



BREAKING LOGAN'S LAWS

Cameron Dane

LoSeId

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www.loose-id.com

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Prologue

Three years ago

Nate Jordan finished shaving the last of the stubble from his jaw, studied his pathetic visage in the mirror, and cursed the razor in his hand.

The dark patches of purple around his eye, down his cheek, and across his jaw had started turning yellow and puke green around the edges, indicating the next stage in the healing process. Rather than focus on that, Nate stared at his reflection, and his stomach churned violently.

You got rid of the one thing covering some of it up.

Seeing the result of his absolute stupidity in all its glory made Nate sick in more ways than one. He couldn't help remembering the split second of euphoric joy that had lifted him into the clouds when he'd thought he read attraction in his best friend Grady's beautiful blue eyes. Then, with one touch of his lips to Grady's, horror and terror became Nate's world. Fists flew at his face and rained blows all over his body, leaving him bloody, and bruising him black-and-blue. He'd thought Grady cared about him, but Grady's actions had proven Nate terribly wrong.

You deserved it. You don't kiss another man out of the blue. No matter how much you thought it looked like he wanted it.

Wetness blurred Nate's vision. He spun away from the mirror, hating the weakness, and then cursed the fast move as stiffness and soreness throbbed through his bruised body. His heart hurt as much as his body did, reminding him he had lost so much more than his best friend in the last few days.

Stop it! Quit being a pussy. Nate exited the bathroom into an unfamiliar apartment that looked out over a city he didn't know.

One good thing had come from his beating and subsequent need to leave Minnesota. A new life in Chicago. With a sister he hadn't spoken to in over a decade.

Kasey. Nate picked up the old stack of letters tied in ribbon, his chest burning with new tightness. *I never knew she still loved me when she ran away all those years ago.*

Shit, Nate had to laugh. Because he'd thought Kasey had abandoned their family, he'd deliberately not searched for information about her. Until a few days ago—when his mother had finally shared the letters his sister had written to him

over the years—he'd had no idea Kasey had become a private investigator, now co-owned a prestigious security firm, and had even married.

Nate wandered around her husband Canin's apartment, amazed a guy he'd never even met until yesterday now allowed him to temporarily live in his place. Canin treated Nate, a total stranger, decently. Just because.

Better than your own father did.

Pulling up short, Nate swore at himself for slipping to a place of self-pity. The past didn't matter anymore. He had a roof over his head, a fucking nice one too, and he had a chance to get to know his sister again.

A heavy banging on the door suddenly reverberated through the apartment, followed by a rough masculine voice. "Get the fuck up, Quinn, and let me in! It's Logan! It's fucking cold, and I don't want to run by myself."

As Nate jogged across the apartment, he found himself biting down a smile in response to the surly stranger outside. He swung open the door, and his lips parted to say hello. With one look at the man on the other side, Nate's voice fled.

Sweet mother. His stomach flipped at the vision of masculinity before him.

"Jesus, Canin, you were supposed..." The dark-haired man in navy sweats and a snug gray sweatshirt braced his weight against the doorjamb. He narrowed his gaze, and it looked like stalks of grass invaded his irises. "You're not Canin."

It took a handful of heartbeats for Nate to swallow moisture back into his throat. "I-I'm Nate." He maintained such a death grip on the door his fingertips hurt. "Canin's brother-in-law."

The man quirked up a thick, dark brow. "Oh?"

God. Get a grip on yourself, idiot. He's just a guy.

Nate commanded his fingers to unclench. "Sorry, yeah. Kasey's my sister, but I just met Canin yesterday. I can tell by the look on your face you've never heard of me." Heat rushed to Nate's cheeks. "I'm not from here. That's probably why."

"Right. Right." Licking the edge of his lip, the guy nodded. "I forgot Canin moved into Kasey's place. I haven't gotten used to the change in his marriage status. My name is Logan Jeffries. I'm a friend of Canin's. May I come inside for a minute?" With his hand planted on the door frame, Logan leaned over the threshold. "I could use something to drink."

"Yeah, sure." Nate automatically stepped aside and allowed Logan entry. "There's not much in the kitchen right now." After shutting the door, Nate walked backward, his eyes on Logan. The man circled the open living room, pausing here and there to examine stuff on an end table or bookshelf. "I could get you a glass of water."

"That would be good," Logan replied. "May I use the bathroom?" Now at the short hallway leading to the bedrooms and bathroom, Logan paused and looked up at Nate. "I know where it is."

"Go for it." Nate plastered a genial smile on his face. Under his breath, he added, "Don't forget to check my bag while you're back there."

Logan poked his head out from around the corner. "What was that?"

"Nothing." Nate burned with red again; he could feel it. Busying his jittery hands, he grabbed a glass and turned the tap on full blast. "Just talking to myself."

The guy barely tipped his mouth up at the edge. "Right." He kept his focus on Nate, past a point that made Nate's breathing a little uneasy. Then Logan abruptly said, "Be right back," and disappeared down the hall.

While Logan took care of business—and Nate seriously doubted that included taking a piss—Nate paced the length of the small, high-tech kitchen, mumbling to himself about having been a lot of things in his twenty-five years, well, truthfully, not many things very exciting, but nobody had ever accused him of being a squatter or a thief. This Logan person clearly thought he was.

His ears straining, Nate heard the toilet flush. When Logan reappeared, Nate stood with the man's water, the glass stretched out in offering.

Once Logan accepted it and took a drink, Nate blurted, "I haven't stolen anything. I'm allowed to be here." He rushed into the living room to grab the phone. "You can call Canin to check if you want."

"No need." Logan's even tone, after the casual way he'd cased the joint, kept Nate's nerves on high alert. "I believe you are Kasey's brother." The man took another sip of his water and then lifted the glass in Nate's direction. "Are you okay?"

"Why?" Nate asked. Then he caught his reflection in the large window behind where Logan stood. "Oh." His heart sank. *Loser. He pities you.* Not only had Logan's presence temporarily taken Nate's mind off his bruised face, but he'd also forgotten he wasn't wearing a shirt. Proof of his beating screamed in reds, purples, greens, and yellows. "Yeah, I'm fine."

"Are you sure?" Logan came closer, and he barely had to dip down to put them on eye level. "I work in law enforcement; I'm a homicide detective. I can help you, Nate."

Openly studying Nate's injuries, Logan reached out and fingered his jaw. At first contact, Nate flinched and jerked away. Part of his response had been a jolt of awareness at this man's rough hand on him. But equally, Nate had flashed on a big fist slamming into his face, and his heart had jumped into his throat.

"Sorry," Nate murmured. For once, he thanked the bruising that might cover at least some of his furious blushing. "I didn't mean anything by pulling away from you."

"No, I apologize." Logan stepped back and raised his hands in surrender. "I know better than to touch someone who has been handled the way you clearly have."

"It was nothing—just a misunderstanding." Nate shifted in an attempt to shadow the bulk of the bruising on his face. Not that it mattered. His torso, back,

and arms looked like a freak abstract painting too. Without running to the bedroom for a sweater, he couldn't cover any of it from Logan's knowing stare. "No need to cause any trouble."

Logan's jaw produced a visible tic. "You wouldn't be starting trouble. You'd be giving me permission to enforce the law." Nate immediately shook his head again, and Logan finished with, "Canin knows where to find me if you change your mind."

"I won't. But thank you."

"No problem." Logan set his glass on the bar on his way toward the door. "I have to get going on my run." Before the man opened the door, he reached his arms toward the ceiling in a stretch. A growl erupted, and his sweatshirt rode up to reveal a hard line of olive-colored stomach. Nate swallowed as he looked. *Wow.*

Logan dropped his arms, opened the door, and said, "It was good to meet you, Nate." Something Nate thought resembled a grin—it definitely had lines too hard to call a smile—briefly graced Logan's lips.

"Um..." Nate waved. "Okay." His tongue felt like cotton, and he suddenly had no idea what to do with his hands. "Bye."

Logan paused in the hallway. "And, Nate?" Logan didn't turn, and he kept his head down.

Nate snapped his gaze up from the floor. "Yeah?"

"I didn't look in your bag. I really did have to take a piss." Right before swinging the door closed, Logan added, "Take care. Bye."

Damn it. Nate stood staring at the closed door, his mouth agape. *He heard every snarky thing I mumbled.*

Nate wished the floor had opened up and swallowed him whole before he'd ever answered the door. *Before I ever heard that rough, raw voice.*

Nate didn't understand his reaction to the man. Logan wasn't even close to traditionally handsome; he possessed blunt, extreme features most would define as harsh. Nate had immediately thought of the word *unforgiving* the second he'd set eyes on Logan Jeffries. Right on top of that, though, Nate's physical reaction had translated into: *He's so fucking...male. It radiates out of his pores.*

Logan had tongue-tied Nate well beyond his normal shyness. In reality, Logan probably only stood an inch taller than Nate, but something in his wider shoulders, stance, and piercing eyes sold intimidation and sent out signals the receiver picked up and perceived as giant. Detective Logan Jeffries was a *man*. And Nate had reacted to it on a fundamental level he had not been able to control.

Better figure out a way to get over it. Fast.

Phantom sensations of his former best friend beating the crap out of him rushed crushing pain back into Nate's bruises and made him stumble. Shit. Grady had some stocky weight behind him, but Nate suspected if a person crossed Logan Jeffries in a way that displeased him, he could put the man in the hospital with a couple of precisely aimed punches.

With the lingering soreness from Grady's attack still so fresh, Nate vowed to put the overwhelmingly sexy detective out of his mind.

And to stay out of his way.

* * *

In the elevator, Logan jabbed the button for the lobby and ordered himself to put Nate Jordan out of his thoughts.

While in the bathroom Logan had made two quick calls, one to Canin, who hadn't answered, and one to Canin's brother, Rhone, who had. Rhone had confirmed Nate's identity for Logan. That call also cleared up Kasey and Canin's "marriage." The pair were working a job right now and could not break their covers to share the truth about the sham marriage with Nate.

Logan didn't laugh at much, but he chuckled in the privacy of the elevator. He'd heard Nate mumbling in that sweetly surly way when the younger man had thought himself alone. Truth was, if Logan hadn't gotten hold of Canin or Rhone, he damn well would have searched Nate's bag for evidence of the man's identity. Christ, the sight of it on the floor in the guest bedroom had severely tempted him anyway, just to see if he could turn up some evidence as to who the hell had beaten the shit out of the guy. Logan's heart went out to Nate while his blood simultaneously heated righteous fire through his body. Logan could tell just by looking that Nate didn't have it in him to step on a bug crawling across his floor, let alone defend himself against such a brutal thrashing. Whoever had bruised such a breathtaking body deserved an equal beating.

I wouldn't mind being the one to do it.

As soon as that thought surged through Logan, he cockblocked it and brought it screeching to a halt. He had a good thing going at home right now; he could not let his desire to help a twenty-something-year-old kid with a sweet ass and a heartbreaking story written all over his face mess it up. If Nate eventually wanted help, his "brother-in-law" was more than capable of handling it. Shit, Nate's sister could fuck the guy up for him too. Probably better than most men.

Still, as Logan pushed outside and hit the pavement for his run, the prettiest, deepest brown eyes he'd ever seen continued to haunt him.

When he got to work, Logan still couldn't get Nate Jordan out of his mind.

Fuck.

Chapter One

Present day

Logan reached across Canin's desk and shook the man's hand, sealing their deal.

Chuckling, Canin said, "Took a hell of a long time, you son of a bitch, but it's good to have you with us."

"Good to be here," Logan replied. He kept his hand steady, but his heart beat faster in the wake of officially becoming a part of Quinn Security.

Logan would head the investigations wing of the firm. According to Canin, a large chunk of Quinn's time of late dealt with security clientele's requests to handle personal investigations. So much so that management had decided to create a branch to deal exclusively with those requests. With Logan's law enforcement background, owners Canin, Rhone, Adam, and Kasey had made Logan an offer too good to refuse.

Maybe get you out from behind a desk every once in a while too.

Logan put a hand over his chest, feeling for the detective's shield that no longer existed. Not having a badge would take some getting used to, even if he hadn't actively worked a homicide case the way a detective should in two long years.

Lingering stiffness from sleet sheeting the air and dramatically dropping the temperature this morning had Logan shifting his hand from his chest to his hip and rubbing the twisted flesh through his pants. *Accepting this job is a good thing. Quinn can see you're still useful and capable, pains and sometimes-limp or not.* And if Logan could just avoid a certain shaggy-haired, dark-eyed fellow Quinn employee, he might one day convince himself he hadn't made a huge mistake in accepting the job.

"Logan?" Canin snapped his fingers in front of Logan's face, making Logan blink and return his attention to Canin's office. A glacier blue stare homed in on Logan from across the desk. "You okay, man?" Canin asked.

"Yeah. Sorry." Before he even processed the move, Logan again lifted his hand and rubbed where his badge used to be. "This is a big change. I was just taking a minute to let it all settle in."

"Go ahead and do that fast," Canin shared, "because I already have a case for you." With one push back of his chair, Canin stood and then moved to his office door. "Come with me."

Logan followed Canin into a centralized hub for the Quinn Security operation. Quinn had once been confined to a suite of offices on the tenth floor of the Houser Building, but the company now leased the entire floor.

As Canin walked Logan to the other side of the building, staff buzzed around them, professional looking, each and every one.

"I'll show you your office first," Canin explained. "You'll have a business cell, laptop, and whatever extras you need. I've put out a company-wide memo letting people know you're going to be interviewing for staff positions for anyone who wants to switch over to the investigations wing. We have a suite of offices ready on this end of the floor for when you hire them, but you're going to have to delve into this first case without a staff in place."

Studying the sea of virtual strangers around him, Logan wondered how long it would take to feel like a family, the way he had at his old job.

"Can I bring in people from outside?" Logan asked.

Canin quirked a brow. "Do you have someone in mind?"

"Not right now. I just want to be sure I can."

"Absolutely. We trust your judgment." Canin put his back to a glass door and pushed it open. Another receptionist hub, this one empty, lay beyond. A cluster of rich leather chairs sat to his left. A conference room loomed big and cavernous straight ahead, and from its door hallways broke off left and right. "Management will do the official hiring," Canin said, "but we'll negotiate seriously with anyone you want to bring on board."

"Good to know," Logan murmured, distracted by the fucking *official* nature of this place. The long lines of office doors, going in two directions, rocked through him and slammed the truth of this job home for him. He would be the boss and eventually in charge of likely a dozen investigators. *Whoa*. If not already accustomed to compensating for his damaged leg, Logan might have stumbled and tipped over.

"In the meantime," Canin added as he led Logan down the left hall, "you will have one right hand in place for this case. He'll act as point and work as your assistant, secretary, gofer, researcher... Whatever you need him to do."

"I don't need a slave, Quinn." Logan chuckled. "I know the bones crack more when I get up, but I'm still pretty damn self-sufficient."

"It's not about age or a broken-down body, man." Canin laughed back. "He's familiar with the client, and that will make them more comfortable working with someone new." Reaching the huge cherry-wood door at the end of the hall, Canin wrapped his hand around the handle. "This is your office." Canin bumped open the door with his hip. "Oh good, he's here. Nate"—Canin said the name, and Logan's heart stopped—"I'll let you get Logan up to speed on your case." Canin turned and thumped Logan on the shoulder. "Logan, I can't say it enough: Quinn is proud to have a person with your skills on our team. Nate should be able to answer any

questions you have, but you know where to find me if you need anything.” With that, Canin disappeared down the hall, leaving Logan on his own.

With a man Logan had never gotten entirely out of his head. Nate Jordan.

Now his partner on this case.

Crap.

Sitting at Logan’s assistant’s desk, Nate drummed his fingers against his leg, unable to stop the hated tic. He did his best to hide it from Logan Jeffries’s observant, pale green stare. Nate wished with everything in him he could have said no to his sister’s request to work side-by-side with Logan, but gratitude for the opportunities she’d given him since moving to Chicago kept his lips zipped.

Shit, though. Crossing paths with Logan over the course of three years had done nothing to help Nate gain any comfort in the man’s presence. Over time, Logan had just seemed to settle deeper into every imperfect, ragged-edged physical and personality trait he possessed. In turn, Nate had simultaneously grown more and more fascinated and intimidated when life put him and Logan in the same airspace. And that didn’t even take into account the wet dreams about the man that fueled Nate’s subconscious when he went to sleep every night.

“So you picked the short straw, huh?”

Logan’s rough voice jerked Nate out of his head. He looked at Logan’s warrior’s body, hardly masked by his impeccable suit, moved up to study the hard slash of mouth, then to icy green eyes.

Nate’s fingers picked up speed in their beat against his thigh. He cleared his throat and managed to say, “What?”

“The short straw,” Logan said. He closed the outer door, strode past Nate, and went into his office. “It won’t be fun being one of two people working the first case in a new division of Quinn.”

Nate jumped up and automatically followed in time to hear Logan finish with, “If we fuck it up”—Logan already looked grim and lordly behind his desk—“it won’t be pretty.”

“And you’ll take the blame,” Nate mumbled as he took one of the two visitors’ seats.

Logan made a feral growling noise under his breath. “You don’t have to throw me under the bus already.” His eyes changed from ice to fire.

“God, no.” *Damn it.* Nate cursed his stupid runaway tongue. *Shit. Stop your stupid mumbling.* Feeling the heat already rise up his neck, Nate met Logan’s stare. “I just meant based on what I know about you that you’d take the hit, even if your subordinate screwed up. I bet you were like that with your partners over the years.” Nate stared, chewing furiously on the inside of his cheek. “I bet you’d be like that with me even if I didn’t live up to my end of this case.”

"If you fuck up, I'll make sure you know it." Logan's expression didn't soften one iota. Shifting his focus to the left, it seemed Logan saw beyond the walls to the offices on the other side of Quinn. "Doesn't mean I then have to take it to the boss, though."

"You are the boss," Nate reminded him.

Logan jerked back to Nate, making eye contact again. "I don't own the company any more than you do," he murmured, wrapping that wonderfully raw voice around Nate in a way that made Nate tremble.

Nate's chest squeezed too. He suddenly had to dig his shoes into the carpet and his ass into the chair in order to stop from leaping over the desk and slobbering all over this hardcore ex-detective. Logan definitely would not welcome or thank him for it. Nate had never forgotten his first beating; he refused to lose control with another straight man and invite a second.

Instead, Nate nodded and offered a tight smile. "Thank you for not thinking I'd have an automatic pass just because of Kasey."

A hint of a smile briefly lifted Logan's lips and flashed up into his eyes. "I've been friendly with your sister long enough to know she wouldn't give you any favors just because you share blood." That glimpse of a grin disappeared just as fast as it had come. Logan's voice went all gravelly as he said, "I also think I know you well enough to believe you'd never ask for one."

Nate rubbed at his cheek to hide the blush. "How about we don't blow this case? That way we don't have to test our job security."

"You're already saying the kinds of things I like to hear in a partner." Logan pushed forward to the desk, and the sober visage Nate had become accustomed to seeing on this man appeared. "Tell me about the people we're going to meet. I know we don't have much time."

"Hold on." Nate strode to the door. "Let me grab the laptops. I have files already started." He spoke through the open door as he gathered the computers and phones. "I've worked this client with Kasey since Quinn acquired the account. Grunt stuff at first," Nate explained as he returned, "but they got to know my face as one of Kasey's assistants, so they trust me."

"Good." Logan nodded, accepting one of the laptops from Nate. After opening it, he powered it up, and then shifted to Nate. "Your presence will help us immensely. Canin was right to give you to me." As soon as the words left his mouth, Logan jerked his gaze up to Nate's. His chiseled jaw clicked visibly. "For this case, I mean."

"Right." Nate's heart plummeted into his stomach at the obvious flinch of discomfort in Logan. *Work. You're here to work.*

"Okay let's discuss the Sarna case," Nate said.

"Wait. Why do I know that name? Sarna. Sarna." Loan's eyes suddenly widened. "The society party girl who went missing?"

“Yeah,” Nate confirmed. “She’s our job.” He first clicked open his own file and then reached across the desk to show Logan where to access it on his new laptop. Immediately, a series of photos of an enormous warehouse and storefront appeared. “Let me give you some background on the Sarnas’ business. They import artifacts, antiques, vintage jewelry, fine art, and home decor from other parts of the world, mainly from India, the Middle East, Russia, and Africa, and to a smaller extent some European countries. This is their storage warehouse”—Nate pointed to the screen—“and that’s their official place of business.” He tapped his finger against the photo of the swank retail storefront located on the Mile.

Logan slid a glance Nate’s way. “Official?”

“They have a number of extremely wealthy clients who demand individual attention.” Nate opened another file and brought up a partial list of their client’s associates. “These people solicit or seek extremely rare items. They have developed more personal relationships with the Sarnas so do not come to the store to have their needs met. Those deals are brokered more intimately. In addition to our security on the warehouse and store, we provide Sarna with guard protection for those one-on-one deals. That’s really how the Sarnas make the bulk of their money.” Nate paused to push at the flyaway hairs tickling his ear. “When one of Sarnas’ people locates an item or comes across a particularly valuable find, Quinn sometimes acts as the courier. We send employees across the world to bring back items safely. Sarna had some problems with their previous security firm and hired Quinn to replace them.”

Logan stared at his computer screen, his chin in hand as he studied the warehouse and store photos. “Okay, so we’ve established their business seems to be chugging along nicely. Tell me about the girl.”

Nate reached over Logan’s hand and clicked open a second file. An image of a fresh-faced, blonde-haired young woman appeared. “Her name is Daria, and she’s twenty years old.” His arm still crossed over Logan’s, Nate clicked the Forward arrow on the screen, bringing up a picture of an immaculate blonde-haired woman and a silver-haired man. “Those are the Sarnas, Elise and Stephen.” He tapped the arrow again, bringing up a dark-haired young man with eyes as blue as the girl’s. “And that’s Daria’s twin brother, Declan.” After clicking one more time and pulling up Daria’s likeness again, Nate lifted his gaze to Logan’s. “Daria has been gone a week,” he said. “The Sarnas are incredibly frustrated the police seem to have made them the only suspects in this investigation and aren’t pursuing other lines of inquiry. In their minds, the police aren’t taking Daria’s disappearance seriously.”

Hardness created brackets on either side of Logan’s mouth. “It’s routine for law enforcement to look at the family. It pisses people off, but statistics show it’s a legitimate tactic. Do the Sarnas have a complaint beyond that? There must be something more going on here.”

Nate forcibly ignored the *fucking insistent* urge to lift his fingers and smooth away those tension lines on Logan’s face. He put his attention on the pretty girl

filling Logan's computer screen, letting her deep blue eyes speak to him and put him back on task.

"Daria ran away once before." Nate shared a knowing glance with Logan. "Two years ago. She showed up ten days later when the cash she'd stolen from the family's emergency stash ran out." Nate's mouth pulled down at the edges. "That rainy-day money went missing in the Sarna home again a week ago. Daria also has a tendency to disappear for a few days here and there without informing anyone where she's going or when she'll be back."

"But the Sarnas clearly don't buy an impromptu vacation in this instance," Logan murmured. "No matter the trend pointing in that direction."

"The father is sure foul play is involved. He's the one who called Kasey with a request for assistance. He, the wife, and the son are scheduled to meet with us in the conference room in"—Nate grabbed Logan's wrist, turning it to look at his watch—"a half hour."

Heat radiating from Logan's skin seeped into Nate's hand the second their flesh came into contact. Nate kept his focus downward, mesmerized by the differences in Logan's rich olive tone compared to his own coloring paled by the winter months. Roughness topped Logan's darker skin in places. Fascinated, Nate ran his fingertips over the back of Logan's hand, down to his knuckles, taken by his warm, nicked flesh.

Logan's arm immediately tensed. Snapping his gaze to Nate's, Logan closed his hand into a fist.

Oh shit. Nate snatched his hand away and tucked it in his lap. "I apologize. I've been chilly all morning." *Not a total lie.* "Your skin is warm." He forced himself not to cower under the sudden darkening in Logan's stare. "I didn't think when I touched you."

"It's okay." Logan's tone came across only a little bit abrasive. The man rubbed his arm and hand where Nate had held it, and it appeared he very deliberately pulled his shirt and suit sleeve down to conceal his watch and wrist. "Forget it. For the next twenty-five minutes"—pure business returned to Logan's eyes—"give me every fact you have about the Sarnas themselves, their business, and any information you've been able to pull so far about the daughter. Then I want your personal impressions of the people, their employees, and the clients you've met." He locked in on Nate and held his gaze. "Tell me what isn't quantifiable on paper, Nate. Give me your gut."

Nate sprang up like a puppy getting its first rub behind the ears. "Yeah?"

With a sharp nod, Logan said, "I want the clearest picture I can have of these people before I ever set eyes on them. You're a great resource to achieve that. Get to it." Logan found a legal pad and a pen in the desk's top drawer, dragged it out, and put his full attention back on Nate. "Start talking."

“Cool.” Nate beamed. His cheeks hurt from the stupid, huge smile he could not contain. Thank God, he hadn’t ruined everything by fondling Logan’s hand. “All right. Let’s start with Mr. Sarna...”

* * *

“Daria dropped out of school six months ago,” Stephen Sarna continued with a bite in his tone. Logan observed the rush of emotion create a chink in the man’s classically polished, statesman appearance. “I should have known something was going on and pressed her to talk about it.” His visage showed signs of a man who hadn’t slept in a long while. “She loved college. Only something truly damaging would have made her quit.”

“Darling.” Elise Sarna settled her hand on her husband’s forearm. “It’s not as though she slipped into some awful drug world.” The woman put her attention back on Logan. “She spent much of her time in our home in Arlington Heights, Mr. Jeffries. She told us she needed a break and intended to go back to school one day soon. She delved into work at Haven, and we saw her on a regular basis until she disappeared.”

“Which makes it all the more alarming.” Stephen put his bloodshot focus on Logan. “I told that to the detectives in Arlington Heights too. If she’d been behaving abnormally, I might buy she decided to take off on her own. But she hadn’t been. That tells me foul play is involved, and it probably involves why she left school so suddenly.”

Logan caught Declan Sarna roll his eyes.

“She didn’t have a boyfriend, Dad,” the young man said. His mouth twisted as he turned to Logan and Nate across the conference table. “If you’re thinking about looking down that road, like my father insists everyone should, you’re not going to find anything.”

Stephen whirled on his son. “Then what the fuck do you think happened, Declan? You’re not exactly forthcoming with information about Daria. You’re not ordering her friends to tell us what they know.” He sent his son the most contemptuous glare. “She’s your sister, and you don’t even goddamn care she’s gone.”

“Hey!” Declan snarled at his father. “If it weren’t for me, you’d just think she’d gone off on one of her weekends again.”

Logan knocked his knuckles on the table. Once he had everyone’s attention, he homed in on the fashionably unkempt brother. “Why do you think she hasn’t run off again, Declan?”

“Because it’s our birthday this Thursday, and ever since we got our driver’s licenses, we’ve taken a weekend to go up to our cabin and hang out, just the two of us. We talk shit about what happened in the last year. We just hang.” Declan shrugged, but nothing in his body language conveyed relaxed. “She would never miss it. When I woke up last Saturday and she wasn’t at the house ready to leave, I immediately called my mom and then my dad to see if they knew where she was.

They didn't, so I started calling everyone we know to see if she was with them for some reason."

"What time was this?" Logan asked as he made a note.

"Maybe around seven thirty in the morning," Declan replied.

Logan jerked his focus back up to the Sarna family. "Neither one of you were home?"

"Out running." Stephen smoothed a hand over his flat stomach. "I do three miles every morning and then go to the gym."

"I was working." Elise slid a glance at her husband without turning her head, and her lips thinned for a split second. "I often do on the weekends."

"We're just one big happy family," Declan declared, slouching deeper into his chair.

Silence thickened the air. After an uncomfortable minute, Nate cleared his throat. "Ma'am." He looked to Elise. "You mentioned Daria had begun doing work at Haven." Logan knew the teen shelter from his years on the job. "Had she done so before? Did she mention anyone taking an undue interest in her during her work at the shelter?"

"No," Elise replied. Her fingers shook as she wiped moisture from the corner of her eye. "She loved the place. We took her to a charity event there one time when she was twelve, and she adopted it."

"Any thoughts on why she'd increased her time working there?" Nate asked, impressing Logan with his note-taking while also paying complete attention to his subject.

"I didn't ask," Elise admitted. "I assume it was because she wasn't in school."

"What about you, Declan?" Logan asked, lifting his gaze to the sulking young man. "Did your sister say anything to you about the shelter?"

"Nope." Declan now looked at Logan through droopy eyes that made him appear half-asleep. "Not a word."

Stephen pushed a brown folder across the table. "I've compiled a list of everyone Daria knew, from friends in Arlington Heights to people at Haven and professors at school. I have my suspicions some of those people at the shelter knew she had money and might have wanted more from her than she was willing to give. Some of those kids will do anything for a buck. They have no conscience."

Logan bit down a scathing retort and scanned the file, checking for anything that might need a follow-up question or clarification. "Have the police pursued the avenues of inquiry you've mentioned?" he asked.

"They police say they've looked at every angle," Stephen answered. "Conversations with administration at the college and the shelter confirm they did." His mouth pulled down in a sneer. "But they sure seem to be asking us a hell of a lot more questions than they are anyone else. They're goddamn wasting time on us because they're too lazy to do any real work."

Stephen's know-it-all tone, for the second time in as many minutes, snapped Logan's attention off the file. He opened his mouth, a tirade forming on his tongue. Just as Logan parted his lips, Nate put his hand on Logan's knee under the table. The gentle pressure made Logan's leg jerk. Fast lines of awareness ripped up his thigh to his groin. He snapped his gaze Nate's way to find Nate subtly shaking his head and mouthing *No*.

As fast as Nate had put his hand on Logan, he took it away. Even though the touch had been fleeting, Logan's leg didn't feel quite right when the pressure lifted. Logan reached under the table and rubbed his knee, trying to dissipate the lingering effect of the contact, as he'd had to do earlier in his office.

Christ. If he's the touchy-feely type, I'm fucked.

Nate turned back to the Sarnas. "At Quinn we always give law enforcement the benefit of doubt and take their word as to their vigorous pursuit of any crime." He raised his hand and effectively shut down Mr. Sarna's obvious protest. "We are seeking a complete picture of Daria's disappearance. Our approaching Arlington Heights detectives with skepticism will not grant us access to whatever information they might have already uncovered."

"Of course," Elise answered. She put a manicured hand on her husband's arm. "I tried to tell Stephen shouting at and browbeating the detectives would not help."

Stephen turned on his wife. "Excessive politeness won't get you anywhere either. If I hadn't decided to call Kasey, we'd still have our thumbs up our asses just to have something to do."

With one clearly vicious squeeze of her husband's forearm, Elise turned her red-faced attention back to Logan and Nate. "Excuse Stephen. He's not used to having his hands tied. Our worry for our daughter's safety is exceeded only by our nightmares of what might have already happened to her."

"Emotions are high." Nate rose from his seat, talking as he refreshed Stephen and then Elise's glasses of water. "Please don't think anything of it. We can't claim to understand how you feel, but please know we intend to attack finding Daria with the same vigor we use to protect your business assets."

Elise's hand shook as she lifted her glass and took a sip. "Thank you."

Fuck. Logan carefully closed his files and clasped his hands together on the conference table. With investigative work, he would probably have little chance of shedding the shittiest parts of being a cop.

Setting his chin with steel, Logan gained the attention of the entire Sarna family. "There is no delicate way to couch this, so I'm just going to say it. Your daughter has been missing for seven days. There has been no attempt to contact you for a ransom. If Daria truly has not run off again, then you must start allowing yourselves to consider all possible outcomes, many of them not the one you want."

"That's priceless." Declan snorted crudely. "You already think she's dead."

Logan didn't sway even a millimeter under the verbal jab. "My experience and knowledge of the statistics of this kind of case tell me the odds lean toward the

worst.” He would not lie to these people, and he sure as hell wouldn’t think Quinn would want him to give them false hope. “But that does not mean I won’t investigate this disappearance with urgency and the goal of finding Daria alive. Nothing is absolute. Sometimes we get the best of all possible outcomes. That is what I’m hoping will happen, but I cannot guarantee it. It is not likely.” Upon saying that awful thing, Logan made a point of looking each member of the Sarna family in the eyes one at a time. “What I can promise you is answers and a complete outcome. We won’t stop until we know the truth.”

“Or until my dad stops paying you.” Contempt grew in Declan’s stare.

“Ignore him.” Stephen shot his son a look that would have pierced straight through him if it were an arrow. “He’s proven himself completely useless time and again.”

Elise closed her eyes, and Logan imagined her silently counting to ten. When she opened them again, steady calm reigned. “Unless you have any more questions for us,” she said as she stood, “I think it’s best we go and let you begin your work.”

Everyone else immediately stood as well.

“I think we have what we need to make a good start,” Logan shared. “But I need you all to be available to me should I have further questions. Since your dossier states Daria still pays rent on an apartment in the city, I’ll start there today.” The Sarnas had attached a key to the file. “Then I’d like to visit your home tomorrow and take a look at the belongings she kept there as well.”

“Our numbers, address, and anything you should need are in the file,” Elise answered. “We’ll be home to receive you.”

“Thank you,” Logan said. He shook hands with Stephen and then Elise as they passed on their way to the door. Nate did too. Declan had his hands shoved in his pockets, and he looked just as spoiled as when he’d stepped into this conference room.

Nate grabbed the files from the table. Together, he and Logan walked the Sarnas to the elevator, then waited until the door closed before beginning a brisk walk back to their wing of the floor.

Once they reached Logan’s office, Nate looked as if his eyes might bug out of his head. “Wow.” He tossed the files on Logan’s desk and pushed his hands through his shaggy hair. “Those are not the same people I’ve met in the past. I’ve never seen Mr. Sarna so...so...nasty and arrogant.”

“Panic and fear brings out the ugly in folks.” Logan threw himself into the nicest executive leather chair he’d ever rested his ass on and swiveled it in Nate’s direction. “Okay, these individuals clearly did not know their child at all, so we’re going to need the cooperation of a lot of other people to figure out this girl’s life and what happened to her.”

“You don’t think it’s something random?”

"I think whether she's alive or dead, statistics overwhelmingly prove acts of kidnapping and/or violence are rarely caused by a complete stranger. If she didn't run off, then whoever took her was probably someone she knew."

"I'll defer to your expertise in the matter," Nate replied. "Mr. Sarna is clearly pissed because of that focus on the family. He knows the cops have been scrutinizing them, and he thinks they're letting valuable time pass."

"He'll just have to suck it up and deal with it." Logan's stare pierced again. "I have sympathy for his situation, but if you want your child found, you let the police do their job without blocking them or constantly throwing attitude their way. If you don't have anything to hide and you cooperate, then they will move off you as suspects much faster and onto someone else."

"I hear you." His laptop already humming again, Nate also had a legal pad in front of him and his phone at hand. "So what do you want me to do?"

Logan bit down a smile that wanted to show itself in response to Nate's eagerness. Instead, he let Daria's image ferment in his mind. "I want to know every little thing I can about this family and what they do when they aren't working. I want backgrounds on every single person on that list they gave us. I want to know the name of the security firm Quinn replaced and if anyone there is holding a wicked-long grudge for the firing." Logan got up and started to move, needing the physical activity to click his critical thinking into its highest gear. "I want to know the fucking shoe size of the detectives running the case, and I want complete checks on Sarna's clients too. When we drive up to Arlington Heights tomorrow, I already need to know the answers to most of my questions before I even ask them." After circling around the couch, coffee table, and two chairs that encompassed one portion of this huge office, ignoring the twinges in his leg, Logan walked back to the desk and leaned his good hip against the edge. "If we can figure out who is lying or misleading us about little things, it's a pretty good bet they are already hiding something bigger from the police."

"Sounds good." Nate finished jotting down something in a scrawl Logan could not decipher. "Are you going to check out the girl's apartment while I do this?"

