’re meant to spend our whole lives in one place, you know? Besides, if we are, well, then I just haven’t found my place yet. When I do, I’ll know.”

Finn chuckled, shaking his head. “You amaze me.”

Rowan laughed out loud. “I’ll take that as a compliment.” This was nice, he decided. Finn wasn’t snapping, but he wasn’t acting like a pod person either, and Rowan was surprised to find he’d been right. Underneath the hard exterior was a funny, nice man who maybe had some issues, but at his core was good. Rowan liked to believe most people, at their core, were good or at least wanted to be. It was always nice when people proved you right.

“What about you, Finnegan? What matters to you?” Rowan turned his gaze on the other man, curious beyond belief as he wondered if he was setting himself up for disappointment or if Finn might just tell him something, anything, now that he seemed so open.

“My books matter. My career matters.” He seemed at a loss for a moment and then smiled as if to himself. “My readers matter. Not because they pay my bills, though they do, but more because they care. I don’t have to do anything but the thing I love most in the world and they’re thrilled. It’s the perfect relationship.”

Rowan tilted his head, doing his best not to show how much that bothered him. He had a feeling this was where he ought to dig when it came to Finn’s anti-social behavior. “Because they don’t ask anything more of you than you’re willing to give.”

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Finn shrugged. "Sort of. It's more accurate to say that what they want and what I'm willing to give happens to be the same thing. I get it right every time. I never fuck my end up."

Rowan nodded, glancing down. His heart pounded, wondering if he ought to press that telling statement or let it lie for the moment. Looking up again, he steeled himself. "What did you fuck up?"

Finn frowned, his look confused. "What?"

"Well, if you're worried about fucking your end up, that has to mean at some point you have and you don't want to repeat it. So what did you fuck up?" He braced himself for an explosion, because God knew Finn had enough pride for a hundred men.

Instead of an explosion, though, Finn's eyes saddened. He sighed, then shrugged. "I was married."

Rowan's eyes widened. He'd, of course, known that at Finn's age the man was no novice to relationships, but married? "To who? When?"

"A girl I knew in college." Finn let out another sigh. "It wasn't like it is now. Back then being gay wasn't trendy, wasn't accepted. It was reviled. It still is, in some places, but then...it was everywhere. There were no articles in *People* about celebrities coming out of the closet. The closet was the only option."

Rowan let out a breath. "So you did what was expected and married a woman."

Finn nodded, meeting his eyes. "Yes. I'd already disappointed my mother by deciding I wanted to write instead of becoming the doctor she and Dad had imagined, so I guess in a way it was a placating thing. Give her what I could, you know?"

Rowan nodded. "What happened?"

"Nothing." Finn let out a short, humorless laugh. "Nothing

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happened. We married right after college, I got a job at a local small newspaper and started my first book, we rented a shitty little house and struggled a lot.”

“Did she know?”

“That I was gay?” Finn shook his head. “No, not then. I suppose she must have suspected, after the first few months. I could barely keep it up enough to consummate our vows. But she never asked, and I never told. She got pregnant six months after we were married, and I figured that was it, I’d done my duty and, while I loved her as a friend and nothing more, I was happy about the baby. I’d always figured I’d never have kids, so one on the way was exciting.”

Rowan had never expected this when he’d decided to pull Finn out of his shell. He had a child. Where? Who? Were they close still? He didn’t ask, though, remaining silent and letting Finn continue.

“Around that time, I met someone, a young man who did freelance photography for the same newspaper. We got thrown together on several stories and...well, one thing led to another and we began to have an affair.” Finn’s jaw tightened and he looked up to meet Rowan’s gaze almost defiantly, as if daring him to judge. Rowan had no intention of doing any such thing. “I’m not proud of it, but it was what it was.”

“Alright,” Rowan murmured, tilting his head. He could understand the guilt involved, but he also couldn’t imagine what it must have been like, Finn living his whole life in the closet, denying the basic core of who he was. Desperate times and all that, he supposed.

“Carol found out. Actually, she found *us*, in the act almost, at the office late one night.” He let out a rough laugh, again lacking

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in any humor. “She brought me dinner, only to find I was mid-dessert with another man.”

Rowan held his breath almost. “What happened?”

“Everything you’d expect. She was shocked, horrified, furious and hurt. She ran out, and I went after her. I don’t have a clear recollection of the moment, but she must’ve tripped running down the steps outside and fell.” Finn took a deep breath. “The baby didn’t make it. They said when she fell she hit the edge of a step wrong and the baby, which was a girl by the way, died instantly.”

“Oh, Finnegan...”

Finn shook his head. “Don’t...no pity, Rowan. Anyway, she filed for divorce before she was released from the hospital. I didn’t contest, and a marriage that never should’ve happened was over, taking an innocent victim with it.”

Rowan didn’t speak for a moment, working out in his mind what he could say. Pity was the worst way to go, obviously, despite the sympathy that filled him. Finally, he exhaled heavily and met the other man’s gaze. “Is that why you don’t let anyone close?”

Finn lifted his brows as if it was a ridiculous question. “I think that’s a good enough reason, don’t you?”

Rowan thought about it for a second. “I can see why you’d think it was. You feel like you caused enough pain, I suppose?” Finn didn’t have to nod. Rowan could see the belief in his steel blue eyes. “How long ago was that, Finnegan?”

“What? Twenty-five years, why?”

Rowan shrugged. “I just wondered...you stopped blaming yourself for your father’s death after eighteen years, so when do you plan to let yourself off the hook for what happened with your wife and daughter?”

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Finn frowned at him. "That was different."

"Is it?" Rowan's brows lifted. "How? You did something foolish, so you blame yourself for other people's actions. Your father chose to come make sure you were okay, your wife chose to run away, but neither were choices you had any control over. Yes, you made a mistake, a very large one, but you can't think that avoiding the world and people who could care about you is the price you ought to pay for it?"

"You don't understand."

Rowan nodded. "You're right, I don't. I wasn't there and it wasn't my life affected, so you're right. I'll tell you what I *do* understand, though. I understand you would never do the same thing twice. I know if you'd known what would happen, you'd have chosen another path. Making a mistake isn't the crime, Finnegan, but not learning from it is. You learned, didn't you? I don't see you married to another woman living a lie, so I'm going to say yes, you did."

Finn gave him a terse look, and Rowan smiled gently. "So maybe you go overboard when you learn lessons." He reached over and laid his hand on Finn's. "I'm sorry for your loss, Finnegan. I truly am."

Finn nodded, and Rowan was grateful he hadn't pulled away. "Thanks." He let out a rough breath and gave Rowan a small smile, just the curve of one corner of his lips. "Subject change?"

Rowan laughed and nodded. "Subject change. Better yet..."

Rowan hadn't been able to stop thinking about the one time they'd been together. Finn had held him, not saying a word, after and it'd been incredibly romantic. Even though he tried his best to tell himself he wasn't going to expect more from Finn than sex and friendship and maybe the chance to help, there was a small part of

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him that had melted inside at that.

“Hey, Finnegan?”

“Yeah?” Finn took a bite of his cream cheese and bagel and looked at Rowan expectantly.

“How hungry are you?” Rowan met the other man’s gaze and, for a second, Finn looked confused. Then Rowan saw the light bulb go on in the way the other man’s eyes lit up and he sat up straighter.

“Not nearly as hungry as I was before you got here.”

Before Rowan could make a move, Finn did it for him. He reached out, his big hand curling against Rowan’s nape, and leaned in at the same time as he pulled him forward. Their lips met, and the thought struck Rowan that Finn tasting of blueberries and coffee was better than breakfast anyway.

His hand was so big, cupped against his nape and the back of his head, Rowan felt dwarfed. It was something that would take getting used to and yet it thrilled him, how big Finn was. Rowan was used to being smaller than the guys he dated or, in Finn’s case, slept with, but never the way he was now.

Finn rose and lifted him off his stool in a display of that size and strength, and Rowan had the bone-melting thought the other man could very easily pin him down and do any damn thing he wanted and Rowan wouldn’t be able to stop him. Finn never would, but he could, and just knowing that was enough to make Rowan throb with desire.

When the kiss broke and Rowan realized they’d stopped moving, he was surprised to find them in the living room, not the bedroom. He blinked, glancing around as Finn lowered him to the long couch.

“Got tired on the way to the stairs?” he teased, and Finn gave

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his ass a light slap as he laid him down.

“No, I decided I didn’t want to wait that long to get you under me.”

Rowan sighed softly, lips curving, and he reached his arms up to twine around Finn’s neck. “Then far be it from me to insist you get me somewhere respectable before you fuck me senseless.” Then he hesitated. “Condoms?”

Finn’s grin was so wicked it took his breath away. “Back pocket.”

Rowan laughed, reaching down and around to slide one hand into Finn’s jeans pocket, pulling out a foil package. He grinned up at his lover. “Let me guess—Boy Scout?”

“Be prepared, that’s the motto.”

The thought Finn had been planning, thinking about fucking him enough to put a condom in his pocket just in case, made Rowan a little weak inside. “Is there lube stashed somewhere, too?”

Finn nodded at the end table above Rowan and he tilted his head back to look up at it, chuckling at the sight of a bottle of lotion sitting there.

“Wow, you really are on the ball.” Rowan pushed up onto his elbows and gave Finn a matching wicked grin. “Let’s see what else you’ve got up your sleeve.”

Their lips met and it wasn’t slow or gentle like moments ago, nothing seductive about it. The kiss was deep, possessive, and Rowan honestly didn’t know if it was him or Finn who was doing the possessing. Maybe both. He didn’t care either way because it felt too good to think about anything for long.

There was a brief struggle as they shifted on the couch, trying to find the right angle for lips and bodies to meet in a satisfactory

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way, and finally Finn sat up, pulling Rowan with him, and leaned back against the arm of the couch. He pulled Rowan against him to straddle his thighs and Rowan grinned.

“Much better. Damn, Finnegan, you make me feel like a midget.”

Finn’s big hands slid down his back to cup and squeeze his ass. His smile was so sexy it made Rowan’s heart thump hard. “Nah...fragile little flower, maybe.”

Rowan laughed out loud. “Now you sound like you write romances instead of mysteries.”

He bent his head, hands braced on Finn’s shoulders, and kissed his lover, body singing as their tongues tangled and they moved against one another. Rowan could feel how hard Finn was and knew Finn could feel the same. The desire that surged between them was intense, making him more than a little light-headed and he wondered if it made Finn just as dizzy. He hoped so.

As if in answer to his question, Finn groaned and slipped his hands between them, never breaking the kiss as he cupped Rowan in his palm, lightly kneading him through his jeans, sending sharp shudders of pleasure through him.

Rowan’s hips couldn’t stay still, rocking into the delicious squeeze and release of Finn’s hand, moaning into the kiss as all thought of seduction disappeared in the furious wave of need and pure, unfiltered lust.

Finally, he broke the kiss enough to speak, panting against Finn’s mouth. “Fuck, Finnegan...touch me,” he demanded, twisting against him.

“I am,” Finn said, his tone wickedly mocking, teeth nipping Rowan’s lower lip.

“Wretched ass, I hate you.” Rowan groaned, his hips rocking

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harder, more insistently.

“Say please.”

Rowan gasped, lifting his head and staring down at the other man, breath quickening. “What?”

Finn leaned in, lips nuzzling Rowan’s as he continued to squeeze and flex his fingers on the younger man’s cock through the cursed denim. “Say please, Rowan.” There was something almost desperate about his tone, sending a shiver racing down Rowan’s spine.

“Finnegan...” He hesitated for a moment, then moaned as a firmer squeeze had his hips jerking. “Please.”

The reaction he got was intense, a rough snarl erupting from Finn’s throat, and before Rowan could grasp what was happening, he was pinned against the back of the couch and Finn trapped him there with his much bigger body, devouring his lips as his hands tugged and fumbled with Rowan’s jeans.

It was overwhelming, and Rowan responded the only way he could, with equal frenzy, his own hands pulling and struggling with Finn’s shirt and jeans. His own search for bare skin came to an abrupt halt when one warm, rough, calloused hand slid inside his jeans and palmed his cock firmly.

“Oh, God.” He rasped the words against Finn’s lips, arms winding around the man’s shoulders and allowing himself to be lifted higher against the back of the couch, almost sitting on it as Finn touched him, the pressure of his palm firm. His jeans were tugged down around his thighs and then Finn was stroking him, hard, driving him right out of his mind with the sounds he made in his throat and the scent of him, the feel of his body and his touch. God damn, when had Finn become feral?

Rowan didn’t get the chance to think about that question, if

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there was even an answer, because the next thing he knew Finn was flipping him around, bending him forward over the back of the couch. The heavy weight of Finn pinned him there, pressed fully against Rowan from behind and even their clothes couldn't dampen the scorching heat that sizzled between them.

"Finnegan," he gasped out, fingers curling into the soft cushions as he shook.

Finn didn't answer, instead shoving Rowan's shirt up and over his head to leave it tangled around his arms. Finn's mouth was then on his bare skin, tongue trailing down his back.

Rowan hissed, shifting impatiently and letting out a frustrated sound when he couldn't spread his legs, the damn jeans tangled around his knees now hindering the instinctual desire to offer himself to the man so thoroughly overpowering him.

"Please." He moaned, and let out a startled yelp when Finn's teeth scraped his bare hip, the other man's tongue sweeping over the stinging spot an instant later. "Finnegan, damn it...I want—" He didn't know what he wanted. To touch, to be naked, to be fucked, all of the above. He just wanted more, and Finn didn't seem at all interested in indulging him, his movements and touches firm and demanding in their own right. Despite his own raging desires, Rowan found himself somehow moving into Finn's touches, accommodating his desires. It was an incredible feeling he'd never expected or experienced before.

It was like being played like a finely tuned instrument and Finn was the maestro. Like Rowan was one of his beloved symphonies.

Through it all, the sharp nips to random spots, the firm roaming of Finn's hands on Rowan's body, Finn never said a word. Rowan had the maddening thought he didn't have to—he was more than getting his point across. Rowan had wondered earlier who was

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doing the possessing, him or Finn. Finnegan was very clearly giving the answer.

Rowan turned his head, trying to glance behind him at Finn, but he couldn't see him, the other man bent over him, his lips brushing the small of Rowan's back, sending shivers through him. Rowan shuddered, leaning forward more, pressing his forehead against his arms, still tangled in his shirt, and though he could easily pull them free, he didn't. For reasons he didn't quite understand.

"Finnegan," he whispered, the other man's name breaking on his lips when, with a rough jerk or two, Finn pulled Rowan's jeans down and off the rest of the way, leaving him naked, bent forward over the back of the couch and wondering breathlessly just what had gotten into Finn. Whatever it was, good God it was turning him on.

Now able to spread his legs, Rowan did so, tilting his hips up and aching he was so ready for penetration. Finn had barely touched him it seemed and Rowan felt like he'd been hanging by a thread for hours. "Please," he begged, voice strung tight. "Touch me, Finnegan."

He got his wish in the next instant, when Finn moved behind him and pressed his lips against Rowan's entrance. Rowan's head tipped back with a ragged cry, fingers fisting tightly in the material of his shirt. "Oh, God." He moaned, and swore he heard a wicked laugh behind him.

He didn't have a chance to think about it as Finn gripped his ass, spread his cheeks and worked him like a pro. His tongue was rough velvet, wet and firm as it swept over him, occasionally stiffening and dipping inside before returning to the maddening strokes and sweeps that felt so damn good, but weren't nearly

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enough.

“Oh, fuck, fuck, fuck.”

“Foul mouth.” Finn broke his silence to chuckle and Rowan felt a surge of warmth inside, like a bubble bursting, and he laughed. It occurred to him that it was a special man, a special connection that allowed for laughter in the middle of what might possibly be the most intense sex of his life.

“It’s your...fault,” Rowan panted, rocking his hips back in encouragement. “I’ll have you know I don’t cuss on a regular basis. Oh, fuck.” Finn’s wicked tongue dipped down to flick his balls.

Finn didn’t reply, just brought his hands up to Rowan’s hips, gripping them firmly, his big hands splaying and thumbs spreading his ass cheeks. Rowan felt thoroughly exposed with the cool brush of air and Finn’s breath against his entrance, but he liked it. More than that, he was beginning to think there wasn’t anything Finn could do that Rowan would say no to. It was both a frightening and a freeing thought.

Then Rowan didn’t have time for thoughts. All he had time for was feeling, as Finn slid one hand inward and his thumb rubbed Rowan’s entrance as his tongue flicked around it. “Oh, God...yes, Finnegan, please...”

“That’s a beautiful word on your lips, Rowan.”

“Please, please, please.” Rowan glanced back and grinned shakily. “How’s that?”

Finn smiled, a true smile that just about took Rowan’s breath away. “Perfect.” Before Rowan could respond, the other man’s thumb pushed shallowly inside, and Rowan gasped, forehead dropping to the back of the couch and he pressed back, seeking more, deeper.

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He got it, as Finn pushed his thumb deeper, then the other hand slid inward as well and a second thumb joined the first. Finn paused and withdrew them briefly to grab the lotion, then his hands were back, slick and easy with the penetration this time, and Rowan cried out.

The teasing, the laughter, the friendship he knew was blooming between them faded away in the heat and fire of the passion, the desire. His hips rocked, and Finn answered with sharp nips to his ass, thumbs removed in favor of two fingers now, big enough to stretch and burn and feel so damn good.

Words were lost and sounds, movements, became their communication. Rowan wanted more and he tilted his hips up with a soft moan. Finn gave him what he wanted with a twist of fingers against that spot deep inside, accompanied by a rough, possessive growl.