Damn. Logan had no fucking idea how in less than five minutes this guy had made him want to grin twice. "While you get *started* on it, you mean," Logan corrected. "That's a fucking big list. I don't expect you to complete it yourself. As soon as I check out the apartment, I'm going to come back and work half that list, just like you. We don't leave this place until we have every bit of ammunition we can find."

Nodding, his lips pursed, Nate said, "That makes good sense."

Unable to keep it down, Logan let a smile slip free. "I'm glad I have your approval. Oh." He snapped his fingers. "I also want to know Daria's global playground. If the Sarna family or Arlington Heights detectives haven't already done it themselves, we need to know this girl isn't on some extended vacation costing taxpayers and her parents a shitload of money searching for her."

"I'll start by looking more deeply at where she holed up the last time she ran away." Nate scribbled more illegible words. "And even though I'm sure the cops have already looked, I'll also double-check domestic and global flight manifests."

"That'll work." Logan leaned back and grabbed up his new business cell. "I assume you already have the number to this thing?" At Nate's nod, Logan strode to the door, adding, "Text me the number where I can reach you. Keep me informed."

Already on the phone, Nate gave Logan a thumbs-up without looking up from his computer.

Shaking his head, Logan chuckled softly to himself and left Nate furiously working in his office.

* * *

Returning from his trip to the other side of Quinn Security, where they had a fully stocked eating area, Logan pushed into his office, his mouth open to ask Nate which soda he wanted. He took one look at the guy, and zipped his lips.

Christ. He's so fucking sweet.

Well past midnight now, in the short time it had taken Logan to traverse Quinn, Nate had put his head against the arm of the couch and had fallen fast asleep. The sight of that beautiful face—with its overlong lashes shadowing his skin, slightly crooked nose, angled cheekbones, and lush mouth—rushed warmth to Logan's cock. Just as fast, Logan acknowledged the pen still in Nate's hand and phone clutched against his chest, and it tugged at a place decidedly north of Logan's crotch. The guy was a fucking workhorse, and no matter how much working so closely with him would test Logan's first life law—never let yourself fall for a straight man—Logan had to count himself lucky Canin had seen fit to loan Nate to him for this case.

Not that Nate would prove useful if he worked himself into a coma on their first day.

In a half-dozen steps, Logan stood at the couch. Putting down the sodas, he knelt in front of Nate and gently shook his shoulder. "Wake up, rock star. You've outshone the boss today. It's time to go home."

Blinking heavily, Nate slowly showed Logan his chocolate eyes. "What happened? What time is it?"

"It's late, man." Logan curled his hand under Nate's elbow and helped him sit up. "Why don't you get out of here and get some sleep?"

"Okay." Nate said it, but his eyelids were still at half-mast, and he only remained in a sitting position with Logan's help. Leaning heavily on Logan's hand, Nate offered Logan a wan smile. "I'm glad I couldn't say no to Kasey."

"Oh yeah?" Logan grabbed Nate around his other arm as the man started to topple in the opposite direction. "How's that?"

Looking into Logan's eyes, Nate offered a sleepy smile. "Otherwise, I wouldn't have ever woken up looking into your pretty eyes." He lifted two fingers to Logan's

face and grazed them over Logan's cheek, down to his lips, where he tugged at the lower one in a way that made Logan's breath catch. Nate's sleepy gaze dropped to his hand playing at Logan's mouth, and his brow furrowed. "You have a hard mouth, but I can't stop thinking about what it would feel like against mine."

Logan whipped his hands off Nate as the combustible force of a backdraft blew through him. Nate landed on the couch sideways, his eyes already drifting closed, but Logan couldn't grab Nate again right now if his life depended on it. Logan couldn't erase the feel of those long fingers against his lips, and as much as he silently begged himself, he couldn't shut down the loop of Nate's sweet, sleepy, uncensored comments from playing in his mind.

Nate settled more completely into the couch. "I'll just... Five minutes..." As fast as he'd rocked Logan's foundation, Nate fell back to sleep.

Fuck.

Logan knew full well he'd avoided Nate whenever possible, but he could not believe he'd never picked up on it until just this second. *Nate is gay.*

Fucking shit.

No one at Quinn had ever hinted to Logan anything of Nate's sexuality. Then again, maybe Nate kept his sexuality to himself and nobody knew. Hell, Logan couldn't call the guy out on it. After all, with the exception of two people, nobody knew Logan had been in an almost four-year relationship with another man and not the woman he'd introduced as his girlfriend. He'd never even told Canin the truth, and Logan had known both him and Rhone for fifteen years. He couldn't rightly demand everyone else in the world declare themselves openly and with pride.

Mother goddamn fucking shit.

Nate's homosexuality complicated the hell out of Logan's attraction, but ultimately it didn't change a damn thing.

Logan might have to toss his first law out the window in regard to Nate, but the second still applied: Never mix business with pleasure.

That rule had kept Logan alive and able to work on the force for close to two decades.

Stuffing down every ounce of his frustration, Logan pushed to his feet and got back to work.

Chapter Two

Logan growled as he nicked his skin with the razor. For the second time. As he put a piece of toilet paper against the tiny cut, he couldn't stop his thoughts from wandering a dozen streets up to another apartment and wondering if the man he'd dumped in bed four hours ago had awoken to the alarm Logan had set for him.

After finishing at the office at two a.m., Logan had managed to wrestle Nate awake enough to guide him down to Logan's car to drive them home. The security guard at Nate's building knew Logan from his regular visits when Canin had lived there, so he readily granted Logan access.

Getting Nate's keys out of his pocket had proven a sweat-inducing challenge. Christ, the guy was a fucking sound sleeper. Logan would never cop a cheap feel, but damn... Slipping his hand into Nate's front pocket and digging for the key had put Logan dangerously close to feeling dick. He'd tried to avoid processing the warm, muscular curve of Nate's thigh, but Logan had nearly touched intimate skin—only the thin fabric of Nate's pocket lay between fingers and flesh. In that hallway, with Nate propped up against the wall, a groan had slipped from Logan. He envisioned himself folding to his knees, rubbing his face into Nate's legs, then nuzzling a bit to the left to tongue that thick ridge of cock, right through Nate's clothes.

The depth of his desire had rocked through Logan and seized his chest to such a degree he'd fast-forwarded through the rest of his task as if snarling wolves bit at his backside. Logan had gotten Nate inside his apartment, dumped him in bed, removed a few necessary pieces of clothing, and quickly set his alarm clock in record time. Logan booked his ass out of that bedroom and building so fast it hadn't even occurred to him until he got home that he hadn't left a note. A text message took care of that problem, and two stiff drinks before climbing into bed had sucked Logan into a sleep too heavy to dream. Or at least, if he did dream about Nate, he knew with a couple of drinks in him he wouldn't remember it in the morning. He had solid data to back that up.

It worked well enough for two months straight after Ryan left.

Logan snarled as he got dressed. He didn't have the desire or time to think about his ex. Ryan had moved on into the arms of the apparent love of his life, and Logan had moved on to a different guy every time the urge to fuck hit him. Well, he had in theory anyway. He *thought* about a different man every time he jerked off. Eventually he would build up the motivation to get himself back into the game for real and find someone who shared his desire for privacy and discretion.

Should have been doing that for the last year, Jeffries. You're not getting any younger or prettier.

Hating the reflection of the hard, slashing mouth pulling a frown, Logan spun away and strode through his living room into the open kitchen for some juice. Lately, he fucking hated the voice in his head. Hated the truth it spoke. Loathed the light it shone on his empty life.

"Not any more, asshole," Logan said to himself aloud, taking the next step to insanity. "Got a fucking job to do now that is going to keep me nice and busy."

Never mind the sexy young partner that comes along with the gig.

"Shut up."

Logan downed the rest of his orange juice. After a quick rinse of the glass, he swiped his keys off the table and grabbed his new cell just as his home phone rang through the apartment.

A quick search of the living room produced the receiver from its position wedged between the cushions of his couch. He clicked the green button and put it to his ear with a "Hello?"

"Hey, you're home." A familiar sultry feminine voice on the other end of the line immediately warmed Logan all the way through. "How was your first day?"

"Busy," he answered his dear friend Nicole. Or as many knew her, his ex.

"So I gathered when I tried you last night at ten and you weren't home."

"I was at the office till two," Logan shared. He could hear his fucking toilet running and moved back into his bathroom to jiggle the handle. "I already have a case."

"Oh yeah?" Nicole's tone perked right up, as Logan knew any good detective's would. He could picture her pushing her long red hair behind her ears and getting ready to take notes. "Anything good?"

When the running water didn't stop, Logan shifted the phone between his shoulder and ear so he could take the lid off the back of the toilet.

"This is on the down low," he told her. "Okay?"

"Do you do it any other way?" A chuckle that would make any straight man hard filled Logan's ear. "Sorry, dude," Nicole said. "You walked right into that one."

"Fuck you," Logan replied, easy as hell about it. He trusted and talked to Nicole like a sister. She cursed worse than he did most of the time. "We're looking into Daria Sarna's disappearance on behalf of the family."

"Wow." Nicole's low whistle carried through the phone. "Nothing like starting with a big bang. The grapevine down here doesn't have much gossip about the Sarna girl. You know what that means."

"Yep."

Meant there wasn't much of anything happening to even get law enforcement tongues wagging.

"Good luck," Nicole added. "Let me know if I can run anything through the system for you."

"Will do." *Fuck*. As Logan pushed up his sleeves so he could fiddle with the float arm in the back of the commode, he asked, "So, how's married life treating you?" He pictured Nicole snuggled up in bed with her blond Nordic god of a husband, and a pinching twist tugged in his chest. And not just because of the guy's stunning sexiness. "Do you regret breaking up with me yet?"

"You know I don't. I'm still just sorry as hell you got the shaft twice in one week. Or, you know, stopped getting *one*"—Logan just knew Nicole heard a perfectly timed rimshot in her head—"to get technical."

Logan barked with a rusty shock of laughter, the sound abrasive to his ears. "Christ, that's your worst attempt at a pun yet."

"Yet it's the first time you've been able to laugh at one," Nicole replied quickly. "That's a good sign, Logan." Her voice softened, signaling a familiar impending nudge about his personal life. The fine hairs on Logan's arms went right up on end. "I think you're ready to open your heart again."

"I never closed it, it fucking never got stomped on in the first place, and I fucking didn't grieve." Logan bit his words out through clamped teeth. "We had sex for a while. Ryan left me. He didn't die, and neither did I. I don't have time for your cheap-ass therapy right now." The toilet—not complying with his wishes either—pushed at Logan's fuse. "Talk to you later."

Nicole sighed loudly and with such dramatic effect Logan swore he felt her breath tickle his ear through the phone. "I'll come by—"

"Bye." He hung up the phone before she could finish that offer of a pity drive-by.

A third growl worked its way out of Logan since waking up less than an hour ago. Unable to get the toilet to stop trickling water, he stooped down and shut off the valve before he ran late.

He hoped his first hour awake didn't prove an ominous precursor of the rest of his day.

* * *

The high-pitched whine of a constant, ear-piercing beep jerked Nate upright in bed. His eyes still full of grit, he reached over and hit his annoyingly loud alarm clock—the only one with a beep loud, high, and obnoxious enough to pull him from sleep.

With one stretch, Nate came up against the pull of fabric that didn't have any give in it. He rubbed at his eyes, scratched through his mess of hair, and looked down to see a wrinkled dress shirt and suit pants. His tie, belt, and jacket were draped over a padded bench at the foot of the bed. One peek over the side and Nate located his shoes.

He crawled out of bed and shuffled to the bathroom to relieve his bladder, all the while trying to remember getting home last night. When nothing came to him, he worked his way backward, and his last clear recollection put him on Logan's office couch, working the Sarna case history.

Oh hell. He must have fallen asleep. Nate could only conclude Logan had dragged his sorry ass home. *Damn it.* Nate wanted nothing more than to impress Logan during the time they spent together. Yet what the hell had he gone and done on day one? Fallen asleep on the job.

Nice going, asshole.

Nate started the water in the shower, letting it warm as he stripped out of his clothes. After stepping inside and closing the glass door, he continued to berate himself for his behavior. *Goddamn.* If Logan could work past midnight without even yawning once then Nate needed to do the same. Another slipup like last night, and Logan might request a replacement. Twenty-four hours ago, Nate would have begged God for that very thing. But just one day in Logan's proximity had whetted Nate's need for more time with the man. It didn't have to be anything but completely professional; Logan never had to know about Nate's longtime crush; Nate would greedily accept Logan's proximity as gift enough for whatever length of time it took to solve this case.

But not if you keep falling asleep on him.

In the shower, all by himself, Nate still felt the heat of a blush creep up his skin. Logan had brought Nate home, and Nate could not remember a second of it. The guy must have put his arm around Nate multiple times, and shit, he'd even walked Nate into his bedroom and loosened his clothing. *Oh God.* Nate's cock started to rise in response to the thought of Logan in his bedroom. The idea of Logan so close to him near a bed warmed Nate's blood, and he quickly realized it might have been for the best to have slept his way through the occasion. If he'd woken up and seen Logan leaning over him, Nate might have dragged the man down to him for a long, deep kiss.

He'd fantasized about what Logan's mouth would taste like so many times he could almost feel those unforgiving lips crushing his right now. Nate sometimes thought a hard man like Logan would grab him by the hair and jerk his head back before swooping in with the force of his kiss. Running his fingers through his hair right now, Nate let his eyes fall closed. He pulled and imagined the sting came from Logan's ardor.

Water sprayed down on Nate's back, and he let himself believe the force of pressure came from Logan's weight pushing him into the shower door. Shifting to the side, Nate pressed his cheek and chest into the glass, and he slid his hand down his stomach to wrap around his cock. First contact produced a gasp and a buck of his hips, but Nate didn't give himself a reprieve. He knew Logan wouldn't. Nate tugged on his shaft, yanked at his hair, and worked with everything in him to feel a big, heated body covering him from behind. So full of repressed need, Nate even listened for the roughest, sexiest voice he'd ever heard, this time whispering dirty

words in his ear. Droplets of water splashing against Nate's nape and shoulder became sweet kisses and licks from Logan, and the thunder of the main spray hitting the walls turned into Logan's voracious need demanding Nate do more.

Eager to please, Nate increased the hold and drag on his prick, combining pain and pleasure to rush an avalanche of blood to his shaft and turn him harder than stone. His balls swelled and pulled in his sac, making Nate moan and writhe into the steam-covered glass. He crushed his cock against the surface and rolled his palm over the top of his length, loving the bizarrely hard, slick sensation of the shower door against his rigidity. While humping uncontrollably against the glass, Nate's nuts screamed for some attention too, and so he reluctantly let go of his hair to rub the weight pulling between his legs.

The wall of water cascading behind Nate twisted in his head to cheers of appreciation from Logan for the show. Steam enveloped and suffocated Nate like the biggest, hottest body covering him everywhere he turned, and Nate desperately craved the love and attention. He gave the foreplay everything he had and slid his hands from between his legs back to his cock to smother it in friction. Nerve endings all over his body clamored for contact, so Nate grazed his palms up his belly to his chest for a scrape against his nipples that made him groan. He traveled higher up and slipped his digits into his mouth, drenching them with saliva as he mentally turned those fingers into Logan's cock and sucked even harder. Getting his digits dripping with spit, Nate then went back to rubbing his hands over every inch of his soapy wet torso, down to his painfully hard shaft, and silently begged Logan to help him come.

Nate swore a tickle whispered over his ear and that he could hear Logan tell him to lift his leg so he could get inside. Nate automatically planted his foot on the soap dish, the move splitting his crack and allowing water to flow straight down his spine and over his asshole. The hint of sensation over his bud shocked a tremor through his frame, spurring a frantic desperation for a fucking.

Without hesitation, Nate shoved his hand between his thighs and plunged his finger into his ass. He cried out at the rough, crude penetration, but the out-of-control ache for release contaminated his entire being and would not be stopped. Nate forced a second finger into his too-tight chute, and the fire of pain did battle with the pleasure he'd often toyed with finding in the past. His passage flamed like an inferno, and his ring burned like a bitch, but Nate didn't feel his own fingers in his clenching passage. Logan's thick, hard cock breached his bud, and Nate knew neither of them could shatter until Logan had himself fully seated in Nate's ass.

Nate even whimpered, "I'm okay, baby," and bore down with everything in him. He wedged a third finger up his snug entrance, getting himself where he knew Logan needed him to go.

Warmth grazed Nate's nape, like breath exhaling against his flesh. It felt fucking insane. The nubby graze of Logan's tongue licked in his ear, and he even heard the man's husky, shivery-low voice say, "I'm in, baby. I can take over from here."

With his forehead plastered to the shower stall, Nate slid his fingers deeper into his channel, all the while certain it was Logan's glorious cock. Thrusting within his ass, again and again, Nate rocked his hips and reveled in Logan finally fucking him. He couldn't say having a cock inside him exactly felt good yet, but it felt right, and Nate knew he'd been born to mate with this man. Even, deep strokes kept Nate on the edge of feeling something just shy of perfection, and he pleaded with Logan to tell him what to do.

Without words spoken aloud, Nate knew to pull on his cock in order to please Logan, so Nate did it, without relenting. He dragged his tightly closed hand up and down his shaft from root to tip, and the sharp shot of pleasure squeezed simultaneously in his balls and rectum. Nate picked up speed, jerking himself off harder and faster with each pass along his length. Each time he did, his passage rippled with delicious pleasure around Logan's buried cock, and Nate egged the man on to fuck him until he screamed.

The knifing in Nate's ass quickly grew more aggressive and rudimentary—in complete companionship with Nate's hand on his prick. With each wind-up of the coil twisting deep in his belly and chute, Nate panted in short, fast bursts against the glass. His balls tingled and lifted, sending a zinging line of adrenaline into every corner of his body. Nate tensed with impending release, yet he continued to whip his hand up and down his cock faster, abrading skin to the point of pain creeping back into the cacophony of pleasure. He didn't care. Only Logan's cock sawing in and out of his ass mattered; only coming as Logan would surely soon allow him to do guided Nate's actions.

"Please..." Nate gritted his teeth as the onslaught of orgasm pushed deep in his core for release. "I can't..." Every muscle in his body locked so rigidly he could do nothing more than grip his granite-solid prick.

Right then, Logan's grate-rough, "Now, Nate. Come for me now," resonated through Nate's entire being. With permission granted, Nate exploded. He shouted, jerked, and then shuddered upon each convulsion. Unfathomable pleasure sped through Nate's cock, the force unloading staggering amounts of seed. Leaning into the shower door for support, his eyes still closed, living in the bliss, Nate worked his length and pushed out every drop of cum he had to give.

After wringing himself clean, Nate opened his eyes, blinking to adjust to the shadows of new light. He chuckled and said, "Damn it, Logan, you know how to fuck a man." He looked over his shoulder to smile at Logan...and found no one and nothing behind him. Nate's chest crushed with debilitating tightness. He glanced down and saw his own fingers still embedded in his ass, not the cock of an aloof straight man he'd coveted from afar for far too long.

You're doing it again. Shades of Grady fantasies from his early twenties haunted Nate anew. *You're such a fool.*

Wincing as he removed his digits from his hole, Nate also quickly found his teeth chattering as the once warm water now rained down on him with fingertips of icy cold. He forced himself under the chilly shower to finish cleaning up, using the

frigid temperature to wake him up in more ways than one. First thing he had to do: figure out how to stop wanting someone he could never have. *Yeah, right.* He'd tried to talk himself out of his attraction for three years without success. Revised first on Nate's list: get dressed, go into work, and fake it until a real solution came to him.

As he got out of the shower, dried off, and took care of his toiletry needs, Nate figured bullshitting his way through this forced time in Logan's company sounded like an accomplishable feat. After all, every time Nate put on one of these nice suits of his—as he strode into the bedroom and did right now—he felt like a total fraud. Rather than a wolf in sheep's clothing, when Nate put on a suit and stepped out of the elevator and into Quinn Security, he often envisioned himself as the sheep trying to masquerade as the wolf. Every employee at Quinn had a job there because they loved this high-octane kind of work. Not only that, but most of them came to Quinn with a private investigator, law enforcement, or insurance fraud caseworker experience in their body of work.

Nate had none of that. Nate had seven years of steel factory work under his belt before running to Chicago. Kasey had given him a job in this security world, and he'd learned the business from the ground up. He knew how to work a case now with some confidence, but he never entirely forgot he had come into this business without the pedigree so many of his coworkers possessed. He'd walked into it by chance. They'd all chosen it. None of them treated him unkindly or held a grudge, but Nate couldn't ever forget the difference.

Now, Nate had to add concealing a powerful personal and sexual attraction to the many masks he wore while walking the halls at Quinn. He wondered how many more he could add before the weight started slipping them down and the real Nate peeked through the cracks.

Who will want me around then?

Stop it. Nate slapped his cheeks and silently ordered himself to snap out of the disgusting self-pity. He ran his fingers through his hair—God, he really needed to get it cut. He then reached for the phone to call down for a cab when the faint ringing of his cell sent him in search of the source. A quick trip to the nightstand reminded Nate he hadn't performed his usual rituals before going to sleep last night.

Logan put me in bed.

Nate ignored the flood of awareness just thinking Logan's name aroused in him. He tried to anyway. His tender rectum reminded him of his recent trip into his fantasy world. No amount of wishing in the world would erase the sensitivity. In the shower this morning, Nate had pushed more fingers through his hole and had treated his passage with less care to the consequences than ever before. He wouldn't have minded one bit and would have loved living with the awareness if it actually had been Logan pushing so deep inside him.

Along with a curse at himself to stop pining, Nate finally found his phone still tucked in his suit jacket pocket. The call he'd just missed had come from his friend Wes in Vermont. A message on the voicemail relayed, "Can you call me later when

you have time to talk? I need a favor. Thanks.” Nate saved the message and made a mental note to check in soon but wondered what Wes needed. After breaking from a controlling, abusive boyfriend a year ago, Wes had worked extremely hard to create a life for himself, on his own, without slipping to rely on someone else. The guy hated asking for anything. He considered it a step backward in his recovery.

A text message from Logan caught Nate’s full attention. Got his heart skittering too. God, just seeing the man’s name on his phone should not elicit this kind of physical response. *Your car is at Quinn. I’ll pick you up at 7 in front of your building. Pack a bag. We might spend the night in AH. Don’t be late.*

Noticing the time on his cell, Nate muttered, “Shit.” He grabbed Canin’s old garment bag from the closet, threw a change of clothes in it in record time, and then rushed back into the bathroom to collect his toothbrush and razor. Back in the bedroom, he shoved the toiletry bag into a zipper compartment, grabbed his keys and phone, and did a sprint out of the apartment. *Jeez.* Nothing like jerking off in the shower to kill every extra minute of free time in the morning. Nate shouted good morning to the building attendant as he sped past, getting outside just in time to see Logan pull up.

As Nate climbed into the passenger seat of Logan’s car, he couldn’t help wondering what Logan might have done if Nate had kept the man waiting.

Nate’s ass squeezed of its own volition. The tenderness reminded him exactly what kind of punishment he could come to love...if delivered by Logan Jeffries.

Oh God. Nate slouched into the seat, as if hiding could halt the needy heartbeat throbbing in his passage or assuage his ache for a man he couldn’t have. *This is going to be a long day.*

Chapter Three

Logan worked like the very devil to control his growl. Sitting across from the commanding officer and one of the detectives in charge of the Sarna case, Logan felt like he could draw a big old goose egg over the piddly amount of information he and Nate had gained about Daria's disappearance.

"This is day eight now," Logan said, eyeballing the two men on the other side of the desk. "Are you leaning toward dead and unfound, or did she run away again?"

The detective, a middle-aged guy with a receding hairline, snorted and spat out a familiar curse. "Don't know. We're getting dick from the people who knew this girl," he said. "The father thinks something sinister has happened, but he didn't know crap about her life, so he can't give us any direction toward what or why something terrible might have happened. He flips back and forth between some secret boyfriend kidnapping her to being sure one of the runaways the girl helped has harmed her. The wife is scared, but I get the feeling she knew her daughter's personality a little better and still believes it's possible Daria took off on her own and will come home. The kid, Declan, is worried but is a shit asshole when it comes to sharing information, and the friends don't seem that worried about the girl going missing. Doesn't mean we're stupid or are taking anything at face value. We're covering all our bases. Keeping an eye on the people we need to while also looking into the father's suspicions."

"Have you eliminated anyone yet?"

"Come on, man. You fucking know I'm not telling you that." The detective leaned forward, fire spitting in his eyes. "We're doing what we need to do. We released her picture and info to the media, and we have a hotline set up and are tracking every tip, which you know is 99 percent crap. Shit, we even did a complete grid search of the wooded areas off the interstate between here and Chicago based on one of those tips. It turned up diddly-squat. You think you can do better?" The detective looked at Logan and Nate as if they were sticky shit on the bottom of his shoe. "Be our guests."

A contained, buzzing knot of choice words punched against Logan's throat and tried to get free. *So this is what it feels like to be an outsider.* Logan had done his fair share of giving crap to consultants and investigators from the private sector in his homicide days too. The smackdown burned in his chest, but as much as it wasn't his nature, he put a lid on his mood and got to his feet.

"Thank you for your time." Logan reached across the desk and shook the detective's hand. "If we turn up anything useful, we will let you know."

Nate rose, following Logan's lead. "Yes, thank you for agreeing to speak with us." After exchanging handshakes and business cards with both men and then exiting the office, Nate muttered, "Could have gotten more useful information out of the stray dog outside."

"Definitely." Logan turned an arched brow Nate's way as they moved through the station. "But would we have understood what he was trying to tell us?"

"What?" Nate looked at Logan askance. "Oh." Twin dots of red marred his cheeks. "Because of what I said about the dog, and then you commented we wouldn't understand him." Nate tore his attention down to the floor, and his voice dropped again. "That was funny."

Christ, Logan wanted to tuck Nate up against his side and kiss the red from his cheeks. Instead, he nudged Nate with his shoulder. "That was one of those things you say that's not really meant for anyone else to hear. Right?"

Nate shrugged without looking up. "Bad habit. Sorry. Oh!" A man pushing past Nate bumped into him and sent them both crashing into the wall. "Sorry." Nate grabbed for the guy and stopped him from hitting the floor. "Are you okay?"

The scruffy blond lifted his hands and said, "No harm done," without breaking stride.

Logan rushed a step ahead and held open the door for Nate. "You okay?" he asked, unable to take his eyes off Nate rubbing at his shoulder. Logan curled his hand into a fist. His fingers ached to take over the task himself. "That guy knocked into you pretty hard."

"Yeah, I'm fine." Nate offered Logan a sweet smile that set off somersaults in Logan's stomach. In the next breath, Nate turned those soft brown eyes on Logan, and without thinking Logan leaned in closer for a whiff of the man's clean linen scent. *Damn*. He almost hummed.

File tucked under his arm, Nate loped down the two steps in front of him. Getting to the sidewalk, he glanced back up at Logan. "You all right?" He squinted and cocked his head to the side.

Fuck. "Yeah. I'm fine."

"What's next on the agenda?"

Agenda? Right. Agenda. Logan would have kicked himself in the ass if he could. *Damn it, man. Keep it in your pants.* They had a missing girl on their hands.

Joining Nate, Logan pulled his shit into place. "Next I want to track down every one of Daria's friends here in Arlington Heights to see if we can find a chink in one of their stories. Then I want to hit the Sarna house..."

* * *

Nate cringed as Logan closed his car door with such controlled, precise movement it resonated louder than an outright slam. They'd spent the latter half of the morning, lunch, and into the afternoon interviewing many of Daria's friends. As the detective had told them this morning, not a blessed one of them had more than

the slightest passing concern for their friend's whereabouts. Meanwhile, Nate had watched Logan's shoulders get tighter and tighter with each ensuing conversation. His patience had grown visibly thinner by the hour. Logan had to be accustomed to coming up against obstructionists during his days on the force, but Nate suspected the seeming indifference of this group of people had severely abraded his usual cool.

Logan's neck cracked loudly as he shifted his head from side to side. He looked at Nate and then frowned in the direction of the Sarnas' Tudor-style home. "Let's do this," he said, and made a move toward the palatial estate.

"Hey." Nate reached out and snagged Logan's arm before the man could complete his first step. Logan slowly turned back to Nate, narrowing that fierce gaze his way, but Nate didn't back off from the snarl. He couldn't care about the risk of a bite right now.

Instead, Nate moved his hands up Logan's arms to his thick shoulders and petted at the tension he found there. He held on to Logan and met his glare with a stare full of concern. "Breathe for me, okay?" Nate pulled in and exhaled a lungful of the tart, pure winter air himself, hoping to get Logan to join him. Nodding, prompting, Nate let his lungs expand with a second dose of crisp air. "Take a breath, Logan. I don't want you so upset you miss seeing something important in Daria's room. Okay?"

Logan stilled under Nate's hands, and the polar icecap worth of chill dissipated some from his eyes. "You can tell I'm upset, huh?"

"Seething mad might be a more accurate choice of words," Nate corrected.

Logan's lips compressed to almost nothing. "I usually do a better job of hiding it." He made that declaration sound like a curse.

Nate couldn't stop looking at the harsh, sexy line of Logan's mouth. "You've never been partnered with me," he murmured, still rubbing at the stiff lines holding Logan rigid.

"You're right," Logan said, his response so husky and surprising it snapped Nate's gaze up to his. All traces of cold had fled from Logan's eyes. "I haven't."

Shit. Logan had responded with words that made sense, so that meant Nate had actually spoken aloud that thought about them partnering together. Nate's mouth went dry enough to steal any utterance that might slip free. *Get your idiot mouth under control.* Nate never mumbled himself into corners like this with anyone else.

"Nate?" Logan's voice sank into Nate like hard, hot, male flesh, penetrating his very being, and dragged Nate back into the moment. "Nate?"

Blinking, Nate looked into the most beautiful pale stare. "What?"

Logan glanced down. Nate followed to find fingers gripping fabric. His fingers.

"You're strangling my tie," Logan said.

"Oh." Nate jerked fully back into reality. He immediately released Logan's tie and tried to smooth out the crumples he'd put in the material. "Sorry."

Logan covered Nate's hand with his. The shock of contact stilled Nate's frantic fussing. "It's okay," Logan said. He held Nate's hand trapped against his hard, flat stomach, and Nate started to breathe a little unevenly. "I don't like the tie." Logan's lips didn't remotely turn up at the edges, but Nate could have sworn that hard line of mouth hid a grin, just for him.

How is that possible?

Nate lifted his hand, wanting to feel what he couldn't actually see, when the sound of a door opening and closing followed by voices brought reality crashing in again. Nate and Logan yanked their hands off each other and put distance between them just as Elise Sarna and a tall, attractive, dark-haired man Nate recognized as one of Sarna's associates exited the home.

This time, Nate deliberately but subtly leaned in close to Logan and kept his voice low. "Phillip Cosgrove." He automatically knew Logan would want the man's name before an official introduction. "Treasure hunter, independent contractor who sometimes works with Sarna Imports. About two months ago, he found them a piece of jewelry from India that Sarna then sold for a quarter of a million dollars."

"Jesus."

"You got that right." Nate then neatly transitioned to the approaching pair, his hand outstretched to Elise first. "Mrs. Sarna, thank you again for making your home available to the investigation."

"Of course." Elise shook Nate's hand, her hold delicate. "Whatever you need, whenever you need it. Just ask." Her color a little on the pale side, she rubbed her hands against her arms, as if the long camel-colored coat did not keep out the cold. "I'm afraid there hasn't been any new information from the police today."

"I know," Nate said. "We spoke to them as part of our investigation. I'm so sorry."

Elise tittered a laugh riddled with obviously shot nerves. "I keep telling myself it's better not to hear anything." She shrugged, but it looked halfhearted at best. "Then at least there's still a chance Daria will call us and tell us to wire her some money for a plane ticket because she's ready to come home."

Nate's heart tugged, but unsure what Elise would accept as comfort, he kept a respectable distance and his hands in his pockets. "That's understandable, ma'am."

An uncomfortable silence that could have accommodated crickets singing in the distance sat heavy between the foursome. Abruptly, Elise extended her arm toward the house. "Please feel free to go inside. Declan is home and can answer any questions you might have. I apologize." She looked up at Logan for the first time. "I'm so distracted I don't think about the niceties half the time anymore. Mr. Jeffries, this is Phillip Cosgrove, one of our associates. Phillip"—she touched his elbow—"Mr. Jeffries is heading up the private inquiry about Daria. I believe you've met Nate."

After exchanging a handshake with Logan, Phillip dipped his head at Nate. "Yes. I'm sorry to cross paths again under these circumstances."

Nate nodded back. "We are too."

"Phillip is here briefly on business," Elise shared, "but he has also offered his foreign contacts to act as eyes and ears for us in case Daria did decide to travel internationally. She did it without leaving a trail before, so I don't blindly accept the police telling me she isn't on any passenger manifests."

"I don't have people everywhere," Phillip clarified, "but the ones I do can ask questions in a half-dozen countries in Asia and the Middle East. They know other people I don't, so I've asked them to spread the word and get back to me if anything sounds promising."

"Last time she disappeared for this long," Elise said, "she turned up in Spain." Her chin wobbled. "Maybe she will again."

Nate's throat got tight for this woman. "Let's hope."

"Do you have a card?" Phillip asked. "If someone alerts me with a rumor or sighting, I can let you know. Elise has already given me the contact information for the official investigation."

Logan and Phillip exchanged business cards, with Logan murmuring his appreciation for the courtesy. Phillip assured him he would do whatever he could to help. He then pointed at his watch. Discreetly, but Nate saw it. Elise did too.

She said, "I wish I could be here to answer any questions you might have, but we have a client who can only be in town today. I have to handle it. Stephen is..." Chips of blue topaz took over her eyes. "Stephen is unavailable to take care of it. You have my number..."

"We'll call you if we need anything," Nate finished the request for her.

Elise touched Nate's hand with her gloved one. "Thank you." She then followed Phillip to a top-of-the-line, luxury sedan Nate figured probably cost more than he would make in two years.

As Phillip and Elise drove down to the security gate, Logan made an inelegant noise. "That guy is fucking that woman."

Nate narrowed his gaze as the car pulled away. From the street, another car pulled out behind it. "Seriously?"

"Hell, yes." Logan made it sound like the most obvious observation in the world. "He put his hand on the small of her back twice—probably didn't realize he was doing it. She didn't even flinch; she's used to his touch. I'm not saying they're off to fuck right now—I don't think she'd be that stupid with law enforcement watching them. I'm just saying they have a relationship. An intimate one."

Nate quirked a brow. "You think that's why he offered to help find Daria?"

Logan delivered the most exaggerated, comical expression Nate had ever seen grace the hard man's face.

"Yeah, all right." Nate rolled his eyes. "Stupid question. Of course he is. You know what, though? Help is help. And we haven't been asked to investigate infidelity here, just find a girl."

"We don't have any proof for the husband, even if we did want to say something." Logan's unblinking stare slipped to downright frigid.

"Good point." Witnessing the chill in Logan's gaze disturbed the hairs on Nate's neck.

Logan strode to the door, and Nate raced to catch up with him. As Nate pulled alongside Logan, he put his hand on Logan's wrist. "Are you ready to do this?"

Logan took a deep, visible breath. "I feel saner now," he said. "Thank you." His brows pulled, and his jaw developed a tic. It took him a handful of heartbeats, but he eventually made eye contact with Nate. And held it. "You were right to stop me, and you really did help pull me back into focus." His proximity burned embers of heat all around them, as if they were bundled up close together on a warm tropical island while an ice storm raged around them. "It's good you were here."

As natural as breathing, Nate slipped his hand down Logan's wrist to his hand. "I'm glad."