When Rowan had had enough—or not enough as the case may be—he didn’t have to say, “Fuck me now,” because his body said it for him, and Finn read it loud and clear. Before impatience could set in, there was the sound of a foil packet tearing open and Rowan trembled. *Oh, God, yes, hurry please.*

Finn did, rising up onto his knees behind Rowan on the couch and leaning forward over him, pinning him with his body bent over the back of the sofa. His big hands came down to urge Rowan’s thighs wide.

“Relax for me, Rowan...might burn,” Finn ground out, his voice rougher than usual, nearly unrecognizable in his passion.

Rowan nodded frantically, fingers curling on the cushion, and bracing himself. He wanted to tell Finn just to do it, that he was so ready he didn’t think Finn would meet an ounce of resistance. Instead, he simply spread his knees farther apart and rocked back

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against his lover, turning his head to meet Finn's steely blue gaze and found his lips captured in a torrid kiss as the other man began to push inside him.

His breath caught hard and Rowan moaned into the kiss. Finn was as big there as he was everywhere else, and yet it seemed as though Rowan had been made to take him into his body. They fit in odd ways that they shouldn't, Rowan's much smaller body nestled snugly in the curve and cradle of Finn's as he bent over him. It was safe and sexy, and it made Rowan want to stay there, forever if he could.

There was that word again, forever. It startled Rowan, and yet it felt right to think it. What had begun as a good deed, helping a seemingly broken man open up to the world around him, had quickly become so much more. And yet he couldn't find it in himself to think it was a bad thing.

The kiss broke and Rowan drew in a shaky breath, clenching around Finn. "I'm okay, Finnegan. I'm not going to break." He realized he was trembling.

Finnegan groaned, a rough sound that shivered along Rowan's nerves like fire before he began to thrust—not hard, but so deep Rowan could feel him through his whole body.

It was breathtaking, and they moved together in tight, short, rocking motions that nudged Finn's cock firmly against Rowan's spot and made him clench, which made Finn moan. It was a heart stopping back and forth as they moved and Rowan shifted his hand, sliding it over to grasp Finn's on the back of the couch. Their fingers tangled and clung, something tender in the midst of the heat and fire that threatened to consume them both.

More... Oh, God, he wanted more and yet he hadn't the breath

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to ask for it or the coherency to understand what he wanted. All he knew was that Finn could give it to him and would.

Abruptly, and without warning, Finn tipped them to the left, urging Rowan to his hands and knees on the couch and rising up over him, hands now hard on his hips and gripping tightly as the thrusts picked up speed. Each one jolted Rowan, dragging sharp, short cries from him and making his head spin.

“Finnegan!” he cried, and the other man leaned low over him, covering him with his body and burying his face in Rowan’s neck.

“Here,” Finn murmured, nodding. “I’m here.”

Rowan smiled, nodding in reply and leaning down to brace his elbows on the sofa, ass lifted high to take the hard, deep thrusts that were rapidly whittling away his control. He wasn’t ready for it to be over, but didn’t know how much more he could take.

Harder, faster, deeper...it seemed Finn was trying to become a physical part of him, and Rowan did his best to accommodate. The hard grip of the man’s hands on his hips thrilled Rowan, even the sensation of bruises raising that would later be admired and touched with wondering fingers as Rowan remembered the way it had felt to receive them at this moment.

Then, like the incendiary flash of tinder catching flame, Rowan let out a sharp cry, head thrown back in ecstasy, and Finn growled his approval, one hand reaching under Rowan to grip and stroke his cock.

“Yes, yes, Rowan, come for me.”

Rowan had no choice and as he instinctively obeyed that gruff order, realizing on some level there was no going back after this. He’d tumbled into something he’d never expected and he wasn’t going to get out with his heart intact. The shiver of fear only added

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to the sharpness of his orgasm and when he clenched around Finn, a ragged cry echoing in the quiet room around them, Finn wrapped his arms around Rowan and held him as he fell.

CHAPTER 7

“So, are you going to tell me what caused this sudden willingness to be social, or is it a secret?”

Finn glanced up from the stove, meeting Rowan’s curious gaze. It was dinnertime and Rowan had just returned after finishing his afternoon shift at the café. Finn had been amused by the shocked look the other man had given him when, as Rowan was leaving that morning, Finn had suggested when he was done with work that he come back and Finn would cook them dinner.

The truth was, he wasn’t entirely sure he should tell Rowan about his visit with Jake that morning. They were good friends and roommates, and what was he? A fling, he figured. It’d be a shitty thing to tell Rowan about Jake’s feelings and threat, so he shook his head with a shrug and a small smile.

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“No secret. I just decided that maybe you were right. I hole myself up away from the world and maybe I miss some good stuff because of it.” He winked. “Like you.”

Rowan sat across the kitchen island from him, propping his chin in his hand. “Why do you do it?”

Finn tossed some extra garlic in the pan and stirred. “Do what?”

“Cut yourself off. Hide in your mansion behind your computer monitors and big gates.”

Finn looked up, for a second tempted to snarl it was none of Rowan’s business, but he was starting to realize that maybe he wanted it to be...Rowan’s business, that is. “I was painfully shy as a kid, can you imagine?” He chuckled and shook his head again. “I was skinny, twice the height of anyone in my class and I liked reading Emerson more than playing sports. Add in the fact I had zero interest in girls and I was pretty much the perfect target for every bully in a ten-mile radius.”

Rowan made a sympathetic sound. “Aw, I bet you were a wonderful kid.”

Finn shrugged. “I was smart and I was big—the only things that kept me from getting my ass beat on a regular basis. I’d sell homework papers to the other kids, so they needed me. I learned very young to use my talents to benefit myself.” He sighed and put the lid on the pan to let the sauce simmer. “When I graduated high school I was sixteen, two full years early, and went straight to Harvard. My mom wanted me to be a doctor, like I told you this morning, but I chose the extremely useless English Lit major instead. Books had always been my best friends and all I wanted to do was lose myself in them, and better yet if the worlds and characters were of my own making.”

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Rowan sat up straighter, a knowing smile curving his lips. “So that’s what you did. You built your own world and characters that are as real as you and me, and once you had that, why come out?”

Finn nodded, not surprised the other man seemed to understand him so well. “Yeah. I wasn’t exactly social, but I wasn’t a recluse either, not until I hit the bestseller list for the third time. There was so much publicity for that book, interviews and television spots and convention appearances. It was just way too much for a guy who could barely stand to make conversation with my family at holidays.”

Rowan shook his head. “I’d convinced myself it was some tragic, traumatic event that had caused you to withdraw from the world, holing up here to protect yourself. Lord, maybe I ought to write a book. My imagination’s vivid enough.”

Finn chuckled, shrugging and tossing pasta into a pot of boiling water. “No, no tragic history. Just painfully shy and socially awkward and when computers came along and took over, it was the easiest thing in the world to avoid dealing with anyone. I work with my editors and agent through the internet, sometimes the phone. I can buy anything I need and have it shipped to my door.”

Rowan grinned teasingly. “You can even get me delivered to your door.”

Finn laughed. “And believe me, if I’d known, I’d have ordered you with a side of sex a long time ago.”

Rowan leaned against the stool back, giving Finn a look that made his awareness ratchet up more than a few notches.

“What?”

Rowan shrugged. “I was just wondering...is this officially a date?”

Finn raked a hand through his hair, brows lifting. “Let’s see,

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dinner...” He came around and tugged Rowan off the stool to turn with him a few times across the Spanish tile floor. “Dancing...” He bent and dropped a kiss on Rowan’s lips. “And kissing. Yeah, I’d say this is a date.”

Rowan grinned up at him. “You know, I don’t put out on the first date.”

Finn laughed, releasing him with a swat on the other man’s firm ass. “Yeah, you put out well before it.”

Rowan let out an ostensibly offended gasp, and, for a second, Finn thought he might have gone too far, that he really did fail at social cues. Then Rowan laughed and shrugged, climbing back up on the stool. “What can I say? I’m a tramp deep down.”

Finn shook his head, taking the pasta off the stove and over to the sink to drain. “No, you’re not. If you were, I doubt Jake would be pining for you.”

Oh, shit.

The instant the words left his mouth, Finn realized he’d put his foot in it in a huge way. He turned slowly and met Rowan’s agape stare.

“What?”

Finn cringed. “I shouldn’t have said anything.”

Rowan hopped off the stool, coming around to glower up at him. “Said anything about *what*? What are you talking about? Jake pining for me? Jake’s straight!”

“Uh...I don’t think he is. He came here this morning.”

Rowan looked even more stunned, brows shooting up. “He did what?”

“Came here.” Finn decided there was nothing to do but tell Rowan the whole story. “I thought it was you when the gate buzzed, but it was Jake. He told me to stay away from you, that I

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was no good for you and to leave you alone.” Finn sighed. “He’s in love with you.” Finn could only think he might be burying any chance he had with Rowan by telling him. Jake was Rowan’s age, they lived together, had more in common... What if Rowan decided he wanted to be with Jake instead of pursuing something with a man twice his age with more issues than a magazine stand?

Rowan just looked flabbergasted, though. He took several steps back, shaking his head. “Are you serious?”

Finn nodded. That did it, he figured. Rowan was going to choose Jake.

“That son of a *bitch*!”

Or maybe not. Finn’s eyes widened as Rowan stomped across the kitchen to snatch the phone off the wall. “What are you doing?”

“Calling him! He has no business poking his nose into my business and telling you to do anything, let alone to stay away from me!”

Finn cringed, really glad he wasn’t Jake at the moment. Of course, then it occurred to him that Rowan was still going to be pissed when he hung up. And he was the only one there to take the heat. *Ah, hell.*

* * *

Slamming the patio door behind him with one hand, Rowan dialed Jake’s cell number with the other, pacing the patio angrily. He could see Finn watching him warily through the glass doors, but the other man had the good sense not to follow him.

“Hello?”

“How could you?” Rowan snapped, hurt rising up to mingle

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with the indignant anger. Jake was supposed to be his friend.

“What? Rowan, what are you—”

“Don’t act dumb with me, Jake. You know exactly what I’m talking about! How could you come here and tell Finnegan to leave me alone? How could you sabotage me like that?”

There was a moment of silence and then an angry sigh. “I wasn’t sabotaging you, Rowan. I was trying to help you!”

Rowan let out a harsh laugh. “Help me? *Help* me? You went behind my back and tried to get the man I’m interested in, who I *care* about, damn it, to stop seeing me! Which didn’t work, by the way, just so you know.”

“He’s a freak, Rowan! He’s twice your age and a fucking hermit. Nobody knows anything about him except he writes gory mystery murders for fun! What kind of person is that? What’s interesting about that?”

Rowan’s anger boiled over at the disparagement of Finn. “Well, he’s a hell of a lot more interesting than a twenty-something asshole who meddles in people’s business like some little old lady! And damn it, why did you tell *him* you’re interested in me, but you never told *me* any such thing?”

Jake was silent for several moments, and when he spoke, his voice was tight. “Because I knew this would happen. Or I was afraid it would. You never see me as anything but a friend, and if you’d just stay away from Finnegan and get yourself out from under whatever spell he’s got you in, you’d see *I’m* what you need, not him!”

Rowan’s eyes widened, shaking his head as if Jake could see him. “How was I supposed to see you as more than a friend when you never gave me any indication you wanted to be more? And I don’t care how you feel about me, Jake, that doesn’t give you the

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right to meddle in my life and try to stop me from pursuing a relationship with Finnegan.”

Jake laughed, the sound hard and ugly. “A relationship? Rowan, the man doesn’t even leave his house, so what kind of a relationship can you have? Are you gonna stay locked up there in his castle like Beauty to his Beast and live your life that way? I know you, damn it, and you’ll be miserable. No roots, no rules, nothing to tie you down from the freedom you love so much, that’s you! All Finnegan has are ties, and you’ll die in his cage!”

Rowan scowled, angrier because a part of him said Jake was right. But he didn’t want to listen to that part, the rest of him being taken by the strangely vulnerable, gruff giant inside cooking him dinner and probably expecting a tongue lashing when Rowan came back in.

“That’s not true! And you don’t get to make that choice for me, Jake. I’m not a child, and you are not my parent!” Rowan shivered, realizing for the first time how cold it was. “I’m hanging up now. And Jake? Don’t expect me home, tonight or maybe at all!”

He clicked the phone off, shaking with emotion. *Damn it*. Why did this have to happen now, when he and Finn were getting along so well? Finn was opening up to him and there was real hope they could forge some kind of relationship from this strange start.

He shook off the cobwebs of doubt that Jake’s comments had spun around him. It wasn’t true; he wasn’t going to end up caged here with Finn. He was going to show Finn the world didn’t have to come to him, but that sometimes he should go to the world. What would Jake’s argument be then? Shaking his head, Rowan flung open the patio door, shutting it behind him, leaving all those doubts outside.

Finn gave him a wary look from behind the island, stirring

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pots. “Everything alright?”

Rowan let out a heavy puff of frustrated breath, turning and nodding. “Fine. Can I stay here tonight?”

Finn nodded, brows furrowing. “Sure. Are you sure everything’s alright?”

Rowan nodded, striding back to the stool and climbing up, giving Finn the best “everything’s wonderful please stop asking” smile. “Yup! So, dinner ready?” He wasn’t going to let Jake ruin this evening.

It was their first date and it was going to be perfect.

* * *

“I can’t believe this,” Rowan grouched, flopping back on the bed. “I never get drunk!”

Finn chuckled to himself. “I don’t know...you seemed a little tipsy the other night when I called you.” He lifted one of the other man’s legs, tugging off his shoe and sock.

Rowan laughed, as if that was the funniest thing ever. “You’re right! I was a little tipsy. I got tipsier...is that a word? I got tipsier after we hung up.” A scowl crossed his handsome features, as he pushed up onto his elbows. “I bet Jake got me drunk hoping to score. Big jerk!” He flopped back again, an indignant huff sending his hair blowing out of his eyes.

Finn shook his head, sighing to himself. Rowan refused to admit Jake’s behavior had hurt him. In fact, he refused to admit he so much as remembered Jake’s behavior, as he’d spent the evening drinking wine, poking at his food, and prodding Finn into giving him a full synopsis of each and every Jacob Wilde book.

Finn tugged Rowan’s jeans down, trying not to laugh when the

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other man almost rolled off the bed attempting to help him. “Stay still, brat, before you give yourself a concussion tumbling off this bed.”

“It’s a *big* bed.” Rowan grinned and rolled onto his stomach, arms and legs splaying out. “Big like you. I love it.” Rowan turned his head to the side, cheek pressed to the cool sheets and aimed a bright smile at Finn. “I love you.”

Finn stilled, heart leaping into his throat. Oh, he knew the other man probably wouldn’t remember he’d said it, couldn’t mean it, but it had been years since he’d heard those words uttered to him by anyone. He lifted his eyes to meet Rowan’s glossy, somewhat loopy gaze. “Hush now, and let’s get you tucked in.”

Rowan’s lower lip pouted out, but he obediently climbed under the covers, up against the pile of pillows and snuggled down. He looked so small all alone in Finn’s custom-sized bed.

“Aren’t you coming to bed, too?”

Finn shook his head with a tight smile, his insides jumping like Mexican beans. “No, you get some sleep. I have to clean up downstairs and get a bit of work done.” He leaned over Rowan and brushed a kiss to his forehead. “Sleep it off, babe. You’ll feel better in the morning.”

Rowan nodded, a huge yawn already overtaking him, and Finn slipped out of the room, shutting the bedroom door and leaning against it. *Jesus*. That man was going to be the death of him.

Shaking his head and trying his best not to think about how sweet those words had sounded on Rowan’s lips, Finn headed into his office. The maid could worry about the kitchen in the morning. He needed to write because the real world had just gotten a bit too hard to handle.

CHAPTER 8

Finn glanced up from his monitor, frowning at the wall clock. It was nearly ten in the morning. When he'd checked at six, Rowan had been sound asleep, and Finn hadn't disturbed him, figuring he'd get his workout in and grab a shower before they had breakfast. Except Rowan either hadn't stopped in to say goodbye this morning, which didn't seem likely, was wandering the house on his own, even less likely, or was still asleep.

The last was what made him frown. Rowan wasn't the type to fritter away the day in bed. He was an "up and at 'em with the sun" kind of guy. Finn saved his work and shut off the monitor. Chances were the wine was still lingering with him, but he'd just go check and make sure everything was alright. *It was a rough night for Rowan, so maybe he just needs the sleep?*

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Instead of a sleepy, rumpled Rowan sexy and naked under the covers, Finn found a flushed, sweaty Rowan with the covers tossed off and shivering. *Shit*. He hurried to the bed, sitting on the edge and reaching out to smooth back Rowan's sweat-damp blond hair from his forehead. Christ, he was burning up.

Grabbing the comforter, he pulled it up over Rowan, wincing when the other man tried to kick it off again right away. "Shhh, hey, it's alright. Just leave it on, Rowan."

Rowan's eyes, fever-bright and hazy, blinked open at the sound of his voice. "I'm hot...and soooo cold." He groaned, coughing roughly.

It was about then Finn remembered that Rowan had been barefoot and jacketless when he'd been outside talking to Jake.

"Rowan, you are a stupid son of a bitch sometimes." Finn shook his head and tucked the blanket around Rowan's shoulders.

Rowan scowled, curling into a ball on his side and glaring at him. "I'm dying, and you're calling me stupid?"

Finn snorted. "You're not dying; you have a cold. No one dies from a cold these days."

Rowan rolled his eyes. "Unlike when you were a kid and they still had the fucking plague?"

Finn had to laugh, shaking his head and rising. "You're a grumpy patient, I can tell. Joy and rapture for me. Stay put. I'm gonna get you water and some Tylenol and a cool cloth for your neck."

Rowan might have wanted to snap some other smart comeback, but a coughing fit overtook him, so Finn took the chance to slip into the bathroom to get what he needed. He filled the glass with water from the tap, grabbed a bottle of Tylenol from the medicine cabinet and a washcloth from under the sink, running it under the

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cold water and wringing it out before bringing it all back to the bedside.

Rowan gave him a sorrowful, apologetic look. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to snap at you. I never get sick. I hate being sick!"

Finn grinned, brushing Rowan's hair off his neck and laying the cool washcloth there. "How would you know you hate being sick if you never get that way?"

That got him another glare. "Shut up."

He chuckled and nodded. "Yes, sir. Here, sit up a bit and take two of these. We need to get that fever down...you're burning up."

Rowan gave a weak laugh as he sat up and swallowed the pills. "Well, you said before that I was hot."

The lame joke made Finn feel much better. He didn't do very well with sick people, mostly because he was only ever around himself. If Rowan could make bad jokes, though, then surely he was going to be fine.

"I didn't have this in mind, believe me. There, now lay back down. Do you want the blanket?" He could never remember—did you sweat a fever or ice one? Feed a cold and starve a fever or vice versa? He made a mental note to hit up Google for the answers he didn't have. *God bless the internet.*

Rowan shook his head. "No, no I don't want to impose. I should go home." A shadow fell across his face abruptly. "Except I can't do that."

"You should stay here."

Rowan stared at him, clearly shocked. "What?"

"Stay here. Until you're better, or until you make up with Jake." Finn smirked. "Besides, you promised me you would last night." He'd done no such thing, but Finn figured a little white lie was forgivable if it meant making sure the flighty bastard didn't

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end up letting himself get sicker.

Rowan let out a laugh, which ended in a fit of coughing. When he'd calmed, Finn gave him an amused look.

"Promises made under the influence of too much wine would probably be construed as under duress."

Finn shrugged. "What're you going to do? Sue me? You're staying until you feel better and then you can figure out what to do about the mess with Jake. End of story." Finn gave Rowan a look that said, "Argue at your own peril." "You wanted in this house so much, Rowan, and now you're in."

* * *

Rowan let out a soft sigh. It wasn't the house he'd wanted into, and they both knew it. He'd wanted into Finn's life. Which was pretty much what the other man was offering now. Finn wouldn't—or couldn't, as the case may be—join Rowan outside in the real world, but he was willing to allow Rowan to join him in his. That was, in Rowan's mind, even better.

He nodded. "Alright. I'll stay."

God knew he felt like death warmed over, and the idea of confronting Jake sounded like hell today. Why bother with that when there was Finn's big, warm bed, with big, warm Finn to go with it? Speaking of warm, he was freezing again and grabbed the comforter weakly, hauling it up and shivering.

Finn made a sympathetic sound and leaned over to brush his hair back from his forehead. It was such a tender move, so at odds with this gruff giant of a man. Rowan was just sick enough to melt right into it and find it ridiculously endearing.

"Are you hungry? Maybe some toast and tea, or something else

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light?”

Rowan nodded gratefully. He hadn't realized how hungry he was until just then. “God, yes, please. That sounds amazing. Lots of lemon?”

Finn nodded and left, leaving Rowan to shiver under the covers. This was kind of nice, actually—not the sick part, but the Finn taking care of him part. Rowan thought he could get used to it very quickly. He yawned and sort of dozed, mind weaving between whining about being sick and going gooey over Finn being sweet.

The door opened and Rowan glanced up with a smile as Finn came in carrying a tray, a bit of his hair falling out of the neat ponytail he kept it in. It was sexy and gave him a slightly rumpled look that had Rowan's heart tumbling over itself. Lord, the man was dangerous, and Rowan knew somehow that there was no escaping the danger this time. He was going down in flames, and Finn was at the wheel.

* * *

Finn stared at his monitor, fingers hovering over the keyboard, but nothing came out. It wasn't that he wasn't inspired. He was actually more inspired lately than he'd been in months, a fact he laid right at the feet of the young man in his bed. No, it was that all he could think about, despite the inspiration to write, was said young man.

Sighing, Finn leaned back in his chair and ran his hands over his hair. Rowan ought to still be napping, and yet he was tempted to go peek in on him, make sure he wasn't awake or needing anything. *It's a cold, Finn, not malaria. He's fine.*

Regardless of the internal sneer at his worrying, Finn pushed

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away from the desk and decided it wouldn't hurt to check on Rowan. If all he got was a teasing smile and a little taunting about being overly concerned, he figured he could handle that.

He pushed the door open quietly, so if Rowan was asleep he wouldn't disturb him, and peered around the door. His brows immediately snapped together at the sight of the empty bed, covers rumpled and pillow dented where Rowan had been when Finn left him.

Pushing the door fully open, he glanced around the room, frowning deeper. The brat was sick, so where had he gone wandering off to when Finn had specifically told him to stay in bed? The brief thought that maybe Rowan had left made his breath catch and he spun around, only to collide with the object of his search.

"Shit!" he swore, reaching out to steady Rowan on his feet, then scowling at the young man. "What are you doing out of bed?"

Rowan blinked up at him, then grinned. "I was hungry. Your refrigerator is a sad state, do you know that?"

Finn rolled his eyes. "I don't entertain often, what can I say? Get back in bed."

Rowan didn't seem to mind the gruff tone, or the ordering around, because he obeyed with a smile, munching on the apple he'd brought up with him. Finn had to work hard not to notice how fucking adorable the other man looked wrapped up in Finn's robe which was easily three times too big for him, and Rowan kept it wrapped around him as he climbed up against the pillows and let Finn tuck the blankets around his hips.

"Happy?"

Finn snorted. "I'll be happy when you're better, and until you are I want you to stay in bed. If you need something, call. I'm just

down the hall.”

“Ha! In this place, just down the hall is anywhere from a few feet to a mile away.” Rowan laughed and then arranged his face in a solemn look. “I promise I’ll call if I need anything else.”

Finn nodded, straightening and looking down at his guest. “You seem better. How’s your fever?” He reached a hand out and frowned. Rowan was still burning up and, despite his cheerfulness, he shouldn’t be out of bed. “You’re still hot.”

Rowan gave him a cheeky smile. “Why, thank you, Finnegan. So are you.”

He couldn’t help the laugh. *Incorrigible*. “Do you need anything before I get back to work?”

Rowan nodded. “Actually, yeah.”

Finn’s brows furrowed, running through a list of what it could be in his head. *Juice? Aspirin? Water? A cool bath?* His heart rate sped up at the idea of giving Rowan a bath.

“I could use some company. I’m bored to tears, Finnegan, so hang out with me.” The other man gave Finn an imploring look.

“Hang out with you?” He wasn’t a seventeen-year-old mall kid, for God’s sake.

Rowan rolled his eyes and laughed. “Yes, Finnegan, hang out with me. Spend time with me? Keep me company? I’m bored and isn’t it rude to let your guests be bored?”

Finn let out a long breath. He really should get back to work; he’d taken far too much time off because of this young man as it was. If he didn’t get cracking and get his ass in the chair, he was going to miss another deadline.

Still, when Rowan looked up at him with his big brown eyes hopeful, Finn couldn’t resist. He was going to have to work on that because the other man was already running roughshod over his

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routines and schedules, but for the moment resisting didn't have nearly as much appeal as indulging did.

"Alright."

Rowan grinned wide, his whole face lighting up. "Really?"

"I said so, didn't I?"

The gruff tone didn't seem to faze Rowan, who kept right on grinning like a Cheshire cat at him. "You did. So what do you have to do that's fun for the bedridden around here?"

Finn chuckled, brows lifting.

"Besides that! Filthy mind... I'm sick, honestly. Chess? Checkers? Monopoly?" Rowan huffed a sigh. "Parcheesi, for Christ's sake?"

Finn shook his head. "I don't play games." He straightened suddenly. "I have an idea. Stay."

"Like I'm a goddamn puppy dog, Finnegan."

Rowan's grumbles followed Finn as he strode down the hall to his den. Crouching down, despite the protests of his knees, he unlocked the cabinet under the display case and pulled out two long, narrow boxes, then carried them back to the bedroom. Rowan's head tilted with curiosity until Finn sat the boxes at the foot of the bed and lifted the tops off to reveal the hundreds of comics, each in its own protective plastic sleeve.

"No! Holy shit, Finnegan, are you serious?" Rowan tossed aside the blankets, fever and aches apparently forgotten, and knelt in front of the boxes, reaching in to pull one out, at which time he just about had an orgasm on the spot. "*Witchblade*? You collect *Witchblade* comics?"

Finn grinned, nodding. "Yup. I also have all the *Darkness* comics as well as all the crossover arcs, early appearances of the *Witchblade* from other comic lines. You name it, I've got it."

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Rowan stared, like a kid in a candy store, apparently unable to decide where to begin. "I'm in shock. Why didn't you tell me you liked comics...this one in particular?"

Finn shrugged, sitting down and pulling one thin, vividly colored book out of the box. "I don't know. I guess it never really came up. You mentioned it once, that you read graphic novels, but I was still in asshole mode, so I didn't say anything. Then it just never came up until now."

Rowan shook his head with a laugh. "Wow. Okay, big question...am I gonna get to read them or just look at them? Do you let them out of the plastic sleeves?"

"These you can read. I have a second set I keep in mint condition untouched and packed away. I always buy two copies, one to enjoy and read, and one to save and collect. So, yeah, you can read these."

Rowan's eyes lit up and he pulled out a handful from the front of the box. They were all in order and Finn had to smile as the other man turned onto his stomach, tugging the covers over himself, and settled down for a nice long reading session. Finn set the boxes on the floor beside the bed and pulled out a handful himself, joining Rowan on the bed.

This is nice, he thought. Better than nice, it felt...comfortable and familiar, like something a couple would do.

Were he and Rowan a couple? Finn wasn't so sure about the answer to that, and decided he wasn't going to worry about it just then. He was going to enjoy Rowan's company and the pleasure of immersing themselves in a dark, dangerous, sexy world where passion was the order of the day. He couldn't think of a better way to spend the day.

CHAPTER 9

“So, tell me about your family.”

Rowan looked up from the comic he was currently reading, head tilting with a smile. “You want to know about my family?”

Finn shrugged with a defensive glare. “What’s so strange about that?”

“Nothing...it’s sweet.” Rowan laughed when the word “sweet” worked to get Finn’s feathers ruffled. The man was determined to hang onto his tougher-than-nails façade, despite the fact the curtain had been pulled back days ago to reveal the man behind it.

“Fine, don’t tell me. I was just being polite.”

Rowan laughed and broke off in a fit of coughing before turning on his side and tugging the covers up over his shoulders as a chill swept him. “Liar. I don’t mind. I was just surprised is all.

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Lord, you're going to have get over this need to defend every sweet thing you do or say, Finnegan, I swear."

Ignoring the glare he got for that, Rowan yawned and stretched. "My family's...different, I guess. I'm very close with my parents, Mom especially, but hardly know the rest of my family. My folks are kind of the black sheep, and I guess I get the guilt by association tarring."

Finn scowled. "That's fucked."

"Blunt, but yeah, it is. My mom, Rachel, married my dad against her parents' wishes. She's, like, a blue-blood, born into money—southern royalty or something—and he was this hippie drifter who breezed through Baton Rouge one day. When he breezed back out, my mom was right beside him." Rowan smiled wistfully. "They were seventeen and it was very romantic."

Finn snorted and began putting the comics back in their sleeves. "Sounds irresponsible to me. Did they have a way to support themselves?"

Rowan grinned and shook his head. "Nope. They had love, a VW bus and my dad's guitar along with my mom's angel voice. They traveled and played music for tips and protested the war and injustices, then finally settled down, if you can call it that, and formed a commune. It's totally self-sufficient with animals and gardens and artists."

Finn gave him a look, brows arched. "You grew up in a hippie commune?"

"Yup. It was amazing. I go back a lot for visits and consider the rest of the residents my family, too. Maybe not by blood, but anyone can be born into a family. It's something special when you choose your own. Means more, I think." Rowan smiled and rested his head on the pillow, peering up at Finn. I'd like to choose Finn

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as family, he thought.

“And now you wander the country and play Good Samaritan? Fixing what’s broken, I suppose?”

Rowan let out a soft sigh. “I’m sorry about that. I was wrong about you. You don’t need to be fixed any more than I do.” He reached a hand from under the blankets to touch Finn’s arm. “You’re perfect just the way you are, Finnegan.” He breathed a sigh of relief when Finn cracked a small smile at him. “So what about you? What was it like when you were growing up?”

Finn set the box of now neatly stored comics on the floor and stretched out on his side, head propped in his hand and the thick silver waves of his hair coming loose from the hair tie he’d used to pull it back. He was so handsome Rowan’s stomach flipped in a way that had nothing to do with being sick.

“Well, let’s see. I had a pet dinosaur and the next-door neighbors, the Rubbles, were awfully nice.”

Rowan laughed and poked his shoulder. “Ass. Seriously. Tell me...I want to know.” He wanted to know everything about Finn.

Finn shifted to lie back against the pillows, and Rowan couldn’t resist scooting closer to cuddle up beside him. His heart squeezed when Finn’s strong arm came around him and it felt like he fit perfectly there.

“Different, obviously. My parents were pretty typical of the times. My mother stayed home and my dad worked a lot of hours doing construction. He always wanted to have his own company.”

Rowan smiled softly. “I bet he’d be proud of you. Working for yourself, so successful...”

Finn nodded, staring up at the ceiling, and a smile played on his lips. “I hope so. My mom was, once she got over the lack of a doctor in the family.”

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“Was?” Rowan’s heat sank.

Finn nodded. “She died two years ago. Cancer. Smoking was glamorous in those days, you know? Not like now where you can’t even light up in a bar anymore.” He shook his head, as if shaking off the cobwebs of the sad memory and smiled down at Rowan. “She’d have liked you. My mom was whimsical at heart.”

Rowan swallowed. “You’d have introduced me to her?”

Finn nodded. “Yeah. You’d have liked her, too. She had soft hands and smelled like vanilla and flowers.”

Rowan gave Finn a squeeze. “I’m sure I would have.” He was surprised by that. Finnegan would have wanted to introduce him to his mom. You didn’t do that kind of thing with just anyone...even Rowan knew that. For someone like Finn, he couldn’t mistake it as anything but a clear sign that maybe Finn’s feelings ran deeper than he’d supposed. Just the thought made his stomach flip again.

“You don’t have any brothers or sisters?” Finn asked.

Rowan shook his head, smiling. “Nope. My folks were both over forty when I was born. They decided I was more than enough to handle in their ‘old age’ and quit with just one. What about you?” This was nice, just the two of them, lazing in bed, talking. He was sure Finn could name on the fingers of one hand the number of times he’d done anything close to lazing.

“I have a brother.”

Rowan grinned, lifting his head. “You do? When do I get to meet him?” He knew immediately this wasn’t a topic Finnegan liked, and his heart ached. Didn’t the man have any joy in his life besides his writing?

“We don’t talk anymore. How about some more juice?”

Rowan sighed as Finn slipped out of bed, the spell of the comfortable companionship broken. “I’d like that, thank you,

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Finnegan.” When Finn had gone, Rowan dropped back onto the pillows and frowned at the wall. He didn’t think he’d ever known anyone who needed love more than Finnegan, or anyone who rejected the idea of it as much.

That thought made his heart ache. He cared about Finnegan, a great deal actually, but he was beginning to realize there was more here than he’d expected and maybe more than he could handle. The way Finn made him feel was, frankly, scary as hell. What was going to happen to Finn when Rowan got the itch to move on again, to find a new town or city or, hell, even country to explore?

He glanced up as Finn came back into the room bearing a tall glass of orange juice. Rowan had to smile, watching him carefully set it down on the nightstand before turning to smile at Rowan. He was such a good man, and he made Rowan feel like no one else ever had.

“I’m glad I got sick,” he murmured.

Finn’s brows lifted, the corner of his mouth twitching. “You are?”

Rowan nodded. “I am. I could get used to waking up in your bed.”

Finnegan stilled, his smile fading as a more serious, unreadable expression crossed his face instead. After a long moment, he nodded. “I could get used to it, too.”

* * *

Two days of comics and juice later, Rowan awoke feeling like he’d been run over by a Mack truck, alone in Finn’s huge bed and with a mouth that tasted like last week’s Chinese leftovers. *Ugh*. The fever was gone, though, and he felt a million times better. He

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sat up slowly, shielding his eyes from the light streaming through the windows and peered around the room. No sign of Finn, which wouldn't have surprised him except, from the looks of the bed, Finn had never been there.

Groaning, Rowan rolled to the edge and dropped to his feet, a little amused that the bed was so big he had to drop down a few inches to get out of it. Finn really was a giant. Now where was he?

Pausing to grab Finn's robe from the back of a chair beside the door, Rowan wrapped it around himself and headed out in search of his man, excess material dragging the floor behind him a bit.

He decided the best place to start would be where he'd found Finn the last time he'd awakened alone in the man's bed. They really would need to have a talk about the appropriateness of leaving one's guests to fend for themselves. Rowan was determined one of these days he was going to wake up in Finn's arms.

This morning, however, he made his way to the end of the upstairs hall and knocked on the door to Finn's office. No answer. Rowan's brows furrowed and he opened the door, peeking in, but the room was empty. *Huh.*

Rowan glanced around, the fanciful thought that Finn might be cooking him breakfast crossing his mind and he grinned, though he wasn't exactly holding his breath. A quick scurry down the stairs and through the foyer into the kitchen proved he was right not to get his hopes up, since it was empty and no smells of bacon and eggs filled the air.

Well damn it, where was the man?

A faint clanging sound caught his attention and Rowan stilled, turning in a slow circle to discern where it was coming from. After a minute, he followed the sound to a door beside the pantry and

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grinned. *The basement.* He was willing to bet he knew what that sound was and was about to find out just how Finn kept his body in such amazing shape.