Something changed Logan's eyes to a deep, smoky sage, making Nate think about clandestine sex surrounded by trees in the woods, moss cushioning his back as his lover took him on the damp forest floor. Nate's nostrils flared, as if he could smell those very evergreens right now. He swayed toward Logan, and Nate couldn't swear to it, but he didn't think Logan retreated from the closer contact. *Oh man.*

The front door swung open and tore them apart. Declan stood there, his mouth twisted with a smug downward pull. "Are you going to make out on my doorstep, or are you going to come inside and do your job?" With that snotty commentary, Declan disappeared into the house, leaving the door wide open.

Logan lunged.

Nate grabbed his arm again and said one word. "Breathe."

Logan's smile was unique, unexpected, and downright savage. "You just saved that kid's life." He strode into the house without another word.

With Declan in the house, Nate quickly followed.

* * *

"I don't think I'm finding anything useful." Nate glanced at Logan, who stood with his hands braced on the open doors of an enormous wardrobe on the other side of Daria's room. "How about you?"

"We're painting a picture," Logan replied without turning around. "That's always helpful."

Nate pulled open a nightstand drawer and started rifling through its contents. "What kind of picture are you seeing?"

"Well, she's not nearly as frivolous or as juvenile as I half thought she might be," Logan answered. "I mean, look at this room." He finally did turn, and Nate watched Logan as the man looked over every corner of the enormous space. "Everything has its place. That's not a maid thing; it's more than someone being paid to tidy up. It's organized everywhere." Dropping to a squat in front of a line of

low bookshelves, Logan fingered some of the book spines. "Other than some Homer and Dickens, there's not a lot fiction here. I'd expect some romance or contemporary bestsellers on these shelves. How many rich twenty-year-olds who are considered flighty and are prone to disappear without telling anyone also read about horse soldiers in Afghanistan or *Freakonomics* or the plight of African women to educate their daughters?"

Nate flipped through a little spiral notebook, searching for something beyond a scribble about picking up a wedding gift or buying a specific pair of shoes. "Maybe she just lacks an imagination for fiction reading. Some people do," he said, glancing up at Logan. "Having shelves full of books like the ones you mentioned doesn't automatically translate into Daria having read any of them. Might be more like a noble goal, or even just purchased for appearances."

Standing back up, Logan narrowed his gaze while continuing to study Daria's room. "Maybe I'd buy that, except look at the room as a whole. The desk and dresser tops are precise and minimal. There aren't any mementos from high school or college or any trinkets commemorating a party or boyfriends or friends. She has a few family photos out, but the rest are in albums on her bookshelf. She doesn't have an obscene amount of clothing, shoes, or purses. What she does have is trendy but professional looking, even though she doesn't officially have a job."

Nate paused. "What about her apartment in the city?"

"Basically the same as here." Logan shrugged, his focus now on Nate. "Nothing appeared missing or out of place."

"I guess that's interesting." Nate didn't like the sudden chill sliding down his spine. "Maybe?"

"It doesn't indicate a frivolous rich kid who takes off at the drop of a hat when the whim strikes her." Hints of exasperation slipped into Logan's words. "I don't even see any empty slots in the closet or drawers. It doesn't look like she took anything with her. Unless she planned to buy all new clothes wherever she ended up, that doesn't make any sense."

Nate went very still. In the last twenty-four hours, he couldn't say he'd learned many useful things about Daria. Logan, however, was a different story. Nate had found he had a knack for reading the flashes in Logan's eyes, the pull of his mouth, and the way his shoulders and back stiffened as if he'd worked with the man for twenty years. *Or lived with him.* The cutting line of Logan's mouth right now spoke volumes.

"You don't even remotely believe Daria left of her own free will," Nate whispered. Any hope for Daria's survival plummeted into Nate's stomach, churning inside him with sick.

Logan nodded sharply, his visage grim. "The only thing that isn't here"—he stood in front of Daria's desk, his arms spread wide—"is a laptop. How does she not have a laptop or even a desktop?"

A shadow crossed the lush white carpet, and a male voice followed. "She did have one," Declan said from the doorway. "She had it with her that day, before she disappeared. I remember because she was playing an online game with one of my friends at the party, who was using my laptop." Declan's dark hair stood out in stark contrast against the color fleeing from his cheeks and lips. "She was monopolizing his...everyone's attention. It pissed me off, and I told her so."

Unable to help himself, Nate moved closer to Declan. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

Declan met Nate's gaze; darkness haunted the blue. "Not yet."

Nate's heart twisted. "What does that mean?"

Logan walked across the room with speed and got right in Declan's face. "If you know something, kid, you need to say it right now."

Suddenly exploding with life, Declan surged. He shoved Logan in the chest, and in doing so moved both of them into the room. "You don't care about my sister," he raged, pointing in Logan's face. "You care about making money. For all I know, you'll hide anything you find and just dole out little nuggets to keep my dad on your leash forever. Not that he really gives two shits." Lifting his arms, Declan turned in a circle. "Do you see him here, distraught and waiting for the phone to ring? No, you don't. He's off somewhere getting drunk off his ass. And my loving mother is out making sure we don't lose a dime of income while her kid is missing. Or maybe she's just fucking her boyfriend." He spit on a photo of Elise and Stephen, nailing his mother right in the face. "It's hard to say if the money or Phillip is more important to her, but you can damn well bet it isn't her daughter."

"Then you have to care, goddamn it!" Logan's voice rose with passion. "Because so far it's not looking to me like you've done anything to help the cops figure out what happened to Daria. You just admitted to stuff the police don't have on record. That tells me you're obstructing the process. And you might be worse, because you might actually know something useful while your parents are just ignorant about Daria's life."

Any chink Nate had observed in Declan's armor a moment ago disappeared. "I don't know anything," he said, looking bored again.

Logan lifted his arms, his hands tightening into fists, but abruptly shook his head and dragged his fingers through his hair. "You're almost twenty-one fucking years old, Declan." Logan clasped his hands behind his neck, and Nate read a mix of pity and intolerance in his eyes. "Start being a man. It's past time to grow up."

"Is this what you did to intimidate witnesses when you were a cop?" Declan looked at Logan with a sneer, arms crossed against his chest. "No wonder you got shot."

Logan's growl quickly became a snarl, and Nate jumped in between the two men before blood stained Daria's impeccable white carpet.

Nate pushed against Logan and met with nearly unmovable force. "Logan, back off." He kept moving and managed to get some space between Logan and

Declan. Nate looked into Logan's fiery eyes and ordered, under his breath, "Take care of searching the rest of Daria's room. I'll talk to Declan."

A battle of wills ensued, where in Logan glared daggers at Nate. The man's entire being crackled and fired with heat; Nate could feel it wash over him like a big, hot wall, buffeting against his stance. Nate held his ground; he fucking sweated out a river of perspiration down his spine in the face of Logan's spitting stare, but he did not flinch, even when Logan bared his teeth. In reality, it could not have taken more than ten seconds before Logan dipped his head and moved across the room, but the result of the tension coiling in Nate's body while asserting control over Logan made it feel like an hour.

Once Logan stepped into Daria's bathroom, Nate exhaled. He then turned, pulled out Daria's desk chair, and asked Declan to take a seat.

"Do you think playing good cop is going to get me to talk to you?" Declan asked even as he did sit down in the offered chair. "Taking a page from every crap cop show on TV isn't all that smart. You were better off letting the Neanderthal try to intimidate me into talking."

Nate gritted his teeth enough to make his jaw sore, but he managed to ignore not only the reference to Logan's getting shot but also the crack about his caveman tendencies.

Instead, Nate pulled over the bench from the foot of Daria's bed and sat down in front of Declan. "How dumb do you think I am?" he asked the young man. "You were trying to provoke my partner into a physical attack. Then *boom* goes the dynamite, Logan is fired, and your family is suing Quinn for everything it's worth."

Declan pushed back in the chair and perused Nate from top to bottom. "So maybe you're not as stupid as I thought."

"And maybe you're more scared about your sister than you want anyone to think, and you're acting this way to cover it up. Is that true?"

Sighing, Declan stretched his long legs wide. "I already told the police everything I know."

"I met your sister once." Holding eye contact with Declan, Nate asked, "Did you know that?"

"No." The kid shrugged. "So?"

"Listen. I'm a grunt, employed by your family, but Daria looked me in the eyes and treated me with respect. Real respect. I never forgot it because clients don't always treat people like me that way. For that reason alone I'm praying she ran off and will come home. But equally, if something has happened to her, I would want whoever took her, or did something to her, to be found and pay for it." Shifting forward, Nate planted his elbows on his knees and tried like hell not to look and sound like the enemy. "I think you love your sister, Declan, and I think in this family, *you're* the one who's actually the most scared about what happened to her. Tell me I'm wrong, and I'll go."

Declan didn't say a word for the longest stretch of seconds. He looked down, surely noticed his hands trembling, and shoved them under his legs. Declan's boot-covered foot silently began beating against the plush carpet in its place, and Nate didn't pretend he couldn't see it.

"I know it might not seem like a big deal," Declan finally said, "and it probably seems stupid to you and everyone else, but I know Daria wouldn't have missed our weekend at the cabin unless something bad happened."

Nate suppressed the fist pump he wanted to jump up and perform. "What else can you tell me about your sister?"

"What your partner concluded about Daria earlier is right. I'm the shithead." Declan pushed that dimpled chin of his up high. "I'm the one who parties all the time. I'm the one who is everything Mr. Jeffries assumes I am." He shot a blue-fire hot glare toward Daria's bed, where Logan now pushed himself under in his continued search. "I'm cool with that. Daria isn't like me." With one blink, Declan brought his attention back to Nate, and all traces of the punk who'd answered the door disappeared. "Daria didn't just steal that money two years ago to run away for a vacation in Spain like some spoiled, rich bitch. She did take the money, and she did disappear without a word, but when she got home I pestered her like hell about it, and she swore to me she took the money and left for a good reason."

"What was the good reason?" Nate asked.

Declan wiped at his mouth, and the knowledge in his eyes suddenly made him look much older than his twenty years. "She refused to tell me. She said she'd been sworn to secrecy and would take it to her grave, but that if I knew, I'd have approved and done the same."

"Have you thought about what that meant?" Nate's mind spun with too many possibilities to land on just one. "Did she give you any other clues?"

"No. I just know she was spending like crazy around that time, but I don't have any idea what she was buying. She didn't have much new stuff to show for it, and then the money from the safe went missing too." Declan's jaw clenched, and he swore softly. "Last week, when we found the emergency money had gone missing again, my mom was sure Daria had done another Mediterranean vacation run, but I knew better."

"Because Daria wouldn't have missed your weekend hanging at the cabin."

"Right."

"Was there anything else going on with Daria you can share with me? With all the money she was blowing through, did you ever suspect a drug problem?"

"With Daria?" A bark of laughter, too spontaneous to be fake, filled the room. "No way. She's totally straight-edge. Daria didn't even drink."

"All right. Anything else?" Nate fixed his stare fully on Declan. "Now is not the time to hold back."

Chewing on his lip, Declan nodded. "In the last few months, she'd taken to leaving the house late at night. She was always home before our parents woke up.

Once I caught her coming in at like four in the morning, and I asked her what the hell she was doing. She told me it was for a project she planned on writing about that she knew would get her back in school. She said it wouldn't interest me and not to worry about it." He shook his head and looked up at the ceiling. "I wish I'd cared more now. I wish I'd followed her once to see what she was doing."

Nate touched Declan's arm and pulled the young man's focus back to him. "Would Daria have given any of her friends information in greater detail?"

"No. None of her friends would have cared enough to ask."

"What about this person Daria was playing computer games with all night on the day she disappeared? What is his or her name?"

"Pierce Lyndsey. But you don't need to bother him." Declan started chewing on a fingernail. "He already talked to the police."

"We'll still want to talk to him ourselves."

Declan slipped into his slouch. "His information is in your files. Do what you want. I don't care."

Nate suppressed a sigh. "Is there anything else you'd like to share?"

"Nope." Without looking at him, Declan got up and, while on his way to the door, started fiddling with his phone. "I'm done."

"Thank you for talking to me." Getting up, Nate stretched out his hand, offering a card. "If you think of anything else, please don't hesitate to call me. I'm going to keep you in the loop, Declan. I'm going to ask you to give the same courtesy to me."

Back to looking put-upon, Declan snatched Nate's card. "Do you think we're best friends now because you sat down and talked nice to me for five minutes?"

"I think you'll call me because you want to know what happened to your sister and you sense Mr. Jeffries and myself are the best way to make that happen."

One glance Logan's way, and Declan came back to Nate with a smile that grated. "You're the brains and charm, and he's the brute strength?"

Nate took deliberate, controlled hold of Declan's shirt. "That man is your greatest chance of finding Daria." His insides shook with a flood of adrenaline, but he somehow kept his hand and voice steady. "He has my complete respect and loyalty. You can keep insulting him on your own time, but you won't do it in front of me ever again." Taking a breath, Nate let go and offered his hand. "Are we clear?"

Nodding, Declan shook it. "I suppose we are."

"Good man." Nate clapped Declan on the shoulder while also guiding him into the hallway. "Thank you for everything you've shared today."

Declan touched the shirt pocket where he'd placed Nate's card. "I'll call you if anything comes to me."

"Thank you, Declan."

Logan stepped in. "Yes, thank you." He extended his hand to Declan as well. Big of him, in Nate's opinion. "We need a few more minutes. When we're done, we'll let ourselves out."

With only a nod, Declan headed toward the stairs.

When Nate heard the kid's heavy boots on the steps, he turned back to Logan. "Let's get this finished." Rubbing at his face, he could feel this house, this case, already getting under his skin. "Where do you want me next?"

"You go over everything I looked at," Logan instructed, "and I'll do the reverse. Just in case we missed anything."

"Sounds good."

Nate moved to the wardrobe, and Logan went to Daria's vanity. In silence, they got back to their search.

* * *

"That was good work in there," Logan said as soon as they exited the Sarna home. "It was quick on your feet to create a personal connection to the victim to get her brother to open up."

At the passenger side door, Nate glanced across the hood of the car. "How do you know I didn't really meet Daria?"

Logan's piercing gaze did not blink. "You would not have neglected to tell me something like meeting the girl, Nate. You never met her." Without breaking eye contact, he opened his door. "You made it up."

Guilt kept Nate's eyes off the Sarna house. "I did," he admitted. "I sensed Declan knew something, and you were... You were..."

"Pissing him off?" Logan finished, his lips tight. "Go ahead. I screwed that up. You can say it." He pushed off against the roof of the car, cursing himself some more as he climbed in behind the wheel. "I played him like the father does." Nate could hear Logan's frustration. "I insulted him, and that wasn't the way to get him talking."

Nate followed Logan into the vehicle, watching him as he buckled his seat belt. "We got some good information. It doesn't matter how."

As the car idled for a moment, Logan gripped the wheel with both hands, and his square jaw took on an unrelenting tic. He flashed Nate a quick, icy look before pulling around the drive toward the street.

"I'm finding it harder to work without a badge than I thought I would," Logan said, eyes now on driving. "Being in uniform and then a detective, you show up, you prove you're an authority figure, and usually people without anything to hide will talk to you. You press a little bit, you hint at them spending some time in lockup for obstructing an investigation if they don't, and you get results. Before I step into a situation now, I have to remind myself I don't have the power of the Chicago police force to back me up."

"Logan, it's your second day with Quinn." Nate ached to kiss away the brackets pulling at the man's mouth. "Give yourself a break."

"No. I can't do that. If you hadn't been here, we wouldn't have gotten that valuable information out of Declan. I have to see my weaknesses and adjust quickly, or I won't be able to produce results. I won't be worth the money Quinn is paying me." Pausing to wait for the gates to open, Logan glanced at Nate and held his stare. "Or the praise you gave me in that room."

"I'm not worried about... Hey."

Nate suddenly only cared about Logan unstrapping his belt and leaning his body over the steering wheel, the side of his face practically smashed against the windshield.

"What's the matter?" Nate asked, leaning and looking too.

"That car that just turned up ahead. The champagne colored compact." Inching the car closer to the gate with every millimeter it slowly opened, Logan jammed his hands into the steering wheel when the space didn't get big enough fast enough. "I think I saw it pass us when we were buzzed in earlier."

"You think someone is following us?"

Logan shot the car out into the street and veered to the left, hauling ass down an empty neighborhood road. "Shit." He turned the car onto another empty street. "If they were, they're gone now."

"Logan." Nate's voice dropped to a hush. He felt like he wanted to press himself flat up against a wall and disappear into the wallpaper pattern. "What have we walked into here?"

One look at Logan and Nate realized he would have to come up with something other than "grim" to describe the many variations on one basic look from his partner.

"I don't know," Logan said. "Keep your eyes open for that car, just in case it tries to pick us back up." He pulled up his sleeve, glanced at his watch, and then to Nate. "I was going to wait until tomorrow morning, but now I want to talk to as many of the guys Declan had at that party as we can right now."

"Works for me."

"We're wasting daylight." Logan slipped back into the suit of determination that likely had made him a great homicide detective. "Punch the first address into the GPS."

His stomach knotting up once again, Nate entered the address that would take them to their first location.

Chapter Four

With half a dozen interviews of various rich, punk bastards now under his belt, Logan had effectively learned how to keep his cool without a badge to back him up.

On the job training. Nothing better in the world.

Pierce Lyndsey, one of Declan's friends in attendance at the party the evening Daria disappeared, sat in his home with the star-filled night at his back. He looked more like a man relaxing for the evening in front of a fire at a ski lodge than someone answering serious questions about his good friend's missing sister.

Tapping his pen against his notes, Logan said, "According to other people in attendance at the party, you spent the most time with Daria that afternoon and evening. Is that correct?"

"Did Declan tell you that?" Pierce's eyes twinkled as brightly as his white smile. "He would definitely notice."

So in control of the situation now, Logan didn't even raise a brow. "Are you disagreeing?"

"Nope," Pierce answered easily. "Just saying I bet Declan could tell you exactly how many minutes I was with Daria and every single thing we did together. Whatever Declan said"—another perfectly capped grin appeared—"you can bet is right."

Next to Logan, Nate shifted forward on the couch. "Why do you say that?"

Pierce leaned forward too and braced his elbows in a mirror of Nate's. "Declan doesn't think anyone knows he likes boys." The guy wiped the edge of his lip as if he couldn't stop himself from smiling. "I can see it, though. Big time."

Logan fucking wanted to do it, but he resisted rolling his eyes. "Because you're so enlightened and insightful?"

"Not exactly." Switching from drinking, Pierce reached into his pocket and withdrew a pack of cigarettes. As he tapped one out, he added, "I know because you're looking at Declan's biggest crush. The dude totally wants me."

"Does that bother you?" Logan didn't give away a hint of his surprise. "Maybe it angered you enough to punish Declan by hurting his sister. It's clear Declan loves Daria a lot. Killing her would be a good way to make him suffer."

"Hell no." Kicking back, Pierce blew out a puff of smoke, sending it in Logan and Nate's direction. "Declan's little man-crush doesn't bother me. It's cute. It makes me laugh. I haven't told anyone. It wouldn't serve any purpose."

"But you like his sister," Logan pressed.

"I like them both." Pierce tapped his cigarette into a glass sitting on an end table to his right. "Just in different ways."

"Does Declan know that?" Nate asked.

"He's harmless." Ease of his superior position oozed out of Pierce in his laid-back stance. "There's no reason to crush him."

"So then you haven't," Logan said, "yet you still hit on his sister in front of him."

The punk puffed on his cigarette as if he thought himself a blond Don Draper. "I never told Declan anything could happen between him and me."

"I bet you've never told him it couldn't either." Nate's clipped tone immediately drew Logan's attention. "I guess you figured you were sending him the message by hitting on Daria at his own party." His pen clicked a furious beat under his thumb. "Right?"

"I liked Daria. She was a cool girl. If I saw an opportunity to hang with her, I took it."

"Did you ever think dangling your interest in Daria in front of Declan might anger him?" Logan asked. He ignored the sharp glance Nate sent his way. He had a job to do here. "Ever think he might blame Daria and direct that anger toward *her* if she liked you back?"

"Declan?" Pierce busted out laughing so hard he spit his drink—Logan suspected vodka—across the coffee table. "Sorry." He wiped his mouth but left the spittle dotting the glass surface between the two couches. "Declan is a lightweight. He thinks he's tough, but he's not anything. His daddy still makes him cry when he lays on that nasty brand of charm. I've seen it. Declan couldn't kill anybody. He's all talk."

Nate shifted his narrow-eyed stare back to Pierce. "What about you, Pierce? Could you kill someone? Especially since you already seem to believe Daria is dead. As far as the police and media are concerned, we're still looking for a missing person."

"After more than a week?" Pierce went back to his cigarette. "That girl is dead, and we all know it."

"Now she's 'that girl'?" Nate's voice scratched high in tone and volume. "A minute ago she was Daria, a cool chick you homed in on and spent time with whenever you could."

"I did like her," Pierce replied, "but she's gone now. Time to move on."

"To Declan?" Nate asked.

"I don't mind hanging with Declan." Another one of those smiles that didn't reach Pierce's eyes appeared. "Doesn't mean we're ever going to fuck."

Logan had the urge well under control, but Christ, he still wanted to smack the smug right off this kid's face. "Ever gonna tell Declan that?"

Pierce's gaze held on Nate for a heartbeat and then slid to Logan. "I suspect your partner here will. I can see the do-gooder gene in his eyes."

The desire to smack this asshole moved up to a punch in the mouth. Logan remembered Nate's advice and breathed. "Do you think the truth will matter to Declan?" he asked.

Pierce took his final puff and tossed the cigarette butt in the glass he'd been using as an ashtray. "We'll see."

Logan crossed off the question mark he'd drawn next to Declan's name. "Back to Daria. You spent time with her that day. You also say whatever time frame Declan gives us is correct, and you will corroborate it. True?"

"Absolutely."

"Did the two of you talk about anything that stands out?" Logan asked. "Did she seem distracted? Scared maybe?"

"For the most part, we played a game against each other on some laptops." Pierce stretched his arm across the back of the leather couch. "I asked her if she wanted to hook up later, but she said she was busy. I asked her what she was doing and told her I'd be cool tagging along, but she said it wasn't anything that would interest me and that I had a dozen other girls who would jump at the chance to bang me and to go bother one of them. I pressed the matter, which probably a few people overheard. That finally pissed her off, and she took her computer and stormed upstairs. I didn't care enough to follow. Wasn't the first time she put me off." He scratched at his artfully groomed stubble. "I didn't figure it would be the last."

"She definitely took her computer with her?" Logan asked while circling the word laptop in his notes.

"Yep."

"And what time was that?" Logan followed up.

"Not late. The party started in the afternoon and went into the evening before everybody wandered to someone else's house." Closing his eyes for a moment, Pierce's forehead furrowed. When he looked at Logan again, he said, "Maybe around nine? Definitely not more than a few minutes before or after that."

Logan added the note to his timeline. "Okay. Thank you for your time." As he got to his feet, he pulled out one of the business cards Quinn had made for him. "If you think of anything else, give us a call."

Pierce gave the card a cursory glance before tossing it on his coffee table. Right into his spit. "I'll put it with my collection. Have a good night."

The guy didn't even bother to stand. His cell phone rang, and he answered it as if Logan and Nate didn't exist anymore. They let themselves out. Nate remained quiet—more in line with the quieter person Logan had observed in the past. Logan could only surmise Pierce's commentary regarding Declan had upset Nate. Heat burned in Logan's chest as soon as he had that thought, and jealousy of a goddamn twenty-year-old spoiled kid fucking ate through him like acid.

A kid who has Nate's interest.

Shut up.

Logan's fourth law stated: never compete for a man's interest.

Therefore, if Nate had picked up on Declan's interest in guys—and Nate liked Declan in return—then Logan had yet another reason to stay out of the game. It was a good rule. Hell, all his laws existed for a reason. He just had to keep reminding the head on his shoulders and the one in his pants of that truth every time the need to touch, smell, and live inside Nate overwhelmed him.

Like right now.

One glance at Nate staring out the passenger side window into the taillight-dotted darkness and Logan wanted to haul the guy onto his lap.

Fuck.

As Logan merged his car into traffic, he said, "You ready to call it a night?" Unable to completely smooth the roughness from his voice, Logan hoped Nate could somehow sense the softness in his attempt. "After more than fourteen hours straight, I'm tired of dealing with these people for the day."

Chewing on his middle finger's cuticle, Nate nodded. His stare remained trained outside. Wholly unsure of himself, a fucking oddity for Logan, he gripped the steering wheel and turned his full attention to driving them to their hotel.

So much for that.

Nate didn't say anything for nearly five minutes. Then he muttered, "What a jerk."

Logan suspected that once again Nate had meant to mumble that comment softly to himself.

"You mean Prince Charming back there?" Logan decided to respond to Nate anyway, as he'd done since the day they'd met. "Agreed."

Whirling in his seat, Nate suddenly didn't look a bit withdrawn. "That guy is totally screwing with Declan. Pierce knows Declan has a crush, and he's dangling little morsels in front of Declan for his own amusement, while he's really hot for Daria. And God knows how many other girls too. But he definitely doesn't want Declan. He doesn't even talk about him like a real friend. It's like Pierce enjoys being the maestro, and Declan is this eager student who will play until his fingers bleed in the hopes of getting a smile or kind word from Pierce."

Nate's life force filled the car with kinetic energy.

"You like Declan now." Logan's heart sank as he said that. *Fucking ridiculous to be jealous of a kid.* Clearing his throat of the rancid taste, Logan added, "That talk with him turned you today."

"And you don't like him." Nate's voice dropped to a murmur.

Glancing Nate's way, Logan saw Nate's interest in his answer. He had clearly picked up on Logan's impatience with the rich kid. *Damn it.* Logan sighed. "I think Declan has had every opportunity for a first-rate education and the best start in life,

yet he chooses to have no standards for himself. Fuck his father. Fuck his mother. He's old enough now to understand he can be his own man if he wants to. Yet I bet he barely scrapes by with passing grades, and never once has it occurred to him to get a job to see what it feels like to earn some money on his own." Logan eased in behind another car to get in the turn lane for the hotel. "His natural intelligence is wasted, and that bugs the crap out of me."

"You didn't have any money when you were growing up." Nate's voice softened, as if fearful of approaching a barely tamed animal. "Is that right?"

"I didn't have much," Logan admitted. *Christ. Why not get into some personal history right here and now?* He cleared his throat again as he pulled into a slot in the hotel's parking lot and cut the engine. "My dad worked in a GM plant, and my mom stayed at home. There wasn't a whole lot of money to divvy between five kids for school, and I wasn't quite good enough at hockey and didn't have a high enough GPA to open any scholarship doors. I'm not bitter about it, but it irritates me to no end to see what little Declan is doing with his life when there are thousands of kids in this country who would give up the few material possessions they have for a chance to attend a good high school and a great college." Feeling like he'd pinned himself under a microscope, Logan finished his rambling diatribe and climbed out of the car, slamming the door quickly to get Nate's stare off him. Without glancing at Nate, Logan knew the guy's gaze practically bored into him. Logan could feel the hairs on the back of his neck responding.

His fucking cock did too.

Nate didn't help the matter any when he fell into step beside Logan on their short walk to the hotel entrance, shoulder to shoulder.

"We didn't have much money growing up either," Nate shared, his hands in his pockets. "I've never been to college."

"No shame in neither of us having gone." A bone-biting wind whipped across the parking lot, and Logan pulled his wool coat tighter across his body. "You like Declan, though." He forced himself to look at Nate's handsome, angular profile and then got trapped there when Nate turned to look at him. "I can see it in your eyes," Logan said, his voice husky.

Nate shrugged his hunched shoulders. "I see nuggets of a good person in there. And I don't care how much he acts like a shit; it has to hurt like hell when someone like Pierce toys with you, yet for some reason you want him so much you overlook it and take what you can get."

"You're making an assumption."

"I don't think I am. There was something in Declan's eyes when he said Pierce's name. He has wicked strong feelings for the guy, and Pierce just loves it."

Reaching the hotel's double doors, Logan held one open for Nate. "Maybe Declan doesn't think he deserves better."

After murmuring his thanks and hustling inside, Nate waited for Logan to move in beside him. As they fell into step again, Nate said, "Everybody deserves better than a Pierce."

"Amen to that."

Nate's phone killed the rest of Logan's thought. After unearthing it from an inside pocket, Nate glanced at the screen, then held it up to Logan. "His ears must have been burning. It's Declan."

Of course it is.

"What's up, Declan?" Nate said as soon as he put the phone to his ear. "Did you remember anything?"

Nate had the volume turned too low for Logan to hear Declan's response. As Logan jabbed the elevator button, he heard Nate say, "We plan on driving up there tomorrow, but that's good info. Thank you. Hold on for a sec." Nate then put his hand over his cell and said to Logan, "Declan says Daria always loved going up to the Sarna cabin to unwind or think. He wonders if she maybe left evidence of what she was working on there. He says his parents didn't include keys in our package, but we can swing back by in the morning, and he'll give us his."

"Great." Logan forcibly worked the tightness in his mouth to a semblance of a smile. "That's helpful. Thank him for me."

Looking as light as a honeysuckle-scented summer breeze, Nate put the phone back to his ear. "Logan says thank you. We're just winding down our day. Getting some room service and some sleep." He paused for the time it took the elevator to open and for them to enter. Then, "Yep. Sure I have a few minutes. What's up?"

Nate threw himself headfirst into his talk with Declan. The ease of the conversation Logan could hear on Nate's end left Logan wondering if Declan had transferred his affections from Pierce to Nate. And if Nate would reciprocate those budding feelings.

Logan jammed the third-floor button, but it did nothing to release the beginning bubbles inside the cauldron brewing in him. Nate chuckled that fucking sweet, innocent laugh, and Logan thanked God the guy was too busy talking to hear the predatory growl Logan could not suppress.

* * *

Emerging from his bathroom wrapped in a towel, Logan rubbed his belly, which grumbled in protest of his only picking at his burger and fries. Unfortunately for his gut, Logan had found it impossible to sit across the little hotel room table from Nate and concentrate on eating. His stupid-ass stomach would not slow down the carnival rides going on inside him enough to consume much food. *Jeffries, you are, without a doubt, completely and utterly ridiculous.* Thirty-six-year-old men with almost two decades' worth of dealing with some of the worst, most intimidating, remorseless criminals did not get flustered in the face of a handsome twenty-eight-year-old sweetheart of a guy with a tendency toward accidentally mumbling his private thoughts.

Apparently you do now.

With another curse that followed the many he'd spewed at himself in the shower, Logan tunneled his fingers through his freshly washed hair and moved with a heavy limp across the hotel room to his bag. As he unzipped the flap, Logan tried to ignore Nate's murmurs, which came Logan's way through the partially closed door adjoining their rooms. Logan did not know what devilry had possessed him when requesting connecting rooms while making reservations late last night. At the time, he'd told himself this setup would more easily allow them to discuss the case. Now Logan could only cling to the comfort that at least Nate wasn't talking to Declan anymore. To Logan's relief, that conversation hadn't lasted much longer than the elevator ride and walk to their rooms.

Unless the kid called again while I was in the shower.

Damn. Logan began to question whether he should have a talk with Nate about getting too close to a family member and possible suspect in an ongoing case. Then he distinctly heard Nate say, "Are you sure you're okay, Wes?" A short pause followed, and then Nate picked up his side of the conversation again. "Okay. Don't worry about it. Yeah, I swear it's cool with me. Hell, it'll even be fun. I won't be there, but ask for Dennis. I'll call him, and he'll let you in. See you soon. Bye."

Wait. Nate's half of that conversation automatically pulled Logan to the connecting door. *Wes?* Did he mean the Wes that Logan had played a part in helping out of an abusive relationship a year ago? Plus, "*See you soon*"? What the hell was that about?

Logan slid his hand across the connecting door. As he eased it all the way open, he asked, "Was that Wes from Ver—" Then Logan looked up. *Oh, motherfucking shit.* Saliva fled from Logan's mouth at the sight before him, and he could not push the second half of the word Vermont past his lips for anything.

Nate stood at the foot of his bed, a pair of black underwear in his left hand, gloriously, stark naked. *Good Christ.* Nate possessed a long torso, lanky legs, sleekly muscular arms and chest, tan skin faded with the winter months, and a fucking long cock surrounded by smooth, bare skin. *Jesus.* Logan didn't think he'd ever seen such a beautiful male specimen, and he'd definitely never seen a man shaved or waxed *everywhere*. At least, not in person. In the few seconds his brain did not function to command him to look away, Logan took his fill of the body before him. Of Nate. Of the man Logan had spent too many nights fighting fantasies that began with Logan hearing Nate's smooth, sexy voice and seeing his handsome face, and ended with waking up sticky from a wet dream.

Swallowing hard, Logan lifted his gaze to Nate's, unable to stay away from those warm brown eyes. Nate looked back at him with abject horror; Logan could not mistake the pupils taking over his stare or his slack jaw.

Suddenly Nate mumbled "Sorry" and whirled away...only to give Logan a front-row view of his pert little ass. As Nate scrambled into his underwear, Logan could see himself taking the five steps needed into the bedroom, folding Nate over one of the chairs, and eating out his hole and fingering his ass so completely that,

by the end, Nate would literally cry for a fucking. Logan actually stepped forward, invading Nate's space, before seeing his reflection in the mirror, full of aggressive hunger. Angry looking. *Shit*. He did an about-face and hightailed it back to his room to grab his sweats.

His breathing wildly out of control, Logan silently talked himself down from running right back into Nate's room and taking the man's mouth with a soul-stealing kiss.

Nate does not fit your rules. On top of that, he's too inexperienced and young for where you are in your life. Two things you should seriously consider adding as a new law.

On the other side of the shared hotel room wall, Nate's bed creaked; Logan assumed as he climbed in. The adjoining door still sat wide open, but Logan didn't dare risk getting anywhere near it again tonight.

With a soft knock against the wall, Nate spoke, his soft tone carrying to Logan from the other room. "Were you going to ask me about Wes? I heard you mention his name when you came to the door."

Okay, good. So we're both going to pretend what just happened didn't happen.

Exhaling his relief, Logan tossed his towel into the bathroom, quickly finished wiggling into a too-snug pair of sweats, and climbed into bed.

"I overheard you say his name," Logan admitted as he straightened the case notes he had strewn across the comforter. "Is it Wes from Vermont? I didn't know you'd kept in touch with him."

"Yeah, it was Wes Turner. We hit it off at Adam and Rhone's reception, and—I don't know—we just sort of fell into being e-mail and phone buddies. I think he liked having someone to confide in who wasn't right there in his face every day, judging his intentions and choices during a rough time. I guess I feel the same. About the judging." Logan could picture Nate shooting up from his pillows as he quickly added that caveat. "Not that I've been through something as difficult as he has."

"I admit I didn't stay in touch with Wes." Logan settled against his headboard. In his mind, the wall didn't exist between him and Nate, and their bare backs touched as they leaned into one other and shot the breeze. "How is he doing?"

"Okay. Good, even. Only, just now he said he's moving to Chicago. He's transferring to the Astor's Olympus Hotel. He's coming tomorrow." A long stretch of silence, wherein Logan wondered if Nate had shared everything he had intended. Then Nate murmured, "I don't understand it. It's totally out of the blue." With those last sentences, for the first time, Nate spoke so quietly Logan almost couldn't hear him.

"You're worried about him." Logan's chest ached at the softness in Nate's tone. "I can hear it in your voice."

"He says he's ready for a change."

"You don't buy it."

A hollow chuckle traveled through the wall. "I guess I'll have plenty of time to see it for myself," Nate shared. "He's moving in with me."

"Oh?" Logan just managed to inflect his voice higher, rather than letting it drop growling-low, in line with the thud that hit his stomach. He hated himself for the involuntary response. This had nothing to do with Wes, or the chemistry Logan remembered Nate having with the younger, sensitive man. It had everything to do with himself, and Logan goddamn knew it.