Slowly, Rowan opened the door and began down the stairs. He didn't want to let Finn know he was there, not yet. To be honest, he was hoping for a little incognito ogling.

At the base of the stairs, he got his wish. The basement opened into a huge space, with a marked running track around the perimeter and the center housing various focus machines for each muscle group. It was state of the art, enormous and Rowan would have been hard pressed to believe such a set-up existed in a private home. Of course, it wasn't any private home, it was Finn's mansion and the basement looked to be almost the full dimensions of the house itself. *Wow.*

Finn was on one of the machines, a butterfly press if Rowan remembered his terminology. The weight on it looked like more than Rowan himself weighed, and Finn was pressing it like it was nothing. It sent a shiver down Rowan's spine, a very good shiver. There was something so sexy about a man who could break you in half if he wanted to, but whom you trusted never to hurt you.

He sighed, leaning against the wall at the base of the stairs, and watched, breath coming heavy and slow as arousal pooled deep in his stomach. Finn was slick with sweat, his hair damp at the temples and the nape where he'd pulled it back in a ponytail. The moisture darkened the gleaming silver, and Rowan could almost smell him, earthy and musky, vibrantly male.

He must have made a sound, though he didn't recall doing so, because Finn's head lifted and turned, and their eyes met across the room. Rowan's cock leapt inside his boxers and he took a step forward on pure instinct to be closer to the cause.

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What happened next was a blur Rowan wasn't sure, only that suddenly the weights were crashing down on the machine and Finn let out a shout of pain and gripped his arm.

Rowan's eyes widened and he darted forward, heart pounding. "Finnegan? Finnegan, are you alright?"

He got a nasty glare for that and a sharp shake of Finn's head. "No, fuck, over on the table are ice packs. Break one and bring it here."

Rowan scrambled to obey, guilt sweeping him as he realized what must have happened. He'd distracted Finnegan and the butterfly arms must have slipped, wrenching one of Finn's arms back with them when the weights dropped.

He grabbed the ice pack, cracking it on his knee to activate it and rushing back to Finn, who had disentangled himself from the machine and was holding his right shoulder with a grimace. Rowan eased the ice pack against his shoulder and winced in sympathy. "Is it bad?"

Finn shook his head tightly. "No, it'll be fine. I just pulled it. I can move it fine so it's not dislocated and nothing's torn. Just hurts like a bitch."

Rowan sighed in relief. "Oh, good." He blinked and then grinned sheepishly at the incredulous look Finn gave him. "Sorry, I meant good it's not bad, not good it... Well, anyway."

Finn snorted. "Yeah."

Rowan straightened with a smile. "I'm feeling better."

Finn gave him a look and a sigh. "I'm glad. That makes one of us."

Rowan reached out and lifted the ice pack, poking Finn's big bicep. No reaction except a lift of Finn's brows. "Doesn't seem to hurt anymore. It'll be alright." It couldn't be that bad, otherwise

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Rowan was sure his grumbly bear of a man would be far pricklier. He kept thinking of Finn as his man. He wondered if he ought to stop that or if Finn wouldn't mind.

"Thanks for the diagnosis, doc."

Rowan laughed and gathered up the robe around him, following Finn. "I'm just saying. You'd be glowering and cursing a lot more if you'd really hurt it."

Finn's lips quirked, and Rowan let out a sharp breath of relief. He wasn't angry and he wasn't kicking him out. That was a huge improvement over the last time Rowan had spent the night.

"You're smiling. What?"

Finn shrugged, shaking his head. "Nothing. You just say what you think, no internal censor. My guess is it gets you in trouble sometimes."

Rowan nodded. "Oh, yeah. I mean, I blurt stuff out at the best of times, but you should see me when I'm drunk." Then he laughed. "Oh, wait, you have!"

Finn didn't say anything to that, and Rowan's senses prickled. "What? Did I say something when I was drunk the other night?" He had very little recollection of their dinner after he'd spoken to Jake.

Finn stilled, his face going impassive, and then shook his head. "No, you were fine and went right to bed after a good long cussing Jake out session" Finn turned and began up the stairs.

Rowan frowned. It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out Finn was full of shit. What didn't he want to tell him? If something was up, it had to have been when he was drunk that night. Rowan hurried up the stairs after Finn, eyes narrowed on his wide back. "What aren't you telling me?"

Finn shook his head, turning into the kitchen and grabbing a

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bottle of water from the fridge, though when he glanced at Rowan, his blue eyes were a bit wary, as if he knew Rowan wasn't buying it.

"Tell me! If I did or said something ridiculous, at least give me the chance to apologize...Jesus." He was going to have to stop drinking, not that he did much, but lately it seemed he'd gotten tipsy more than his share of times.

Finn finally sighed, shaking his head. "It was nothing. You were half-asleep already, on the verge of passing out. It's no big deal. I didn't take it seriously."

Something in Finn's eyes put Rowan's nerves on edge. He wasn't being totally honest, which wasn't surprising for Finn, but Rowan sensed this was more than just the other man's natural reticence.

"Alright, then I won't take it seriously either. What did I say?"

Finn sighed heavily and leaned back against the counter for a moment before he shrugged. "Fine. You said I was old."

* * *

The lie tasted foul on his tongue and Finn felt like shit for it, but there was no way he was telling the other man the truth, that he'd smiled at Finn so sweetly and said he loved him. Rowan would either feel obligated to say it again, whether he felt it or not, or he'd be awkward and uncomfortable and leave abruptly. Neither of which Finn wanted, so he thought a lie was the best route.

Rowan frowned as if he wasn't entirely sure he believed it, before he smiled sheepishly and shook his head. "Well, you're not, and I apologize. I'm glad you didn't take it seriously. Drunk and half-asleep, who knows what kind of crazy things I say."

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Exactly. Finn felt better about the lie since Rowan's apology all but confirmed that the declaration wasn't to be believed. "It's fine. You passed out not five minutes later."

He turned and put the half-finished bottle of water back in the fridge, taking the few seconds to compose himself. So maybe there was some small part of him that had hoped...it was stupid, though. Rowan had been drunk, and Finn had known, even at the time, that the words had meant nothing.

Putting a smile on his face, Finn turned and leaned against the counter again. "So how do you feel? Need anything?"

Rowan shook his head. "No, I'm fine. Finnegan, where did you sleep last night?"

Finn shrugged. "I didn't."

"At all?"

Finn shook his head. "No."

"Why not?"

Finn smirked, pushing away from the counter and reaching up to tug his ponytail out. "Because you make sex sounds in your sleep."

Rowan let out a shocked gasp. "You sorry son of a bitch, I do not!" Then he paused, snickering a bit. "Do I?"

Finn nodded. "Yes, you do. And since you were definitely in no shape to follow through on the promises your moans were making, I spent the night working. Got a good bit done, too."

Rowan laughed. "Well, glad I could be of service. Sorry I cost you a night's sleep, though."

Finn grabbed an apple from the basket on the table and shrugged as if it didn't matter. "That's the joy of working from home and for myself, Rowan. I can spend the whole night working and just make up for it with a nap during the day." In truth, he

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didn't like to do that at all. He liked to keep to his schedule and his routine, but somehow, without even trying, Rowan threw it all into chaos.

Rowan followed him as he left the kitchen, Finn taking a bite of the apple, with his other hand holding the ice pack to his shoulder still. From past experience, he knew it'd be sore for the rest of the day and then be gone by the next morning and the next workout.

"So you're going to bed?"

Something in Rowan's voice made Finn pause, glancing over his shoulder. "Not right this minute, no." His eyes raked over the other man, wrapped in his robe that dwarfed him so completely. And wondered what Rowan was wearing under that robe, if anything. "Why?"

Rowan grinned wickedly. "I was thinking, with that arm of yours sore, you could maybe use a good massage. Loosen things up. You're so tense, Finnegan, you know? I know Reiki massage. I could give you one."

To turn that down would be a fool's act. And yet Finn still hesitated. Rowan was more than a great lay, more than a sometimes annoying distraction Finn couldn't seem to get rid of. He was special. Maybe not the most realistic of people, with his love/peace/hippie beliefs, but special because Rowan really believed the world was full of good people and, for God knew what reason, Rowan believed Finn was one of those good people.

He shook his head. "No, Rowan, thanks. I'm not kicking you out, because I don't want to get yelled at again, but I need to shower and change and then, yeah, I'm probably going to sleep." He paused, meeting Rowan's dark eyes. "Alone. Are you going to go talk to Jake?"

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Rowan blinked, drew his lower lip into his mouth and frowned. His gaze was assessing, and, after a moment, he nodded. “Yeah, I should. I hate fighting with him. Alright. I’ll be gone before you get out of the shower probably so come here and give me a kiss goodbye like a good lover does.”

Finn shook his head with a grin and bent to slide his good arm around Rowan’s waist, pulling him close and taking his lips in a slow, thorough kiss...the kind of kiss meant to have Rowan thinking about him all day long and lure the other man back to his door before the sun went down.

“Be careful on your way home. I’ll see you tonight?”

Rowan grinned wide and nodded. “Yeah, yeah, you definitely will.”

CHAPTER 10

Rowan exhaled anxiously as he unlocked the apartment door and stepped inside. “Hello?”

There was no answer and he sighed, relieved. He didn’t know if he wanted to talk to Jake or not. He knew they needed to discuss what was going on, but he hated confrontation and he didn’t see how this was going to end up being anything remotely close to pleasant.

Dropping his jacket over the back of the couch, Rowan kicked his shoes off and padded into the kitchen to grab some juice. His shift didn’t start until noon, so he had time to change, relax a little and have some breakfast before he headed back into town.

He hopped up onto the counter and sighed, taking a long drink. It’d never occurred to him that Jake thought of him as anything

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more than a friend, a roommate. It still shocked him that, not only was he wrong, but Jake had taken it upon himself to decide Rowan had no business seeing Finn. It made him angry all over again thinking about it, even while he tried to tell himself Jake had done it out of caring. He'd probably thought it was for Rowan's own good.

The sound of a door opening made him sit up straighter and his heart started to pound. *Fuck. Jake wasn't gone after all.* Rowan slid off the counter and took a deep breath as his friend came around the corner and froze at the sight of him.

"Hey." He hated this tension between them now. For the past three months, Rowan had considered Jake to be the closest person to him, and now it was as if they were standing on opposite sides of a canyon.

Jake averted his gaze. "Hey, I didn't hear you come in." There was a heavy pause and then Jake met his eyes, his own defiant. "I wasn't sure you were coming back."

And so it began. Rowan's stomach rolled a bit, but he told himself it was nothing but a misunderstanding and they could figure this out. Finn was important to Rowan, but so was Jake. He didn't want to have to choose one or the other and hoped he wouldn't have to.

"I wasn't sure I was going to either, but then I realized I had to. You're my best friend, Jake, and I don't want this to come between us."

Jake's jaw tightened and his eyes hardened in a way Rowan had never seen before. "This? You mean Finn. You don't want *Finn* to come between us."

Rowan swallowed hard and nodded. "Yes. Finnegan means a lot to me, but so do you, Jake. I'm not asking you to be his best

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friend. I'm asking you to be mine. I thought you were."

"I am! Jesus, Rowan, do you think I didn't know you'd be pissed if you found out what I did? But I had to do it because you're not thinking clearly, and I couldn't just sit by and let you make a mistake like this!"

Rowan did his best not to get worked up, taking a couple steps forward. If they were both furious and shouting at each other, nothing would get resolved. Still, the anger he could feel rolling off Jake made his insides quake. God, he hated fighting.

"Jake, I know you meant well, I do. But you had no right to say anything to Finnegan, let alone order him to stop seeing me. Did you even stop to think it wasn't his idea in the first place? It was mine! And believe me, if I want to keep seeing him, I will, whether you or he like it or not."

Jake glared, pressing his lips together and pushing past Rowan into the kitchen, and yanked the fridge door open. "You're an idiot, Rowan, and that's saying something because I think beneath all that flower power bullshit you spew, you're a pretty clever bastard. But in this case? You're an idiot. The guy's a creep, and you can't even see it!"

That did it. Rowan wasn't going to stand by and let Jake say things like that about Finn, no matter how angry Jake was, how jealous he was.

"No, but do you want to know what's creepy, Jake? It's not Finnegan being somewhat of a recluse, or even that he wouldn't know social skill if it bit him in the ass. What's *creepy* is you sneaking over to his house and trying to control my life! Making some grandstand ultimatum as if you had any place to do so. You're not my parent, you're not my lover and you're not my husband. You're my best friend, but that doesn't give you any right

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to me.”

Jake spun on his heel to face him, and Rowan took a step back, shocked by the pure vicious fury in his normally calm, cool green eyes.

“Fuck you, Rowan! You want to be this guy’s trick for a few weeks, go right ahead. If it makes you feel like some fucking philanthropist to bend over and take it from a creepy fucking hermit twice your age, go for it!” Jake reached into his pocket and threw Rowan’s cell phone on the counter. “I’m done trying to help you.”

Rowan’s eyes widened as he reached out and picked up his phone. “You took my phone? My God, Jake, how long did you plan your little interference?!”

Jake just glared at him, didn’t say a word, and shoved past him. Rowan jumped at the sound of the bedroom door slamming hard enough to rattle the hinges.

Hands shaking, he stuffed his cell phone in his pocket and strode for the door, grabbing his jacket and the hat Finn had loaned him on his way out the door. He couldn’t stay there one second longer, not knowing how furious Jake was, and apparently how sneaky he was. How could he not have known Jake had such viciousness in him?

Throat clogged, Rowan climbed onto his bike and took off. He knew Finn would be in bed by now and probably wouldn’t hear the gate buzzer to let him in, so instead Rowan turned his bike toward the center of town. He’d go hang out at the café with Jodie until his shift started. Maybe he’d be calmed down by the time Jake came in that afternoon for work.

* * *

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“So what are you going to do?” Jodie took a drag on her cigarette and casually flicked the ashes as she leaned against the back wall of the café. Her gaze was sympathetic.

Rowan shrugged. “I don’t know. I guess find another place to live. Maybe another job...” He sighed, leaning heavily against the wall beside Jodie and shaking his head. “Maybe I should just plain move.”

Jodie’s eyes widened. “What about Finn? Oh, Rowan, you really like him, and I swear it’s such a romantic story...you can’t just leave in the middle of it!” She stubbed out her cigarette and tucked the remainder in her pocket. She was always complaining that breaks weren’t long enough to finish a whole one. Rowan had given up convincing her to quit.

“I don’t know. I mean, I set out with Finnegan thinking he needed my help, you know? But it turns out, he really doesn’t. He’s fine, Jodie, and despite being a grouchy bastard, perfectly normal. He doesn’t need me.” Never had, if the truth be told. It stung a bit to realize.

“Maybe you need him, though.”

Rowan cut her a sharp glance. “What do you mean?”

She held her hands up with a laugh. “Hey, back down, tiger, it was just a suggestion. I don’t know, I mean you like him, he likes you, so why would you take off in the middle of that? What if it ended up leading to more?” She let out a soft sigh with a wistful smile. “This *is* Massachusetts after all. Maybe there’ll be wedding bells at the end.”

Rowan let out a laugh, shaking his head. “No. I can promise you there won’t be. Finnegan is... Yes, I care about him and, yes, I enjoy being with him and, God, yes, we have amazing sex.” He grinned at that and shrugged. “But that’s all it is. He’s so set in his

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ways. He has his life exactly the way he likes it, and I just don't think anymore it's my place to go changing that. If I even could."

"You already have." Jodie snorted, pushing away from the wall. "I gotta get back in. Are you coming?"

Rowan shook his head. "Not yet. I'll be there in a minute."

Jodie nodded and dipped inside, leaving Rowan alone save for his thoughts, none of which were very shiny at the moment.

Jodie was crazy. How had he changed Finn's life? He hadn't, not that he could tell. Sure, Finn had allowed him to be *in* his life, but to be a part of it, actively? He wasn't and he realized he never would be. He was okay with that, at least right now.

Would he always be, though? Sometime down the road, if things stayed the way they were, would he start wanting more than he could have with Finn? And what would happen then?

No, it just made sense, the more he thought about it, to go ahead and leave. He respected Finn's boundaries, and he wasn't going to put the other man in the position of having to hurt him because he knew it'd kill Finn to do it.

Rowan had to do it for him. There was no time like the present. Decided, he pushed away from the wall and took a deep breath before slipping inside again. He'd finish the day, give Marty the news, say goodbye to Jodie and then...say goodbye to Finn.

He didn't doubt that it was going to be the single hardest thing he'd ever done.

* * *

Finn stared at the computer screen and finally decided it just wasn't going to happen today. He reached for the stereo remote to turn off the music and then shut off the monitor as well. He sighed,

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leaning back in his chair, and glanced at the clock.

It was going on eight P.M. and he hadn't heard from Rowan since he'd left that morning. There wasn't anything special about that. Rowan had said he'd be by tonight, but hadn't said when. Yet Finn felt anxious and he wasn't sure why.

After pushing to his feet, Finn skirted the desk and hurried out into the hall, deciding he'd just go ahead and have dinner. He'd waited, hoping Rowan would be there and they could eat together, but obviously that wasn't going to happen. When did it start to matter to him? When had Rowan become a part of his life to the point the prospect of eating alone was depressing?

Whenever it'd happened, the deed was done. The man had wormed his way into Finn's life and carved a spot out for himself, despite Finn's protests. Finn would admit, though, that they'd been weak protests at best. There was something about Rowan that made it all but impossible to tell him no and mean it. Damned if he knew what it was, but there wasn't any denying Rowan when he set his mind to something and, for whatever reason, he'd set his mind to turning Finn's life upside down. He might never admit it, but Finn had decided, at some point, he liked it.