He'd already had to reconcile the possibility of Nate and Wes sharing an apartment a year ago when Quinn Security had given Wes the option of coming into the company to train for their team. This had all gone down right after Ryan dumped Logan, and Nicole found a man she quickly fell in love with and married—pushing Logan into a mood to possess another person in order to prove Ryan hadn't meant a damn thing to him. And there Nate had been, right in front of Logan in the aftermath, completely innocent of Logan's raging desire to own the younger man's body and soul every second they'd spent in each other's company in Vermont. After baiting Nate for a good portion of the time leading up to Adam and Rhone's wedding—as a way to keep distance between them—Logan had then become something of a hermit on that trip. In the end, as much as Logan told himself it didn't matter, he'd started breathing easier when Wes had declared his intentions to stick with his job in Vermont.

"Logan?" Nate called out softly.

Fighting the tremble hearing Nate say his name induced, Logan squeezed his eyes shut and put his hand over his pounding heart. "What is it, Nate?" Christ, his tongue itched to call this man *baby*.

"You don't think this has anything to do with Jared, do you?" Nate mentioned Wes's abuser. "Could he be threatening Wes from prison?"

Logan rolled his head and glanced at the open connecting door, as if that somehow brought him closer to Nate on the other side.

"Do you think Wes would confide in you if that was true?" he asked.

"I think so. He did when it was happening in the beginning. I don't know." Nate's frustrated sigh encapsulated both rooms. "It's probably nothing. Wes is ready for a change, like he said."

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Logan waded knee-deep into Nate's personal business. "Would you like me to check on Jared for you? Make sure he's staying out of trouble?"

"You don't have to," Nate said quickly. "I know how to do that."

"I didn't ask if you could do it yourself." This time, Logan couldn't have hidden the growl that laced his words for all the money in the world. "I asked if you wanted me to look into it for you."

"I would like you to." The agreement left Nate's mouth and speared straight into Logan's heart. "I know you're good at getting people like the guards and warden to trust you. You have a gift with stuff like that." Nate paused, and Logan

held his breath, desperate for anything from this person he could steal for later. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, Nate said, "Thank you for offering."

"I'm happy to help you, Nate." *Christ almighty, put me in the grave right now.* Logan couldn't feel any more like a man than he did in this moment. "All you have to do is ask."

"You're a good man, Logan." A catch in Nate's voice as he said Logan's name pulled an answering tug in Logan's sweats, stirring his body awake again. "I've always thought you were."

A breath-stealing flood of blood, something Logan pleaded to a higher power not to feel, pooled in his cock and pushed his dick hard against his sweats.

Trying his damndest to ignore his penis, Logan forced out a laugh to cover the groan. "Now you're just flattering me so we can sleep late tomorrow."

Nate's laugh, this one full of his wonderful warmth, danced through the open door and tiptoed across Logan's naked torso, making him shiver.

"Yeah, I'm trying to butter you up," Nate called out, an obvious smile in his tone. Logan knew this man well enough to read his joy without seeing his face. "You were the best cop and detective Chicago ever had, and there's no possible way they could have appreciated your brilliance." A squeak indicated Nate shifting in bed again. "Does that get me any extra minutes?"

Logan smiled in answer to the grin he imagined Nate wore. "That doesn't even get you one hit of the Snooze button. You have to do better than that." Logan sank into the pillows and rubbed his hand across his abdomen, settling it low on his belly. "Try again."

"I think you're shrewd and intelligent. And I think you're strong, Logan," Nate said, almost in a murmur. "You're one of the bravest men I know too." A hint of something filled with smoke laced those words by the end.

Nate's confession sucked the air from Logan's body and then squeezed down with the sweetest, crushing pressure around his heart. The man's voice, so matter-of-fact and somehow shy at the same time, invaded Logan's bloodstream and surged straight down into his shaft, pushing his member past painful to a place of basic, pure need.

Christ, I'm gonna go straight to hell.

Logan pushed his hand down the front of his sweats anyway and began stroking his straining, rigid cock. *Damn it.* He gritted his teeth against the surge of pleasure the firm contact brought. *But it isn't right. It's not him.* Switching hands, Logan rubbed his dick again, and the strangeness of using his left hand rather than his right made him suck in a quick gasp of air. He closed his eyes, and the illusion of Nate's touch took hold, making his prick thicken even more.

With his hand wrapped around his cock, Logan waded deeper into his need. "Keep talking, Nate." At this point, the guy could recite his grocery list, and Logan would pop his load in less than a dozen strokes. "Tell me who you disobeyed in order to get assigned the thankless job of assisting me in this case."

"This job isn't a punishment, Logan." Nate's voice carried into Logan's bedroom. He paused for the longest tick of seconds in eternity before softly adding, "It's an honor."

Logan's entire frame jolted. "Jesus." Shoving down his physical response choked his ability to speak.

"What?" Nate asked.

"Nothing." *Strike me down and send me to hell now, God.* While waiting for damnation, Logan pushed his sweats down to his hips, freeing his rearing dick for a rougher handling. His mouth dry already, Logan spit into his palm and swallowed down a moan as he rubbed at his aching balls and sensitized shaft. "Keep talking to me." This man's voice worked on Logan's system like the most powerful arousal-inducing drug. "Please."

"Kasey and Canin thought you needed someone you already knew, so that you'd hopefully feel like you had immediate trust. That's one of the reasons they asked me."

Every word Nate spoke sank into Logan's flesh, right into his system, and sent roving lines of pleasure all through his body. Logan writhed his ass over the cool sheets, unable to remain still. Listening to Nate talk spurred Logan to anoint his hand with more saliva and start dragging up and down the length of his cock with firmer, overhand pulls.

"I was nervous about saying yes to working with you at first," Nate went on, "for a lot of reasons. I still am. But I already like being around you." Nate's voice slipped to a thicker place that felt as if each sentence he spoke poured warm molasses all over Logan's naked, willing body. "I'm glad I said yes."

Logan's chest constricted with pain equal to the rigidity making his cock spike-stiff. "Don't be scared of me." Worry mixed itself with Logan's desire and turned his tone gruff. "I'm mostly bark."

"You like to protect yourself," Nate responded. "I understand that." A pause sat heavy within the wall separating them. "I wouldn't push or judge you for that. I'm that way too." Nate's tone dropped to something that sounded like a confessional whisper at the end.

This man's willingness to share parts of himself locked itself around Logan's heart and cock with equal strength. Nate's introverted yet somehow vivacious personality combined fear and pleasure within Logan and pushed with steady strength against those very walls within him, the ones Nate had just revealed he saw and understood. Adrenaline flooded Logan with warnings to shut himself down and slip into the authoritative, brusque cloak he wore like a second skin. But this time, since he was so fucking hard, the adrenaline flooded his pleasure centers and drove his hips into upward thrusts, where Logan knifed his cock into his fisted hand. He fantasized with everything in him that he took Nate's tight, willing ass.

You feel so fucking good, baby.

Just as Logan rolled onto his stomach and started thrusting into a pillow, imagining he had Nate spread out under him, taking a powerful fucking, Nate broke through the sex-laden air, saying Logan's name with a soft breath Logan wanted to feel whispering against his lips.

Oh Christ. Logan trembled as he let Nate's saying of his name sink into him and drive his libido out of control. "What is it, Nate?" Unable to stop, Logan pumped his hips and shoved his prick into the pillow—Nate's ass—but also feared his voice sounded too hoarse and would give him away.

"I-I have your back. I can protect you if-if..." A soft curse followed Nate's sweet stammer. "If you'll let me."

That staggered Logan to a stop. His throat tightened with unchecked emotion welling out of control. "After today, Nate"—vulnerability Logan had become a professional at stuffing down and pretending didn't exist burst out of him without censor—"I don't want anyone at my six but you."

"Partners?"

Jesus fucking Christ. Logan didn't have to see the excited smile on Nate's face. He could goddamn feel it beaming through every pore of his body.

"Partners, Nate." *Fuck.* Logan squeezed his eyes shut, as if making the room dark could dwindle his erection. *Shut it down, man, now.*

Fighting the confessions of desire and attraction that wanted to spew out of him, Logan whispered to Nate roughly, "You earned an extra half hour of sleep." He whipped his hand up and down his cock, gritting his teeth through the pleasure he could not suppress, and added breathlessly, "Goodnight."

Now go away. Please.

"I never wanted the extra time to sleep," Nate responded, breaking into Logan's darkness and splitting him open right down the middle. "I just wanted to keep talking with you."

Nate's confession locked Logan tight from top to bottom, paralyzing him as sublime physical joy coursed through his being and touched every corner of his body. Nate then whispered, "Night, Logan," and did Logan in for good with those two small words.

The inhuman cry welled up inside Logan, something meant to shake the walls, Logan could feel it. Self preservation made Logan bite into his forearm to stifle the shout, racing acute pain into his arm. As Logan jerked and slammed his hips into the pillow one last time, he cut into muscle with his teeth, drawing blood. On the inside, he shouted Nate's name as the first surge of pleasure hit him harder than a baseball bat to the gut. His balls pulled up with ridiculous tightness against his body, and then he shuddered and pumped his seed into the pillow. With each subsequent tremble and spurt of cum spilled, Logan quieted internally, until by the final thrust of his hips, he whispered Nate's name, exhausted, sated, and well loved.

So good, baby. Logan went lax, melting into the bed on the heels of an incredible release. *Fucking amazing.*

“What do you need, Logan?” Nate asked softly, breaking the silence. Invading Logan’s world.

“Logan?”

With Logan’s name carrying on the air again, in that voice he swore he could feel living inside him, Logan blinked his eyes open and found himself facedown in bed, his sweats tangled around his thighs, his bare ass hanging out in a well-lit room, and cum sticking him to a pillow.

And Nate’s only one room away. Logan turned his head, following the wall and stopping with a groan. *On the other side of an open door.*

Logan jerked his sweats back up and scrambled out of bed, wincing as pain fired through his leg. “What do you mean”—limping, he circled the room but steered clear of the connecting door—“what do I need?” Jesus, he had to breathe or his heart would bust straight out of his chest. “What are you talking about?”

“You said my name,” Nate answered. “I wondered why.”

Fuck. Logan chose a few more choice words silently for himself but externally only said, “Nothing. I’m okay.” He pulled at his hair, not stopping until it stung. He deserved pain for his loss of control.

“Logan?” A tentative edge tinged Nate’s tone. “Are you all right?”

Not even close.

Logan bared his teeth and growled like a caged animal scrambling into a corner to hide and protect itself from ogling people, hoping to scare and distract so nobody looked too closely and saw he no longer had any claws.

A long shadow broke Logan’s pacing stride, grinding him to a halt. He looked up, and Nate stood in the doorway, wrapped in a blanket, looking sleepy and edible and every kind of temptation Logan could not bear to see.

Concern lit Nate’s chocolate eyes, and Logan didn’t think he could breathe through seeing this man caring about him. Not right now—not while the buzz of need still stoked the embers in his blood. Unable to stand three feet away and not touch, Logan picked up his pacing once again.

Nate pulled the blanket tighter across his chest, and he visually followed Logan’s trip around the room. “You didn’t sound okay. I could hear you moving around in here.” His handsome face paled as he watched Logan move. “I was worried about you.”

I can’t take his kindness. Not with cum with his name on it already staining my bed and my dick pushing for round two.

“Logan, what—”

“Go to sleep,” Logan snapped, shutting Nate down with a cruel bite. “You don’t want extra time in the morning”—he pointed while delivering a glare out of the corner of his eye—“you’re not going to get it. Better be able to get yourself up and be ready on time.”

With that ugly meanness that made Logan hate himself even more said, he strode into the bathroom and shut the door with a deliberate click. Locked it too and hoped like hell Nate heard it. He *could not* have the guy attempt to follow him. The thread between Logan keeping his distance, maintaining control of his ability to function, and ripping that blanket off Nate to tear at every inch of his beautiful male body stretched itself thinner and pulled tauter, nearly at its snapping point.

Then the sound washed over Logan like a blessing from above and a bullet through his soul at the same time. Logan heard the door click closed, and knew Nate had turned their one open room into two.

Sick to his stomach but knowing it was for the best, Logan didn't run out and confess everything. Instead, he cleaned up his forearm as best he could, using soap and water on the skin he'd broken when biting himself to silence his orgasm, and finally trudged back to bed to study his case notes.

Logan didn't fool himself that with Nate one thin wall and closed door away he would get any sleep.

Chapter Five

In the Sarnas' cabin, finishing their search, Nate watched Logan visibly work to keep his frustration under control. Logan meticulously and methodically, in virtual silence, checked every nook and cranny in the cabin for something of Daria's that would fill in a piece of her life and story.

Nate looked for clues and the computer too, but he couldn't stop his gaze from repeatedly straying Logan's way. If Nate could classify yesterday as a display of the "emotional" Logan, then today, "all business" Logan had reemerged. From the moment Nate had woken up, he'd found Logan dressed, his case file open next to his plate of breakfast. With his cell already attached to his ear, Logan had given instructions to a researcher from Quinn, explaining he wanted a complete background of the Sarnas' previous security firm on his desk by tomorrow, as well as preliminary interviews with professors who'd taught Daria in the last year before she quit college.

Logan had hardly given Nate two words that didn't pertain to their schedule for the day, and on their trip up to the Sarna cabin, he'd done the driving and kept his full attention on the road. He wasn't exactly rude; he answered anytime Nate asked a question, but Nate couldn't help noticing the extra hardness around Logan's mouth or the pale look in his unblinking eyes that warned everyone around him to keep some distance. Logan seemed angry—at Nate.

Kind of the way he was last night when I walked in on him prowling his room.

After the bit of friendship Nate had thought he'd gained with Logan yesterday, a closeness, even, during a couple of their talks, the prick of rejection nicked Nate with enough force to draw metaphorical blood. Nate had done something to piss Logan off; he knew it. He could *fucking feel* the new cold radiating off the man. He just didn't know why. It was dumb as hell, but Nate had savored it when Logan had opened up and talked some about his blue-collar family, childhood, and education. Nate's gut told him Logan didn't reveal his past to many people, if anyone, so he had stupidly translated that in his head to mean Logan considered Nate a little bit special and someone he could trust.

On top of that, the conversation they'd shared from their beds last night, wherein Logan had sensed Nate's worry about Wes and said he would help had made Nate's belly flutter in the nicest way. Nate stilled for a moment, rubbing at the tightening in his chest. Sitting on his side of that hotel wall last night, Nate had welled up with pride that Logan considered Nate someone important enough to

offer his assistance. Now Logan had gone back to treating Nate like a stranger. Worse. Like a stranger he didn't particularly like.

The stab to Nate's middle in reaction to the emotional blow had him looking in Logan's direction again.

And finding the man staring right back at him.

Oh God. Nate's breath caught at the unforgiving, harsh beauty in Logan, something Nate wondered if anyone else looked close enough or deep enough to see. Logan's piercing, intimidating stare certainly didn't invite people to linger. Logan used that inherent intimidation factor on Nate right now, and Nate found himself fighting the tremor building within him and the instinct to bow his head in deference to Logan's superior will. Nate didn't blink, though, even with every warning bell to protect himself shrieking in his head. His heart rate sped up so fast his mouth went dry and wouldn't let him swallow. Still, Nate held his ground. Under Logan's scrutiny, Nate wanted to bend to his knees and beg for forgiveness, without having a clue about what he'd done wrong.

Then something seized Nate's heart. Logan flinched. And he looked away first.

Nate stood immobile, stunned. It felt like jet fuel pumped through his system and brought his skin buzzing to awareness—he just didn't know what the hell for or why. His body's physical response told him something important had just happened—a victory—but Logan now wouldn't even look at him, so it rang empty and hollow.

As still as Nate stood, Logan suddenly strode across the big open room that comprised the ground floor of the Sarna cabin. Without glancing back at Nate, Logan swiped up the cabin's keys from a side table on his way to the door.

"There's nothing here," Logan spat. "Whoever grabbed Daria must have her laptop too." He swung open the front door and headed into the whipping wind outside. "Let's go check the boathouse and then get out of here."

Feeling cut through and through by Logan's dismissal, Nate chased the man onto the porch. "Hey." He grabbed Logan's arm and jerked him around, standing tall even though his heart raced like mad. Logan probably knew a dozen ways to kill a person without leaving a trace, and awareness of the man's thicker body and keen mind made Nate's throat tight. "What's going on?" He barely pushed the question out past the tightness constricting his throat. "I thought we were partners."

Logan's entire frame pulled up straight. His jaw jutted with clenching prominence, and his chest seemed to expand in the way some animals did to make themselves appear larger against a predator. "We are." His lips hardly moved. "We're both here working." With a blink, he looked down at Nate's hand wrapped around his wrist. When Logan brought his gaze back up with a second blink, his eyes reminded Nate of icy jade stones. "Together."

Nate snatched his hand away, feeling the rebuke knife all the way through him. "Then tell me what I did wrong to make you mad at me." He could hear the pathetic neediness in his voice, but he didn't know how to shield his desire to please

this man or how to act cool and suave when he wasn't. "You've barely talked to me all morning, and now you won't even look at me."

Logan's face drained of color and went hard as granite. He turned away, cursing at himself and jamming the heel of his hand into the porch railing. After an uncomfortably long silence, he faced Nate again. No longer cold, his eyes now glittered with something fiery.

"Christ, Nate." Linking his hands behind his neck, Logan said, "I'm not mad at you. Jesus, look at you. You're so fucking sweet. I could never be mad at you." He lifted his hand and got *oh-so-heart-stoppingly-close* to touching Nate's jaw before letting it fall back to his side. "I'm mad at myself, and I get quiet and withdrawn to take personal inventory when that happens. I didn't mean for it to come across as anger toward you."

It's not me. Relief hit Nate in a powerful wave. At the same time, his heart ached at the rigid determination in the man before him. Logan didn't accept failure as an option, and Nate should have realized that from the start.

"We're doing the best we can, you know," Nate reminded him gently. "Nobody expects you to have a resolution so quickly. We can only work with the information we're given and that we hopefully uncover during our investigation. You know I'm right." He tugged at the scarf peeking out from Logan's dark coat. "Right?"

Logan's mouth compressed, but he chuckled too, even though it came out gravelly. "Yeah, I know you're right. Goddamn it, man." With something almost like a smile—for Logan anyway—Logan looked down and then over the fog-covered water, shaking his head before coming back to Nate with a new light glinting in his eyes. "I can't get over how you read me so fucking easily. With just a few words, you put everything in order and calm me right down."

Childlike giddiness overtook Nate. It felt like a bright ray of sunlight broke through the January clouds and shone down on his upturned face. He didn't even think when he said, "I guess that makes me the Logan Whisperer, huh?"

Logan laughed, and it sounded real and happy. "Something like that."

They held still and in silence for a drawn out moment, holding eye contact, as had happened in the cabin a moment ago. The icy air between them thickened, creating a mist from their combined body heat, and billowed something of a cocoon around where they stood.

Then Logan closed more of the distance between them, warming the air even more. He rubbed the pad of his thumb across Nate's nose. "You must be cold," he said, his voice husky. "Your nose is red. Here. Take this." He unwound his scarf from his neck, draped it around Nate's, and even tied it loosely at Nate's throat. Logan held on to the ends of the material, and with a light tug, pulled Nate closer. Their chests almost touched, and Nate sucked in a breath when Logan's exhale spread warmth over Nate's lips.

Logan scanned Nate's face, memorizing, it seemed, and it felt like fingertips touching over every sensitized inch of skin. "There's something about you, Nate. I

don't know what the hell it is, but I..." Logan's piercing stare suddenly narrowed and veered toward the right. A string of foul words finished his sentence. He then vaulted over the porch railing and took off in a dead run across the Sarnas' expansive, frost-covered lawn.

Automatically spurred into motion, Nate leaped down the steps and took off running too. "What is it?" he called to Logan's back, churning his legs as fast as he could to try to catch up to Logan's sprint. "What's the matter?"

"I just saw someone come out of the boathouse," Logan shouted without slowing or glancing back. "He caught me looking at him and hightailed it toward the trees."

Shit. Instant fear flooded adrenaline into Nate's system, kicking his chase into higher gear but also making him feel like one big, raw, exposed nerve ending. Nausea bubbled in his stomach and did battle with a surging, inhuman instinct to keep Logan safe. Nate forged into the thick of trees, picking up his pace as Logan pushed his way through brittle tree branches a dozen feet ahead. Chasing after whom, Nate could not see. No other person loomed in sight.

Nate bobbed and weaved his way closer, his focus intent on Logan's back. Almost caught up, Nate tripped over a knobby tree root. In his spin to catch himself, he caught a beam of light bouncing off metal in the distance. The refraction split rays of sunlight through the tree branches.

I can't believe it.

"Logan!" A burst of euphoria juiced Nate with a jolt of cheetahlike speed. "Wait, wait, wait. Look!" He managed to snag Logan's coat and yank him to a halt. The man whirled and shot him a mutinous glare, but Nate steered his attention to sunlight reflecting off the pale gold metal, barely visible through a sea of mile-high trees. He gave Logan a second to process what was in the distance and then asked, "Is that the car you thought was following us yesterday?"

"Son of a bitch." The foul string of curses continued as Logan shot off toward the obscured vehicle. "I think it is."

Almost on top of Logan this time, Nate stayed close, using his arms as a shield to keep dead foliage from snapping in his face. The grating gun of an engine sounded in the distance. As they reached the small clearing, a man bolted out of the driver's side door. He took off down a dirt path on foot, but Logan kicked his chase up to another level and threw himself on the man's back, taking him down onto the packed ground.

The smaller guy instantly scrambled out from under Logan, but Logan held on to his leg and jerked him back into the dirt face first. Without breaking pace, the man donkey kicked his left leg backward and jammed his boot into Logan's shoulder, sending Logan into a roar.

Instinct took over Nate. He erupted with a hellacious cry from all the way in his gut; a noise he had never heard himself make. He didn't care if Logan had hold of the guy's leg again and could subdue him without assistance. Nate only

registered the pain in Logan's voice as he'd taken that hit. Reaching into the fray, Nate took two fistfuls of the guy's jacket and hauled him to his feet. He dragged the man to the car, spun him around, and pinned him to the side with a hand nailed to his chest.

Taking a deep, uneven breath, Nate let the haze of outrage clear from his eyes, and what he saw sent triggers of familiarity into his system. He categorized unkempt blond hair, many days' worth of stubble, tanned skin, and hazel eyes.

Not a stranger.

The guy brought up his arms, but Nate anticipated the karate chop coming at his elbow and quickly switched his hold, this time using his forearm to plant his full weight across the man's upper chest, dangerously near his windpipe.

Nate leaned down, close enough to see the flashes of gold flecks sparking life in his opponent's eyes. "Don't you dare even think about trying to run," he hissed through clenched teeth. "I recognize you. You're the guy who pushed past me at the police station yesterday."

A couple of inches shorter than Nate, the man flexed his jaw and notched his chin up high. He gave Nate a glare that dared him to take a swing.

Nate exerted more pressure with his arm. "Who the hell are you?" His forearm inched a crucial step toward his captive's neck. "Why are you following us?"

The guy didn't so much as flinch. Even the lazy way he blinked conveyed a sense of boredom about the whole situation.

"Tell me!" Images of Daria Sarna and her family turned Nate's demand into a snarl.

Logan moved to Nate's side. "Down, rock star. You got him." He rubbed his hand across Nate's upper back—Nate swore Logan did it to soothe him—before curling his fingers around Nate's shoulder. "I think he's figured out he's not going anywhere without giving up some answers. Give him his throat back so he can breathe."

The guy held up his hands, and Nate removed his forearm from the man's neck. The dude did slump for just a moment when Nate let go, and Nate belatedly realized he'd pinned the man so high, he'd forced the guy onto his tiptoes.

Damn. Nate trembled with the overflow of testosterone. He goddamn hated becoming aggressive or violent with a person. In three years with Quinn, he'd only had to get physical a half-dozen times, and it still made him feel like he might vomit today.

His hand still on Nate's shoulder, Logan found Nate's gaze. His eyes held open concern. "You okay?"

Not quite feeling steady yet, Nate gave Logan a sharp nod and stepped out of the way.

Logan swung around and got directly in their detainee's face. "Back to you." He crossed his arms and eyed their assailant with a frostiness that felt like it took the already-freezing air down at least ten degrees. "Let's start with your name."

Breathing a whole lot easier now, the guy pushed away from his car and planted his hands on his hips. His army jacket pulled back with the move, revealing tight hips and a flat stomach under a snug, faded black sweater.

The man had the *fucking gall* to look *Logan* up and down. "How about we start with the fact that I know I have something you want. I have information about Daria Sarna. But in exchange for this information, I want access to parts of this case. I want Quinn Security's resources at my disposal to assist the pieces of this investigation that overlap with my case."

"What are you?" Logan looked at him sideways. "A private investigator? Who hired you?"

"Not gonna happen," the man answered. "You don't get answers. Not yet anyway. I want your word I get Quinn Security's help in return before I talk."

Logan stood toe-to-toe with the guy, towering over him with his three or four extra inches of height. "First thing I want to know is how the hell you know who we are and why we're here. You'd better goddamn give me something good, or I'll forget this deal you're trying to work and haul your ass straight to the police."

"I'm not a stranger to the cops. They won't give a shit about me," the man shared easily. "You already saw me in the station, so you know I've been there." With a shrug, he leaned his shoulder against the car. "Since you already know that, I'll go ahead and reveal that I overheard you mention Daria Sarna as you were leaving the commander's office yesterday. You left the door open when you walked out, so I could also hear the lead detective bitching to his boss about Quinn people trying to come in and make them look like fools. I pushed past you so I could watch which car you got into and then run the license. Logan Jeffries, retired homicide detective; that's you. Wasn't that hard to do a search and figure out which Quinn the detective was complaining about. You also went to the Sarna home yesterday." The man shifted his attention between Logan and Nate. "Now, I didn't see anything about private investigation in Quinn Security's online mission statement, but it seems obvious the Sarnas hired you to figure out what happened to their daughter."

"You sure seem to know a hell of a lot about me already." Logan made a rumbling noise, and Nate guessed it reflected his displeasure at not having the upper hand. "How about you give me some courtesy in return, friend? Tell me your name, and tell me what you do." He circled the vehicle, his limp even more pronounced after his recent sprint, and came to a pause at the back. With one brow raised, full of menace, he pulled out his phone, and settled a chilly stare on the blond man. "Save me the time of running your plate like you did mine."

The guy dipped his head. "Fair enough. My name is Riley Gibson. I recently went through the police academy in Miami and had just started on the job. Don't pull a weapon on me." Riley raised one hand and reached behind him with the other. "I'm just getting my ID." He produced a Florida state driver's license from a wallet. "Go ahead and call that in. Have one of your people in Chicago check it out. I am who I say I am. We can wait until you confirm it"—a flashing smile showed intelligence in his eyes—"or you can give me a yes and we can start talking now."

With a roll of his eyes, Logan said, “Sit tight, blondie.” He snatched the ID out of Riley’s hand. “I’m not anywhere near trusting you yet.” One glance Nate’s way from Logan, and Nate read the *Keep an eye on him* message conveyed without words.

After Nate nodded, Logan stepped aside and started punching numbers into his phone. As he moved out of hearing range, Nate once again couldn’t help noticing the heavier limp in Logan’s steps, and could only imagine the price he paid in pain for his efforts to catch this Riley person. Logan held the phone to his ear and spoke in low tones. At the same time, he rubbed at his hip and thigh, clearly working out some serious discomfort. Watching, Nate barely contained a bone-deep, consuming need to go to Logan, put an arm around his waist, and take some of the weight off his step. The only thing keeping Nate’s boots dug into the dirt was the knowledge that Logan wouldn’t thank him for drawing attention to something in front of a stranger that could be perceived as a weakness. Hell, probably in front of anyone.

Riley nudged at Nate’s elbow. When Nate shifted his gaze, Riley jerked his head in Logan’s direction. “Did I do that to him?”

Nate’s snarl returned full force. “Logan is just fine. He took you down without even losing his breath.” Nate positioned himself to block Riley’s view of his partner. “Don’t you worry or think about him one bit.”

Hands up in surrender, Riley took a step back. “No problem.” In one blink, Riley went from bracing his hands on his hips, his stance full of bravado, to chewing on his lip as he shifted and watched Logan on the phone. Vivacity drained from his gaze, and the gold in his eyes lost its luster. “I’m not an asshole, you know.” Riley’s tone moved from one of demand to something full of a scratching plea. “I just need some help, and this is the only way I can ensure it.”

“If you really need help, tell Logan what you know, and what kind of assistance you need. He’s not even close to the kind of person who will steal your information and then leave you hanging. Shake on it with Logan”—Nate nodded, nudging—“and it’s a done deal.”

Logan paced himself back into the conversation, and he shot Riley another measured look. “While I’m on hold, you’d be better off confessing everything to Nate. If he cares, he will make sure the right people do too. On the other hand, if you keep me dangling on a string for much longer, and I don’t hear anything good about you from my associate”—he held up his phone as if it were a bomb about to explode—“I’m not above using my connections to law enforcement to make your stay in our great state very unpleasant.”

“I really am a rookie with the Miami Dade police department,” Riley responded quickly. “At least I was until I had to come up here suddenly, and I lost my position.” His sharp exhale clouded the air. “Please don’t fuck with me. Tell me I can trust you. I need someone with your expertise and connections.” He thrust his hand out at Logan. It trembled, and Nate’s heart got mixed up with his curiosity. Those shaking fingers took away Nate’s initial fear and suspicion of this person. “Please,” Riley added.

"Good faith, Riley." Logan shook Riley's hand, something visibly solid and dependable. "There's nothing in it for me to jerk you around. Just tell us what you know."

"Thank you." After pumping Logan's hand, Riley spun and reached through his open driver's side door to the passenger seat. He backed out with a thick, document-size envelope in hand. With two steps, he stood at the hood of the car, withdrawing a photocopied image from his file. "Okay, so, this is Daria Sarna"—he planted a picture of the blonde, blue-eyed heiress on the hood, holding it down with his hand—"and she disappeared nine days ago. From here in Arlington Heights, but we can all agree she had significant ties to Chicago." He looked up at Logan and Nate. "Right?"

A harassed sigh from Logan sucked up the air around them. "You're not telling me anything I don't know yet, man."

Nate slipped to Logan's side and put his hand on the man's wrist. He squeezed, and Logan's focus dropped to the hold before snapping up to Nate, shots of fire heating his stare. Nate just kept his hand wrapped around Logan's wrist, letting the skin warm his hand, and somehow put his attention back on Riley.

"What else do you have?" Nate asked. "You wouldn't think you could make a deal if you didn't have something good."

Riley whispered, "Thank you," to Nate and then switched to looking at Logan again. "Here's why your case is important to me. My little sister ran away from home three months ago. She was living with my aunt in Winter Haven, and I was down in Miami. I didn't know anything about her being gone for nearly an entire month. Bree—Sabrina, my sister—is sixteen. I was going through my academy training, and my aunt didn't want to tear me away. Listen"—shadows under Riley's eyes and the roughness of his appearance suddenly showed a man who hadn't slept in ages—"my sister is ten years younger than I am, and I hate that we weren't close and I didn't give her enough of my time. But when I found out Bree was gone, I couldn't stay in Miami. I went home to Winter Haven first and from there tracked Bree up here. Some girls on the street in Chicago remember her face, and someone from Safe Shelter remembers her spending a few nights with them. Then she disappeared. That was about seven weeks ago. Nobody can place her after that. Gone." He snapped his fingers. "Just like Daria."

"Son of a bitch." Logan's entire being went rigid, and his stare slipped back to that cold place of foreboding.

"That's not even everything," Riley added. "This is my sister." He withdrew a three-by-five photo from his folder and slid it Nate and Logan's way. The image of a blonde-haired, blue-eyed girl that could have passed for Daria's little sister smiled up at them.

Nate wiped his hand down his mouth. "The similarities are incredible."

"Yeah." Grim lines pulled Riley's mouth into a frown. "So when I saw Daria's picture on the news, I went to the cops and tried to show them the eerie likeness and suggested maybe they were somehow connected. They brushed it off because

Bree is sixteen and Daria is almost twenty-one, and my sister was a runaway with rumors of hooking attached to her while Daria is this rich girl with everything going for her. And Daria went missing from Arlington Heights, not Chicago.”

Nate went from clinging to Logan’s wrist to slapping at his arm. “But Daria did volunteer work at a shelter, Logan. Maybe someone mistook her for a resident.”

Logan took hold of Nate’s hand, stilling his excited hits. “It’s a possibility we’ll look into.”

He gave Nate a squeeze that felt supportive but looked across the hood to Riley again. “So the police basically told you your sister had probably moved on to hooking somewhere else or was dead by a pimp or john. Hundreds of girls run away and meet a violent end. Don’t go looking for a serial killer where there isn’t one. They are so much rarer than the public thinks. Am I getting the words right?”

“Pretty much.” Riley nodded. “Which would fucking kill me, but I might accept if even *one* person saw Bree after seven weeks ago, but none of those girls who’d talked to her before had. Plus, most of those girls who die on the streets actually turn up dead somewhere. We find a body. My sister is not a corpse somewhere with a Jane Doe tag. She has fingerprints in the system from when she was a kid and law enforcement was doing all those programs to help quickly identify children if they were ever to go missing. If she’s dead, she hasn’t been found. And if she hasn’t been found, there’s still a chance she’s alive.” A hint of moisture filled Riley’s eyes, but he blinked and fought it off without a tear falling. “My sister is a fighter and would not go down without doing some serious damage to her opponent.”

“Jesus.” Logan scrubbed at his face and then up through his hair. His focus went from Riley to the paraphernalia laid out on the car. “That folder’s not empty yet. What else do you have?”

Riley withdrew a few more sheets of paper. “After I recognized the similarities in Bree and Daria, I went digging some more. I hit all the runaway shelters in and around Chicago, looking for her. When nobody recognized Bree as having stayed recently, I started questioning some of the employees and girls living at these places about other girls. Guess what? Over the course of the last twenty months, two of these shelters report growing relationships with other girls who then vanished, never to come back and ask for help again. Not unusual—I’d be the first to admit that. But some of these kids get real close to each other, and some of the volunteers and employees at these shelters begin to think of some of these runaways as their surrogate children. They don’t forget faces.

“I asked them about blonde girls in particular, and they specifically remember being sad and disappointed when these three girls”—Riley laid out two sheets of paper, one with one photocopied photo on it, the other with two—“stopped showing up after getting regular help. One at a place called Sacred Grace, and two at another teen shelter called Second Home.” Nate stared down at the three group photos, all showing girls that must have been residents of the shelters. In each one, Riley pointed to a teenage girl, and said, “Gone without a trace. All of them.”

Sickness twisted in Nate's belly. He looked at Logan and, through the unblinking stare, could see Logan's brain clicking as he processed this new information. "Logan," Nate whispered, "someone targeting girls in shelters must have seen Daria coming and going from Haven and grabbed her too."

"They thought she was disposable." Logan's voice made Nate shiver. "She went out with what this bastard thinks is trash."

"Guys." Riley's tone became that of the grim reaper. "If this animal is grabbing these girls because he thinks they aren't worth anything, and that no one will care, then one other thing might have sealed Daria's fate. It's what I was actually at the station yesterday morning to tell the cops about, but then I overheard the two of you. I figured out you worked for a prestigious firm. I started to follow you while deciding if I could trust you since I wasn't having any luck with the cops. I wasn't sure about you yet when you spotted me by the boathouse. You gave a good chase, though, and when you grabbed me, I could tell how important solving this case is to both of you. You don't give quarter easily, but you're open to theories, and I respect—"

"Spit it out, blondie." Impatience coated Logan's tone. "Stop stroking our egos like you think they're gonna get hard and happy or something."

To Riley's credit, he only blushed a little bit. "Since Daria went missing, I've been trying to track her life as much as I have Bree's. The other night, I figured out Daria had taken a night job." He upended his envelope, and a packet of matches fell onto the hood of the car. "At that place."

Nate grabbed the matches, flipped them over to the front, where the logo showed a pink shadow of a voluptuous woman draped across the words *The Kitty Club*.