He was passing through the foyer, trying to decide between leftover chicken alfredo and a quick salad, when his cell phone began vibrating in his pocket. Much to his chagrin, his heart started pounding as he pulled it out, glancing at the touch screen. And damn, how his stomach flip-flopped when he saw Rowan's name and number there.

"Hello." He paused in the foyer and moved toward the door, glancing out to see if Rowan might be at the gate, realizing belatedly that he couldn't tell anyway, since it was too far away and dark.

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“Hey...are you busy?” There was a tense note to the other man’s voice that set Finn on edge.

He stilled. “No, I was just about to figure out something for dinner.” He didn’t say he’d been holding off waiting for just this call. When Rowan didn’t answer, Finn frowned. “Are you alright, Rowan?”

There was a moment’s pause and then a sigh. “Not really. Do you still want me to come over? I might not be very fit company.”

“Have we met? You’re telling *me* about not being fit company?” That got a soft laugh and the sound made Finn’s tension ease. “Come over. You’re always welcome, Rowan.”

“Good. I’m at the gate, so let me in?”

Finn chuckled and moved to the panel beside the door, punching in the code for the gate. “Come on around through the kitchen. I’ll be heating us up some of last night’s leftovers.” Rowan agreed and Finn hung up, setting the phone on the entryway table and moving towards the kitchen with a decided spring in his step. That was what the man did to him—made him grin like a fool and put a bounce in his step as if he were twenty years younger.

He’d just spooned a portion of the leftovers into a pan when there was a light knock at the kitchen side door. Finn frowned again. Since when did Rowan knock? Once again convinced something was wrong, Finn went to open the door.

His heart skipped a couple of beats when he got a look at Rowan, hair damp from the rain Finn hadn’t noticed had begun, and shadows under his eyes.

“You look like hell,” he stated, brows lifting. “Come in, before you get sick again.” He stepped back to allow Rowan to step in, shutting the door behind him. “I thought I loaned you a hat for just

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these occasions? For someone who likes to play Mr. Fix-It for everyone else, you're not so good at taking care of yourself."

Rowan didn't laugh, though, his face tightening and glancing down. "I forgot it at work. Well...my former work." He glanced up, taking a deep breath. "I quit my job."

Finn's brows lifted. "I see." He didn't—not really—but what could he say? Rowan was a grown man, despite his youthful appearance, and had demonstrated rather well that, despite some minor poor judgment like latching onto grumpy OCD hermits, he was capable of making his own decisions.

Rowan sighed and climbed onto a stool, dropping his chin in his hands and sighing again. Finn's lips quirked.

"Those are some awfully heavy sighs for such a little thing like yourself. Care to share?" He normally wouldn't dream of asking anyone to share anything with him, mostly because it kept them from asking him to do the same, but Rowan was different. Rowan was the type who needed to get things off his chest before they poisoned him from the inside out.

Much to Finn's surprise, Rowan shook his head. "No. I just...I came to say goodbye."

That stopped Finn dead in his tracks, turning slowly to meet Rowan's sorrowful dark eyes. He was serious. Something chipped inside Finn and he stiffened, straightening as he set the spoon down on the counter. "I see." Twice in as many minutes he'd told that lie. His jaw tightened and his smile was tight. "Well, then, I appreciate the courtesy, but it wasn't really necessary."

Rowan winced and shook his head, sitting up straighter. "Don't do that. Don't act like you don't care because I know you do, and so do I."

Finn's brows lifted. "I'd appreciate it if you didn't tell me what

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I do and do not feel, Rowan. You're under no obligation to continue seeing me. In fact, this is probably for the best."

Rowan glared at him. "It has nothing to do with me not wanting to see you, Finnegan. It's just...it's time for me to move on. I never stay in one place very long. I told you that."

Finn took a deep breath. "Rowan, you don't owe me an explanation. You came to say goodbye, you've said it, now it's best you go."

Rowan slid off the stool, coming around the island to stand in front of him, and Finn had all he could do not to take a step back. As if Rowan was somehow dangerous, all five-foot-four, one hundred and forty pounds of nothing that he was.

"You're not going to ask why? You're not going to ask me to stay?"

Finn snorted. "Is that why you came? Expecting me to beg you to hang around? Rowan, you're sadly mistaken if you thought that was going to happen."

Rowan shook his head. "No, I didn't think it would happen. Even though I know, no matter how much you deny it, that you want to. I'm sorry, Finnegan. I just... I wanted to help you."

That was the exact worst possible explanation he could have given. Finn scowled, eyes narrowing. "I'm not your charity case, Rowan. You're not the Good Samaritan, and I'm not lost and broken on the road."

* * *

Rowan had to smile at that, his heart aching. "Yes, you are, Finnegan. You're just so used to the pain you don't recognize it for what it is anymore." That got him a snarl in response, but Rowan

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held his ground. He wasn't going to walk away without holding a mirror up to his lover and making him look. "You're so tough and so hardened and you act like nothing touches you, but it's not true. You're lonely, Finnegan, and it's okay to admit it. You're not doing yourself any favors hiding it and yourself away like you do."

Finn shook his head. "Your parents must've smoked one too many joints when you were a baby, because you're delusional."

Rowan wished he were. Because that would mean Finn wasn't broken at all, that he didn't need Rowan, and Rowan could then leave without any guilt dogging his steps. As it was, though, what had begun as a simple chance to help someone who needed it had turned into Rowan losing sight of his purpose. He was realistic. He knew he and Finn had nothing in common. They were generations apart and light-years difference as far as where they were in their lives.

There was nothing holding Rowan here, nothing to give him hope they could actually become more than they were...except a feeling. And that feeling scared him. Maybe he was the one being afraid now, because what had made sense this evening, when he'd given his notice and left work, he now questioned.

"You're the one who's lonely, Rowan, and you're as blind as you accuse me of being." Finn's voice was tight, and Rowan blinked, surprised by the hard outburst.

"I don't know what you mean."

Finn snorted, turning and shutting off the stove with an angry flick of his wrist before turning back to face him and glowering. Jesus, did the man practice those glowers in the mirror or was it a natural gift?

"I think you do. I think you know exactly what I mean. Who's the one locking himself away, Rowan? Running from town to

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town, state to state, flitting away when things get a little too close, a little too personal?” Finn took a step closer, towering over Rowan and even still, with the anger rolling off the other man, Rowan didn’t feel threatened. He felt safer than he ever had. “How did you think you were going to ‘help’ me when you can’t even help yourself? How many times have you done this—made someone a pet project and when it got too hard, or maybe too easy, you took off?”

Rowan tensed, that barb hitting close to home. “I don’t run. I leave when I decide it’s time.” He didn’t run...did he? It’d made so much sense earlier. Given the situation with Jake, he didn’t feel comfortable being there anymore and he’d sort of concluded that, though Finn did shut the world out, that chosen behavior of Finn’s wasn’t something Rowan could fix or even should really. So he’d decided it was just time to move on. He’d always done that, followed his gut when it said, Time to go.

Was it his gut speaking now? Or was it his heart, afraid of what Finn made him feel? God, he felt like a hypocrite, but he didn’t know the answer.

“Maybe you’re right. Maybe things have gotten deeper, more personal, than I’d planned. Is that what you’re saying, Finnegan? If you’re going to ask me to be honest with myself, then you have to give me the same in return. Tell me, if I left would you miss me? Would it hurt you?” He reached up and placed a hand on the other man’s chest, meeting Finn’s gaze. “Would it hurt you here?”

Finn’s jaw tightened and he caught Rowan’s wrist, as if he was going to push his hand away and instead tugged, bringing him closer. “You want honesty, Rowan? I’ll give you honesty.”

Rowan knew what was coming before it happened and didn’t try to resist when Finn lowered his head and slanted firm lips

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across his own. Devastation. That was the only word for Finn's kisses, pure and utter devastation of the senses. Rowan forgot all about leaving, forgot all about still being wet from the rain, and lost himself in the simmering heat of Finn plundering his mouth like a goddamn pirate run amok.

His arms wound around Finn's shoulders and he wasn't at all surprised when Finn caught him around the waist and straightened, lifting him off his feet. He was going to have a talk with the man about his penchant for carrying him everywhere. Later. He'd talk to him about it later, when he wasn't being kissed mindless.

Moaning, Rowan chose to take advantage of the added height and wrapped his legs around Finn's hips, tilting his head and giving back as good as he was getting. And oh, it was good. It was heaven.

The kiss broke, but only so Finn could fist one hand in Rowan's hair and tug it back to move on to devastating kisses along his neck. Jesus, he was good at that. Twenty years of extra practice or not, Finn had a mouth that ought to be registered as a lethal weapon or at least come with a disclaimer: Warning—may be deadly. Handle with caution.

"Finnegan..." He didn't know what he'd intended to say, any thought disappearing with the sweep of Finn's tongue, rough wet velvet, against his pulse.

"Yes." Finn groaned, as if he somehow knew what Rowan had meant or been about to ask.

Rowan was glad one of them knew because he was unable to remember his own name at the moment.

Finn turned, striding from the kitchen, and Rowan had the vague, hazy thought that they'd already fucked on the couch. Finn wasn't headed for the couch because, apparently, distance didn't

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factor in this time. He clearly wanted home field advantage and proceeded to carry Rowan upstairs to the bedroom, tormenting him with tongue, teeth and lips on his neck the whole way.

By the time they tumbled back on the bed, Rowan was aching inside his jeans, lifting himself against Finn and he heard himself say please without any encouragement this time. It got the exact reaction it had the other day, a rough growl and Finn's teeth scraping his skin, raising sensual goose bumps down his spine. He'd beg all damn night if it got him reactions like that.

It was then Rowan realized he hadn't taken his jacket off, and he only realized it because Finn had to lift off him and kneel to tug the zipper down. He groaned, twisting to help Finn get it off, and finally it flew to land with a rustle on the floor somewhere toward the foot of the bed. Rowan didn't care if it'd landed on the moon because Finn was back, leaning over him, straddling him and kissing him deeply. Nothing registered but that and the burning need to get the rest of their clothes as gone as the jacket was.

Finn was of the same mind, it seemed, because as they kissed, the other man's big hands slid up under Rowan's T-shirt, splaying on his bare stomach and making him suck in a gasping breath. His hands were warm, rough at the fingertips and it made Rowan wonder hazily what kind of work Finn had done to get them that way. Rough like a working man's would be, not like a writer's should be.

Finn's tongue, sweeping through Rowan's mouth, stole that thought as well, and Rowan gave up, focusing entirely on Finn and the insane feelings he inspired. Had he planned to leave? To never have this again? Rowan decided then and there that he was a fucking fool.

"Finn," he gasped out, arching hard against him.

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Finn lifted his head, panting heavily. His eyes were hot, silvery blue and blazed down at him. “You’ve never called me that before.”

Rowan laughed, hips lifting, twisting impatiently. “Yeah, well, I’m running short on breath.”

Finn grinned, for the first time since he’d walked in the door. Rowan swore he’d never seen anyone who could change an entire scenario with just a crooked grin, but Finn could.

“Good. Let’s keep you that way.”

Finn didn’t have to worry, a single firm roll of the other man’s hips and what breath Rowan had left rushed from his lungs. He didn’t care if he never got it back, so long as Finn kept doing what he was doing.

And they weren’t even naked yet.

That needed to be remedied, and now. “Finn, if you don’t get me naked in the next two-point-five seconds, I might just have to hurt you.”

Finn chuckled, brows lifting. “Promises, promises, brat.”

The threat might have been weak, but it got him what he wanted, Finn tugging his shirt up and over his head, and Rowan returned the favor. He let out a rough breath, hands splaying and running over the other man’s chest.

“You have the most amazing body.”

“For my age.”

Rowan glanced up at the bite in Finn’s tone, shaking his head. “No. Period. No qualifying. Haven’t you figured out by now that your age doesn’t matter to me? What matters is how you make me feel.”

Finn’s eyes went instantly serious as he rocked his hips again. “How do I make you feel?”

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Rowan smiled slowly. "Free."

There was no crooked grin this time, just a slow smile that lit Rowan up from the inside. Better than sex was the look on Finn's face when Rowan said that. He meant it, too. He honestly didn't think he had it in him to lie to Finn, even when it might be what was best for them both. So he'd tell the truth and risk more for this man than he ever had for anyone...and pray it was worth it in the end.

Rowan was jarred from his mental navel-gazing and pulled right back into the moment when Finn abruptly slid down his body and turned the wicked power of that mouth loose on Rowan's nipples. One, then the other, fell victim to the torment, and Rowan arched, gasping the other man's name as desire surged through him.

Finn lifted his head, and Rowan let out a disappointed moan. That earned him another curve of Finn's lips and he decided he was going to do his best to see Finn smiling more often. It was as devastating as Finn's kisses.

"What are you grinning at?" he asked, moving impatiently beneath Finn.

"You. Were you aware you're so demanding?" Finn's eyes laughed at him, and Rowan couldn't find it in himself to mind at all.

He nodded, reaching down, and his fingers tugged Finn's jeans open, causing the other man's grin to widen and then falter when he slid one hand inside and palmed Finn's cock.

"I'm entirely aware...it's in your best interest to give me what I want." He gave the hard length in his hand a firm squeeze, savoring Finn's rough groan.

"I'm getting that impression," Finn agreed, batting his hand

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away.

Rowan would have protested, but the next instant Finn was shucking the jeans down and off, and Rowan let out an appreciative moan, eyes devouring him. He was gorgeous, his body big and hard, and dwarfed Rowan. He liked it that way, the way his stomach quivered when he reached up, ran a hand over Finn's chest and saw how small it was against Finn's much greater size. He'd never known anyone like Finn and counted himself lucky as hell to be right where he was.

"C'mere," he said, reaching up and sinking both hands into Finn's thick hair. No man should have such gorgeous hair on top of everything else, he thought vaguely as he tugged the man down and kissed him. Silky and heavy in Rowan's hands, it made him want to fist and pull and ride Finn hard. So he did just that, fisting his hand in Finn's hair, rolling them and rising up over the other man.

He glanced down and chuckled. "One of us is over-dressed."

"I was getting to that when you decided to pull my hair out," Finn said, hands sliding down to cradle Rowan's hips in them. "I've kept my hair for almost fifty years and one demanding man is going to end up tearing it all out."

Rowan laughed and bent low over Finn, tunneling his fingers into the heavy silver mass again. "It's not my fault...it begs for it."

He laughed again when Finn abruptly reversed their positions, rolling Rowan beneath him again and sliding down his body not to torment his nipples this time, but to tug open his jeans, dragging them and his boxers down his legs to be tossed aside.

"Oh, much better...naked is good."

Finn grinned and bent his head to nuzzle Rowan's hip. "Naked is very good."

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Rowan shivered hard, breath quickening. Finn's breath followed suit, fanning in short pants across his skin, sending goose bumps rippling, and ratcheting up the anticipation. God, Finn's mouth was so close. If he'd just...

And then he did. Finn turned his head, his eyes closing, and took Rowan's cock into his mouth.

Oh, sweet God in heaven. Rowan saw stars, or maybe it was just lack of oxygen, because every drop had been knocked from him when Finn's hot, wet mouth closed on him, taking him deep. Rowan swore he'd never known anything like what Finn was capable of causing inside him.

He couldn't look away, transfixed by the sight of Finn, his dark lashes heavy and thick against his cheekbones, his firm lips damp, and that fucking, gorgeous hair tumbling around his face and brushing Rowan's skin, leaving shivers in its wake with every movement Finn made.

"You're killing me." He groaned, tentatively rocking his hips up. "Fuck, Finn, don't toy with me, not this time. Please, I just want you inside me, now please."

As amazing as Finn's mouth was, Rowan was squirming and aching and empty. For some unknown, unnamed reason, the only thing he wanted more than his next breath was for Finn to cover him with his body and push inside him until it felt like they'd never be able to separate themselves from each other.

Finn lifted his head, and though Rowan couldn't help the soft sound of disappointment, he didn't have a chance to linger on the feeling. Finn did exactly what Rowan had been craving and covered him, kissed him and, at some point grabbed the lube because the next thing Rowan knew there were slick fingers nudging his entrance. He relaxed with a breathless moan into the

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other man's mouth.

The moan became a gasp and then a growl as those fingers sank inside, two of them, the pressure exquisite and setting off every bell and whistle inside Rowan. He tore his mouth away, driving his hips up to meet every hard thrust of Finn's fingers. "Yes, oh, fuck, yes, Finnegan."

Finn growled in return, nipping along Rowan's jaw as he thrust his fingers deep, shifting the angle to nudge Rowan's spot firmly. "Too much breath left...gotta fix that," he whispered roughly.

It took Rowan a few seconds to realize what Finn was talking about and then laughed, the sound cut off by a sharp cry when the other man focused in on his prostate and proceeded to drive him out of his fucking mind. "Finn...Finn...there, all fixed, now hurry up and fuck me!"

Finn withdrew his fingers with a low snarl, and the sound set Rowan on such a sharp edge that he trembled, heart thumping heavily in his chest as with quick, sure movements Finn tore open a condom and sheathed himself before moving over Rowan again and tossing one of his legs up against his chest. Rowan forgot how to breathe as he stared up into intense steel blue eyes, his body bowing up off the mattress when Finn snapped his hips, surging into him halfway with one hard thrust.

"Oh, fuck," he gasped out, eyes all but rolling back into his head as the euphoric combination of pleasure and burning discomfort just on the edge of pain swamped him.

"I am...hang on, Rowan."

It wasn't enough warning, not when his brain was taking twice as long as normal to fire those damn synapses. The hard thrust, followed by another and another and another, took him by surprise, but he caught on quick and decided Finn was what he ought to

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hold onto. Ride the storm rather than weather it, he'd always thought was best.