Oh hell. Nate didn't even want to think about sharing this news with Declan and his parents. The roiling in his stomach grew as he handed the matches to Logan.

"Great." Scowling as he looked down at the flap, Logan then tossed the matches back onto the car. "A strip joint."

"Yep," Riley confirmed. "A nasty-ass one too."

"This just keeps getting better and better." Logan looked like he might pull out all his hair by the end of this case.

"What do you want to do now?" Nate asked.

"I guess we're going to see a show," Logan replied, eyebrow cocked for trouble.

"Wonderful," Nate murmured. He hadn't visited a strip club since his days of pretending to be straight back in Minnesota. God, he'd hated sitting in those places, faking it for his supposed friends. Felt wrong to him, and he guessed not entirely pleasant for the women either, on so many levels.

As Riley cleaned up his evidence, Nate noticed Logan didn't look too thrilled with hitting a strip joint either. Riley had given them legitimate new evidence, so Nate had to wonder why at least Logan didn't look more pleased. Then again, back

on the porch, Logan had *almost* touched Nate, and it felt as if he'd been about to say something important. Logan had definitely pulled Nate closer to him without any kind of weirdness...

Stop it right fucking now. Nate shut down those wishful, lust-filled fantasies dead in their tracks. He thought he'd felt and read all the same signs of attraction in Grady. The guy had never flinched when they wrestled in his bedroom, hell, even on his bed, yet it had taken Nate weeks to recover from the beating he'd taken by making that wrongheaded assumption. Nate didn't for a second think Logan would beat him up, but if he made an inappropriate move on the man, it could make for an awkward situation for everyone at work.

Right then, hands clapped thunderously in front of Nate's face. "Earth to Nate," Logan said, jerking Nate back to reality. "Let's go take a quick look for Daria's laptop in the boathouse."

Nate nodded. "Okay."

The rev of an engine snapped Nate's attention to the right. Behind the wheel of his car, Riley lifted his hand. Jeez, Riley and Logan must have shared an entire conversation while Nate had slipped into la-la land to dream about something with Logan that would never happen.

"Rock star!" Logan shouted from a dozen feet away. Framed in stark beauty by the bare trees all around him, Logan stared at Nate, his brows pulling in puzzlement. "You coming?"

"Right behind you."

Silently, as Nate admired the breadth of Logan's shoulders once again, he ordered himself to focus on work and forget about his stupid crush.

Chapter Six

Logan bit at his lip and silently ordered himself not to snarl. Mr. Harold Shadden, the proprietor of the Kitty Club, sat across from him in the dimly lit, nearly empty establishment, lying through his crooked teeth. A Poison song blared in the background, the guitar riff so loud it shook the stained tile floor. Two young women, one with jet-black hair and the other with long brunette waves, worked the pole and slowly shimmied out of black leather bras and panties for tips from five piddly customers.

Harold barely gave Logan a glance as he got to his feet. "If you're done asking questions, I gotta get back to work."

Logan grabbed Harold's arm and applied enough pressure to persuade the asshole to retake his seat.

"What the fuck, dude?" Harold's voice switched from clueless to a defensive whine. "I already told you I don't know shit about what you want to know. I swear."

"I am not the cops, Mr. Shadden, but I did once have a badge." Butter wouldn't melt in Logan's mouth. "If you keep bullshitting me, I will make sure you have a dozen guys in blue swarming this place by tonight. They'll get so far up your ass looking for a way to shut you down you'll taste their cologne in your throat before I tell them I made a mistake."

"Fine." Harold threw himself back in his chair. "Finish asking your damn questions."

Logan lifted his gaze to where Nate sat at a table on the other side of the strip club. The guy looked earnest and professional as yet another girl in a skimpy tank top and short-shorts shook her head at him, clearly telling him she didn't know anything about a Daria Sarna.

As a customer opened the door, streaming light down a short entry into the body of the club, Logan looked up at Harold with a victorious smile. *Ah yes.* "If Ms. Sarna never worked here, then you won't mind if I look at your security videos to see for myself."

"Don't have any."

A knot of tension over Logan's left eye twisted into a tighter ball. He rubbed at the developing headache as a sigh escaped. "I saw cameras aimed at your parking lot when I walked in, Mr. Shadden."

"Fake," Harold replied. "Just there to keep away people who might think about coming in to rob the place. You can look at them if you want. Nothing is attached."

"Of course there isn't." The tension developed into a throbbing pulse in Logan's skull.

"Sorry."

"Sure you are." Logan snapped up his photo of Daria, and the chair legs screeched across the floor as he got to his feet. "Thank you for your help, such as it was."

Across the club, Nate shook the last girl's hand and made his way back to Logan. They'd already talked to the minimal staff on shift, none of whom had done much more than murmur their "no, I don't know Daria Sarna," just like the owner. As Nate joined Logan he made a discreet zero sign with his hand.

Logan pushed through the front doors of the club, and Nate moved in at his side. "I didn't get anything," Nate said. "The women all said they didn't recognize Daria."

"No. I should have known they wouldn't." Logan veered around the side of the building. "Come with me."

"What are we doing?" After jogging a step ahead, Nate spun and walked backward, facing Logan. "The car is back there." He pointed at the parking lot.

Logan grabbed Nate's hand and put it back to his side. Damn, he loved the strong, solid feel of Nate's fingers, and he couldn't help thinking about them touching over every inch of his body. Phantom tingles of awareness tickled life across Logan's belly and back. He tore his hand away just a hairbreadth before guiding Nate's to his stomach to bring that fantasy to life.

With a silent order to focus on work, Logan lowered his voice and nudged Nate close to the side of the club. "Those girls didn't admit to knowing Daria, because they were afraid. I noticed more than one of them checking to see if their boss was paying attention to them as they talked to you." When they reached the back corner of the building, Logan stilled Nate with a tap against his forearm. "They all knew Daria, without a doubt, but we have to hope at least one of them liked her and will try to slip out and grab us with an offer to help once she doesn't have to worry about her boss seeing her."

"So what are we going to do?" In the cutest damned way possible, Nate peered around to the back of the club, his spine attached to the wall, his nose peeking around the corner. "Are we going to stake out the employee entrance for one of them to come out for a smoke so we can talk to them again?"

"Nope." Unable to fucking help himself, Logan moved in and braced himself against the wall, his hand planted only inches from Nate's head. He told himself he just needed to get close enough to smell Nate's scent. *Nothing more.* "I don't think we're going to have to do that. Ahhh, there we go." Logan's breath rustled against Nate's hair, and damn, it felt dangerously close to lying on top of him in a bed, with Logan's arms in a push-up stance the only thing keeping their bodies from connecting from top to bottom.

Motherfucker.

Logan exhaled through his desire to dip down and deeply breathe Nate in. Mentally ordering himself again, he put his full attention on movement at the back of the club. "Look at what we have. Someone else is taking a peek too." The woman ducked back into the club as fast as she'd looked out. "I bet she was checking for someone watching her. Ten bucks says we'll see her again within five seconds as she comes searching for us, hoping we're still here."

"That was Mya," Nate said. He turned, and the shift put his lips dangerously close to Logan's. His pupils flared, and he licked the edge of his mouth, but he didn't duck under Logan's arm toward freedom. Nate's voice did catch in his throat a bit however—Logan definitely heard the change—as he said, "She has that body from Pilates. Can you believe she has two kids under four years old?"

"Does she now?" Logan asked, a grin in his voice. Goddamn it, he wanted to flick Nate's mouth with his tongue and take a taste. Logan bit his cheek to stop himself, but he couldn't push away from the wall if his life depended on it.

Red pooled under the ruddy pink already chafing Nate's cheeks, flaming bright crimson lines across the angular slashes of bone. "I tried to establish conversations with the women that didn't have everything to do with the case," Nate shared. "I hoped it would make them more comfortable talking to me."

The one thing more powerful than Logan's desires for this man—his job—intruded right then and saved him from tilting Nate's head back and taking the guy's mouth with full intent for more. Mya not only opened the door, she stepped outside into the cold and started walking toward the front parking lot.

Jesus. Before Logan got a hard-on while on the job, he pushed past Nate and approached the Latina woman clutching a hoodie sweater closed over a short, fire-engine red robe.

"Hi." Trying to put forward his least intimidating stance, Logan stuck out his hand. "Nate says your name is Mya? I'm Logan. Were you coming to look for me?"

"Yeah. I hoped I could find you before you left." Mya took another quick glance at the door she'd just exited from before shaking Logan's hand. "Look, I don't really know if the girl I knew is your girl, but I think she is." A woman with short blonde hair peeked out of the door and gave Mya a thumbs-up. "Cindy is watching the club for me. She says Shaddy is drooling on one of his favorite girls right now, but that might not last long."

"Here." Logan produced his photo of Daria. "Take another look at this young woman. Do you know her?"

Tugging at her sweater, Mya studied the picture. "I think it's her. The bone structure, the mouth, the shape of the upper body is the same, but the girl I knew called herself Sunny, and she had really deep red hair in this funky, choppy bob cut." Mya took the picture from Logan. After looking at it close-up one more time, she tapped it against her hand. "When I saw this Daria chick's picture on the news, I remembered thinking she looked kind of familiar. But the news talked about some prestigious high school and college she went to, and Sunny had like a New Yorker accent, and I figured she hadn't even graduated from high school. Sometimes people

look alike, so I didn't think about it much. Then one of our bartenders said something about how Sunny and this missing girl looked kind of alike too, and Shaddy got so pissed. He said she didn't, and it wasn't her, and if anyone came asking, we never had any Daria Sarna working here. Which"—she handed back the picture—"we didn't. We had a Sunny working here."

"And when you and the bartender thought she looked familiar, nobody else questioned Shaddy's insistence that they weren't the same girl?" Logan asked.

Righteous fire suddenly blazed in Mya's eyes. "You've never seen Shaddy crazy-mad. We all need our jobs here, and Shaddy will fire your ass if he thinks you're looking at him sideways. It ain't like anyone is gonna take on a wrongful termination or sexual harassment lawsuit from a stripper, you know?"

Logan backpedaled off the judgment he'd unfairly let seep into his voice. "I apologize. Can you tell me how long Sunny worked here?"

Mya made a clicking noise with her tongue, before saying, "Sunny started working here maybe like two weeks before I saw on the news about this Daria girl disappearing. We have girls up and quit all the time, so it wasn't so strange when Sunny all of a sudden didn't show up for work."

"I'd like to get back to your boss for just a second. Can you think of any reason Mr. Shadden might want to hurt Sunny?" Logan asked one of the most obvious questions he'd ever uttered in his life.

Mya snorted. "He wanted to fuck her, if you can count that as something. She used that New York tough-girl thing to make him keep his hands mostly to himself. He also hinted she could make a lot of extra money doing shows in the private rooms upstairs. She told me she asked him to his face if he was saying he would pimp her out for a price, and Shaddy quickly promised her that wasn't what he meant." With a roll of her eyes, Mya finished, "It was what he meant. Not that you can prove it."

Logan could see Nate furiously taking notes, which allowed him to breathe easier and focus entirely on Mya, what she said, and her body language.

"Did that happen right before Sunny disappeared?" he questioned.

"I think two days." Mya looked down at a sparkly, crystal-encrusted watch on her wrist. "I don't have much more time. It'll be my turn on the stage soon. I told you everything I know."

"Just one more second," Logan said. "If you can."

Mya's gaze darted back to Cindy, and her stance became more tense. "Hurry it up."

"Can you think of anything else that stood out about Sunny? Did she ever mention a Daria, as if she were another person? Did she ever not respond to the name Sunny, as if it were a new name to her?"

"No, this gig wasn't even new to Sunny. She said she worked at Gentleman's Choice a couple of weeks before she came here but didn't like the owner, so she quit." Mya dropped a bomb without any seeming clue she had.

"Anything else?"

"You know"—Mya perked up—"Sunny did ask about someone named Tracy. She even showed me a picture to see if I recognized her. I didn't, but I think Cindy did." Mya moved closer to the door, her heels clicking on the concrete. "Cin," she whispered. "Sunny asked you about that Tracy girl too. Right?"

Just as Logan and Nate reached the duo, Cindy said, "Yeah. I think it was on her last night working. I told her Tracy worked here for like a month and then never came back. She wanted to know if I knew where she was working now, but I didn't. Never heard from Tracy again after she quit." Cindy disappeared into a dressing area and peeked through another door. "Hurry it up," she said back to Mya. "Shaddy looks like he's getting bored."

New scenarios and possibilities cranked up the speed of the wheels turning in Logan's mind. "What did this Tracy look like?" he asked Mya. "Do you remember the picture?"

"Pretty enough. Long blonde hair, full lips, blue eyes. Young looking, I thought." For a second time, Mya bounced with new animation. "I can draw you a picture from my memory, if you want. I'm pretty good. I could have gone to art school if I hadn't had to drop out."

"Would you?" Logan didn't know how he stopped himself from grabbing this woman and spinning her in a happy, fast circle.

Mya glanced back at Cindy again. This time, Logan could see the other woman tapping her wrist and beckoning at Mya. "Shit," Mya muttered. "I can't do it right now. I got like three minutes to get my ass on that stage. I could do it when I go home tonight." She nodded, as if excited. "You could come back and get it tomorrow."

"Do you have a computer and a scanner?" Logan asked, already pulling out a card. "You could e-mail it to me tonight as soon as you finish it."

"No, I don't have a computer. But there's a copy place a couple of blocks from my apartment. I could send it to you from there."

"That would be excellent." Logan withdrew his money clip from his front pocket. "Let me give you a twenty. I don't want it to be on your dime. And here's my card." He snatched Nate's pen with an apology and jotted some information on the thick, matte gray card stock. "I added my personal cell and e-mail address on the back. Okay?"

"Okay. Great. Fantastic." Mya tucked Logan's card and money into her sweatshirt pocket. "I gotta go. You should too. Bye." She shut the door, leaving Logan and Nate alone.

"Shit." Logan wiped at the lines bracketing his mouth. He shared a conspiratorial glance with Nate as they made their way back to the car. "It looks like Daria might have somehow put together the pieces of these blonde girls going missing too."

"You think she was investigating on her own?" Nate asked.

"That's what my gut is telling me right now. We'll have to wait and see what happens with Mya's sketch."

"You called that one," Nate said, as they came to a stop at the rear bumper of Logan's car. "I wouldn't have thought to hang around to see if one of the girls came looking for us." Nate looked at Logan, and it appeared as if the sunset lived in his dark eyes. "That was good work."

"We can revisit if it's good when it actually turns into something." Logan rubbed at his hip, grimacing as the icy, whipping wind turned to powerful gusts registering in single digit temperatures. "Right now it's just random information that hasn't yet led us to Daria."

"You don't like compliments," Nate murmured. "I've noticed that about you."

Discomfort nipped at Logan's neck, spurring him around the car to the driver's side door. "A person shouldn't be praised for something they're being paid to do. This is my job. Quinn *expects* me to find clues and get a result." Logan found Nate right on his heels, and the shock of his proximity unleashed a growl.

"Shut up and do your damn job," Nate responded quickly. It looked like he tried to—completely unsuccessfully—hide a smile. "Does that sound about right?"

Logan's jaw clenched as heat crept up his neck. "If you want to boil it down to that, then yes."

That goddamn teasing smile of Nate's that tweaked and poked at Logan's rigid, personal philosophies only grew.

"So what's our next *damn* job then?" Nate asked. "Finding this Gentleman's Choice club?"

"Yep. I think we can GPS it and hit it tonight." Fishing his keys out of his pocket, Logan gave one more assessing look to the Kitty Club. "Do what we did here and hope something else useful shakes out."

"Let's get to it then." Nate slipped in between Logan and the car, blocking the driver's side door. He held out his hand. "I'll drive."

Logan opened his mouth, ready to shout his protest. He knew an inferno burned in his gaze, and it had to intimidate Nate. Nate didn't back down, though. He just kept his stare locked on Logan's. His palm remained out and up, waiting, and Logan fucking knew this man had noticed his uneven gait on his walk to the car. Hell, he'd surely witnessed Logan limping off and on all day since chasing Riley. Logan tended to growl when anyone dared draw attention to his injury, and it ate at his ego that Nate could so obviously see his discomfort. It made the eight-year gap in their ages seem like a hundred. Logan felt more like a broken-down model of manhood than ever while Nate was shiny, full of all the best technology, and brand-new. Trapped, Logan clicked his jaw together so hard his teeth ached. He stared at the neon sign flashing in blues, pinks, and yellows above the club and wanted to tear it down with his bare hands.

"Look at me, Logan." Nate's tone, so full of gentle reprimand, jerked Logan back to the man. Nate waited for him, and the open admiration in his eyes sucker

punched Logan in the gut. "Let me drive." Nate's voice became an extension of his gaze, and it brushed across Logan like the most attentive, *caring* caress. "Just for tonight, okay? I'm tired of being chauffeured."

Fuck. As if disconnected from his body, Logan found himself watching his fingers release the keys into Nate's waiting hand. "All right."

It then shocked the hell out of Logan that his leg didn't feel as heavy or tight on the walk around his car to the passenger side as it had when walking across the parking lot.

* * *

Nate drummed his fingers against the elevator console, waiting, fully aware of the silent man next to him, who had agreed to share a late dinner in Nate's apartment.

I can't believe he said yes to a meal with me.

"I hope you're okay with leftovers." Nate chanced a glance at Logan. *God, I bet his leg is still hurting.* Nate figured some defensiveness must still linger in Logan from Nate having taken over the driving. *Maybe I shouldn't have done that.* "I have a lot of food." Nate could feel a rambling babble-session coming on. "But since I only cook for one there's usually not enough of one thing left for a full meal."

"I'll eat almost anything." Without returning Nate's glance, Logan remained with his hands clasped behind his back, his focus rigidly forward.

Nate's fingers picked up speed, this time tapping against the railing. "Anything from Mya yet?"

A look did finally come Nate's way, a dubious one. "I doubt she sent an e-mail in the two minutes since I last checked."

"Right." Nate couldn't help recalling the brief conversation he'd shared with the single mother. "I hope she doesn't lose her job when the cops come in and start asking questions. Do you believe Harold is smart enough to conceal his illegal activity, or do you think the club will get shut down?"

One look Nate's way showed some of the hardness leaving Logan's face. "I don't know, but in good conscience, I cannot withhold this information from the police for much longer. When we get Mya's sketch, I'm going to hang on to it for at least a few hours while I see what I can uncover, but I won't conduct our entire investigation by blocking the official search for Daria." His respect for his former profession reverberated in his words and stature. "They might have something that could prove useful to us, and if we share, it might loosen their hostility."

"I'm not questioning you. We can warn Mya, though, right?" Nate asked. "That way she can get out before the cops come in."

His jaw still looked like it could shatter glass, but Logan did glance at Nate and nod. "We can do that."

"Good." Nate breathed easier. Everything in him wanted to hug Logan, but he held himself to saying, "Thank you."

Right then, the elevator dinged open. Logan put his hand on the door and gestured for Nate to lead the way. “We also have to tell the Sarnas what we’ve learned,” Logan added as he fell into step beside Nate. “That’s our job. I don’t want someone from Arlington Heights, who might have some anger toward the Sarnas for hiring us, revealing this information with less sensitivity than they should.”

“Agreed. Oh”—Nate spun at his door after putting the key in the lock—“that reminds me. Right before we walked into Gentleman’s Choice, you said you were going to call Quinn about looking at businesses around the Kitty Club.” Logan wanted to check for security cameras next to and across from the strip joint to see if any were angled in a way that showed the club. “Don’t forget.”

Logan had his head down, his focus on case information in a little notebook. “I already sent a text,” he murmured with a flip of a page. “But thanks for the reminder.”

“I keep telling you”—Nate’s lips barely moved as he twisted the key and shoved open the door—“I have your back.”

“You’re proving that every hour we work together, Nate.”

Logan’s suddenly soft tone, his fucking response, really, whipped Nate’s attention to the man. *Crap. I did it again.*

“I’m guessing that was one of those things I wasn’t supposed to hear.” Something akin to amusement shone in Logan’s pale eyes.

Nate dropped his gaze to the floor, and his voice went with it. “It’s fine. Come on inside.” He stepped over the threshold and left Logan to shut the door behind him. “I’ll get us that food.”

Logan kicked the door shut and lunged. He whipped out his hand and grabbed Nate’s wrist, spinning him around so they faced each other. Logan kept that arm’s length between them, but his hold on Nate could not have been more secure.

“Listen, I know I can be a bastard sometimes.” Logan’s voice came across so gritty it felt like sandpaper rubbing over Nate’s skin. “You have to learn to ignore me when I growl or get quiet. I’m never doing it to send you some kind of message that I don’t like what you’re doing.” His stare remained intense, but somehow a hint of softness crept in too. “Okay?”

“I know.” Nate’s need for a deeper, personal connection with this man propelled him closer. “It’s hard for me not to step in and help when I see you trying to work something out by yourself.” He couldn’t break away from the swirl of storming beauty painting strength and pain in Logan’s eyes. “I don’t like to see you struggle.”

Logan dropped Nate’s hand and jerked backward, bumping into the wall. “It’s not bad, Nate.” He rubbed his hip. “I don’t—”

Nate lifted his hands, cutting Logan off. “So please don’t be mad at me for what I’m about to offer you.” *Shit. You’ve said too much to back out now. Just do it.* “I bought it a long time ago but immediately realized I didn’t have any right to give it to you.” As Nate speed walked to his bedroom and into his closet, fear and nerves

kept his mouth running, speaking loud enough for Logan to hear from the living room. "I probably still don't have any right. But I never took it back to the store, so I'm going to give it to you now." He returned to the living room and thrust the large brown bag at Logan. "You should have it."

Although it appeared as though Logan thought there might be a bomb in the bag, he took it from Nate and looked inside anyway. "You shouldn't spend your money on me. It's not..." He pulled the gift out of the bag, held it up, and the bag slipped from his hands to the floor. Looking from it to Nate, Logan uttered, "Son of a mother."

"It's a heat therapy pillow. See?" With fingers that shook, Nate flipped the pillow over and pointed to the information printed on the paper wrapped around the width of the item. "And it has herbs or chamomile or something inside with the flax seed that are supposed to be calming in conjunction with the warmth when heated." Nate grabbed Logan's hand, a plea in his grip, but quickly absorbed the whipcord tension and let go. "Sorry. When we were in Vermont, I noticed you were limping a lot. I knew your leg and hip must have been hurting in the worst way. I hated seeing what it did to you. I actually bought the pillow while we were there, but then everything with Wes went down, and then your leg must have been bothering you so much you hid yourself away in your room. I didn't know if you would welcome my giving you something like this, so I put it in my suitcase and pretended I hadn't bought it."

Words and confessions Nate knew he shouldn't make kept gushing out of him. But when he looked at Logan, the man behaving so fucking stoically when he didn't have to, Nate couldn't stop. "The truth is, you look so stone-faced right now, I'm still not sure you'll welcome my giving the pillow to you. But as much as I can tell you hate it when I notice your pain, I did see you rubbing your leg today. You're good at pretending you're doing something else, but I know what you're covering. I couldn't see myself keeping this thing stashed in my closet when it might help you, not just because I'm terrified you might hate me for breaking some kind of unspoken rule about acknowledging your injuries."

Logan paced unevenly to the window, giving Nate his back, the pillow clutched in one hand. From across the room, even with the extra layer of his coat, Logan's spine looked like a branch that would rather break than bend. "Jesus Christ, Nate." Logan braced his fist against the window and looked back at Nate from the corner of his eye. His breathing clearly unsteady, his stare pierced right through Nate's soul. "I don't have a fucking clue how to deal with you."

"I apologize if I crossed a line." Nate's voice dropped to a scratchy whisper, and his heart lodged itself in his throat. "But I don't know how to ignore it when you hurt."

Logan's face drained of color. "This is bad." He cursed and jammed his knuckles into the windowpane. "This is so goddamn bad."

"I know. I'm sorry." The crush of attempting to bury his emotions nearly suffocated Nate. Doing it every once in a while when he happened to cross Logan's

path had proven difficult enough, but spending this time with Logan while watching him do a job that was so obviously an essential part of his makeup—in addition to learning about his moods and personality quirks—made it completely impossible. “I swore I wouldn’t let you see it, but you have, and now it’s weird between us because you’re not, and I am, and I can’t walk headfirst into that wall a second time. Not with you.”

Logan didn’t move a muscle. It didn’t even look like he breathed.

Nate didn’t know how it happened, but the sickening thud in his stomach grew and made everything inside him feel rancid. He darted his gaze all around the living room as if he didn’t recognize his home. “I’m going to call Kasey and tell her to assign someone else to assist you.”

“Don’t move.” Logan’s order snapped around the room with the thunder of a cracking whip.

The air in the room changed, thickened, as Nate *felt* Logan move to him. Logan’s body heat buffeted against Nate’s front, washing over him with a mixture of comfort, safety, exhilaration, and arousal. The man’s very nearness—the tips of their shoes now bumped into one other—kicked Nate’s shyness into full gear and tied up his tongue.

A rough-skinned finger touched under Nate’s chin and lifted his face out of hiding. “Open your eyes, Nate.” Gentle command brushed over Nate’s lips with shiver-worthy contact. “It’s my turn to tell you to look at me.”

Nate blinked as if he’d just awoken from a very long sleep. When his sight adjusted, Logan, his face mapped in those harsh edges Nate found so beautiful, stood only inches away.

“Thank you for the pillow.” Logan made a very good effort at a smile. It didn’t quite happen, but God, it transformed him to something arresting. “No one has ever given me such a thoughtful gift for no other reason than they thought it might make me feel better.”

Nate’s heart seized. “That’s all I want.” He could barely talk through the onslaught of tenderness choking his throat. “I’d take away all your pain if I could.”

“Jesus, man.” Logan tore his gaze away. He cursed, calling himself a name Nate didn’t like, and then looked at Nate through eyes shot with the purest of green. “Your heart is the biggest, the sweetest, and the most sincere of anyone I’ve ever known.” He moved his fingers from grazing Nate’s throat to cupping his jaw, and the warmth of rough skin against his made Nate tremble. Logan’s focus dropped to his thumb, where it brushed the very edge of Nate’s lower lip, watching it as if he didn’t understand why it was there. “You’re gonna make me break all my la—”

The tumble of locks turning in Nate’s door rang like gunfire through the apartment. Logan jerked away from Nate just as the door swung open and a muscular, raven-haired man appeared.

"Wes." Nate couldn't rush to his friend or give him a hug. Too much awareness of Logan, who'd strode back to the window wall, swept through Nate, locking his legs in place. "You're here."

Wes's violet-tinged blue eyes lit up the second he spotted Nate. "Nate, hi. You're home." He strode to Nate and gave him a fast, hard hug. "I wasn't sure I would see you tonight. I'm so happy you're here." He slapped his hands against Nate's shoulders, like a football player revving up his teammate for a play, and then sweetly, ridiculously planted a kiss on Nate's forehead. "I am so grateful to you..." Wes's focus shifted over Nate's shoulder, and he immediately took a step away from Nate. "Mr. Jeffries. I mean, Logan." Wes's demeanor reverted to proper. "Hi."

From his solitary position, Logan dipped his head in greeting. "How are you doing, Wes? You look well."

"I'm pretty good. Thank you." Wes nodded back at Logan. "I start work tomorrow, so I figured I might as well check out the hotel. Then I came back and walked around Nate's neighborhood to get a feel for the area. I found a restaurant that looked nice, so I decided to stop for a late dinner."

"Did you give yourself a tour of the apartment?" Nate asked, squeezing Wes's shoulder. "Found your room okay?"

"Yes." The tension in Wes's shoulders loosened a bit. Nate could feel it. "Thank you again. Your generosity went beyond anything I should have asked of a friend."

"Hey." Nate gave the bigger guy a noogie and a little shove. "You're gonna pay half the rent, so it isn't such a bad deal for me either."

"Still..."

Wes's voice suddenly ceased to penetrate Nate's ears. Logan moved across the living room to the door, and Nate could only see Logan's back as he walked away.

Rushing to the man's side, Nate stopped just short of grabbing his arm. "Logan?" He hoped his voice didn't reek of neediness.

Logan bit off a foul word and then glared at Nate from the corner of his eye. "Don't call your sister. I don't want another partner. Your ass better be in my office, ready to work, at seven tomorrow morning." He didn't sound happy, and he looked like he could spit shrapnel, but his words lifted the weight pressing Nate into the floor.

"Thank you." Nate fisted his hands so he didn't touch—when everything in him ached with desperation to do so.

"There's nothing to thank. We're even." Logan held up the pillow, reminding Nate how they'd gotten to this intense, confusing moment.

Logan shifted his attention beyond Nate. "Wes, welcome to Chicago. I'm sure I'll see you again soon. Goodnight." Logan let himself out before Nate could say another word.

Wes came up behind Nate. "What was that about?"

Motherfucking shit. Every hope that only moments ago had inflated inside Nate collapsed like a sad-looking balloon at the end of a party. “Oh God, Wes.” Nate dragged himself away from the door and moved to the couch. He flopped back onto it, groaning as he covered his face. “Right before you came in I let slip how much I think about him and worry about him, and I think I basically told Logan I’m gay and that I have a huge crush on him.”

“Maybe that’s not such a bad thing,” Wes replied. A great friend with a sympathetic ear, Wes knew of Nate’s feelings for the man. “You weren’t going to be able to keep it hidden from him forever. Especially not with the both of you working at Quinn now.”

“Yeah.” Looking up at the ceiling, Nate scrubbed at his face and pushed his fingers through his mess of hair. “Maybe it’s time to think about getting out of there soon.”

Wes cocked his head. “What?”

Stricken, Nate quickly said, “Nothing. Catch me up with you. What are you really doing in Chicago?”

Busying himself with taking off his coat and hanging it in the closet, Wes looked everywhere but at Nate. “I just wanted to try a new hotel in a new city,” he said. “Ms. Astor offered me a transfer to Chicago, so here I am.”

Somehow, from the moment they’d met, Wes had felt like a brother to Nate. Once they’d started talking and learning more about each other, Wes had confided he thought of Nate as the kind and supportive older sibling he’d always wished he’d had, instead of the viciousness and fear he’d experienced with his own brothers before leaving home at sixteen.

“Come on, man.” Nate cajoled his friend into looking at him. “I hardly bought that excuse on the phone.” He studied Wes’s fidgeting, and recognized the symptoms of discomfort from his own habits. “I buy it less in person.”

Wes’s nearly violet stare welled up, but he quickly gathered himself and blinked the wetness away before it could fall. “I don’t want to talk about it right now. Is that okay?”

“Of course it is.” Curiosity poked at every corner of Nate’s psyche, but he understood the instinct to hide and lick wounds better than most. “Come sit down with me.” He bounced his hand against the cushion next to him. “It’ll be nice not to watch TV by myself.”

Wes settled in on the couch, and together, they found a movie they wanted to see. But as much as Nate pushed with every fiber of his being to relax and focus on the story, he couldn’t help his mind wandering over the events of today. Nate told himself not to do it, but he could not stop thinking about Logan. About what Nate couldn’t quite dare let himself believe had almost been a kiss between them.

Forget how much it had hurt after learning Grady didn’t want him in a romantic way. Hell, not even in friendship after the kiss and beating. With Logan,

Nate knew guessing wrong—incurring Logan's anger, intolerance, or disgust—would destroy him.

* * *

Goddamn motherfucking cock-sucking bastard.

Logan ranted not at Nate, or even the sexy, young Wes's timing, but at himself. That had been close. Too close. If Wes had waited just one more second to put his key in the door, Logan would have had his mouth on Nate's, tasting the wonder he knew existed beyond that sweet man's lips. He would have ripped away the necessary pieces of clothing on both of them, taken Nate to the hardwood floor and lost himself in the exquisite oblivion of the man's willing body.

But thank God Wes had shown up when he had. Not only had Wes jarred reality back into Logan with piercing precision, but for a moment he'd blessedly not realized Logan standing there and had greeted Nate with his unfettered affection. By doing that, he'd confirmed Logan's law number three: never force someone back into the closet with you. Logan now knew Nate wasn't in the closet. Wes had greeted Nate in a manner that conveyed a knowledge and comfort with each other's sexuality—a relationship that clearly understood and accepted the warm, natural friendship between two openly gay men.

Jealous as hell over the ease he'd witness between them, Logan nonetheless said a silent prayer of thanks for Wes's sudden appearance in Chicago. He could only hope Nate transferred his attention to dealing with Wes's issues and let Logan slip back under Nate's radar, where he'd lived successfully for three long years.

Yet without pausing to think, as soon as Logan cut off his car's engine, he grabbed the pillow Nate had given him and buried his face in it. When he inhaled, he swore he could detect Nate's welcoming fragrance permeating the already scented material. His cock immediately responded, swelling painfully, demanding attention for the erotic fantasies Logan had let slip into his mind at Nate's apartment.

Too fucking bad. Logan drove a lid down over his desires, smothering them in a dark place with a command for them to wilt and die. Taking a minute to get his dick back under control, only when he could proceed without sporting a tent at the front of his pants did Logan get out of his car.

He locked his door, looked up, and immediately proceeded to forget the great parking spot he'd found when he noticed the man leaning against the front of his building.

With a growl, Logan crossed the street, glaring at Riley Gibson the whole way. "You are just the fucking perfect cap to my day." Soreness had already set into Logan's shoulder from this man's kick, and he knew black-and-blue bruises would cover the area by the morning. "What in the hell are you doing here?" He made sure not a drop of welcome laced his voice. He was not in the mood for any of this. "How did you find my address?"

Riley bounded up from the sidewalk, backpack in hand. "The cops in Arlington Heights and Chicago might not want anything to do with me, but I still have some friends in Miami. It wasn't that hard to find out where you live."

"What do you want?" Logan snapped, unable to rein in his frustration.

"I need a place to crash."

The headache returned behind Logan's left eye. "Of course you do."

"Hey." Riley stiffened his entire five-feet-eleven, wiry frame. "I'm not asking for a handout. I gave you good information today. In exchange, I need a place to stay tonight. Give me just one freaking break. I've tapped out my resources trying to find Bree. I've slept in my car for the past four days and have been cleaning up at rest stops on the interstate. I'll keep doing that indefinitely if I have to, but I thought you might have some compassion since I did actually help you learn something about Daria."

"Why didn't you hit up Nate?" Logan's chest hurt as he thought about the unconditional compassion in the man who'd invited his pen pal to live with him on one day's notice. "You had to see he has a softer heart for this kind of shit than I do."

Riley flashed a white smile. "Because I like my teeth." He looked up at Logan with confidence in those hazel eyes of his. "You would have fucked me up if you'd found out I'd turned up at Nate's apartment looking to crash on his couch. That guy has no idea how much you want him naked, anywhere you can get him." He gave Logan a once-over and rubbed a protective hand over his stomach. "I think your jealousy would be a lot more dangerous to rouse than his."

Logan crushed the pillow in his fist. "You're not helping your cause one damn bit."

"I disagree," Riley replied. "I think you're a man who appreciates the truth and would see right through a lie. You'd call me on it in a shot. How about this? Do it because Nate would be disappointed in you if you left me in my car for another night."

Logan backed Riley into the bricks behind him, and hissed, right in his face, "Now you're moving beyond pissing me off into a realm you don't want to witness. Don't ever use Nate to get to me."

Pale white stole Riley's golden tan. "I pushed it too far. I apologize. You want the stripped-down truth?" He looked like he might throw up. "I need a decent night's sleep if I have any chance of picking up another clue that will lead me to Bree. I can't miss something that might save my sister because I was too tired to see it. Help me. Please."

Fucking A. "You can stay one night."

Riley actually slumped against the wall. "Thank you."

Logan unlocked the door and let them into his building. "Tomorrow you can come to Quinn and talk to management." Christ, he hoped he could still trust his

ability to read a person. "We'll see if we can put you on as a temporary consultant for this case. Get you on a daily wage so you can afford a safe place to sleep."