He wrapped his arms and one leg around Finn. Clinging to him and staring up at him. The other man's face was set in a hard, intent mask of desire and lust, and residual hurt and anger from earlier. It all blended to amount to intensity the likes of which Rowan didn't think he'd ever experienced before.

What began as hard and fast changed slowly, until Finn lowered Rowan's leg, braced himself on his elbows and their eyes locked, bodies moving in rhythm, slow and deep and powerful. Every thrust seemed to say something, and if neither of them consciously understood it, it became clear that subconsciously they did.

Finn shifted, and Rowan moved automatically to adjust. Rowan moaned, and Finn nodded in seeming agreement to an unspoken endearment. The climax wasn't nearly as important as the things that flowed between them. Rowan shuddered and closed his eyes, letting out a shaky, faint laugh when Finn brushed a kiss across his lids.

"Finnegan..."

Finn nodded, breath fanning across his lips. "I know. Shut up and kiss me, Rowan."

Wasn't that just like the man? Words made Finn uncomfortable, which was odd for a man who made his living with them. Rowan opened his eyes, grinned at him and kissed him, pouring every drop of emotion he felt into the kiss and hoping Finn understood it all. The fear, the desire, the longing...all of it, everything Rowan felt and didn't say because to do so would be putting them both on a spot they'd rather not be on.

Maybe Finn was right—maybe he did run. And maybe Rowan

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was right, too, that maybe this was only going to end up hurting them both. But maybe...maybe it was worth it even so.

Then the kiss changed. Finn tilted his head and took command of it, and Rowan went breathless and shaky as it deepened, hardened, grew as intense as the faster thrusts that now jolted their bodies.

If he could speak, he'd be begging. His cock pressed tightly between their stomachs, slick with sweat and pre-cum. The friction was maddening and just this side of not enough. He broke the kiss with a shuddering gasp and stared up at Finn, before reaching between them to grasp his own cock and stroke.

Finn's eyes followed his movement, and Rowan could see the flare in his eyes. Spurred by that reaction, Rowan brought his other hand up and shoved Finn's shoulder, urging him to roll and rolling with him so Finn now sprawled on the bed with Rowan straddling him.

Sitting up, he continued to rock his hips. Finn's big hands settled on them to steady him for the continuing hard thrusts. Rowan caught his lower lip in his teeth as he sat up, free hand braced back on Finn's thigh as he worked hard and fast on him and stroked in the same rhythm, never looking away from Finn's face. Watching his expressions as Finn watched *him* was as much a turn-on as the jacking off was.

"Finn...harder, Finn," he demanded, stomach tightening as the pleasure shot up with every movement.

Finn obeyed, reaching one hand up to splay on Rowan's chest, skimming it down his arched torso. There was something so worshipful, almost awed in the touch, it brought Rowan right to his knees. He'd happily give anything to always feel a touch just like that from this man.

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“More, Rowan...give me more.”

Rowan’s eyes widened slightly and at first he was at a loss, unsure what Finn was asking for. The fact he was asking made Rowan want to give him whatever it was.

“Tell me what you want, Finn. Anything, and it’s yours I swear.”

Finn’s face stilled, even if his body didn’t. As the orgasm raced closer for them both, Rowan watched Finn and waited breathlessly for the answer, any answer. What could he give the man who had everything?

Finn sat up abruptly, both arms wrapping around Rowan and one hand sinking into his hair. “Stay.”

Rowan couldn’t reply, because just then Finn took his mouth in a hard kiss and took his body in an orgasm neither could escape. Hard, mind-numbing, soul-shaking, it rippled through them like a single living thing, not two separate bodily functions. Rowan came harder than he’d ever come before and the feel of Finn, throbbing and jerking inside him only added to the astounding pleasure of it.

Stay...Stay...Stay... The word rang over and over in his otherwise empty, devoid of thought mind. *Stay*. Could he? Did he dare? It was an answer he didn’t have.

CHAPTER 11

It had been a very long night. Finn frowned and stared at his computer screen, wondering where Rowan was. He wasn't still sleeping Finn knew because Rowan had poked his head in earlier to ask if he planned to eat breakfast with him. Finn had made the excuse he had some work to do, but promised to come down for lunch.

So, Rowan was still there.

How long, though? How long would Rowan stay before he began thinking that leaving would be best again? A day, a week, a month? It was funny that at the beginning, less than two weeks ago now, he'd have given his last Edgar award to get rid of the man, and now he sat here wondering whether he had what it took to make him stay.

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He pushed away from the desk and crossed to the window, folding his arms over his chest. This was ridiculous. He ought to just suck it up, be a man, and go ask Rowan to stay. He'd asked last night—demanded to be more accurate—but Rowan hadn't promised. He hadn't disagreed with the demand, but neither had he said, "Yes, I'll stay."

::So quit being a pussy and go ask. He'll stay::

Finn wasn't nearly as confident as his muse was.

Still, it was not his style to stand around and wait for things to happen that he wanted. He made them happen. So he strode back to the desk, shut off his monitor and headed off in search of his lover.

Finn found him in the sitting room downstairs, sprawled on his stomach on the couch with a book in hand. Finn paused in the doorway.

"What are you reading?"

Rowan startled a bit and turned his head to look at Finn over his shoulder. He smiled. "You."

"Me?" He came over and sat down next to Rowan on the couch, reaching out to pluck the paperback from his hand. A grin spread across his face. "The first Jacob Wilde book."

::He's got good taste::. The damn muse sounded so smug.

Rowan nodded, shaking back the shaggy hair that had spilled across his forehead. "Yeah. I figured it was time I did. I've heard about them from my dad for so long and now... Well, yeah." He shrugged and took the book back, casting Finn a sideways look.

"And?"

Rowan lifted his brows. "And what?"

"And what do you think?" Finn would readily admit that more important than any review or bestseller list was what Rowan

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thought. He hadn't been so anxious since the first time he'd given his mother a copy of his first book, waiting to hear whether she thought he was a hack or not. This was almost worse.

Rowan beamed at him. "I think it's amazing."

::Very good taste, I told you.::

Finn couldn't stop himself from remembering the other night, when a drunken Rowan had beamed at him almost the same way and told him he loved him...right before passing out. Finn was far too old to be caught believing drunken men and their promises, but he found himself wanting to believe Rowan, wanting to believe that, drunk or not, his young lover had meant those words.

::What would you do if he did mean them, Finn? Say them back?:: The damn muse's voice was taunting with its British accent in his head. *::We all know the stoic Finnegan Clark doesn't need or want anyone's love. Let alone return it, right?::*

Ordinarily, and even a day or two ago, Finn would have agreed. But last night, when Rowan had stood there in his kitchen and announced he was leaving and not returning, Finn had come to the belated conclusion that, despite nearly forty years of trying to be, he wasn't an island after all. Or, if he was, his island had just gotten another resident. One Finn wanted to make permanent.

"You told me you loved me the other night."

::Smooth way to ease into the conversation.:: But for once, the mocking voice wasn't so mocking. More like breathless, like it had been waiting for this as long as Finn had.

Rowan sat up, blinking at him. "What?" He looked adorably confused as he tilted his head, brows furrowed.

"You heard me. You were drunk." Finn took a breath. "I think you meant it, though."

Rowan glanced down, seeming to be trying to figure out how

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they'd gone from Jacob Wilde books to confessions he didn't remember making. Part of Finn had, he supposed, hoped that Rowan did remember. Apparently not.

"Did you mean it, Rowan?"

The other man looked up, his dark brown eyes confused. "I don't know, Finnegan. Maybe I do. I care about you, you make me feel things no one else has...but you scare me, too."

Finn's brows lifted and Rowan rushed to continue.

"Not physically. I'm not an idiot and, believe me, you might be big, but I think I could still outrun you." Rowan raked a hand through his hair, visibly shaken. "I've never given any thought to settling down in one place, Finnegan. That's not...that's not who I am, or at least I didn't think it was."

"But?" There was clearly a "but" in there, and Finn was about to lose his mind waiting for it.

Rowan glanced up at him. "But you asked me to stay last night and my first instinct was to say yes. To stay with you for as long as you'd let me."

Finn's breath hitched and he tilted his head. "You said you always listen to your instincts, Rowan."

The other man nodded. "I do."

"Then stay." Lord knew he had more than enough room, and Rowan didn't have any place now with Jake behaving the way he had. It was like everything kind of aligned to make it make sense. *But...* Did he want Rowan to stay because it made sense or because he couldn't be happy with anything else? He knew the answer to that and frowned.

Rowan looked startled by the sudden scowl. "You don't look like you like the idea much, Finnegan."

Finn shook his head, moving to sit on the couch beside him.

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“That’s not it. I want you to stay. Not because it makes sense or is convenient, but because you want to, because more than anyplace else you want to be here with me. If you don’t, then say no, don’t stay, and walk away if you want.”

There was silence and Finn thought it was the longest seconds of his life before Rowan looked up at him and a slow smile curved his lips.

“No more pushing me away?”

Finn’s brows shot up. “In case you haven’t noticed, I stopped doing that a while ago.”

“Oh, really?” His tone told Finn that Rowan had any number of recent incidents to refute that statement.

Damn. Finn let out a sigh. He hadn’t realized he was doing it even, had been convinced he was letting Rowan in. Maybe he wasn’t. “It’s going to take some time, Rowan. I’m not going to change overnight and I can pretty much guarantee I’m never going to be this touchy-feely, emotional dumping sort of guy.” He met Rowan’s eyes. “But I’m going to try.”

Rowan all but glowed. Christ, he was so beautiful when he smiled it made Finn want to keep that smile in place as much as possible. Which was so corny, he very nearly gave himself a cavity on the saccharine sweetness of it all.

“So, you’ll clear me out a drawer then?”

Finn didn’t miss how Rowan had sidestepped the love thing. But that was alright. He was staying. Finn was going to have a lot of opportunity to make sure if that drunken declaration hadn’t been true before, it would be. Eventually.

* * *

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Rowan tucked his legs up against his chest, Finn's robe draping him completely, and frowned at the dresser. Frowned at it like it'd just kicked his puppy, or spilled wine on his new shoes. The top two drawers had been cleared out and now sat empty, sachets inside, waiting for Rowan to fill them with his things.

Except, well...he had no things. His things were still at the apartment. The one with Jake in it, and Rowan had no desire to go get his stuff and likely face a blowout fight when Jake realized Rowan was moving in with Finn.

Blowing out a puff of air, Rowan propped his chin on his knees and glared at the dresser now.

"Do I need to separate you two?"

Rowan glanced up and snorted, shaking his head with a roll of his eyes. "Shut up. I'm just trying to figure out a way to get all my stuff here without having to run into Jake and probably get into a fight."

Finn chuckled. "Well, I don't think orange juice and *Witchblade* comics are going to be of any help in curing this."

Rowan sighed, and Finn's brows furrowed. "I don't want you to go alone, Rowan."

"What?" Rowan sat up straighter. "Why?"

"What you told me about Jake stealing your cell phone, planning it so he knew you wouldn't make it here the other morning...it makes me nervous. I don't think I like the idea of you being around him alone." Finn shrugged. "It's not my place to tell you what to do, I know. I'm just worried."

And that in and of itself was a miracle to Rowan. Finnegan Clark, as non-demonstrative as they came, was worried about him. It was very sweet, even if Finn would likely scowl and grumble if Rowan said so.

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“Well, I don’t know how else I’m supposed to get my things.” Finn wasn’t going to go and get them, that was for sure. Jodie was doing her best not to get in the middle of this thing between Rowan and Jake.

“Can you go pack up while Jake is at work, then I could hire a couple moving guys to load it all up?”

Rowan nodded with a sigh. “I guess that’s the best way. Honestly, I’m not too keen on having a run-in with Jake myself.” He turned, stretching out on his side and reaching to tug on Finn’s shirt with a smile. “You done working?” Finn had taken the day off, so to speak, but had gone an hour ago to make a few calls and answer some emails he couldn’t ignore.

Finn nodded, his head tilting at the gleam in Rowan’s eyes. “I distinctly remember someone insisting I had to get this next book finished because you were dying to read the next installment.”

Rowan laughed and gave a hard yank, pulling Finn down and wrapping his arms around the other man’s neck. “I changed my mind. Sue me.”

Finn shook his head with a laugh. “No, I don’t think I will. The things I’d want to do to you in a court of law would get me thrown into solitary for the rest of my days. Short though they may be at my age.”

Then Finn kissed him, before Rowan could tease him about being old. When Finn kissed him, old was the last thing on Rowan’s mind. Heat, sex, passion were all things that flooded him and stole coherent thought from his mind.

When the kiss broke, Rowan panted breathlessly and flopped back on the pillow with a sharp exhale. “If you’re the old man, why am I the one out of breath?”

Finn grinned and tugged the comforter aside, one big hand

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sliding inside the robe to rest on Rowan's stomach, warm and commanding. "Because I'm that good. You don't have to keep up, baby, just hold on."

Well, that was easy. All Rowan wanted to do was hold onto Finn. He wrapped his arms around the other man's neck with a grin, arching as his lover's big fingers pulled open the tie on the robe and let it fall open. "Like this?"

Finn nodded, swallowing visibly. "Just like that."

Rowan loved that, the way Finn would react so strongly to the simplest move, smallest gesture he made. It was a powerful feeling, to have a man like Finn in the palm of his hand. He'd never really thought about it before, but people always assumed the bottom was the weaker. Rowan didn't feel weak right then, with the strong man over him touching him with trembling fingers. He felt incredibly powerful.

"Finnegan," he whispered, and the other man looked up from where his gaze had been caressing Rowan's now bared stomach.

"Yeah?"

"I did mean it." Rowan's heart was pounding like a drum against his ribs.

Finn stilled, brows furrowing. "Mean what?"

"I love you." He might have been drunk the first time, but the only thing he was drunk on this time was Finn's kisses. He'd been a fool to think he ever could walk away. He knew now if Finn hadn't stopped him, he'd have crumbled before he got ten feet anyway.

Now all he needed was the big lug's answer. A response of some kind. Instead of, you know, staring at him like he'd grown a second head. Third, if you counted the one currently pressed against Finn's hip.

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“Finnegan?” Rowan laughed, brows lifting slightly. “This is the part where you say you love me, too.” His smile grew and he wrapped his arms around his lover’s neck. “I know you do.”

Finn let out a breath he’d been holding and Rowan wanted to kiss the man as the tough expression he assumed was belied by the warmth in his eyes. “If you know, then why are you nagging me to say it?”

“Because I want to hear it. Come on. Tell me.”

Finn rolled his eyes, but his lips twitched in affection and humor. “Fine. I do. Happy?”

Rowan laughed. “I think the ‘I dos’ come much later. Let’s start with something a little easier. I love you...” He lifted his brows again, letting the last word drift off expectantly.

“I love you, too.”

It was so simple—no teasing, no feigned gruffness—just four words Rowan knew were anything but easy for Finn to say, let alone feel. He absolutely melted inside.

“You’re not as tough as you like to pretend, John Finnegan.”

Finn’s brows lifted. “Googled me finally, did you?”

Rowan laughed and shoved his shoulder. “Yes. Why didn’t you tell me Finnegan Clark was just your pen name? I should know the real name of the man I love, shouldn’t I?”

Finn shrugged, bending to brush a kiss across Rowan’s jaw. “I’ve been Finn Clark so long I barely remember I have another name.” When Finn lifted his head, his lips curved in a smile so open and unshadowed it took Rowan’s breath away. “You can just call me yours, if you like.”

“Oh, I like. I definitely like. C’mere, mine.” Rowan lifted his head and took the kiss his lips had been aching for, rolling them so he straddled his lover. Finn’s big hands slid down his arms and

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shed the robe from him, leaving him naked. When he broke the kiss, Rowan sat up, desire rushing him as Finn's narrowed eyes raked over him, the look as possessive as a touch of those strong hands. "Finnegan?"

Finn didn't look up, his gaze following the path of his fingertips along Rowan's bare side. "Yeah?"

Rowan leaned over him again, hands sliding up his chest and into his hair to fist there hard. That got Finn's attention, his eyes meeting Rowan's. "Are you planning on fucking me, old man?"

Finn glared at him in exasperation. "Not if you keep calling me old, brat."

"Not if you keep these damn clothes on either." Rowan circled his hips and reminded Finn that there was denim between them, a fact neither of them was going to appreciate when the need got too much.

* * *

Finn did his best to hide the smile. Rowan's mouth, sassy and smart, was one of the things he'd loved from the beginning. Not that he'd ever admit it...no need to encourage him.

Rowan circled his hips again, his brows furrowed in consternation, and Finn reached around to give one firm ass cheek a smack.

"If you want me naked so badly, imp, why don't you get me that way?" The thought of those soft little hands on him made Finn's breath shorten and speed up. The wicked grin Rowan gave him half a second later did the same, and he wondered, not for the first time, how it was he'd managed, so far, to keep up with a libido half his age.

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Rowan grasped the hem of Finn's shirt, tugging it up and over his head in one rushed motion, then tossing it aside. The look that crossed Rowan's face as his gaze roamed over his now bare chest made Finn's ego puff up like a teenager's. It's impossible, he thought, to worry about whether I measure up when the most beautiful young man I've ever been with looks at me like he wanted to have me for breakfast. "Like what you see?" And still his pride wanted more.

Rowan nodded with a soft sigh. "Oh, yes." His dark eyes sparkled when he glanced up at Finn. "But you know that. Fishing for compliments?"

Finn shrugged, unable to keep his hands to himself and reaching out to skim one down Rowan's sleek side. "Maybe."

Rowan laughed. "I must be slacking, then, if you still need to ask whether I like what I see." He shook his head, leaning down to brush a kiss to Finn's lips. "I love everything about you, head to toe and everywhere in between. Here especially," he murmured, one hand resting on Finn's chest just above his heart.