"Thank you so much." Riley grabbed Logan's hand and pumped it enthusiastically. "You are so awesome. Nate is too. He—"

Logan's hand went right up in the air in front of Riley's face. "Stop talking about Nate or I will put you back out on the street."

"Right." Riley zipped two fingers across his lips. "Hey." He pointed down at Logan's hand. "What's up with the pillow?"

"Shut up." Logan folded the pillow and tried to hide it under his arm. "You ask questions, you also don't get to stay."

"Got it."

After that, Riley very wisely closed his mouth entirely...leaving Logan lots of quiet time to stew about the one person he ached to share his apartment with tonight. Who also happened to be spending the night with someone else. Logan told himself over and over again that having Wes around as a buffer between himself and Nate was for the best.

At about two in the morning, without a wink of sleep achieved, Logan switched to calling himself a liar.

Chapter Seven

“Yeah, that’s definitely her.” Jamie, one of the runaways staying at Haven, nodded her shaved head.

“You’re sure?” Nate asked the tattooed girl. While the other girls he’d spoken with had given him a halfhearted yea or nay, Jamie had taken her time. “And her name was definitely Tracy.”

Jamie handed the photocopy of Mya’s sketch back to Nate. “Well, she could have lied, but that’s what she called herself when she was here. After Tracy left, Daria showed me a photo of this girl, and this sketch is close to what Tracy really looks like. Daria asked me if Tracy mentioned if she was planning to leave the shelter and why. I told her we overlapped a couple of nights together at Haven, but we didn’t really talk.” Jamie looked down at herself, raised a pierced brow, and studied the rendition of a smiling, blonde, all-American Tracy. “Different kinds of people.” She shrugged. “You know?”

Tempering his excitement, Nate nonetheless looked over his shoulder at the office behind him and saw Logan still in conversation with one of the shelter employees. He just wanted to make eye contact, something to show his success, and hopefully see pride in Logan’s eyes. Right then, Logan rubbed at his neck, once, then again. As if that didn’t satisfy or take away the tickle, he then shifted and looked right up at Nate. Nate didn’t do anything; he just held Logan’s gaze and let the sensation of success well inside him. After a moment, Logan gave him an almost imperceptible nod, but definitely a real acknowledgment, and went back to his interview.

Stupidly, childishly satisfied, Nate returned his attention to Jamie. “Did Daria say anything else? Did she tell you why she was asking about Tracy?”

“Nope.” Jamie pushed from leaning against the wall to shoving her hands into her cargo pants’ pockets. “She did once ask me if I noticed anyone new volunteering or hanging around the shelter that didn’t seem like it was where they should be, or maybe seemed like they were watching the girls staying here. A man, woman, young, old...anyone. I told her no. But there are new kids in and out of this place all the time, so new faces don’t really stand out.”

“Thank you for your time.” Nate shook Jamie’s hand and found himself surprised by the power in the grip of such a petite young woman. “You’ve been very helpful.”

"No problem." She started to walk into a lounge area but abruptly paused and spun back to look at Nate. "Hey." Hands back in her pockets, her shoulders rolled protectively, she said, "Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure."

"Do you do okay for yourself?" she asked, looking him up and down. "I mean, you're wearing a decent-looking suit and coat." She took a step closer, and her big, deep green eyes took over her face. "You like what you do? It's a cool gig?"

"I can't complain." Nate had to curl his hands so he didn't draw this young woman into a protective embrace. "Why do you ask?"

"No reason." The girl's shoulders folded into a deeper hunch. "Just curious. Seems like it might be cool, so I asked. No big deal. It don't matter."

Don't do it, man. You don't have any right. "How old are you, Jamie?" Nate asked anyway, knowing he had just stepped way over the boundaries of his position at Quinn.

"Seventeen."

"Do you have a job?"

"No. Haven has helped me go out on a couple of interviews, but nothing has happened yet."

"Is that because you come and go a lot?" Nate prodded gently. "Do you disappear into the city as much as you stay here?"

Defensive lines took over Jamie's frame. "Maybe. So what if I do?"

Nate took his position at Quinn in his hands and leaped right into uncharted waters. "I'm going to make a suggestion, and it's up to you if you want to take it. I want you to go to Quinn Security and ask to speak with a woman named Kasey about a job. Tell her Nate sent you. If you make a good impression on her, and you prove you can be reliable by committing to Haven, I'd bet Quinn Security would be happy to have you as part of their team. You'll start low on the ladder doing grunt work—that's what I did. You don't start out with the security, bodyguard, or investigative detail. Certainly not when you're still seventeen. But if you prove your worth to management, and you show you have an aptitude for the work, you can rise within the company. You might not like it. You might discover it's not for you, but you'll have it on your résumé in the future, and that ain't a bad thing."

"Seriously?" Jamie's mouth gaped, giving Nate a good view of her tongue ring. "You don't even know me."

"I'm working from my gut." Nate had never heard such a solemn, adult tone in his voice. "Don't make me wrong." He thought he might remind her to eat her veggies next.

"Thank you." Jamie pumped Nate's hand hard enough to make his wrist crack. "Can I go talk to this Kasey person today?"

"Give me a chance to talk to her first. How about tomorrow?"

"I'll be there. Thank you. Bye!" Jamie ran into the lounge and bounced onto the couch next to another girl, where she clearly shared her news.

Nate leaned against the doorjamb and watched Jamie's new vibrancy spill onto her friend. Observing put a silly smile on his face and lightness in his shoulders, making him feel tall enough to touch the clouds.

The wonderful mixture of earth and man tickled Nate's nose with titillating familiarity, and a moment later, Logan stepped to Nate's side. Their shoulders *almost* touched, and Nate steeled himself not to lean in for the contact. But God, as much as Nate had no idea where he stood with this man, he ached to link arms or hold Logan's hand.

"That was generous of you." Logan's deep voice pulled Nate back to the shelter. "Come on, we're done here." With a nudge from his elbow, Logan got them moving. "Risky too. Giving that young woman a recommendation puts your reputation on the line."

Nate winced. "You heard that, huh?" His sister would certainly agree to interview Jamie, but Nate really should have cleared it with her first.

"I heard most of the second half as I was coming out of the office." Logan held open the door to the shelter and gestured for Nate to step outside first.

"She was the only girl I talked with who really took the time to look at Mya's sketch," Nate shared. "You know how hard it can be to make a connection between a pencil sketch and a real person. She took the time to study it. She recognized Tracy. And she readily offered answers whenever I asked questions. Contrary to the tough look about her, there wasn't any hostility or disdain for helping us do our job."

After they crossed the street, Nate walked backward so he could see Logan's reactions, as seemed to be his MO now. "I liked her." Nate went ahead and owned up to the simple truth. "It's pretty much the same chance you took with Riley. No big deal."

"Not true." Coming to a stop next to their vehicle, Logan leaned his good hip against the rear door. "Riley has law enforcement training, and he has something personally invested in helping us figure out what happened to Daria. It wasn't a huge risk on my part." With only two feet of space between them, Nate could see every striation of pure green in Logan's pale eyes. "You're a rock star to that girl now." He went quiet for a moment and stole a bit more of Nate's breath with each second he silently searched Nate's face.

Nate started chewing furiously on his lip. "I don't think that's true."

Logan stepped closer, steaming the cold air around them. "Every time I think I have a handle on you, you surprise me a little bit more."

His heart skittering, Nate replied, "I'm an open book. I think you see everything in me. You're the one I don't understand." Nate's throat went dry, his body's best effort to seal off his voice, but raspy or not, he couldn't stop. "I want to, but then I think I'm seeing things I wish were true, and I'm so fucking scared to be wrong again."

Please. Nate swallowed. And waited. *Please tell me I'm not wrong.*

Jesus, baby. Logan silently called himself ten kinds of jerk asshole. *Wrong again about what?* The existence of Logan's laws, and understanding they served him well, was one thing. Letting this open, kind man remain confused about the chemistry sparking between them was another.

Nate suddenly went all stoic in front of Logan and then ruined it by tearing away and dropping that bottomless brown gaze to the sidewalk. "Never mind." He turned and moved to get in the car.

Damn it. Logan reached out and planted his hand on the passenger side door, holding it closed. Nate clutched the door handle. He wouldn't turn to look at Logan, and it tore out Logan's heart.

Logan let his fingers drift down the window, and he didn't stop until he covered Nate's hand with his. A jolt of contact went right through both of them. Logan stepped closer, grazed his front against Nate's back, and changed the jolt into a dual shudder.

So fucking close, Logan whispered, "Nate, don't—" Right then, Logan's goddamn-motherfucking-son-of-a-bitch phone rang, *and*, down the street, he spotted a woman darting out of Haven, waving both hands in their direction.

With one concentrated, angry motion, Logan yanked his phone out of his pocket, looked at his incoming caller, and let a slew of curses slip from his mouth. He pushed off the car, *away from Nate*, and grimaced at the man.

"It's Riley," Logan shared. "I have to take it." He'd sent the man out with a to-do list this morning, and Riley had sworn he would not return empty-handed. "It might be important."

"Go ahead." Nate stepped aside, creating distance between them that felt like a gaping mile.

As Logan put the phone to his ear and said hello, he gestured to the woman down the block, acknowledging her presence.

"Talk to me, Riley," Logan bit off. "And it had better be good."

"I wish it was." A frustrated grunt leaked through the phone to Logan's ear. "Jackson Roth"—the head of the Sarnas' previous security firm—"is trying to sweat me out. He's had me waiting in his lobby for over three hours. I can outlast him. I will sit here all day and not move until I can corner him when he leaves, but that means I can't hit Daria's college for you. This bastard is gonna try to starve me into leaving before him. I can feel it." Riley cursed again, and then Logan heard him softly apologize to someone who must have been within hearing range.

Logan rubbed at the furrow burrowing into his skull. "Okay. The guy's a son of a bitch. Call the office and have someone bring you food if needed, but don't leave. I've dealt with this man a couple of times during the course of a police investigation, and I've never liked him. If he has information, he sure as hell isn't going to volunteer it without some arm-twisting. He'll probably think he's too clever for you,

and that might actually work in your favor. Have good questions ready when you talk to him, and listen for the things he doesn't say as much as what he does. I'll take care of talking to Daria's professors on my own."

"Sorry, boss."

"Don't worry about it. Staying was a smart move." Watching Nate, Logan found the distraction of this man's sad eyes softening his voice. "Keep me informed."

Already backing down the sidewalk toward Haven, Nate raised his finger in the woman's direction. "I'll go talk to this woman. You go deal with Daria's school. I can take a cab back to Quinn."

"Nate." *Shit*. The tension knotting Logan inside locked him up tight. "This conversation isn't finished."

It took a couple of blinks, but the flash of too-bright sheen in Nate's eyes disappeared. "It's okay. It isn't your job to make me feel better. You're supposed to figure out what happened to Daria, and I refuse to be a distraction to that. See you back at the office." Nate jaywalked in his efforts to get away from Logan. "Bye."

With Nate already across the street striding back to the shelter, Logan muttered, "You handled that just great, Jeffries." He gave his car door a decided slam after getting in, but it didn't lighten the blackness clouding his mood.

* * *

"Okay," Logan said with a growl. In a cramped and cluttered closet of an office, he sat across from the editor-in-chief of Daria's college newspaper. "I'm getting sick of people trying to give me information without actually just coming out and telling me what they know."

Logan had spoken with a handful of staff who didn't have much to say, good or bad, about Daria. The young woman's creative writing teacher had proven the one exception. He'd told Logan of Daria's curious and clever nature, and shared it could prove beneficial for Logan to visit the school newspaper.

Shifting in the metal chair, Logan gritted his teeth against the stiffness in his leg and used the surly look it produced on his opponent. "If you have something to share, you need to tell me. This could be a matter of Daria's life."

"I'm telling you what I can," the young woman replied, unfazed. "If I don't have my credibility as someone who can keep a confidence, then I don't have anything."

"Fine." *Ask questions she can answer*. "So Daria attended this school for almost two years, correct?"

"I would say that probably sounds about right."

"All right." Logan started to feel his home run swing coming back to him. "Can you have someone retrieve every paper the school put out during the time Daria was here? I would like to read them."

"I can do that." The woman picked up her phone and dialed a number.

Logan waited for her to relay his request before engaging her again. "I'm going to assume I'm not looking for articles written by or featuring Daria, but that still

leaves a lot of scope." He tried to breathe evenly in an effort to take away every ounce of irritation and frustration marring his visage and voice. Leaning forward, he clasped his hands between his spread legs. "Can you at least give me a clue that will narrow down the field?"

After a moment, the editor said, "There was a game I used to play as a kid called 'which one of these things is not like the other.' Did you ever play that?"

"I did."

"Play that game again." She pushed up from her seat, pausing at her office door. "I'll go check on those papers for you."

"Thank you." Feeling blocked everywhere he turned, Logan settled back into the wickedly uncomfortable chair and waited.

* * *

Using a luggage carrier he'd found in his trunk, Logan wheeled the boxes of newspapers into his office.

Nate jumped up from the couch and immediately rushed to Logan's side. "What is all this?" He grabbed part of the handle and tugged it toward the coffee table.

Clenching his teeth, Logan dug in, not letting Nate move the boxes an inch. "I can handle it." He shot Nate a look that dared him not to back off. "I'm not an invalid."

Nate immediately snatched his arm to his side and took a step back. "Sorry. What is all this?"

"This"—Logan wheeled the boxes to a stop next to his whiteboard that showed everyone even remotely connected to Daria or this case—"is every newspaper Daria's school put out during her time in attendance. Our job is to figure out how she's in them without being in them." At Nate's puzzled expression, Logan said, "I know. We'll figure it out." He moved to his desk and took a seat. "So what was the deal with the woman at the shelter? She didn't look like someone I spoke with while we were there."

Nate took a seat in one of the visitors' chairs. "She's one of the councilors. Her name is Anna-Maria Gonzales. She was pretty adamant and worried something terrible has happened to Daria. Foul play." Shifting in his seat, Nate settled his chin in his hand. "I got the feeling she wasn't telling me something, but then a huge fight broke out. She jumped in to help break it up and ended up taking a cut across her forehead. One of the volunteers took her and three other girls to the ER."

An image of a tough girl with vulnerable eyes flashed across Logan's mind. "Was your girl Jamie one of the kids in the fight?"

"Nope." The sweetest goddamn little smile in the world tilted Nate's lips. "She wasn't in the room."

Logan wiped at his mouth, covering the answering grin pushing to get free. "I'm happy to hear that. We'll give this Anna-Maria a night to recover, and then we'll go push her a bit harder to see what jars loose. Good work."

Nate's smile moved from sweet to downright cheeky with just a flashing change in his eyes. "It's not good until it turns into something useful." He raised a challenging brow. "Right?"

Groaning, Logan leaned back in his chair and glanced heavenward. "Jesus. You're quoting me now. It's all going to hell on a rocket ship from here on out." He glanced at Nate, saw and heard the man chuckling, and a sense of light lifted his mood.

Logan's office phone buzzed. He picked it up with a breezy, "Hello."

Quinn's receptionist said, "Mr. Jeffries, I have a Nicole Stevens here to see you."

Logan thudded back to earth with a crash landing. Nic would not invade his workplace without an important reason.

"Send her in."

"Very good," the receptionist replied. "Oh, and can you please relay to Mr. Jordan that Mrs. Jordan-Quinn is free to see him now."

"Will do. Thank you." Logan hung up the phone, and lifted his gaze to Nate's. "Time to go explain Jamie to your sister. They just told me she's ready to see you."

Nate pushed up from his seat. "I'll go do that now then. Be back in a bit."

"Good luck."

Pink dotted Nate's cheeks. "I hope I don't need it, but thanks." He swung open the office door and almost crashed into Nicole, her hand poised to knock on the other side.

"Oh!" Nate reared and then sidled around the sleek, statuesque woman. "Hello, Detective Stevens." He looked at Nicole as if she were an animal whose habits he didn't quite understand or know how to read. "How are you?"

"I'm just great, sweetheart." Nicole gave Nate's arm a squeeze. "How are you?"

"Good, thank you." Nate looked the Glamazon woman up and down, his eyes growing wider with each second he perused. "I like your new hair. It's very... 'don't fuck with me' but also very sexy."

Logan rolled his eyes as Nicole winked at Nate.

"Thank you." Nicole beamed. "That's what I was going for."

"Okay, well." Nate jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "I have to go." He darted away, calling, "Bye."

"Bye, darlin'." Nicole leaned against the doorjamb, watching Nate until he disappeared from sight. She then closed the door and looked at Logan, smiling in a way that brightened her already stunningly gorgeous face. "That man gets more adorable every time I see him. If I weren't married, I'd eat him up." She turned a naughty little grin on Logan. "Why don't you do it for me?"

Logan kicked his feet up on his desk and steepled his fingers under his chin. "Why don't you tell me what you want?"

With very deliberate moves, Nicole removed her coat, draped it over the back of one of the visitors' chairs, and took the other for herself. She crossed one long leg over the other and folded her hands against her knees. "Hello to you too," she began in a singsong voice. "And why, yes, thank you, I did cut off all my hair and go blonde. I'm glad you like it. Eric loves it, and so do I."

"Fair enough." Logan nodded with chagrin. "I apologize. You look great, and I'd agree with Nate's assessment of your new look; it's ballsy and sexy. But you always look great, and you damn well know it." He turned the pointed stare back to her. "You didn't come here to add my compliments to your list."

"You know me too well."

"What's going on? Don't sugarcoat it for me."

"Ryan called me last night." Nicole dropped her bomb, and Logan—very proud of himself—didn't even flinch. "I had lunch with him today."

"I'm not interested in anything he has to say," Logan shared.

"He's getting married."

Acid tore through Logan's system, eating up and spitting out every sliver of good will and tenderness still living inside him for his ex.

"In point of clarification," Nicole said, "he and Roland are having a commitment ceremony next month."

Committing to the guy he left me for. To the man he came out of the closet for.

With every ounce of willpower he possessed, Logan did nothing more than blink. "Why are you telling me? I didn't need to know."

"Damn it, Logan." Nicole jabbed the pointy toe of her high-heeled boot into Logan's desk "Just because Ryan moved on doesn't mean he doesn't still care about you. You had almost four good years where you were happy together, you know. That doesn't just die."

"I don't see your point."

"It was important to Ryan that you know. He didn't want you to find out about it unexpectedly or from someone who doesn't care about you. That's why he contacted me." Nicole's gaze softened along with her voice. "He didn't know if you would be open to a phone call or an invitation to the ceremony and wanted to run it by me first."

That got Logan thudding his feet to the floor and jamming a finger in Nicole's direction. "I really don't fucking need to see him marry someone else. It's over. We were done the day he told me about Roland. I don't know why in the hell he'd think I would care about this." Through a clenched jaw, Logan bit off, "If he's waiting for an answer, feel free to tell him I don't want to go to his ceremony, and I definitely don't fucking need a pity call that he'd only use to alleviate his guilt."

Tapping her taupe-painted fingernails on the arm of the chair, Nicole narrowed her stare right back at Logan. “Just so you know, I’m going to paraphrase that.”

“Say whatever the hell you want to say. The truth is the truth. It won’t change the fact that he swore up and down to me he *had* to live in the closet or he’d never be able to keep his career. And he was cool with that choice, and with us, as was I. It was why we worked together for as long as we did. Then a dozen secret trips with another guy and *bam*”—Logan’s clap thundered through the office—“everything changes, and he just has to be open with another man.”

“I know that hurt you.” Nicole reached across the desk.

Logan whipped his hand away before she could give it a pitying squeeze. “It didn’t hurt me. It just wasn’t honest, which pissed me off.”

“Logan, can you stop being such a macho asshole for one minute? It sucks to—”
Knock. Knock.

“What!” Logan practically roared the door down.

“It’s Nate. Never mind,” he added quickly through the closed door. “I’ll come back later.”

Logan rushed to the door and ripped it open. “No. You stay.” Logan felt ready to explode, and Nicole’s news had pushed him well past hiding it. “Nicole and I are finished.”

“I guess we are.” Nicole gathered her things and made her way to the door. “I’ll call you in a couple of days.”

If Logan clenched his teeth any tighter he thought his jaw might crack. “I promise you it’s not necessary.”

Not daunted, Nicole brushed a kiss to Logan’s cheek. “I’ll do it anyway. Bye.” This time, she only dipped her head in acknowledgment of Nate as she left.

Logan locked his hands behind his neck and started prowling the office, abbreviated gait be damned. “How’d it go with Kasey?” He glanced at Nate, who still hovered just inside the door.

“Canin grabbed her before I could. Listen.” Shifting from foot to foot, Nate glanced toward the hallway before coming back to find Logan pacing in front of his window. “If you need to take a break, I’ll understand.”

Snapping his head up, Logan put Nate in his place with one look. “I don’t.”

Thick, oppressive silence reigned for all of ten seconds, and then Nate burst out with, “It’s just you didn’t look happy when you heard Nicole was here, and you look even less so now. She’s your ex, and even though you’re friends it still has to hurt to see her when she’s happily married, just got a promotion, and she looks like she could be on the cover of every fashion magazine out there. I’d understand if seeing her bums you out.”

Everywhere Logan moved in his office, Nate followed him with his vulnerable, kind, supportive stare, somehow simultaneously twisting at Logan's heart and pissing him off even more.

Nate made an attempt to pat Logan's shoulder as they almost came into touching distance. "I understand if you're upset and want some time."

Glaring from the corner of his eye as he circled away again, Logan growled, "I'm not upset about Nicole."

"Of course you are. I can see it in your eyes and in how you can't stay still." Sympathy, so sincere but so incredibly unnecessary, infused Nate's tone. So much that Logan almost began to believe Nicole had broken his heart.

"You're human, Logan," Nate said, almost a plea in his voice. "It's understandable. You can show your anger in front of me. It's okay."

"I'm not angry." *Although I will be in a second if I hear a speck more pity in your tone.*

"Why not?" Nate asked. The pity crept in, and such heat took over Logan he only saw black. "I think if I were you, I sure as hell would be."

Logan stalked Nate, and the man's eyes suddenly grew wide and darkened past pitch. Logan didn't stop crowding into Nate until the man's spine rode the wall, with Logan blocking any path to retreat.

"Wh-what?" Nate tilted his head back against the plaster, and a gasp parted his lips. His voice went grainy and oh-so-fucking-sexy, and he darted his gaze all over Logan's face. "What are you doing?"

Oh Jesus Christ. Step away right fucking now, Jeffries.

This time, their proximity, the mood saturating the air, and the residual desire from last night drowned out the cautionary voice in Logan's head. Feeling like he'd waited his whole life to do it, Logan watched himself sink his hand into Nate's dark hair. Thick, silky softness threaded through his fingers, and he marveled at the way it snagged on his calluses. Logan looked into Nate's eyes, and his heart pounded painfully fast as he terrifyingly slipped into the rabbit hole.

"You want to know why I'm not upset with Nicole?" Logan dipped his thumb into the seam of Nate's lips, pushing down with gentle pressure, and opened Nate's mouth. Nate's breath caught. The tip of his tongue darted against the pad of Logan's finger, shocking them both into eye contact once more.

Hell yes.

Logan teased the edge of Nate's lips, he and Nate so amazingly close everything became a blur. "You want to know?" Logan repeated in a rough voice. "This is why." Logan descended and claimed Nate's mouth with a branding kiss. *Oh fuck, yes.* Nate tasted like pineapples and man, and his mouth was warm and wet and welcoming. It was fucking paradise, just as Logan knew it would be. *Not enough.*

Groaning, Logan sank in deeper and kissed Nate with every pent-up desire living inside him, marking the man with force, all the while moaning for a complete

taste of the heaven he'd wanted to know for far too long. Logan angled Nate's head and slashed their open mouths together. He licked and probed with an invasive plundering, unable to hold back an aggression that had frightened other men when unleashed in the past.

A squeak from Nate quickly deepened to the rawest low moan Logan had ever heard, and it pushed Logan somehow faster to the brink. So far past gentle—even though everything inside him wished for calm—Logan dug his fingers into Nate's scalp and cheek, probably leaving bruises, but he couldn't stop the flood of need roaring from his being. Biting, licking, and scraping became Logan's way of showing Nate the depth of feeling consuming him—that only Nate elicited. Every inch of Logan that could press itself into Nate's solid muscular frame did just that, yet it barely appeased the animal inside that craved a merging of bodies, a desire to own.

Just then, Nate slipped his tongue into Logan's mouth and tentatively rubbed, with a hum mixed in. After a heartbeat, he did it again, stealing another taste. Nate's innocent move fired through Logan's blood, and his cock immediately stiffened with drugging speed. Logan groaned and dropped his hands to Nate's hips, yanking him in tighter for a rough grinding of crotches, anything that would get him even a millimeter closer to Nate. *I fucking want inside him.*

Logan forced his hands between their bodies to jerk at Nate's belt and shove down his zipper. His fingers grazed smooth cotton over rock-solid cock, making Logan shudder and nearly come in his pants. He glued Nate to him with a rough prison of a hold. Right then another squeak escaped Nate and sank into Logan like razor-sharp talons—the noise something uneven, and possibly fearful. *Shit.*

The sound immediately penetrated Logan's brain and sent a seizing warning signal through his body, cooling his core temperature by a dozen degrees. Right on top of that, he processed Nate flitting from touching Logan's shoulders to his elbows to his waist, never staying in one place to hold or grip for more than a heartbeat. *He doesn't know what to do with his hands or mouth because he's never done this before.* Frigid water splashed itself over Logan's boiling body, drop kicking him the rest of the way back to reality.

With a tremor in his hands, and his breathing out of control, Logan closed Nate's zipper and took a decided step back. He wiped at the tension shaping his mouth into a frown and forced himself to make eye contact with a beautiful brown gaze so full of attraction and confusion—and definitely some real fear. That last one cut straight through Logan's heart.

This is why you should never ignore your laws.

Logan steeled himself to face Nate without flinching, blinking, or showing a hint of weakness. "This can't happen," he stated, unfulfilled need still thickening his voice. "We are incompatible and wrong together for so many reasons, all of which have to do with me and not a bit with the incredible person you are."

Logan watched the bubble of exuberant, nervous life deflate from Nate, and a rush of red quickly mar his skin. As Logan stared, his chest tightened beyond what

he thought a heart attack might feel like, and he couldn't overcome the need to move closer.

He curled his hand around Nate's nape, holding the contact until it hurt to look without speaking. "Jesus, Nate." Logan pressed his forehead to the other man's so Nate couldn't look away or misread the desire burning in Logan's eyes. "Please don't ever again feel bad, or think you're crazy or believe the vibe you get from me isn't real. It is. It's very real. More than anything I've ever dealt with in my life. But we cannot do anything about it. It would be a disaster." Unable to resist, he brushed his lips against Nate's temple before pulling away. "I have to go."

"Wait!" Nate lunged, making a grab for Logan's arm that Logan just managed to avoid. Nate's plea leaked into his eyes, brimming them with a too-bright light. "We're partners. I'll come with you."

"No." Logan moved into the outer office, but even then he didn't feel strong enough to walk away without keeping a straight-arm block between them. "I'm going to Arlington Heights to talk to the cops and the Sarnas on my own. I don't know when I'll be back. You get started on those newspapers and figure out if we have a new pool of suspects." *This case*. One thing that would keep Logan and Nate tied together until its completion. Logan started to sweat. "If Riley comes back, tell him to get on that surveillance video. Have him start with the stuff from the store positioned straight across from the Kitty Club and work his way to the side businesses."

Nate held on to the doorjamb, but Christ, that brown gaze of his reached across the room and grabbed for Logan tighter than a ripped pair of arms.

"Logan," Nate whispered. "Please."

"Talking won't change anything, Nate." It rubbed his throat raw, but Logan got it out. "Bye."

Logan strode out of the office and down the hall, not stopping until he reached the elevator. After jamming the button, he paced the space in front of the doors, eating up the rich Berber carpet under his shoes. What in the devil's worst machinations had possessed him to take Nate's mouth in such a display?

With another jam of the elevator button, Logan curled his hand into a fist, aching to punch something. Himself. "Stupid—"

A hand reached into the action and covered the buttons when Logan went for them a third time. "Whoa," Canin said. "What the hell has you looking like shit?" Kasey stood at Canin's side. Equal concern shone in her eyes, but she reminded Logan too much of the man he'd left in his office, and he couldn't hold her gaze.

"Not now, Canin." Volatility lived inside Logan at this moment, and he couldn't know for sure where it would explode next. He needed some time alone to talk himself down from a destructive edge. "You can fire me over it if you want to."

"Get us a result for the Sarnas." Canin didn't press into Logan's space. He actually backed off, allowing the breathing room Logan so desperately needed. "If you need to talk at some point, you know where to find me."

"I'll be fine." Thank everything good in the world, the elevator opened right then. Thank God it was empty. "We'll get an answer for the Sarnas too," Logan said as he got on, without looking up. "Bye."

The doors could not close fast enough for Logan. Jesus, he could not believe he'd practically assaulted Nate in their place of work. He needed to get through this case. After that, Logan didn't know what the hell would happen next. No way in hell could he stay at Quinn.

Not with Nate so close by.

Logan welcomed hitting the interstate to Arlington Heights in afternoon traffic. It would give him plenty of time to get himself back into control.

Good luck with that.

Logan growled and told his inner voice to shut the fuck up.

Chapter Eight

Logan swooped down and ducked the fist flying his way.

"My daughter was not a whore!" Stephen Sarna raged in Logan's face, blowing the stink of booze across the air strong enough to curl Logan's hair.

"Oh my God, Dad." Declan shoved his father. "That was not what he said. He said she was working at a strip club, not that she was hooking."

Stephen turned and got into his son's face. "Stripping is selling your body for money, which is the definition of whoring oneself." He whirled back and jammed his finger at Logan with a strident poke. "I don't care what those other strippers said. They are wrong. My daughter would never take her clothes off in some cheap, degrading place for money."

Still seated, Elise Sarna fanned her face with her hands. Her skin flushed as if suffering a sudden hot flash. "Oh my good Lord." The color suddenly drained from her complexion and washed her out. "I saw Daria slip out a couple of times at night. I just thought she had an unsuitable boyfriend she didn't want us to meet. I never thought it was for something like this."

"It wasn't!" Stephen turned on his wife. "You're a traitor."

Declan rolled his eyes. "You're so pathetically deluded about everything."

That nasty glare and tone from Stephen shifted in Declan's direction. "It should have been you."

"Stephen!" Elise surged to her feet and pushed in front of Declan, blocking him from his father's ugly rage. "You take that back right now."

"It's okay, Mom." Declan moved out of his mother's shadow. "He's not saying anything he hasn't said before. Daria is everything. She is perfect and wonderful and craps rainbows, and I'm nothing." Declan threw himself down into a corner of the ornate couch. "I know it."

Standing big, puffed-up, and belligerent, Stephen glared at Declan. "You haven't given me a single reason to believe otherwise."

"Just got a perfect GPA every year I was in high school," Declan muttered. "Not that it's relevant or anything since I didn't play sports."

"You never did shit except play games on your computer." Stephen went on without relent. "For all I know, you cheated your way through every grade to get those perfect As."

"Of course," Declan replied, sarcasm dripping. "That's exactly what I did."

Stephen shot back, "It's not like you have a job right now and are putting any of that supposed intelligence to good work."

Holy fucking Christ. The kid never winced in the face of his father's coldness. Logan had to wonder how often this happened and if alcohol always played a role. Stephen might have been buzzed that morning at Quinn too. He so obviously and outwardly cared for one of his children over the other. But perhaps it only appeared that way due to Daria's disappearance. He might not have given much of a shit about the girl before she went missing. Stephen opened his mouth again, and Logan decided maybe the man was just an asshole.

"Excuse me." Logan raised his voice, drowning out Stephen's next tirade. "If I can go on, I have more information to share."

Stephen continued to shoot daggers at Logan from his position next to his wife. "If this is how you're handling finding out what happened to Daria, then I'm not interested in what you have to say. I'll fire your ass just like I did the Roth Agency. There are plenty other firms out there who want my business. I'll find someone who's interested in discovering the truth."

"Shut up right now." Elise coated each hushed word to her husband with ice, and Logan had no doubt she could easily crack his balls. "You are embarrassing me." The freeze in her voice frosted the blue of her eyes. "Sober up and listen to what this man has to say about your daughter."

"The information about Daria stripping is relevant and credible." Logan watched each family member as he revealed this news. "But she wasn't doing it for the money. It appears she was doing this job as part of an investigation into the possible disappearance of a number of runaways and somehow became part of the story herself."

Elise put a hand over her mouth. "What?" Her perfectly executed makeup suddenly couldn't hide her age. "I don't understand."

Logan gave the others a moment, but neither Stephen nor Declan said a word. Stephen looked as if something had finally stunned him into silence, and Declan reverted to his blasé spoiled-rich-kid routine.

"I don't have anything solid yet," Logan went on, "but so far the information we are gathering points to Daria taking it upon herself to discover what happened to these girls. Does this sound like Daria to any of you? Is she someone who had an interest in investigating crimes? Perhaps had an interest in becoming a journalist?"

Stephen finally showed life again. "No. I was always under the impression Daria wanted to join our business one day." No longer belligerent, he now simply shared information about his child. "She traveled globally with her mother on occasion and had an interest in learning the company."

Elise shifted forward to perch at the edge of the cushion. "Daria spent most weekends either working at the shelter or hanging out with her friends. She enjoyed her college courses but seemed minimally interested in a flawless attendance or even in what grades she earned. I honestly figured she would get married in the

next four or five years and eventually drift into working part time at Sarna Imports." Her hand trembled as she smoothed a nonexistent wrinkle in her winter-white pants. "I never heard her talk about anything like this."

"Mom encouraged Daria to give my friend Pierce a chance," Declan said. "She had high hopes of Daria becoming part of that family."

"Don't make me sound mercenary, honey." Elise's cheeks pinked a tinge. "He's a nice young man, and Daria is a smart, pretty girl. It couldn't hurt to give it a try."

Declan went visibly rigid. "Yeah, that would have been tons of fun."

"So there's your answer," Stephen said, his tone strident again. "We didn't know anything about any of this. Why don't you go ahead and get back to all your hard work? There's still plenty of night left to hit some more strip clubs with our hard earned money."

Logan's hand tingled to return the punch Stephen had tried to land. Instead, he curled his fingers in his coat pocket and turned his focus on Daria's twin. "What about you, Declan? Did you ever hear your sister talk about previous investigations she might have tackled? Anything about this one?"

Declan slouched even deeper into the formal couch. "I already told you I didn't know why she was leaving at night. She told me to stay out of it."

"Which you did"—Stephen's voice cracked—"because you don't give a shit about anyone but yourself, and in the process you probably helped your sister die." Stephen swiped at the tears quickly filling his eyes. "I have to get out of here." He shot up and rushed across the expansive living room.

"That's right!" Declan looked in the direction his father ran. "Go pour another drink down your throat. It's what you're good at."

Stephen gave his son the finger as he left the living room.

Elise Sarna's cheeks moved from pink to ruddy. "I apologize, Mr. Jeffries. I've often heard situations like this bring out the best in people. In our case it's bringing out the worst. I promise we're not like this all the time. And Stephen doesn't drink as much as I'm sure you're assuming he must by what you've witnessed."

"It's not for me to judge." But Logan did. He figured these people probably hardly crossed each other's paths more than once a day, if that, before Daria disappeared. And when they did, he'd put money on them barely saying two superficial words to each other. "I just want to uncover what happened to your daughter."

Elise cleared her throat, and her chin lifted with a proud edge. "With this new information, I'm afraid you're really leaning toward something bad." She looked into Logan's eyes, and he marveled at the fact that hers somehow remained dry. "You think something terrible happened. I can tell."

"I'm sorry." Christ, Logan wasn't one to reach out and offer a comforting touch. Even as a cop, he'd much more naturally taken to breaking down the facts or crushing a suspect than delivering horrific news. Thoughts of Nate drifted back to the surface, stirring a tug in Logan's chest. He knew Nate would know just what to

say to Elise to make everything okay. Aching for his partner in so many ways, Logan remained stiff on his side of the coffee table. "I wish I could lie to you, but I'm afraid we're going to unravel something that came to a bad end."