Before Finn could respond, likely in far less romantic terms, Rowan had moved on, scooting down to begin working on the button and zipper of his jeans, and Finn forgot about romance and could only think of the pleasure that was coming. He wondered if he'd ever get used to it, then thought not. Rowan was special, what they had was special, and he didn't *want* to get used to it. He wanted always to be stunned and awed by what they shared, in bed and out.

As Rowan tugged the jeans down enough to free his cock, Finn let out the breath he hadn't realized he was holding. He propped himself up on his elbows and watched as Rowan nuzzled, his breath hot and moist against Finn's hard length. His dark eyes

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lifted to meet Finn's gaze and the wickedness in the look made his stomach jump like a teenager about to get his first taste of carnal pleasures.

But Rowan didn't put that beautiful mouth on him. He smiled instead, this sweet, charming smile that made every warning bell in Finn's brain go off. The brat was up to something.

"What?" he asked, brows lifting.

Rowan shook his head, his soft lips brushing against the shaft of Finn's cock with the movement. "Nothing."

"Liar."

That got him a cheeky grin. "Maybe." Rowan tilted his head, peering up at Finn through his lashes, nestled comfortably between Finn's spread thighs. "I have an idea."

Finn let out a short laugh. "Oh, that can't bode well. What's the idea?"

Rowan smiled and tilted his head. "I couldn't help noticing...you have a huge bathtub in there." He nodded toward the bathroom. "Can I assume it has whirlpool jets, too?"

Finn's brows lifted and a smile curved his lips. "You can."

Rowan grinned wider. "Grab a condom. I'll grab the lube. You and I are going for a dip, baby."

Finn chuckled as he sat up, taking the opportunity to shed his jeans and underwear before grabbing a condom as ordered. "A dip? It's not a pool."

"Might as well be. Look at the size of this thing!" Rowan gestured to the tub as Finn followed him into the bathroom.

"I've seen it...it's custom, like my bed. I'm six-seven, Rowan, so everything's got to be a bit bigger than average."

Rowan spun on his heel with a wicked laugh, gaze raking over Finn and giving him a saucy grin. "Everything?"

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Finn gave Rowan's ass a slap as he moved past him to the tub and leaned over to turn on the water and test the temperature before setting the plug. He turned back to find Rowan rummaging in a basket of bath stuff that'd been on his bathroom counter for God knew how long. He thought the maid had put it there because it looked nice.

"Oh, no, Rowan. I don't ever—" Before he could inform Rowan that he never used the stuff, his young lover had turned to him with a bright smile and a bottle in his hand that had flowers on it. *Flowers?* "Oh, no, you don't. Put that back."

"But it's right here...why's it here if you never use it? We should use it." Rowan unscrewed the cap and took a sniff, holding it out. "Here, smell..."

Finn did take the bottle, only to drop it in the trashcan and scoop up the now sputtering indignantly Rowan.

"Finnegan!"

"Rowan!" Finn mocked with a smile, climbing into the tub with his sweetly wriggling burden.

"You're an ass."

Finn snorted as he settled in the steaming water, Rowan in his lap. "You keep saying that. It's not exactly newsworthy, brat."

He needn't have bothered because Rowan had already forgotten about the bubble bath and turned in Finn's lap to straddle his thighs, arms sliding around his neck. "This is nice."

Finn swallowed hard, inclined to agree, if his mouth hadn't just gone dry as a bone the instant his cock settled snugly against the cleft of Rowan's ass. Nope, it was never going to get old. He was sure of it.

"Where're the bubbles?"

Finn blinked, shaking his head. "The ones I threw away?"

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Rowan laughed softly, hips shifting against him. “Distracted, Finnegan? No, the whirlpool bubbles. Where’s the switch to turn them on?”

“Oh. Oh, they come on automatically when the water gets to the right level.”

“Oh.” Rowan circled his hips again, and Finn responded by sliding both hands to cup his ass and tug him closer. “Finnegan?”

“Yeah?” Hopefully, not another difficult question.

“Kiss me?”

Ah, good. Easy question with a very easy answer. Finn leaned in and took Rowan’s smiling, damp lips in a heated kiss, one hand sliding from his ass up the wet arch of his back to sink into his hair and hold him for the kiss.

Rowan clung and kissed him back, pressing as close against Finn as he could, and Finn held him there, leaning forward as if he could get him closer still, when there wasn’t room for a breath between them.

When their lips parted, Finn slid his mouth down Rowan’s arched throat, tasting the salt of his skin, the cool, clean drops of water that had splashed on it. His pulse raced against Finn’s lips and Finn couldn’t stop himself from scraping his teeth there, tongue soothing the slight sting.

“Finnegan,” Rowan gasped, and Finn’s pride surged.

He’d put that breathless quality in Rowan’s voice. The most gorgeous young man he’d ever met went weak like that because of him.

He felt the jets kick in and reached over blindly to shut off the water, mouth never leaving Rowan’s neck, moving to his collarbone, the sleek round of his shoulder. Rowan was slim, but with enough muscle to keep him from tipping over into skinny

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territory. His stomach was hard and flat, his hands soft but stronger than they looked and those legs of his... Finn could spend an eternity in their firm vise.

"You're evil," Rowan murmured, circling his hips as Finn tormented him with his mouth.

"I am not," Finn countered, chuckling against Rowan's damp skin.

"Maybe not evil...but close."

Finn lifted his head, meeting Rowan's gaze and smiling. "I can't help that the bath inspires slow and drawn out. Can I? You want water going everywhere if I fuck you hard?"

Rowan snickered, pressing closer. "I want you inside me. What you do once you're there is up to you." He slid one hand down between them to wrap around Finn's cock, making his hips surge upward. "Come inside, Finnegan."

The whispered demand had the effect Finn knew Rowan had been aiming for. He could no more deny his lover than he could not draw a breath. He shifted, lifting Rowan easily and turning him to face away.

"Lean forward," he murmured, and Rowan shivered, obeying. The water came just up to the bottom curve of his ass as Rowan leaned forward on all fours, straddling Finn's legs and facing the opposite end of the tub. Finn let out a soft sigh. "So pretty."

Rowan laughed and glanced over his shoulder. "Yes, now do something with it, wretched man."

That mouth. Finn made a decision he was going to have that wicked, smart mouth on *him* before they were done, but right now he was far more interested in getting his mouth on Rowan.

Leaning forward, both hands came to Rowan's hips. It struck him sometimes how much larger than Rowan he was. His hands

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covered a fair portion of his ass, thumbs spreading the firm cheeks and revealing the pretty, contracting entrance.

Rowan's breath caught and held, his eyes hooded as he looked back at Finn. Finn met his gaze and smiled, then bent his head and gave a long, slow sweep with his tongue, reveling in the delighted shudder and soft moan it earned him.

Rowan's skin was damp and sleek, flawlessly golden and silky under his hands. Finn swept his tongue again, this time focusing in on his target, and Rowan trembled, rocking slightly. It made Finn think about the future, oddly. This was his future now. Rowan and the strange sunshine he brought with him. Finn had lived in the dark for so long, he hadn't figured ever to care. But Rowan made the sunshine something to look forward to.

"Do you know what you are?" he asked, voice muffled against the warm cleft of Rowan's ass.

Rowan laughed, the sound a bit edgy with the desire that raced between them. "You're asking me questions now? I don't know, horny?"

Finn growled and gave him a slap on his damp butt for that. "Brat. I was going to be romantic. See if I do that again."

Rowan laughed, the sound so full of happiness Finn pulled him back to give him a hard squeeze before putting him back in place. He didn't have the right words anyway, he didn't think. Unusual, but from the beginning Rowan had stolen his sense from him and he was beginning to think the other man would never give it back.

One hand resting on the lovely dip of Rowan's back, Finn focused on his ass, so close and so absolutely perfect. His eyes darted up to find Rowan still looking over his shoulder, watching. Finn held the gaze as he brought one finger up and gently, slowly, sank it inside his lover.

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It was an incredible thing to watch, the flicker of expressions across Rowan's face, the pleasure and subtle changes in his eyes. They widened, then fell half-closed when he moaned his pleasure. His lips curved, in a knowing smile as old as time and sex itself. It was a Mona Lisa smile, satisfied, slightly secretive and a bit taunting. As if there was more to discover and Rowan was daring him to do so.

Finn didn't say a word and didn't look away either. He'd never watched, and the sight was enthralling. His finger turned, twisted inside Rowan, seeking out the spot that would make him go weak. Finn wanted to see that most of all.

Rowan seemed to sense what Finn was after and his breath caught, lips parting slightly in anticipation. When Finn found the small bundle of nerves, the first touch was breathtaking to watch.

Rowan's whimper was knee-weakening, making Finn glad he was sitting down. His lover's legs shifted a bit farther apart and Finn had never been so glad for a large tub as he was when those slim thighs spread and Rowan's ass tipped up in offering.

"Jesus." His voice wasn't much more than a breath.

"What?" Rowan whispered, blinking as he circled his hips.

Finn shook his head. "You're so beautiful, you have no idea."

Rowan smiled at the compliment, teeth catching the corner of his lower lip, and it was such a seductive look Finn feared his heart was going to just give out right there.

Instead, he leaned forward and traced his tongue around his finger, sweeping the smooth, sleek skin as he slowly thrust his finger, and Rowan responded with more whimpers and soft moans. It seemed every other time they'd fucked... But this was different. Making love wasn't something Finn had ever figured he'd experience and yet here it was, having fallen into his lap when he

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hadn't expected nor wanted it.

And now he couldn't see himself ever living without it, without Rowan.

* * *

Just when Rowan thought he couldn't adore the man any more than he already did, Finn went and touched him like he was in awe. It was humbling because, of all the things Rowan knew about himself, he knew he wasn't even close to perfect. Finn made him feel like he was, though.

It might have taken Rowan a while to get to this place, where he was ready for what Finn offered and for what Finn expected of him, but now he was here, Rowan couldn't imagine another way to be.

The physical pleasure racing through him in shivering waves was secondary to the love that filled him to near overflowing. He braced one hand on the edge of the tub, the other reaching back to cover Finn's on his hip. Immediately, that big hand shifted, turning to lace their fingers, and Rowan's heart swelled. He would never have imagined that a man so gruff and large could be so gentle at heart. It was a contradiction of the best kind.

"Finnegan," he murmured, and Finn turned his head to press a kiss to the curve where ass met thigh.

"Yes?"

Oh, he sounded so deliciously wicked. Yet another contradiction that made Rowan's stomach flip over, the way Finn could be so tender and in the same breath make him weak with the desire to submit everything to him.

"I want you inside me, Finnegan." He looked back and met

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warm, blue-gray eyes. "Please."

Finn's warm eyes turned hot in an instant.

He didn't have long to wait, as Finn withdrew his finger and stretched over the edge of the tub to grab the lube and condom from the soft rug. When he turned back, Rowan turned as well, to face him on his knees and reached out to cover Finn's hand that held the condom.

"It's just us, right? I mean...we're going to be together now, just me and you." He took the condom from Finn's hand and gave him a questioning look. If Finn would prefer they keep using them, they would, but...

Finn smiled and nodded. "Yeah, it's just us." Finn hesitated, then continued. "Have you been tested?"

Rowan nodded. "Right before I moved here."

"Six months ago for me, so if you'd rather wait for a fresh one..."

Rowan shook his head and tossed the condom back to the floor as he slid forward to straddle his lover's thighs again. "Six months is recent enough." No more talk of tests and diseases, he thought. His heart beat even harder now, if possible. He couldn't remember the last time he'd had a man natural, skin on skin, nothing between them. For some reason, it seemed so much more intimate. He trembled as his arms came around Finn's broad shoulders. "I love you."

Finnegan's eyes softened and he leaned in to brush a kiss to Rowan's parted lips. "I love you, too."

And then there were no need for words, as Finn squeezed the lube onto his fingers and Rowan lifted up to his knees. The first push of two big fingers slick inside him had Rowan wobbling, leaning heavily against his lover. Finn held him, mouth finding his

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neck as his fingers thrust slow and deep, nudging past his spot, but not actually hitting it. It was a beautiful torment.

Within seconds, Rowan was shifting and twisting against him, panting harder with every motion of those talented, ruthless fingers. “Finn...”

He could feel the broad grin against his neck and Finn lifted his head. “There it is.”

Rowan wasn’t sure what he meant at first, then grinned himself. “Are you only ever going to fuck me when I stop calling you by your full name?” he teased. “I’ve caught on now, so what if I start calling you Finn from the get go?”

Finn’s lips quirked as he withdrew his fingers. “I’ll find another way to know that you’re needing me just enough.”

Rowan had no doubt Finn would, too. He shivered as his lover’s hands settled on his hips and urged him down. Rowan reached behind him to grasp Finn’s cock and guide it into position, their eyes meeting as Rowan eased down, taking Finn in inch by inch.

The stretch and burn was a sweet discomfort, one he welcomed and sank into happily. It was a small price to pay for the pleasure to follow. And it did follow. Not a second later, the sting was gone and Finn was guiding him to move over him.

Rowan’s hands curled on Finn’s shoulders, their eyes never looking away as Rowan rode him. He took Rowan’s breath away, the harsh lines of his face softened, while his eyes were more intense than ever. He could lose himself in those fierce, steel blue eyes.

The water slapped against the side of the tub, and it was like a subtle music to their otherwise silent coming together. Panting breaths, soft moans and the splash of water as Rowan moved on

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him.

It seemed to take forever and seemed to happen so fast at the same time. Rowan lost track of how long they stayed that way—lazy, deep rolls of his hips and wicked clenching of muscles with every movement. All he knew was he'd never felt anything like it.

And then it was ending, their faces so close together, panting harder, lips parted, eyes locked. Finn's hand slid from Rowan's hip to his cock and stroked in the same sleek movements. It didn't take much more than that before they came, a shuddering gasp accompanied by widening eyes and tightening hands.

It was the most amazing thing Rowan had ever experienced and as he sagged against Finn and reveled in the soothing stroke of his hands up and down his back, Rowan smiled. This was home.

CHAPTER 12

Rowan couldn't put it off anymore. He'd spent the last day-and-a-half coming up with excuses not to go get his stuff, but when he'd been washing the same outfit for the third day in a row and using Finn's spare toothbrush, he'd come to the decision he wasn't going to be able to avoid it forever. He'd checked with Jodie and Jake had to be at work at noon so he wouldn't be home. Rowan could simply leave a note, along with an envelope with his half of the rent for the next two months as a sort of apology for skipping out, and that would be that.

It wasn't as if he never wanted to see Jake again, but with everything that had happened, and with the way Jake felt about Rowan's relationship with Finn, it was just best they give each other some space.

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So, as he climbed the stairs leading up to their second-floor apartment, Rowan's heart was pounding. He pulled out his key and had just slipped it in the lock when the door was flung open. He took a step back instinctively, startled, and blinked at Jake, who stood in the doorway. *Shit. Not working, after all.*

"You're alright."

Rowan immediately felt guilty. He hadn't even considered that Jake might be worried. With being sick and everything developing so quickly the past few days at Finn's, Rowan admitted the last thing on his mind had been checking in with his friend. If they were still friends, that is.

He nodded. "Yeah. I'm sorry, I've been—"

"At Finn's." Jake's voice was cool, and Rowan stiffened.

"Yes." He lifted his brows and gestured into the apartment. "Can I come in?"

Jake shrugged and turned, heading back inside with the door left open. Rowan took that as a yes and stepped in, shutting the door behind him.

"Listen, Jake, I'm sorry. I should have let you know everything was—"

"Jodie said you'd left. Marty said you quit. I tried calling your cell over and over, and you never answered." Jake gave him a baleful look over his shoulder. "I thought you were gone for good."

Rowan sighed, looking away. "I said I was sorry. Look, I just came to get my things."

Jake turned, his eyes widening. "So you really are leaving? Where are you gonna run to this time, Rowan? California, back to Mommy and Daddy and the band of hippies?"

Rowan shook his head, ignoring the sting of the barb. "No. I'm

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not running anywhere. I'm moving in with Finnegan."

That was apparently the last answer Jake had been expecting, his blue eyes widening even farther, mouth opening and closing a couple times as if trying to form words but unsure what to say.

Rowan didn't give him a chance, shaking his head and brushing past him. "I won't be very long, since it's not like I have a lot anyway." He didn't figure it'd take more than one trip to take his clothes, music, some keepsakes, but that was it. The bed and dresser had come with the room when he'd rented it from Jake. He'd never been one to collect things, not with his vagabond lifestyle.

Not anymore, though, he thought with a smile. For the first time in his life, the idea of putting down roots didn't scare him. In fact, it downright made him giddy with excitement.

It was probably the giddiness, as well as the desire to get in and out of this uncomfortable situation as quickly as possible, that kept him from noticing that his best friend hadn't said a word. Rowan was just stretching up to grab the suitcase on the top shelf of his closet when the world went hazy in a sharp explosion of pain at the back of his head.

He crumpled, confused, and as the darkness slid in he heard Jake's voice.

"I'm sorry, Rowan. But I love you."

And then all he knew was silence and black.

* * *

Finn frowned at the clock on his computer. He pushed to his feet and strode to the window, peering out toward the front gate, even though he couldn't make anything out from the distance

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anyway.

It'd been three hours since Rowan had left to get his stuff from Jake's and not only wasn't he back yet, he also hadn't answered his cell phone. Now, there were any number of reasons for that, from the battery dying to Rowan deciding to stop by the bakery and say hi to Jodie and losing track of time.

However, Finn's gut was telling him otherwise. Something was wrong.

Shaking his head, he turned and sat back down at the desk, doing a quick Google for the bakery phone number. At least he could find out if Rowan had been there.