"You're being honest." Elise looked away. She lifted her hand to wipe away tears but after a moment squared her shoulders, and her attention returned to Logan. "I guess sincerity is the most we can ask for under these circumstances. I appreciate what you've discovered so far."

"I wish I had magic words, but I don't." Feeling awkward as hell, Logan did reach out and touch Elise's hand. "I'm so sorry."

Elise pulled away, offering a tight smile. "I had so hoped one of Mr. Cosgrove's contacts would spot Daria somewhere overseas. I pinned everything on that. With this new information... With what Daria was secretly doing..." The woman took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "I'm going to call Phillip and tell him I don't believe his overseas search is necessary anymore. He's doing it at his own considerable expense. Excuse me, please. Will you?" Her head down, her hand over her mouth, Elise whispered her apologies and moved to the stairs before Logan could say a word.

After watching his mother rush up the steps, Declan turned his smug focus back to Logan. "I'm surprised you're here by yourself, Mr. Jeffries. Where's your partner? I have to say, he's a hell of a lot better at sympathy and getting people to talk than you are."

Logan steeled himself not to rise to this amateur's bait. "Is there something that wasn't said that needs to be? Do you know something you're unwilling to share with me?"

"Not really." Stretching his arm across the back of the couch, Declan settled in, his stare on Logan. "Except to say I'm not that shocked to hear Daria was working on some kind of investigation. Certainly not surprised like my parents were anyway."

"That doesn't surprise me," Logan muttered as he stood. "Thanks for your time."

"What my mom said about Pierce Lyndsey isn't true, you know," Declan added, putting Logan back in his seat. "Well, he can be nice, which is what she's seen of him. But he's not good. He didn't respect Daria. I don't even know if he actually liked her or was attracted to her." The asshole demeanor slipped away completely, and Declan's eyes turned to cold chips of blue diamonds. "He just wanted to be the guy who said he conquered her first. She'd never had sex." Declan shook his head and looked heavenward while his Adam's apple bobbed a mile a minute. "Pierce wanted to be the guy who could brag he changed it."

Logan watched a battle rage inside this kid. Sitting across from him, wanting to go hard and let his instincts guide him, Logan knew he had to find some way to incorporate the innate kindness Nate had employed all along this investigation. Particularly in dealing with Declan.

Christ. Just act like he's your kid or something and you want to ease his suffering. "As much as Pierce's disgusting motives pissed you off on behalf of your sister," Logan said, his voice jerking Declan's attention back to him, "you were also jealous and hurt you weren't the Sarna whose cherry he wanted to pop. Is that right?"

Declan surged to his feet, his face stony. He looked in the direction to which his father had fled. A vicious tremble ripped through his body. "I can't talk anymore," he said, tightness in his voice. "You have to go."

When Declan took a step, Logan jumped up and put a hand on his arm, bringing the kid to an immediate halt. "It's okay, Declan." Logan tugged him to sitting back down. "I'm not going to say anything to your parents, although I wouldn't necessarily trust Pierce isn't whispering in people's ears already."

Declan's hands shook, and his pallor slipped to vampire pale. "I know he's laughing at me behind my back." His voice dropped to a hush. "I hate what he was trying to do with my sister, but I hate even more that I still like him." Declan inhaled a deep, uneven breath. When he made eye contact with Logan again, he looked like a scared kid. "I hate that I know he only spends time with me when he doesn't have anyone else, but I still eat up every second he gives."

Logan fucking couldn't believe it, but his heart squeezed for this boy. "We all want someone at some point in our lives who isn't good for us," he said gently. "We all wish they would like us even though we know we deserve something so much better."

"I don't know if I deserve anything good." Declan swiped at wetness brimming in his eyes. He opened his mouth, clearly trying to speak, but it took a few attempts before he whispered, "I sometimes dreamed if Daria wasn't here, then Pierce would turn to me."

Oh Jesus. Channeling Nate—the man had fucking burrowed into Logan's system to his core already—Logan pushed up and went to sit next to Declan. "Listen to me." He pulled the boy's face out of hiding. "You didn't wish this fate on your sister."

Bleak, hopeless depths turned Declan's gaze bottomless. "Maybe I did. Not that it worked. Pierce hasn't even come over to keep me company or just to say he's sorry she's gone."

"I think that tells you everything you need to know about what kind of man Pierce is."

"Yeah. But I'm still afraid I'll keep doing anything he asks of me." Something truly forlorn darkened the edges of Declan's eyes.

The hairs on Logan's neck shot to full attention and sent a chill down his spine. "What does that mean?"

"Nothing." Suddenly animated, Declan shoved Logan. "If you're done dropping bombs about my sister for the night"—he sped to the door and tore it open—"then it's time for you to leave."

Logan rushed to Declan and whirled him around. "What the hell did you mean, Declan? What did Pierce ask you to do?"

"Nothing." With a surge of strength beyond his size, Declan shoved Logan outside. Logan's bad leg buckled, and Declan managed to push him over the threshold. "Get the fuck out of here before I tell my parents to fire you." Declan slammed the door in Logan's face.

What the hell was that?

Hearing the door lock, Logan knew he wouldn't get any more answers tonight. He rubbed at his thigh and hip as he walked to his car with cautious steps, the slower pace easing the stab of pain piercing straight through his leg.

What in God's name had Declan meant with that cryptic comment about Pierce? Had Pierce manipulated or dared Declan into doing something with Daria that went terribly wrong? In some ways, Declan had mastered his poker face. With that bastard of a father, he clearly had tons of practice hiding his feelings. A modicum of sympathy still sat in Logan's gut for the kid, but that didn't mean he gave Declan a pass about anything. Whatever he had going on, there was zero chance Logan would remove the boy's picture from his whiteboard anytime soon.

Christ. Logan bet if Nate had been here, he would have gotten something more out of Declan.

Damn it. Damn it. Damn it. Stop thinking about Nate.

A hollow laugh escaped Logan. *Fat chance of that ever happening. He's too deeply ingrained in your very being to ever go away.* Logan's choosing to comfort Declan had proven that. Kissing Nate, breaking that fragile facade Logan had erected, changed everything. He would have to work a hundred times harder now to maintain some distance.

Logan scrubbed the tired from his face and climbed in his car. He still had a long drive home before he could let himself unwind enough to sleep.

* * *

Exhaustion infected every bone and muscle in Logan's body. The drive back from Arlington Heights had only given him time to stew. Everything about this case sucked, and the fact that he couldn't even break the victim's twin brother ate at the last remnants of Logan's mood. Answers sat right at the tip of a low-hanging branch, within his grasp, yet he couldn't quite grab them. He could feel his fingertips grazing so very close to something important, but taking hold continually eluded him. Logan just needed one bright spot to shine through the murky horizon and give him hope he had made the right choice to join Quinn and that he could solve this case.

The elevator dinged open to his floor, and Logan immediately cursed the darkened hallway. The light had gone out two days ago, and if maintenance didn't fucking fix it soon, Logan might do something that would get him thrown out of his building.

He turned the corner, cursing under his breath, and jerked to a dead stop.

Oh my fucking Christ. He's beautiful.

On the floor, his angular profile highlighted by an amber-colored sconce lit at the very end of the hall, Nate sat folded against Logan's door. *Holy hell.* Logan's heart lurched. He must have made a noise because Nate suddenly looked Logan's way; his eyes shone with such devotion it stole Logan's breath away and frightened him to his core.

He feels that for me.

Nate rose, whispering Logan's name. He held open his arms, and Logan started moving. Pain in his hip no longer relevant, Logan strode with purpose. Nate said Logan's name again, making the two syllables a joyous song just as Logan wrapped the younger man up in his arms.

I'm home.

Welcoming body heat from Nate sank into Logan's bloodstream, something that felt so fucking right it racked a shudder through him. A rainstorm of kisses from Nate peppered Logan's forehead, cheeks, and hair, each one making Logan feel more cherished and terrified than the last.

With his heart rate wildly out of control and his tether to his good sense hanging by a single thread, Logan forced himself to grab Nate by the arms and push him a measure away. Breathing heavily, much too fast for the little pecks Nate had delivered, Logan scrambled for sanity and order.

"Nate." He struggled against the man's attempt to get closer again. "You have to stop." *Damn it.* Nate's deep brown gaze begged, and Logan couldn't look without feeling like he was drowning. "You shouldn't be here."

Nate kept hold of Logan's jacket, tugging in a way that matched the plea in his eyes. "I couldn't leave things the way they were at the office. Not after that kiss today." One step closed the distance between them. Nate then pressed his chest to Logan's and grazed their lips together, the contact tantalizingly soft, and finally put their noses tip to tip. "And not after the way you just ran to me when you saw I was here." Nate circled his arm around Logan's waist.

Oh God, please help me. A piece of Logan struggled against the gentle hold Nate had on him. The embrace wreaked conflict in Logan even as he scraped his mouth against Nate's cheek, holding there and whispering, "No no no. We can't."

Nate's mouth turned up in a smile against Logan's jaw. "Yes yes yes. We can." He wrapped his arm around Logan's neck, tying them into an even more intricate knot, and didn't look away. "You want this just as much as I do."

"No." *I want it more.* Logan groaned as his cock swelled in agreement with his assessment. Fear sluiced lines of adrenaline through his system and made him sweat. "Go home." The request choked in his throat in its fight not to come out. "This is bad. Please..." Right then, Nate slid his hand under Logan's coat and rubbed his ass, and Logan bit his cheek to stifle a cry of pleasure. "It was a mistake. We can't—"

Nate shushed him with a soft kiss that wound its way all the way down to Logan's soul. "We can. We should." His fingers danced across the small of Logan's back, stirring more nerve endings to excited life. "It's perfect. You're perfect, Logan."

"No." Logan had never felt so fucking green yet steel-hard and ready to pound his dick into another man in his life. He looked into the blur of innocent eyes that glimmered with the first hints of power. "I'm not even close."

A soft chuckle tickled Logan's lips. Nate withdrew a sliver, and his gaze became the clearest, most focused of any Logan had ever seen. "I mean you're perfect for me. I see you, Logan. I see everything about you. Everything you don't like. Everything that is rigid and not comfortable to you. Everything you hide and wish people didn't know." He moved his arm from around Logan's neck and brushed his knuckles down Logan's cheek and jaw, creating the gentlest, most loving, contact. And with each brush of the back of Nate's hand, Logan trembled a little more.

"I know all of it," Nate revealed. "I didn't understand or think I knew, but I get it now—I know you better than anyone. And everything I see and hear when I look and listen is everything I want." His smile tremulous, Nate cupped Logan's cheek and pressed his lips to Logan's forehead. "And that everything, sweetness, is you."

"Jesus." Falling hard and fast and without any cushion to soften the eventual crash, Logan grabbed Nate and seared their mouths together, kissing him with a silent plea for everything he needed and wanted but didn't know how to ask for. Nate melted into Logan, fusing their chests, bellies, and cocks together in a way that somehow stripped away the barrier of their clothes. The hard bulge pushing at Nate's jeans dug into Logan, making him jerk, and the two of them stumbled into the door.

"Please." Nate parted his lips on that whisper. He flicked his tongue against Logan's lower lip with the sweetest little lick. "Take me. I've dreamed about you since the day we met."

Groaning low from somewhere deep within he didn't recognize, Logan licked and bit at Nate's lush mouth while blindly fumbling to get his keys out of his pocket to unlock his door. He knew he needed to stop, or at the very least slow down, but he'd denied himself sex for over a year, and this was Nate, and the man held Logan around the waist and kept up a constant rub of the front of their bodies. Nate writhed as if he couldn't get enough, and Logan had engaged in so many fantasies starring this man that the real thing, on a night when his defenses were shot, proved more powerful than Logan's individual will.

He managed to get the bolt and handle unlocked. Barely pausing to yank the keys out of the knob, Logan shoved open the door and roughly ordered, "Inside."

Nate backed into the apartment with Logan right on top of him, mouths still sealed together. Logan kicked the door shut and threw his keys on the floor. In between kisses that sometimes became bites hard enough to nick skin, Logan ripped his coat off and jerked Nate's down his arms too.

A whimper escaped Nate, breaking the kiss. "Fuck me, Logan." He tugged his shirt and tore at the buttons. Desire glazed his eyes, and his lips appeared so swollen anyone would have thought he'd been sucking dick all night. The shirt hit the floor, and Nate's gaze darkened close to pitch. "I want to feel you inside me."

Logan's cock swelled with full, rutting life. "Christ, yes." He lunged, grabbed Nate around the nape and dragged him in for a hard, grinding kiss. Just as their tongues met, demanding a rougher tangle for domination, the memory of trembling fingers and a squeak from earlier today slammed Logan back into reality.

Fuck.

Somehow, Logan unclenched his fingers from Nate's thick hair and took a step back. "No." Every part of Logan's being screamed at him to grab and take and screw without mercy until neither one of them could move. As he looked at Nate, at his stunningly fit body, his chest gloriously bare, Logan's mouth turned dry. Expectations for something spectacular lived in Nate's eyes—*Oh Jesus*—making Logan curse and spin away.

Damn it. "You're not ready," Logan whispered, the words gutting him. "And there's such aggression in me right now I'm shaking with it." He lifted his hand and held it to the side, giving Nate a piece of vulnerability he never offered anyone. Logan then curled his fingers into a fist, hiding it once again.

If there is mercy in this world, please give me a minute and help me find my control.

Fingers grazed Logan's nape, shattering Logan with their fleeting touch. He moaned for willpower as he stepped forward, severing the tormenting contact.

"No." Nate didn't let him take a second step. His gossamer touch became a steel band around Logan's shoulder. "Don't pull away."

Tension strung every muscle in Logan's body whipcord tight, and his breathing became a tangible thing. "You don't know, Nate." His cock raged to find a smothering shelter in Nate's ass, and temptation teased mercilessly with his fragile hold on control. "You're too innocent to understand."

Rather than step aside, Nate peeled off Logan's suit jacket and rubbed against his back. The shirt did nothing to dull the contact. Logan groaned as Nate's nipples—fucking pebbled tips already—scraped across his spine. Keeping that contact, Nate circled Logan to stand in front of him, leaving less than a foot of space between them. His body heat rolled over Logan in drugging waves, but the fire burning in his stare trumped all else.

"I know what you want." Nate held eye contact with Logan, and with every word he spoke, he undid Logan's tie until it landed on the floor. "And I know I'm ready for whatever passion you unleash on me." He started on the buttons, but something vulnerable glimmered in his eyes. "The only thing I'm afraid of is never knowing what it feels like to be with you."

"No." The word slipped out, but to Logan's ears the breathless softness sounded more like a plea than a rough order.

“Yes.” Without looking away or blinking, Nate grabbed Logan’s wrist and dragged his hand around Nate’s waist to his backside. He forced Logan’s fingers open with a bruising grip and pushed his palm down, down...until Logan’s fingertips grazed a distinct circular shape through Nate’s jeans.

Oh Jesus Christ.

Logan lost his legs, falling to his knees. The man had a butt plug buried in his ass.

Nate dropped to kneel in front of Logan. Gone was the flash of trepidation. In its place only steady certainty remained. “I’m ready for you.” He slid Logan’s shirt off, letting the material fall the short distance to the floor. Leaning in, he grazed their lips in the softest caress, and said, “Don’t be afraid.”

The second those sweetly innocent words passed Nate’s lips, and his fingers brushed against Logan’s lower belly, such a fucking erogenous zone for him, Logan shuddered and pounced. Any shred of desire to maintain some kind of distance or cool evaporated in a shot. The idea of teaching or going slow ceased to exist. Logan clutched at Nate’s head and delved in for a violent kiss of ownership, forcing his way inside the man’s mouth and marking territory with every lick and bite.

Hot, firm male flesh burned a brand into Logan’s hands everywhere he touched, and the fact that he felt up the man he wanted with a frightening intensity only spurred Logan on more. Nate kissed and ran his hands all over Logan in return, murmuring the most wonderful loving and dirty things under his breath every time their mouths broke for air. Logan knew with a certainty Nate wasn’t even aware he mumbled his every erotic thought aloud, and that somehow turned Logan on even more.

Logan thrust his tongue into Nate’s mouth with the same aggressive manner he wanted to rip into the man’s ass, hoping the kiss would give him a measure of reprieve. Instead, it only ratcheted Logan’s base desires up another dozen notches and thickened his cock to a wickedly rigid, painful degree. Everything inside Logan raged for more faster, quicker, and hotter so his body could achieve release.

Unable to fight the tornado of need tearing through him, Logan severed the kiss and shoved Nate facedown onto the living room floor. “Get into that end table drawer in front of you,” he ordered as he ripped Nate’s jeans down to his hips, baring only the smooth hills of his buttocks. *Oh sweet merciful God.* The sight of Nate’s pale ass, with the silliest pink flange of a butt plug sitting as a bull’s-eye covering his pucker, filled Logan’s mouth with saliva and made his balls heavy with seed. “I fucking need a condom and some lube fast.”

While Logan spread his hand across the firmest, hottest ass he’d ever felt, mesmerized by the sight of his hand finally on *this* man, Nate gasped and reached for the end table. With one grab, he pulled on the handle so hard he yanked the whole drawer onto the floor, spilling the mess of contents into a small fan of clutter.

Not missing a beat, Nate found one of the condoms and a little bottle of lube and handed them back to Logan. “Here, here.” One glance over his shoulder at

Logan showed a dark passion in Nate's eyes that matched every ounce of unchecked desire coursing through Logan.

As Nate lay himself flat, his buttocks tightened visibly, eliciting a moan as the plug shifted in his chute. "Oh God, hurry. I need you." He squeezed that embedded toy again. Logan could see the muscles contracting. "Please."

Oh fucking mercy. He wants that to be my dick as much as I do.

The long sinewy line of Nate's bare back pointed Logan's eye down to the man's taut buttocks again and again, and Logan lost a little more of his battle for supremacy. He ripped at his pants and underwear, freeing only his cock. His member rearing thick and red with his need, he tore open the condom packet, rolled the protection on, and slathered lube on his stiff shaft. All the while, he never broke his stare from the toy plugging Nate's hole or stopped picturing anything but his prick pushing in even deeper as he took its place.

Logan wrapped his fingers around the base of the plug, and Nate sucked in an audible breath. Logan jerked his gaze up and found Nate staring back at him in the darkened room, his eyes burning like the most polished orbs of onyx.

"Do it," Nate said. "Take it out and fuck me." He pushed his ass a measure in the air, not much, but it was there—*oh holy fuck, help me*—and it was an offer that tripped the final switch in Logan's descent into pure need.

With a raw, low growl, Logan tore the toy out of Nate's ass with a less than gentle hand, barely noting the man's cry as he replaced the butt plug with his cock. He plunged deep into Nate's ass, to the hilt on the first shot, and changed that sharp cry into a guttural moan.

Smothering, choking-tight, burning heat surrounded every inch of Logan's dick, consuming more than just his cock. A rich concentration of before-now unimaginable pleasure spread through to every corner of Logan's being, commanding more of him, demanding everything at once. He started pumping his hips in rapid-fire thrusts, finally owning an ass he'd wanted to know from the moment he'd stumbled on Nate three years ago. *Finally*. Logan knifed his cock into Nate's scorching passage again and again, unable to get enough. *It's so fucking good.*

Each grunt Logan heard Nate make as his ass took a brutal pounding rang a silent curse in Logan's brain. He knew he needed to find a rhythm Nate could handle, but with every little bump of Nate's ass upward into Logan's dick, Logan severed ties with anything more than a rudimentary fucking.

On one deep surge into Nate's passage, Nate bucked and shouted and then bore his forehead into the rug. Unfathomable guilt and pain sliced through Logan, even as his body demanded another slam into his partner's untried chute. Unable to stop, but needing to do something, Logan covered Nate and jerked his head to the side. He pulled Nate's face out of hiding. Eyes glazed with pure lust, not pain, looked back at Logan, shocking Logan into a racking shudder.

Logan jolted and sank his dick into Nate to the root, out of his control. Just as he buried himself balls-deep, Nate's rectum squeezed down, surrounding Logan's length in fire, and they both gasped.

Holding eye contact, Nate said, "You feel so fucking good, Logan." His tone reached Logan's ears as the roughest, most wonderful caress. The man clenched his jaw, clearly fighting his body's needs. "I'm gonna come too fast."

Jesus Christ. Logan wrapped his arms around Nate and reared them both to a kneeling position, with Nate sitting on Logan's lap, impaled on his cock. *How did I ever deserve this man?*

Jerking Nate's head to an awkward angle, Logan then slashed his lips across the other man's and took his mouth as hard as he did his ass. In between deep, thrusting licks, Logan uttered, "Ride me, baby." Logan took hold of Nate's waist and shoved his dick into the deepest reaches of the sweetest, snuggest body he'd ever fucked, giving Nate a goal to shoot for when he took over the task. "Take every goddamn inch you need until it hurts." Logan's hip and thigh screamed in this position, but he wouldn't move right now if someone promised him a magic pill that would take away all his pain forever. "Fuck me and make us both come."

With a whispered "Yes" against Logan's lips, Nate planted his hands on Logan's thighs and started bouncing up and down on Logan's cock, filling and emptying himself in an erratic pattern that sent Logan to a place where nothing but connecting to this one person mattered. He didn't care if the coupling had finesse or if it looked or sounded pretty. He only cared that he'd never wanted a mating more and that Nate seemed to revel in having Logan embedded deeply in his body.

Just then Nate pushed down as far as he could go. He took every possible inch of Logan's prick into his passage and pressed even harder, shoving his weight down, until his channel started squeezing in a vise around Logan's shaft. Nate stayed in place, grinding his hole into Logan's pubes. He cried out, but he didn't relent. He just kept pushing down, and in between moaning he demanded Logan kiss him and pull on his cock.

A chuckle fought its way into Logan's groan. His prick swelled on Nate's order—one the man surely hadn't realized he'd given. Logan curled his hand around Nate's neck, up to his jaw, and angled his head for another feral kiss. Right before Logan slashed his lips across Nate's, he teased first, saying, "Whatever you want, baby," and then took him with a crushing kiss. At the same time, he shoved his free hand down and wrapped it around Nate's rearing, cum-smeared prick in an equally aggressive hold, jerking the man's dick from base to tip with a suffocating, fast pace.

Nate immediately jolted, creating friction between his anal walls and Logan's cock again, sending both men into a frenzy. Contorted in front of Logan, partially on top of him, Nate rode Logan's shaft in a clumsy way that aroused Logan even more. Nate murmured, "Yes, yes, yes" each time he impaled himself on Logan to the hilt, and killed Logan with pure, unadulterated physical pleasure. *Fuck yes.*

Nate reached up and tunneled his hand into Logan's hair, holding Logan in place as he sank his tongue into Logan's mouth, stealing Logan's breath and the last remnants of his control.

"Ohhh fuck..." *Fuck fuck fuck.* Logan's balls pulled up hard, shoving him toward his endgame with ruthless power. "Shit, baby, shit." He jerked Nate off, teasing his sticky slit. He licked into Nate's mouth, frantic to shove Nate into coming too. "Losing it..." He bit back a ferocious groan as his cock swelled in Nate's ass, pushing hard to achieve release. "Gotta shoot with me now." He reached between Nate's spread legs to rub at his balls and press on his sweet spot from the outside. Harder, just a bit harder...*please.*

In a shaking rush, Nate hung frozen for a split second, hoarsely whispering Logan's name. His shaft thickened immeasurably in Logan's hand. A heartbeat later, he jerked with a shout and came. Each time his body shook, he spurted, dumping thick lines of milky-white seed into the dark-colored rug.

With the first powerful clamp of orgasm, Nate's rectum pulled tight around Logan's dick and shoved him the rest of the way to release. Logan latched onto Nate with a kiss, burying his cry in the man's mouth with the same depth he forced his dick into Nate's ass. Tucked in as far as he could possibly go, Logan shuddered, holding on to Nate in every way he could, and dumped endless lines of cum into the condom, wishing like hell he could mark his brand directly into Nate's very being.

Tremors rocked through both men for long minutes, and heavy breathing filled the air. Sweat poured down Logan's back, and the sheen of perspiration coated every inch of visible bare flesh on Nate too, making them slick in some places and sticky in others. Logan's hip and thigh screamed for a change in position, cramping terribly, but he couldn't make himself loosen his hold on Nate. The weight, even partial as it was now, of another man on him—*of Nate on him*—snaked into Logan's being as something fundamentally right and good. He'd denied himself closeness to anyone, but particularly this man, for such a long time that his body wouldn't release Nate and allow a separation. Some sort of internal panic that he would deny his body the comfort of another human being seemed to have kicked in, and Logan couldn't let go, even though he knew he should.

His eyes closed, his mouth still resting against Nate's, Logan blindly brushed his lips over the man's jaw and up the cutting line of his cheekbone. He grazed his lips across Nate's temple and then into his hair to breathe in his natural essence, to let the musky mix of man, sex, sweat and berry shampoo tickle his nostrils and invade his bloodstream. Logan hummed with the buzz still working its way through his system, and Nate nuzzled against Logan's softly questing lips, murmuring a contented noise too.

I've never had such a perfect moment in my life. The second Logan's thought resonated in his brain and body, tension began coiling in his belly and cooled his overheated skin.

Right then, Nate covered Logan's hand on his stomach and twined their fingers into a loose hold. He pecked a kiss to Logan's chin, and Logan pried an eye

open, feigning an irritated scowl. Nate waited there for him, and the sheer joy in the man's bright, unwavering gaze crushed a fisting hold on Logan's heart.

"That was the most incredible thing I've ever felt," Nate said in a dreamy voice. "You were amazing with me—beyond anything I ever imagined in my most explicit fantasies."

Logan chuckled to hide the rough catch in his voice. "If you give me some time to recover, I'll show you how it can be when it lasts more than three minutes."

The hold on Logan's hand grew tighter, and Nate's pupils took over his gaze. "I'm not complaining. I liked the pace. It felt raw and real. Hell"—he blushed—"it *was* raw and real." He looked into Logan's eyes, holding, and the very open nature in how he studied Logan without hiding anything of himself shot lines of adrenaline into Logan's blood. "It felt like I imagined it would be for two people who've wanted to have sex with each other for a lot longer than just these last few days."

Shit. Logan fought the urge to flee. "Ask your thousand questions, Nate. I can see them all sparking in your eyes."

Nate's pupils flared even more, drowning out almost every bit of the warm pure brown. "Will you answer them?"

"God's honest truth? I don't know." A heavy sigh escaped Logan, one that made him feel like a coward and an asshole, but he could not ignore the automatic way all the hairs on his body rose on end. "Try me, and we'll have to see."

"You're an honest man." Nate twisted on Logan a bit more to wrap his arm around Logan's shoulders. He tweaked their noses against one another, and softly said, "I like that about you."

The shift made Nate's rectum contract around Logan's still-buried cock, reminding him of the connection and eliciting a moan of new pleasure. *Jesus. That's so good.* He brushed a kiss to Nate's lips and murmured in a throaty tone, "Let me get you under me in my bed, give me some time to learn every inch of your amazing body with my mouth, and by the end you might find one or two more things to approve."

"Yes, please." With a surge to his feet, quickly breaking the connection of their bodies, Nate yelped and immediately put his hand on his pucker. Going furiously red, Nate rubbed his surely discomfited ass and then pulled his jeans up, leaving them unbuttoned. "Remind me not to do that again. It hurt a bit and felt really fucking weird."

Logan swelled with ridiculous pride. Not because of Nate's momentarily aggrieved asshole, but because right then, the man no longer even attempted to murmur embarrassing or intimate things anymore. Perhaps Nate didn't even realize it, but he was comfortable with Logan now. Felt safe enough to openly speak everything on his mind.

Goddamn. Logan's chest squeezed with such an ache he almost couldn't breathe. *It's even better than giving me his ass.*

Nate, looking so fucking sexy with his beautiful face and hard body and jeans barely holding on to his waist, held his hand out in offering. "You gonna show me that bed of yours, Logan?"

Hell yes. Logan tore off the used condom, but in his attempt to shift to his knees with the use of only one hand, his hip and thigh contracted harder than a steel pole. Lines of fiery pain streamed down Logan's leg, and he collapsed onto his ass.

Chapter Nine

“Logan!” Nate dropped to his knees and grabbed Logan around the waist, keeping him from falling to his back and slamming his head into the floor.

Pain sliced through Logan’s hip and thigh, making him curse and grit his teeth, but it didn’t remotely compare to the blazing heat coursing through him that he had a witness to his weakness. Nate. Again.

Fucking shit.

“Here.” Nate tightened his hold and used his weight to propel Logan to one knee and then to his feet. Logan managed to get his pants and underwear back around his waist before Nate nudged to get him moving. “Let me help you to the bed.”

Logan gnashed his teeth, partially to bite down the stabbing pain crippling him, but just as much due to his inability to shove Nate away to show he could walk on his own. At this second, he couldn’t. And Logan fucking hated it.

After the slow trek to his bedroom, wherein numbness set in to part of Logan’s leg and made it difficult to lift, Nate steered him to the bed.

Using his upper body strength, Logan battled against Nate’s momentum. “Let me walk,” he growled, using the strength in his arms to win the fight. Nate remained firmly attached to Logan’s side, but he did help shift them away from the bed and assisted Logan in moving slowly around the bedroom.

Guilt pushed further explanation past Logan’s lips. “I need to move for a few minutes to loosen up the muscles, and then I can put some heat on it.”

Nate crushed his fingers into Logan’s waist. “I can—” He clamped his mouth shut, but Logan read the hope in Nate’s eyes as if they’d partnered each other for years instead of days.

Some of the shell protecting Logan’s heart cracked, allowing a piece of this man, along with Logan’s acceptance that he wanted to please Nate, in through the small fissures.

“Your pillow works real well, Nate.” Logan glanced to where it lay at the foot of his bed, allowing Nate’s gaze to follow. “I’ve already used it once.”

“Good.” Nate’s nod was sharp and brief, but Logan could see the dots of pink suffusing his cheeks. The way he bit his lip surely tried to hide a pleased smile. “I’m glad it helped.”

After that, they circled Logan's bed with tentative steps once more and even moved back into the living room and around Logan's kitchen table before returning to the bedroom. As they passed the footboard a third time, the discomfort in Logan's hip finally reduced to a dull, warm throb and his thigh no longer felt like it would seize up on him if he stopped exercising it.

"It's okay now." Logan pulled back from leaning his weight on Nate to rub his fingers deeply into his hip and thigh muscles, working out the kinks even more. "I can move on my own."

Nate withdrew his hold around Logan's waist, but he didn't back off, and his dark stare didn't waver. "As long as you're going to move your ass right into bed then that's fine with me."

Logan glared even as he obeyed and climbed into bed. "I feel a thousand years old every time you see me limping or wincing or hurting in any way because of this fucking leg." He punched his thigh, welcoming the shot of pain he inflicted on himself.

With a sigh, Nate dropped to his knees beside the bed, next to Logan. "Logan, someone shot you; it doesn't make you old. Look at you." Nate's gaze strayed from one end of Logan to the other. With each second he looked, the darkness in the way he observed pumped new heat into Logan's blood.

Nate made eye contact again, and everything they'd just done on the living room floor burned inside him. "You have this insane body and this harsh, beautiful face that make my mouth go dry when I look at you. Every time I'm near you I get hard and hot." Blushing again, Nate abruptly shot to the foot of the bed and put Logan's booted feet in his lap. "An occasional limp someone inflicted on you doesn't add a year of age to you, let alone a thousand. I wish I could take away your pain so you never had to suffer"—Nate didn't break eye contact as he started unlacing Logan's shoes—"but as far as I'm concerned, the fact that you battle through it every day and get on with your life only makes you sexier."

"Jesus." Logan adjusted his cock as it attempted to swell to life again. "We've definitely made it clear at least one thing on me isn't ever broken or slow when I'm around you."

Nate looked at Logan's crotch. "Amen to that." He covered Logan's hand with his.

Logan groaned. "Talk to me, man." With great regret, he moved Nate's hand away from his penis. "I need longer than you do to recover."

"That wasn't why I touched you, but we can talk." Nate went back to removing Logan's shoes, and a definite twinkle shot moonlight into his eyes. "I figured out how Daria was in her school's newspapers without being in them." After putting Logan's boots on the floor, Nate peeled off his socks and moved to massaging the arches of his feet.

"No shit." Logan shot upright and then hissed as the fast movement spiked a flash of fire in his hip. "How? What? Tell me."

“Just relax.” With a gentle but unrelenting push, Nate guided Logan back against the pillows cushioning his headboard. “You can get the same information while kicking back as you can full of tension.”

New knots twisted on themselves in Logan’s stomach. “Don’t baby me. If you do, then we’re not equals. If we’re not equal”—Logan delivered one lingering glance at Nate that he hoped felt like he was running his hands over every inch of the man’s body—“then I can’t fuck you as soon as I’m able to get it up again.”

“I’m not babying you.” Nate’s Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed, but he never blinked. He didn’t blush, he didn’t cow, and he didn’t give Logan an emotional inch to move and find space to breathe. Instead, he continued moving his massage up Logan’s foot to his ankle and then under his pants to knead his calf. “You can retract enough to let just one person in to take care of you for a little while, you know. It stays between us, Logan. I’m not going to go blabbing at work or to the bosses that you let me undress you and tend to you for an hour at the end of a rough couple of days.”

With his heart rate kicking up far too fast to attribute to the simple massage Nate gave him, Logan reached desperately for some flirting. “You’re gonna undress me?” His voice scratched more than he wanted.

Nate grinned, something full of mischief, and Logan expelled the breath trapped in his chest.

“That’s what I was going to do with my hand a minute ago,” Nate shared. He proceeded to run both palms up Logan’s inner thighs, leaving tingles of awareness under Logan’s pants. He teased over Logan’s shaft too, definitely on purpose, before curling his fingers around the waistband of Logan’s pants and underwear, ordering “Lift up for a second” before pulling them down and off, leaving Logan naked.

Completely exposed.

Shit.

Mangled, twisted skin with a combination of raised and smooth discolored scars, some pale and others an angry, permanent red, created a gnarled, nasty canvas of abstract art out of Logan’s flesh from his hip to halfway down and across the front of his thigh. A crater where a hunk of flesh had been permanently removed added to the uneven terrain. It wasn’t that nobody had ever seen his scars before—Ryan had many times—or even that they embarrassed Logan. Rather the automatic pity they evoked kept him from wanting others to see.

Nate stared openly for an uncomfortable minute, which made Logan both squirm and breathe easier.

“So it wasn’t two shots from a pistol or even something like a revolver someone put in you.” Nate finally looked up, making eye contact again. No pity existed there, just curiosity. “To me it looks like it’s from something with buckshot, like a shotgun?”

“Not exactly,” Logan said with a grimace. “But the idea is similar.” The mere existence of bullets that splintered on contact, ones designed to maximize the

damage done to the victim—the kind that had put an end to Logan's career in law enforcement—tore a growl out of Logan. "You'd be amazed at the bullets ammo specialists are designing these days."

"Yeah." Nate growled too, something much softer, almost like a cub compared to Logan's lion. It brought a private smile to Logan's lips. "Fucking sucks to be the law sometimes. Stay right there," Nate said. He brushed his hand across Logan's bare belly before getting to his feet. "I'll be right back."

Logan watched Nate disappear into the bathroom. "I wouldn't trade my time with the force," Logan called out, suppressing another one of his rare grins as he heard the flow of water. "It was worth it." Closing his eyes for a moment, Logan pictured Nate cleaning himself at Logan's sink. *Fuck, I like the thought of that.*

"No, I don't imagine you would second-guess yourself." Nate raised his voice sufficiently to be heard over the running water. "I'm sure you've never regretted stepping in to help the day you got shot either." A pause thickened the empty space between them, causing Logan to open his eyes. Nate appeared at the bathroom door with a washcloth and towels in hand. He was nude. *Fuck.* Logan could not get over the sight of his beautiful, sleekly muscular, hair-free body. His skin still held the sheen of water from his quick washing job. Nate's gaze somber, he added softly, "Even though it changed your life."