"Have Your Cake & Eat It, Too! How can I help you?" The cheery female voice chirped in his ear.

"May I speak with Jodie, please?"

"This is."

He took a deep breath. "This is Finnegan Clark. I'm Rowan's..." He paused, unsure how to refer to himself.

It turned out he needn't bother. "Oh, I know who you are!" There was a cheeky smile in her voice, and Finn's lips quirked.

"I was calling to see if Rowan had stopped by there? He's a bit late coming...home." *Home*. He liked the sound of that and for the first time he recognized that's what this was now. Their home.

"Um...no, he hasn't been by here that I know of. I'd ask Jake, but he didn't show for his noon shift."

Something inside Finn chilled. He told himself he was being ridiculous. He'd written one too many mysteries and was seeing danger where there was none. Jake wasn't a dangerous person. Rowan had the instincts to know if he was. It was coincidence that Rowan was unreachable and Jake also happened to have missed his shift. That was all—coincidence.

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"Is everything alright?" Jodie asked, sounding worried. Damn, he hadn't intended to upset the girl.

He forced a relaxed tone. "I'm sure everything's fine. I was just checking, but he's probably..." *Probably what?* Rowan wasn't the type to disappear without saying anything. Well, maybe in the past he might have up and gone, but now? Finn reassured himself that Rowan wouldn't run now.

"Mr. Clark?"

::Something's wrong. It's no coincidence, jackass.::

For once, Finn didn't argue with his muse. Jacob Wilde might just be a character in a book, but he was also the best detective in his world.

"Jodie, if Jake were to want to take Rowan somewhere, to talk, where would they go? I'm sure everything is fine. Perhaps they've gone somewhere to work things out?"

There was silence on the other end and Finn had to stop himself from snarling at the poor girl. *Hurry, hurry. Something's not right.*

"Well...we spent a lot of time when Rowan first came at the beach. Bonfires and parties, you know. They might have gone there. I know Jake still goes there a lot, even though it's cold now."

Bingo. Finn pushed to his feet. "Where, Jodie? Which beach?"

"Are you sure everything's—"

"Jodie! Which beach, honey?"

"Long Point. The lighthouse on the east end is where we always hung out."

Finn was already heading down the stairs. "Thank you. I'll have Rowan give you a call when we get back, not to worry." He hung up, tossing the phone on the entryway table and snatching a pair of keys from the drawer there. With Rowan driving the Mustang, the only other vehicle Finn had was his Harley. He

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hadn't driven it in nearly twenty years now.

He stilled just inside the front door, palms sweating.

::This is ridiculous. Rowan might be in trouble. And you're standing here sweating over going outside? What the hell's the matter with you?::

Finn tightened his jaw. Rowan had asked him once why he hid himself away from the world. The answer was that there was nothing out there better or more important than what he had here, in the safety of his own little world. That was no longer true. Rowan was more important.

Fisting his fingers around the keys, Finn grabbed his coat out of the closet and strode determinedly out the front door.

* * *

"Have you lost your mind?" Rowan scowled across the room at Jake. Rope bound his hands to the chair he sat in. This was insane! His head ached, and he was pissed. More pissed than afraid, though there was some of that, too.

Jake met his eyes and shrugged, looking a little lost. "Maybe." If he weren't so mad at his friend right now, Rowan might feel sorry for him, he sounded so forlorn.

"What are you doing, Jake? This isn't you. What're you going to do, keep me here until I decide I'm not in love with Finnegan anymore?" He lifted his brows in question. "It's going to be a very, very long wait. You have eternity on your hands?"

Jake's jaw tightened and his eyes narrowed. "You're not in love with him."

Rowan bristled, glaring at the other man. "Fuck you, Jake! You don't get to tell me how I feel."

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“Even if you do...” Jake shook his head, pushing away from the wall and approaching. “He doesn’t love you.”

That hurt, and Rowan looked up at Jake when he stopped just in front of him. “Yes, he does. And even if he doesn’t, even if this is going to end with me and a broken heart, that’s not your problem, Jake. It’s mine, and you don’t have any right to try and stop it from happening.”

“You barely know him, Rowan! Just listen to me—you’re gonna be twenty-five this year, so isn’t it time you stopped acting like the world is all candy flowers and rainbows? You can’t just...” Jake stopped, shaking his head. “I just want you to stop and think. And if this is what it takes, then so be it. You’ve been on this crazy rollercoaster ever since you took that damn delivery, and I’m not gonna let you go over the edge without trying to stop you.”

Rowan clamped his lips shut, glancing away. How dare Jake do this? He kept thinking that Finn must be worried by now. He could see the sun was going down. It made his stomach knot to think of what Finn must be thinking, what he was doing. Had he called someone? Was he looking for him?

“He’s not going to come, you know.”

Rowan’s gaze snapped back to Jake, seething. “You better hope he doesn’t, Jake.”

“He hasn’t left that fucking compound of his for years. If he loved you, he’d come for you, wouldn’t he?” Jake crouched down in front of Rowan, looking up at him. “I would.”

It was the sadness in Jake’s voice that penetrated the anger. This was his best friend, and he couldn’t truly believe Jake intended to harm him. “Jake, why didn’t you tell me how you felt?”

Jake shrugged, straightening and stuffing his hands in his

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pockets. “Because I didn’t really know how I felt for sure until...you were his already. I had more fun with you than anyone else ever. I loved being with you even if we were just watching stupid *Batman* reruns. You made me laugh, and I wanted to be with you all the time. I never figured that was more than just best friend stuff.”

Jake sighed and crossed to one of the curved windows, peering out at the calm water just beyond the shore. “And then suddenly all you could talk about was Finn, all you could think about was Finn...and I was jealous. But by the time I figured out why, it was too late. He had you already and now...”

Rowan bit his lower lip. “Jake, I do love you. You’re still my best friend, but this has to stop. You have to know this isn’t going to help.”

“Maybe.” He turned and met Rowan’s sympathetic gaze. “But if the person you love was about to make the worst mistake of his life, wouldn’t you do anything to try and stop that?”

Rowan shook his head. “Not this. Sometimes, Jake, you just have to let people make their own mistakes because demands and scare tactics only make them dig their heels in. If this is a mistake, loving Finnegan, being with him...then I’m going to need you more than ever, won’t I? But if this is how you’re going to behave, who am I going to go to if I need someone?”

Jake seemed to think about that and a surge of hope rose in Rowan’s chest.

“Jake. Jake, listen to me. I believe you intended the best today, I really do. But this is crazy and it has to stop. Let me go.”

Jake frowned and took a step forward, and Rowan was already planning how to hide that this had ever happened so Jake didn’t get in trouble when the roar of a motorcycle penetrated his awareness.

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Jake must have heard it, too, and turned, frowning.

Abruptly the roar went silent and then another roar echoed from outside.

“Jake! I’ve written over a hundred murder scenes, boy. I *know* what to do with the body!”

Rowan’s eyes widened and he wasn’t sure whether to laugh or be peeved that Finn had come riding to the rescue. Five more minutes and there might not have been a rescue needed, damn it.

Then he realized...Finn had come. He’d left his safe, familiar bubble and come. For him. Laughing or being peeved was no longer an option when all he could do was melt inside. That man loved him crazy.

“He’s nuts! No way am I letting you go with him!” Jake turned on Rowan as if to say, See, I told you so!

Well, hell. So much for negotiation. Shit was about to hit the fan.

CHAPTER 13

Finn stared at the silent lighthouse. He leaned over and peered into Jake's car, stomach lurching at the sight of rope sitting on the front seat. *Son of a bitch, if he's hurt Rowan...*

He stormed toward the lighthouse, fury roiling in him. He was gonna kill the bastard, friend or no friend.

"Stop right there!" Jake's voice shouted out.

Finn glared at the window it'd come from and didn't pause his swift stride.

"I said stop!"

Finn reached the door and flung it open, pinning the little pissant with an enraged glare. "I don't take orders from cowardly children."

Then his eyes fell on Rowan, tied to a chair across the room

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and looking at him like he wasn't sure whether to hug him or hit him. Finn hoped he'd go for hug because he was pretty sure once he got his hands on the man he wasn't going to let go for a while. A long while.

He began toward Rowan only to find his path blocked by the either very brave or very stupid Jake. Finn stilled, eyes narrowing even more, and Jake had the good sense to take a step back.

"Finnegan," Rowan said in a soothing tone.

Finn didn't look away from Jake. "You want to get out of my way. Trust me." It was the only warning the boy was going to get.

"No, what I want is you to go back to your fucking cave and leave Rowan alone."

"Am I invisible here?" Rowan's voice rang with frustration, and Finn would have smiled if he weren't so pissed.

"Not gonna happen, Jake. Even if I did, you think he'd choose you after today? Huh? Think again." He made to step past him, but the young man made the mistake of trying to block his path again. Finn had him by the collar and slammed against the wall in the next instant, their faces inches apart. "Rowan might be a pacifist, Jake, but I'm not. You try to get between me and what's mine again and you're gonna be minus a few necessary extremities. Clear?"

He didn't wait for Jake's answer, releasing him abruptly and turning to stride to Rowan. He crouched down and began tugging at the ropes knotted at his wrists, lifting his gaze to meet Rowan's. "Are you alright?"

Rowan nodded. "I'm fine...headache, but fine."

Finn's head turned to pin Jake with another glare. "You hit him?" He snarled, teeth gritting against the urge to throttle the bastard again. He got the ropes loose and had Rowan in his arms

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the next second. Ah, damn, it felt so good to hold him. It'd only been about four hours since the last time, but the worry made it feel like a year.

"Hey," Rowan murmured, arms tight around his shoulders.

"Hey, yourself." Finn rose and, still with one arm around Rowan, turned on Jake and pulled out his cell phone. "Sit down. I'm calling the cops."

Rowan gasped and shook his head, reaching out to close his hand over Finn's on the cell. "No, Finnegan, don't."

Finn's brows shot up. "He *kidnapped* you, assaulted you. Rowan, you can't just—"

"Yes, I can. Finnegan, please let me handle this." Rowan smiled up at him. "I love that you came riding to the rescue, old man, but I'm a big boy."

Finn's jaw clenched, but he nodded. "Alright." He intended to have words with the little prick privately, though, unwilling to trust Rowan's instincts the guy was done being a fucking fool.

"Jake, I want you to promise me something. I'm not going to call the cops, but I need to know you're going to let this go." Rowan laced his fingers with Finn's and took a step toward Jake. "You said if he loved me, he'd come. He's here, Jake, and while I didn't need the proof, you seem to."

Finn said nothing as Jake looked between them, his brows knitted.

"I can make you happy, too," Jake murmured, imploring Rowan with a look. "I— Okay, I know I fucked up today, maybe for a while now, but..."

Rowan shook his head. "No buts, Jake. This isn't going to happen again, I want you to promise me. I want us to be friends, but if you can't accept this..."

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Jake swallowed hard, not saying anything for a long moment. “I never had a chance, did I?”

Finn wanted to smack the kid with a reality stick, but a squeeze of Rowan’s hand kept him silent. This was Rowan’s fight. Finn was just the one-man army backing him up.

“No. I’m sorry, Jake, but the sooner you realize that, the better. Finnegan didn’t steal me from you, and without him, things between us wouldn’t be any different than they are now.” Rowan gave him a gentle smile. “Friends, that’s all, but it’s very important to me. You’re important to me. I’d like it if that were enough for both of us.”

Jake looked like he’d been kicked in the gut and, for a second, Finn pitied him. He knew it’d rip his heart out to ever hear those words from Rowan. He could just imagine how Jake was feeling. Then he remembered the young man had knocked Rowan unconscious and Finn stopped pitying him and was back to wanting to kick his ass.

Finally, Jake reluctantly nodded. “I still don’t like it, but...if you’re happy, Rowan, that’s what matters most. And if he’ll take care of you like you deserve.”

Finn didn’t like Rowan seeking Jake’s approval, but the feeling was mitigated by the fact he knew Jake’s approval wasn’t required, simply desired. Rowan was his and nothing, least of all Jake’s hurt feelings, was going to change that.

He squeezed Rowan’s hand. “Let’s go home, Rowan.” He wanted his beautiful man back under his roof, in his arms, where he could check over every inch of him and make sure he really was okay. And then maybe squeeze him a lot because, fuck, it’d ended well, but the afternoon had been scary like only a couple other moments in his entire life had been.

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Rowan glanced up at him. "My stuff...and the car, it's all still at the apartment."

Finn narrowed his eyes at Jake. "I'll have someone go get your things. I'm sure Jake won't mind making sure they get everything." His expression dared Jake to so much as breathe an argument.

Jake had the brains to nod. "Sure."

Finn nodded. "Good. C'mon, we'll pick up the car on the way." He might have rather had Rowan spend the whole drive home clinging to him on the back of his Harley, but halfway was good, too.

Just as they reached the door, Jake reached a hand out and touched Rowan's arm. "I really am sorry, Rowan. I just...wanted what's best for you."

Rowan smiled and Finn was once again amazed at his man's capacity for compassion and caring. "I know. That's Finnegan, trust me. It is."

The way he said it, with such conviction and not an ounce of doubt made Finn's heart ache. Once outside, he dragged Rowan into his arms and bent to kiss him. Rowan seemed to melt into his arms, kissing him back, and when the kiss broke, Finn got a primal thrill at the dazed look in his eyes.

Finn brushed his fingers across Rowan's soft, now kiss-swollen lips. "Go wait for me by the bike. I'll be right there."

Rowan's eyes flicked to the lighthouse, then back, for a second seeming as if he was going to protest. Then he nodded, giving Finn a significant look. "He meant well. Try to remember that." Rowan lifted up onto tiptoes and kissed his cheek. "And I'm yours. Remember that, too."

Finn watched him walk away, taking a breath and then turning

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back to the lighthouse, striding inside. Jake scrambled back several steps, but Finn kept coming until the young man was back against the wall with Finn mere inches from him, glowering down at him.

"I'm not going to call the cops because Rowan asked me not to. I'm not going to break your neck because Rowan asked me not to. I'm going to turn around and walk out that door and take Rowan home...because he asked me to."

Finn leaned down, one hand on either side of the shaking young man as their eyes met. "But I want you to listen to me and listen very closely. If you *ever*—and I do mean ever—lay a hand on him again, it'll take a hell of a lot more than him asking to keep me from tearing your arms off and beating you bloody with them." He gave Jake a cold smile. "Are we clear?"

Jake nodded, looking like he just might piss himself. "Yes, sir."

Finn nodded, straightened and gave Jake's cheek a pat that might have been harder than necessary. "Good."

All he wanted to do now was get Rowan back to the house, naked preferably, and remind himself over and over that he hadn't lost him. As he approached the bike, Finn made a decision.

"How about we leave the car for tonight? Let's go home."

Rowan's whole face softened and he nodded emphatically. "God, yes. Please."

Finn climbed onto the bike, handing Rowan the sole helmet. "Put that on. Your hard head's taken enough abuse today," he teased, and it had just the effect he'd wanted, which was a beautiful smile wreathing Rowan's face.

The bike roared to life with a kick and a twist of his wrist as Rowan climbed on behind him, his lean, hard body pressed tight against Finn's back, legs hugging Finn's hips and his long-fingered hands stretched across on his stomach as he held on.

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It was going to be a very long ride.

* * *

“Are you sure you’re alright?”

They were lying in bed, naked and sated for the moment. Rowan smiled and tilted his head back to glance up at Finn.

“I’m sure. Head will probably ache for a day or two, but I’m fine.” He nestled closer, shaking his head when Finn scowled. “None of that.”

“None of what?” Finn asked, jaw tight.

Rowan laughed and reached up to pat his face. “That. The scowling and the clenched jaw. Look at me.” Finn did, and Rowan shifted to stretch out atop him, like his own personal, rather lumpy mattress. “If I wasn’t fine, do you think what we just did would’ve been even half as amazing?”

Finn sighed and shrugged, the movement nearly toppling Rowan from his perch. “No. But still...”

“No buts.” Rowan placed a finger against Finn’s lips. Lord, he had a beautiful mouth. The man drove him to his knees, in every way. Literally, most often. “You were very knight in shining armor today, you know.” He laughed out loud at the squirming expression that flashed across Finn’s face. His man didn’t like being complimented. Too bad, he was going to have to get used to it.

“Not really.”

“Yes, really! Riding to the rescue on your Harley...and by the way, why didn’t I know you had a Harley?” Finn looked deadly sinful good on it, too. Big and bad and sexy as hell.

Finn grinned and rolled so Rowan stretched under him. “You

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think I'm gonna tell you all my secrets in one go?"

"Nope." Rowan smiled and reached up to push back the heavy fall of Finn's silver hair. "But I'm going to very much enjoy figuring you out bit by bit."

Finn lifted his brows. "How long do you suppose that'll take?"

Rowan shrugged. "However long it is doesn't matter. We've got all the time in the world." For the first time in his life, that thought didn't scare Rowan. He had roots now, settled firmly in Finn's soil, and it felt good.

Better than good, it felt perfect.

FAE SUTHERLAND

Fae Sutherland has always dreamed of being a published author, starting off her writing career at age 11 with a horrific “Monkees” fan fiction that will, luckily for all, never see the light of day. At age 34, she has since progressed to more serious writing, though always keeping that dash of irreverence and fun.

Fae tells the stories that the muses give her, but though she is multi-published both solo and jointly, she truly does prefer writing with her co-author Marguerite Labbe best. When she’s not working hard on writing new stories to make her readers sweat or slaving over edits for completed work, she spends her time on website and graphic design, being with her closest friends and playing The Sims 2 until the wee hours of the morning.

Find out more about Fae (and Marguerite Labbe, her occasional co-author) at their website: www.chasethedream.net

* * *

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