Logan shrugged. "You always have a badge. It never comes off, even when you're not on duty." He had no interest in rehashing the day a reckless, remorseless teenager put two bullets in him and took him away from actively working cases for the force. "Sometimes shit happens. I didn't lose my life like some men and women have, so I don't think anyone is interested in listening to me bitch and moan about occasional discomfort."

"Bet you feel the same whenever you suffer for your job." As Nate crossed the room, he tossed the damp washcloth at Logan and then proceeded to drape two dry towels over Logan's damaged hip and thigh. "I bet you barely even looked twice at that wicked bruise on your shoulder there." With a glance that ended up turning into a narrow stare, Nate muttered, "Shit, Logan." He thumbed the red and purple discoloration tagging Logan's shoulder, his touch so gentle Logan almost sighed in place of wincing. "I think I can see the shape of Riley's boot."

Logan glared at the affliction in the same way he had done to Riley last night upon getting his first look at the nasty bruise. "Son of a bitch got me good. I should have let his ass freeze on the streets last night as payback."

His chocolate gaze twinkling, Nate bussed a kiss to Logan's cheek before pushing to stand. "Nah. You know you like the guy." As he moved backward, still looking at Logan, he grabbed the therapy pillow off the foot of the bed and kept right on steadily moving toward the arch that led to the rest of Logan's apartment. "Aside from that, catching Riley brought us good information. Plus, he successfully waited out Jackson Roth." Nate paused, sharing a triumphant half grin. "Got the bastard at fucking eight o'clock at night on his way out of a side door of the building."

“No shit?” Logan found himself talking to Nate’s back again.

“Shit.” Nate’s chuckle carried to Logan from the kitchen. From the beeps Logan could hear, he knew the guy played with buttons on the microwave. “He didn’t get a lot of information out of Jackson, though. Just something about Elise getting her panties in a bunch and firing the agency when he started asking what he says were perfectly reasonable questions about some of their business practices.”

“Oh yeah?” Logan sat up with a bit more attention. Illegal backroom deals with Sarna Imports could explain a kidnapping of the daughter, even though they had yet to receive a ransom or notice of payback for a deal gone wrong. “Like what kind of practices?”

“Jackson wouldn’t say. Confidential and all that good stuff,” Nate shared from the kitchen. “And Mr. Roth intimated he’s sure the Sarnas would have cleaned up their act before hiring another security agency.”

Logan snorted. He fucking couldn’t help it. He did not trust Jackson Roth as far as he could throw the perfectly polished, expensive-suit-wearing bastard. “That’s a likely way to cover your ass when you don’t have proof of anything. It’s a nice way to explain away why you lost a client too.”

“Riley had the same thought,” Nate said. The subtle, warm scent of lavender mixed with earthy herbs tickled Logan’s nose. Empty-handed, Nate appeared at the door and leaned his shoulder against the jamb. Fuck. He looked *right* walking around Logan’s place naked. Like he fucking *fit* in the space.

“Riley didn’t seem to take to Mr. Roth,” Nate shared. “From what I could tell based on how he talked, anyway.”

“That makes me feel even better about trusting Riley’s judgment.” Watching Nate, seeing his interest and talking with him, Logan found himself settling inside. “It is interesting, though, because earlier tonight, when Stephen was threatening to fire Quinn, he said *he* was the one who let the Roth Agency go.” Something else from earlier scratched at Logan’s brain too. “From the beginning of my conversation with them, Stephen also repeatedly spoke of Daria in the past tense. Which might not mean anything,” Logan quickly added. “Could just mean he’s come to terms with the likelihood that Daria is already dead.”

The microwave dinged through the apartment, and Nate disappeared again. “I’ve never gotten that vibe from Mr. Sarna before.” In a flash, Nate reappeared, the pillow supported on the third of three towels. “Stephen and Elise always seemed as if they were still believers to me. Declan was more the one who appeared to grasp his sister isn’t coming back.” Nate crawled on the open side of the bed and knee-walked to Logan’s side—his damaged side.

“Interesting you should mention Declan in that context,” Logan said, his heart ticking up every second he watched Nate arrange and fuss. Nate placed the heated pillow on the towels covering Logan’s scarred hip, and Logan exhaled something between a hiss and a moan. “Ahh yeah...” Each molecule of heat warming Logan’s damaged muscles felt like sinking straight into heaven. “That feels fucking good.” One thing had felt better in his life, and it had just happened on his living room

floor a short while ago. Finding Nate's gaze in the shadows, Logan murmured, "Thank you."

"You're welcome." Nate's pleasure beamed through in the way he looked at Logan, making Logan feel like a fucking hero just by lying still and accepting Nate's help.

Still looking for all the world like the kid who'd just been told he could eat ice cream for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, Nate settled in at Logan's side. He crossed his legs and clasped one of Logan's hands loosely in his lap, dangerously close to his long, pretty cock.

"Tell me why mentioning Declan was interesting," Nate said, his voice jerking Logan out of his brief fantasy of taking Nate's prick down his throat for a good, long suck.

"Oh right." *Crap, man. Focus.* "I had a talk with him tonight that didn't sit well in my gut." Logan spent the next few minutes explaining not only his conversation with Declan but also did his best to reenact the kid's demeanor and emotions as well.

By the end, Nate's mouth twisted with something of a frown. "I don't know." He fiddled with Logan's hand while chewing on the edge of his lip. "I don't buy Declan hurting his sister. Not even accidentally because he couldn't say no or wanted to impress Pierce in some way."

Logan covered Nate's hand with his bigger one. "Declan is still so young, Nate. I know you feel for him, but you can't let that lull you into believing he's not capable of committing murder. He's hiding his sexuality and surely confused as hell about it. Then you add a master manipulator like Pierce into the mix, who understands exactly what Declan feels for him and is willing to play with it, and you could end up with a prank that went wildly wrong."

Nate untangled their linked hands and pushed back from Logan. Not much, but it sent the hairs already tingling on Logan's arms, and now his neck, into a full upright stand.

"I'm not saying let go of your suspicions about Declan," Nate finally responded. "You obviously have them for a reason. I'm just asserting that my perspective on Declan's behavior points me more toward something like Pierce pushing him to do sexual things for his amusement and then humiliating Declan when he does them."

Studying Nate's obvious discomfort drew a furrow between Logan's brows. "You think the kind of shame I witnessed is all about Declan giving Pierce a blowjob, and then Pierce coming on his face and laughing at him?" Logan wanted to reach out, felt like something inside him told him to act, but damn it, questions he could only classify as part of an interrogation filled his mind. "Did Declan confide something to you that you haven't told me?"

Coming immediately out of hiding, Nate reared back. "No, of course not. I would never keep something important like that from you."

Every hair on Logan's body became a full-on homing device. Trained right on Nate. "Then what is it, Nate?"

"Nothing."

"Tell me, damn it."

"It's just...when I think about how big a crush I had on my best friend back home..." Nate looked down, and his voice dropped to a raspy whisper. "When I really stop to think about what I would have done for him if he'd kissed me back and started toying with me rather than going postal and beating the shit out of me—"

"Whoa. Whoa." Logan's heart stopped. *Goddamn it.* He jerked Nate's face up with a grip on his chin, pulling his stare off the slate-colored bedspread. And there it was. The shame. Traces of old fear.

Jesus motherfucking Christ.

"That's what you were recovering from the first day I met you." It wasn't a question; Logan could see the dying embers of old humiliation in Nate's eyes. During all the nights Logan had wondered, he'd never thought of that. "You ran to Chicago because you thought your best friend felt something more for you, so you kissed him, and he went off on you until you were black-and-blue and bloody. Is that right?"

Nate opened his mouth but then snapped it shut quickly. He tried to hide again, but Logan kept hold of Nate's chin and wouldn't let him. A battle lived in that gaze less than three feet away, but Logan would not let up his grip. He would not relent. He couldn't.

Don't lie to me. Logan couldn't believe how his arm vibrated as the rest of him went completely still. Even his breathing went silent. Trust. *He has to trust me. Christ, baby, I think I want yours more than anything else in the world.*

"Talk to me, Nate." His heart aching for the open wound he could see still doing damage inside Nate, Logan shifted his bruising hold to a caress down the line of Nate's wonderful, angular jaw. "I stumbled on you that day while you were recovering from a hate crime at the hands of your best friend. Correct?"

Logan asked his question. Then he let go of Nate, gave him the freedom to run, and waited.

Nate's chest hurt. Breathing became a tangible, difficult thing, much as it had that day back in Minnesota three years ago.

Which is why you have to stop hiding it. Nate looked at this man, the toughest damn person he knew, who had bent enough to allow Nate to play nursemaid for a little while. *Let Logan help you take away the power of that terrible day.*

Watching Logan so very closely, Nate exhaled an unsteady breath. "Yes." He got out the admission in that one word. It seemed to obliterate the dam inside, letting the rest flow out in a flash flood. "I'd never even fucking been in a real fight before that day. Not one where fists are flying and the other person wants to see

you in a bloody pile on the floor by the end. At first, I was so stunned I didn't even understand what was happening. But then he wouldn't stop hitting me, and he wouldn't stop threatening me with even worse things than beating me, and I didn't know what to do."

Nate laughed, but it was the hollowest sound he'd ever made. "I was in my own fucking kitchen, and I had no way to protect myself. As I'm lying there on the floor being suffocated by Grady's knee in my sternum, all I could think was how now everybody will know. Everyone will know what I've been hiding since I was fourteen years old. And it's awful because I don't even have Grady as a result. I've disgusted him, and he's beating me up, and I deserve it because I had no right to interpret his friendship as something more." Raw inside, almost as stripped to nothing as that day, Nate worked with everything in him not to succumb to the pussy tears he'd let fall uncontrollably three years ago. "I just kept thinking I was the stupidest person God ever put on this planet to think Grady could have liked me that way, or that I had any right to try and kiss him."

"Fucking hell, Nate." Logan cuffed his hand around Nate's neck and dragged him in close. With his lips pressed to Nate's temple, Logan uttered gruff words that penetrated straight into Nate's heart. "You misread signals. It's human. That's no excuse for what that bastard did to you."

Nate clutched at Logan's forearm, holding on for dear life as the flood continued to spill out of him. "Why in the hell do you think I was so damn scared every time I thought I saw something more than a casual interest in you?" His heart seized with terrible tightness, much as it had the first time he'd found himself drowning in Logan—another straight man. "I was drawn to you from the first second, but then I found out you had a girlfriend, and I knew I could not go through wanting someone again who could not and did not want me back. I tried to avoid you as much as I could, but we still crossed paths so much because of Canin and Kasey. Every time I saw you or listened to you talk or watched how you treated other people, I liked you more and more, and that just messed with my head more and more because I knew you were straight, and I felt like I'd trapped myself in my feelings for the wrong man again."

"Then, this week, I started thinking maybe you were feeling something for me too, but I couldn't tell for sure." With his throat constricting in his effort to control everything he felt for Logan, Nate pleaded silently with himself to get this said without succumbing to tears. Logan's beautiful, pale gaze maintained complete contact between them, and Nate tried not to get lost in the never-ending wave of emotions this man evoked in him. "What I thought I sensed in you scared the hell out of me because at this point what I feel for you goes so much deeper than any simple attraction I *thought* I sensed in Grady back home. I knew if I was wrong again, a rejection at your hands would crush me."

Clutching Nate, Logan scraped a kiss against Nate's forehead. "Jesus Christ, baby." His voice scratched awfully, in a way that ripped somehow even deeper into Nate's already captured heart. "I'm so sorry. I never meant to fuck with your head."

I'm not in denial about who I am, but nor am I out. That's not my life either. I had no clue you were even gay until just this week. Then the way you were with Wes made me realize you're out to him, so I know that must mean you are to your sister and probably Canin, Adam, and Rhone too, which is so fucking different from my life."

"Kasey and the others know," Nate shared. "A few other people do too." On his knees now, leaning into Logan, Nate brushed his hands over Logan's face again and again, unable to believe he could. "I tried so hard to stay away from you. I was afraid if you knew how much I liked you, it would be humiliation all over again. Then my sister put us together, and I couldn't say no."

With a groan, Logan angled Nate's head and took him with a fast, licking kiss, drawing a shared shiver when their tongues met for a flash. "You've had me fucking hard from minute one. I've been aware of you, Nate. Christ, baby..." He pulled Nate on top of him and ran his big, rough hand down Nate's spine to cup his ass, settling their crotches against one another. "From the day we met, I've been fighting myself every time I get near you. When we're in a room together, I can feel you. I instinctually know where you are." He sipped repeatedly from Nate's lips, and his prick began pushing against Nate's, bringing Nate to moaning life too.

"Damn it." Logan darted his tongue inside and licked the roof of Nate's mouth. "You've complicated my life so much more than I ever thought possible for one human to do to another." Vibrating with a hungry sound, Logan slipped his fingers into Nate's crease to tease his pucker. "I don't know what to do with how you make me feel."

Logan's words awoke exciting possibilities in Nate but—*oh fuck, that's good*—the man deepened the kiss between them and began putting a more intense pressure against Nate's asshole. He scraped that rough fingertip over Nate's ring and then dipped down to rub a delicious, wonderful sensation into his taint.

Nate bit his lip as he waged a battle against the pleasure Logan pulled out of him. "What about Nicole? Oh God..." Nate automatically lifted his ass into the delicious contact, needful of this connection he'd craved for so long. At the same time, he shook his head, breaking the kiss, and tried to focus through the blur of pleasure Logan delivered him. "You... Oh, shit, shit." Nate hissed, responding to Logan pushing his hand between their stomachs to mash their thickening cocks together. The squeeze and pull incited sharp pleasure and made it nearly impossible to focus on anything other than mating with this man again.

Even as Nate cursed himself for doing it, he pushed his hand into the mix and stilled Logan's wonderful handjob on both their dicks. "You were hurting last year when Nicole broke up with you." He tunneled his fingers into Logan's hair, pulling, forcing him to look up. "I know what I saw. I felt it every minute we were in Vermont."

With a sigh, Logan pressed his forehead to Nate's, and something almost invisible Nate was beginning to think served as Logan's smile appeared. "It wasn't Nicole, okay?" His jaw clenched; not much, but Nate picked up on it immediately. "I

broke up with someone else right before Adam and Rhone's wedding. Another man. You didn't see or feel me in any stages of hurting, though. I was pissed and angry at him, not to mention mad at myself for being blind to what was going on, so I took it out on everyone around me."

"But—"

Logan whipped his hand off their cocks and shoved it over Nate's mouth. "No 'but.'" Immediately, some of the hardness went out of Logan's eyes, and he softened the crush of fingers pressing into Nate's mouth. "When we were in Vermont, I wanted *you*. I knew I couldn't have you, and that poked at me daily and made me even less social and polite than normal. That, mixed with being mad as hell at my ex, was what you saw a year ago."

Curiosity about this ex stirred in Nate, but happy butterflies danced in his belly, and he couldn't hold back the big smile taking over his face. *He wanted me. A year ago, he wanted me.*

Nate pried Logan's hand off his mouth and dipped down to steal a kiss. "If only we'd known back then..."

"I still wouldn't have done anything," Logan replied. "I have law—" He snapped his mouth shut, but Nate saw a flash of shock register in Logan's eyes before he banked it.

"You have what?" Nate asked, studying the stiffening in Logan's jaw and the lines deepening around his mouth. "Tell me."

Desire flooded Logan's gaze, drowning out any hints of what Nate thought he'd witnessed. "I have a raging hard-on again, is what I have." He stabbed it with delicious intent into Nate's lower belly. He looked at Nate without blinking, fire now igniting the green in his eyes. "I fucking want to do something about it right now, if your ass isn't too tender to take me." As he lifted up and grazed their lips, again and again with tormenting lightness, he slid his palm slowly down Nate's side and took his ass in hand again, squeezing gently. "It'll be better this time."

Laid out along every inch of Logan's hard, unforgiving frame, Nate lost himself a bit more to the seduction of a taut male body so intimately intertwined with his. Every press of Logan's erection into Nate's stomach reminded Nate of the intense, frantic, wonderful way they'd become one on the living room floor. Each brush of Logan's rough fingers over Nate's buttocks and into his crack drew out a rocking response in Nate, asking without words for more.

With every soft touch along the back of Nate's thighs, his ass, and across the small of his back, Logan continued to suck Nate deeper and deeper into a vortex where only sex existed.

Logan tangled his hand in Nate's hair and looked into his eyes without wavering. "I'm not always rough like I was with you on the floor," he said, his voice gruff. "I promise."

Nate cupped his hands to Logan's chiseled face. "What we did last time was insane. I'm not complaining."

“That’s good, because I can’t think about anything but getting inside you again.” A soft gasp escaped Logan, and his fingers closed in a tight fist within Nate’s hair. He gritted his teeth as their cocks rubbed against each other in one delicious slide of hard male flesh. “You need to tell me right now if that sweet little wiggle you’re doing isn’t a yes.”

Blood pumped with vicious purpose to Nate’s cock. With deliberate intent, Nate slid every inch of his naked body over every bit of Logan’s, creating a fucking inferno between them. As Nate delivered a nipping kiss, he said, “Is that enough of a yes for you?”

Logan bit Nate’s cheek in return. “I like the way you agree to things.” With that, he rolled Nate under him in one, *almost* smooth motion.

Nate’s heart stopped. “Your leg—”

Logan stole the rest of Nate’s protest with a fast, hard kiss. When he pulled back, he soothed his thumb along Nate’s bruised lips, sensitizing them even more. “My leg is fine for now,” Logan said. “Thanks to you.” His eyes—Nate couldn’t quite believe he saw it—but Logan’s eyes glinted with hints of flirty playfulness. “Now it’s my turn to tell you to just relax and enjoy the attention I’m giving to you.” Then he fucking dipped out his tongue and flicked it against the tip of Nate’s nose.

After that—with Nate too stunned to react to this playful side of Logan—Logan proceeded to gently, oh so very gently, graze kisses across Nate’s cheeks. He touched his mouth over Nate’s forehead and around his hairline to rim the shell of his ear. With every brush of Logan’s lips or tantalizingly soft lick, he softly murmured wonderful phrases in praise of everything from Nate’s firm, warm skin, to his pretty mouth, to the kindness in his eyes. Each whisper mingled with the incredible sensations of Logan learning Nate with kisses, which sent Nate into a buzzing state of euphoria that went far deeper inside him than finally feeling Logan’s mouth on his flesh.

Nate undulated beneath Logan’s solid frame, searching for more complete contact while also trying to absorb himself into the scorching heat emanating from his partner. He spread his legs and clamped his thighs against Logan’s hips but then almost jerked away when the gnarled, ridge-covered texture of Logan’s injury stamped itself into Nate’s inner thigh. Logan didn’t flinch, though; in fact, he groaned and bit his way back to Nate’s mouth to push in for a deep, aggressive kiss, taking Nate in a way that stole his breath. He rocked his weight into the V created by Nate’s spread legs, grinding in a simulation of the sex to come, and pulled a shudder through Nate that tagged every corner of his being. Logan’s focus, his clear lack of caring about his leg in this moment, sank into Nate and made him forget about being delicate with this man.

“Please.” Lunging up, Nate speared his tongue into Logan’s mouth, taking over with a dominating, punishing kiss. He scraped his fingers down Logan’s back and dug into his buttocks with a bruising hold, jamming their middles together in an even rougher manner, desperate to feel the stab of Logan’s iron-hard cock anywhere and everywhere. “Please please please...” Crying out as Logan tore his mouth away,

Nate begged breathlessly some more, no matter that he knew he needed a second to drag some oxygen into his lungs. He dug into Logan's ass and thrust upward clumsily. "Oh yes..." Nate's cock pounded with blood, and his nuts felt like baseballs swinging in his sac. Holding on tight, he surged into Logan again, biting his lips. "Fuck me."

With a growl, Logan reached back and tore at the fingers crushing his ass. "Fuck it, baby. That's too good for you to keep doing it right now. Let me keep my head long enough to get to your cock."

Nate wanted to grab at Logan again, but Logan fought against Nate, not relenting until he had Nate's arms stretched out wide, helping him by twisting Nate's hands into the sheets.

His eyes burning a luminescent jade, Logan ordered, "Hold on to the bedding. Squeeze it every time you want to claw at me."

Wanting to please Logan, Nate twisted the material under his fingers into tight knots, holding on with everything in him. At the same time, he lunged up and licked Logan's swollen mouth. "Can I claw later?"

The edges of Logan's lips didn't move, but his eyes once again shone bright with teasing laughter. "Hell yeah." Logan settled his full weight into Nate. He dipped down until their faces were only centimeters apart, and finally, a little grin, the sexist thing Nate had ever seen, appeared. "Once I'm inside you, taking you so fucking deep you don't know how to breathe through it, you can tear my back to shreds."

"Ohh shit..." In reaction, Nate bucked his hips and pumped early ejaculate onto Logan's stomach.

Logan immediately reached between them and took hold of Nate's balls. "Not yet, rock star." He scraped their mouths together, agonizing Nate, before whispering a challenge. "I know you can hold back a little bit longer. Don't even think about coming until your tight ass is smothering every damn inch of my cock." After issuing that command, Logan let go of Nate's nuts and started kissing his way down his jaw to his neck and shoulder, anointing every centimeter of skin he passed with a brush of his lips or a wet graze of his tongue.

With each bit of surface area Logan covered, Nate clutched at the bedding and writhed against the sheets, fighting the ache in his testicles and flood of blood raging in his cock. Logan dipped his nose into Nate's armpit, growling, "Christ, you smell good," and Nate whimpered as his cock jerked toward his stomach, painfully erect and needy for full attention.

Logan continued his exploration with tormenting leisure, detouring briefly to lave his tongue over Nate's nipples and leave hungry knots of pebbled nerve endings in his wake. Nate moaned and held on to the sheets somehow harder, his grip so tight his fingers went numb, but he didn't let go. Instead, he clutched harder and harder and harder as Logan made his way down the centerline of Nate's stomach with darting little licks that left a shiny line of saliva in his wake. Logan bypassed the rigid line of Nate's cock and instead buried his face in the smooth, sensitive skin

surrounding the root and balls. He rubbed his cheeks, forehead, and nose all around the waxed area, humming in a way that vibrated ridiculously delicious sensations into Nate's shaft and nuts, making Nate lift his hips in a silent plea for more.

From his position between Nate's legs, Logan looked up, the light of clear wonder brightening his stare. "Holy hell, Nate. Maybe it's just that it's you, but I never thought shaved-all-over would get me so fucking hot." Logan then transferred to running the rough flat of his palm over the hairless skin, not only around the base of Nate's prick but under to the flesh surrounding his balls too. As Logan did it, he moaned and pumped his hips into the bedding. "It's incredible."

Feeling the silly smile appear again, Nate embraced the emotions overtaking him and melted into the mattress. "Glad you like..." Right then, Logan stole the rest of Nate's comment with one look. His gaze grew dark a split second before he licked straight up the underside of Nate's prick and swallowed his shaft whole. Nate shouted hoarsely and thrust his hips, moaning as Logan groaned around his cock. Logan grazed his lips all the way along Nate's shaft to the tip, only to quickly swallow his length down again, making Nate cry out a second time. It felt like every nerve ending in his body rushed straight to his dick and clamored for more of Logan's amazing tongue. *Fuck yes.*

Any sense of looseness gone, Nate let go of the sheets and tunneled his fingers into Logan's hair, holding the man's head in place for a couple of full pumps Nate could not control. His cock screamed for more of the wet, hot cavern that existed past Logan's lips, and Nate could no longer deny his body's needs. He jammed his length home again, and Logan spit him out with a grunt.

The man held tightly to Nate's hips, not letting him move an inch. "I love tasting you and feeling you get so excited in my mouth." Wicked, dark things lived in Logan's stare, drawing out a shiver in Nate. As Logan held eye contact from his position, he tongued the smooth orbs of Nate's balls and took a wet swipe at his perineum. "Don't be shy, baby. Spread your legs for me." He pressed on Nate's inner thighs, guiding Nate to open himself wider and put his hole on display. "I'm gonna want at your ass too." Then, surely meant to torment, Logan flicked his tongue over Nate's rosy bud a half-dozen times, just enough to get Nate panting and his chute contracting in anticipation. Then Logan went back to killing Nate with the single most voracious blowjob he had ever known.

Oh God, help me. Digging the back of his head into the pillows, fighting the pleasure, Nate nicked his lower lip with his teeth, drawing the coppery taste of blood. With his hands wrapped around his legs, Nate crushed his fingers into muscle, barely holding on as Logan took his cockhead to the back of his throat and then kept right on going. He swallowed, creating a sensation so intense and powerful Nate blazed with ridiculous heat and thought his head would blow clean off his neck. When Logan pulled off, moving instead to lick around the sensitive underside of Nate's glans, saliva dripped down from his root to around his sac and over his taint, pooling wetness around Nate's pucker. Excitement and anticipation

mingled with a hint of fear and had Nate's asshole squeezing again and again of its own volition.

Without pausing, Logan switched back to the repeated suction up and down Nate's shaft. As he did, he rubbed his palm over Nate's stomach to his chest, scraping at Nate's nipples before moving on and pushing his digits against Nate's lips. *Oh yes.* Nate's passage clenched even harder. *Please.* Knowing exactly what Logan intended to do, Nate sucked those fingers into his mouth, moaning as the salty essence of man roared his taste buds to life. Dipping in to lick the webbing as well as all along the length and over the nicked pads, Nate gave attention to Logan's fingers that matched the man's intense focus on Nate's cock.

Soon Logan grunted an "enough" around Nate's dick and yanked his hand away. Nate's cock slid out of Logan's mouth, but Logan didn't move far away. He rested his chin against the smooth skin in the crease of Nate's thigh, watching Nate as he slipped his fingers down to tease Nate's hole. First contact, just a graze against the striated muscle, produced a gasp and jolt through Nate. Logan rubbed again, applying more pressure, and Nate inhaled sharply, watching as his entrance shrank inward with shyness.

"Just relax, baby." A kiss against the inside of Nate's thigh helped soothe the tension thrumming within him. "If you've put a butt plug inside yourself, then I know you know how to do it."

Locked in on the man between his legs, Nate couldn't look away or censor himself. "But I never did it with you." His entire body heaved as he sucked in a shaky breath. "It's special with you."

His jaw clenching visibly in the shadows, Logan closed his eyes for a moment. "Damn it, man. Don't fucking make me come." Pure, unfiltered desire took over Logan's face. "Not right now." Without waiting for a response, Logan went down on Nate again and started sucking his cock.

Oh, motherfucking holy hell. Nate nearly lost his mind. "Yes, yes, yes, yes..." He knifed his hips, lodging even more of his dick farther toward Logan's throat, and exhaled when Logan took it with a low moan that said he loved every bit of Nate's cock in his mouth. Nate didn't think foreplay could get any better. Then Logan added his finger into the mix and began playing with Nate's bud. In between every drag up Nate's shaft, Logan pressed his digit with a bit more force against Nate's back entrance, ratcheting up anticipation with each gentle stab.

Soon Nate could barely breathe through the pleasure. The need to feel Logan, any part of him, inside his body took complete control. With the next push from Logan against his pucker, Nate drove his hips into the pressure and—*oh God, oh God, yes*—Logan sank his middle finger deep into Nate's ass.

Nate groaned a rough, low noise that scratched at his throat, and his passage sucked in convulsively around Logan's buried digit, beyond his command to stop it.

Slowing down his blowjob to half its previous pace, Logan picked up his finger-fucking of Nate's channel without giving him a moment to assimilate. Logan switched his attention to pushing his finger into Nate past the second knuckle one,

two, three times without relenting, demanding Nate's passage settle down and accept the invasion.

Panting heavily, out of control, Nate churned his hips in a tight pattern, confused as to what his body could withstand more—Logan's mouth owning his cock or his finger mastering his ass. Nate stared down at Logan, captured by the hard lips wrapped around his dick and the long, rough finger disappearing into his ass, but became completely entranced every time Logan met his gaze.

It's Logan's mouth on me. It's Logan's finger in me. It's Logan's green eyes finding me, keeping us connected, time and again.

The truth of what was happening slammed into Nate with the force of an earthquake and catapulted him to a place of no return. With only a jolt of warning, Nate grabbed Logan's head but didn't have the chance to shove him away before a broken cry ripped out of him, and he shot his load inside Logan's mouth. His body jerked as he spurted ejaculate down Logan's throat. As much as Nate attempted to pull away, Logan stayed with him, massaging Nate's cockhead with shiver-inducing suction until Nate finally collapsed, nothing more inside him to give. The moment the tension left Nate, Logan let Nate's dick slip from between his lips. He withdrew his finger from Nate's ass too, and the horror at what Nate had done filled him with fire.

"I'm so sorry." Boiling with embarrassment, Nate reached down and wiped at the sheen of cum tagging the edge of Logan's lips. "You said you wanted me to wait until you were inside me."

Logan climbed up Nate in a flash and slapped a hand over his mouth. He stopped Nate from speaking with a bruising grip, but once again his eyes lit with humor. "It's okay, honey." The glint within the green led to a biting nip against Nate's cheek and a gentle brush of his hand through Nate's hair. "I promise that it's fine." He took his hand away and gave Nate an equally soft kiss on the lips. "I have no objections to you coming in my mouth."

Nate breathed a little easier, but a very real burn still heated his skin. "It just happened. I couldn't hold it back until we were having sex."

Without looking away, Logan braced his weight into the bed with one hand and reached to his nightstand to open the drawer. "I have news for you, rock star. This isn't finished." After digging around for just a heartbeat, Logan dropped a bottle of lube into the bedding and put a condom packet to his teeth. As he tore the wrapper, he mumbled around the plastic, "I'm just arrogant enough to believe I can make you come again very soon."

Oh God. Nate chuckled, rumbling the man on top of him. *Who did I fall in love with?* Right on that thought, Nate's heart seized, tightening with an exquisitely terrible, wonderful pain. *Oh hell, I'm in love with him.* A slice of fear went through Nate, rocking him with panic, but right then, Logan smiled down at him, a real, honest to God smile, and nothing else mattered.

I love him. The truth settled inside Nate with a little shiver, and he suddenly felt dreamy and languid all over. He's a good man. *It's all gonna be okay.*

Poised above Nate, his brow furrowing, Logan quickly dipped down and nipped a fast kiss from Nate, tingling Nate's sensitized lips and drawing him back into reality. Where Logan now wore a condom and had two of his fingers in a holding pattern right on Nate's hole.

I can't believe tonight is really happening.

Logan's gaze on Nate, he fingered Nate's pucker and brought every nerve ending around the ring of muscle to excited life. "You still with me, rock star?" Logan asked. Without waiting for a reply, he pressed again, pushing with exquisite force on Nate's asshole. On the third attempt, he collapsed Nate's entrance and took him with two long fingers, all the way to the webbing.

Nate flashed a snarling grin through the fiery burn of penetration, something he was coming to love. "Oh goddamn it, yes." He moved his hips in time with Logan's fingers, desperate not to lose the connection. "I'm here. More..." He clutched at the thick ropes of firm-as-hell muscles encasing Logan's shoulders. "Oh fuck, give me more."

Rather than ease in a third, Logan withdrew his two fingers, making Nate yelp a *no* at the loss.

Before Nate could protest too hard, Logan moved up, settling against Nate, with his hand shoved between their bodies. "Just enough to get some slick inside you this time, rock star." He nudged at Nate's thighs a little more, creating a space, where Nate quickly felt Logan's cock kiss his hole.

Oh God. So close. Nate tried to clear his head so he didn't lose his mind. "Why do you call me that?" He sucked in air as the pressure against his entrance once again increased.

Nate watched as Logan shifted his attention all over Nate's face. The unaccustomed softness Nate saw within Logan's pale assessment rocked Nate to his core. Logan came back to eye contact, his stare as gentle as Nate had ever seen. "Because you're sharp and witty and picked up on all kinds of subtle things with this case in a way that impressed me." He flexed his hips as he spoke, pushing his cockhead harder against Nate's squeezing bud. "But most important, because when you're in a room, you light it up, and my eyes can't go anywhere else." With that, Nate gasped, his heart hurting. Logan caught the quick intake of breath with a kiss *just* as he pressed through the last of the resistance and slid his cock into Nate's ass.

The second their bodies became one, both men choked on shared air, jerking as Logan sank deeper and took Nate to the hilt. Fiery spasms stole control of Nate's chute, and it felt as if his body both tried to drag Logan in somehow deeper and expel him at the same time. Nate knew which one he wanted, so he clung to Logan's shoulders and bumped his hips against the weight of the man on top of him, inside him, and tried to merge them together more somehow.

Logan trembled as he pumped his hips, gliding his rigid shaft deliciously within Nate's fluttering passage. He suddenly staggered to a stop, and his lips parted as flecks of emeralds deepened his eyes. "Christ, Nate..." With another slow

thrust, Logan pushed into Nate to the root. "Oh Jesus Christ..." Stilling again, Logan burrowed his forehead into Nate's, and the tension humming within him felt like someone struggling against his body's needs. "Never felt anything like this." His voice held a stripped quality that cut into Nate's heart. "Like being inside you."

His chest hurting at the struggle he saw in the man he loved, Nate moved up from holding Logan's shoulders to cupping his face. "Then don't be afraid to show me." He brushed his thumbs over the brackets surrounding Logan's mouth, soothing the unforgiving lines. "Fuck me, Logan. Make me come again." Holding the blur of Logan's gaze, Nate darted out his tongue and licked at his partner's lips. "With you."

Groaning, Logan attacked Nate with a ferocious kiss, almost fighting his way into Nate's mouth for a deep, rough plundering. He ate Nate raw and swollen, inside and out, making Nate feel like a dying man's last meal. Nate held on to Logan and kissed him back with nearly equal fervor, but Logan's emotions seemed to have finally gotten the better of him, and he dominated Nate with a power Nate did not want to defeat.

Reveling in Logan's surge of passion, Nate slashed his mouth and tangled his tongue around Logan's, doing something that felt like passionate fighting and loving all rolled into one. Nate wanted everything with this man. He experienced a level of desperation he'd never dared believe he could unleash, and now that he could, he shoved his tenderized asshole into the thrust of Logan's cock again and again, still feeling like he had to steal something Logan voluntarily gave. In his efforts to keep Logan buried within him, Nate squeezed every muscle inside or near his ass, so damn hard he thought he stamped the shape of Logan's penis into his rectal walls.

Logan grunted and immediately jerked to a halt. "Damn it, oh Jesus. Damn it." His stare burned hot enough to melt steel. "You're so fucking tight, baby. You're killing me." In one smooth motion that shocked Nate into stillness, Logan reared up to his knees and took hold of Nate's ankles, pushing his legs high and wide, opening him up where they merged for full display. "Gotta see it." Perspiration glistened over every inch of Logan's perfectly formed torso and thick, muscular arms, but the absolute fascination shining in his eyes as he watched his dick disappear into Nate's ass with sure drives took precedence over all else. It filled Nate's heart and made blood speed with a mission straight back down to his prick. Glancing up, Logan uttered, "Can't believe I'm finally fucking you."

"Me either. God, Logan..." Nate's cock swelled to full erection as he watched Logan plug him deep with repeated, sure strikes that nailed his sweet spot every damn time. Nate lifted his hips as best he could to welcome every knifing thrust. "It's so damn good."

"Play with yourself," Logan ordered in a guttural tone. With one glance up, the briefest of contact, he showed every speck of dark desire raging within him. "Scrape your nipples and tug your cock for me."

No thought of denial or prolonging with teasing entered Nate's mind. Watching Logan through a lust-filled gaze, Nate rubbed his palm across his chest, pinching and tweaking one little disc to a stiffened peak, moaning as the line of awareness pulled in his prick and nuts too, arousing him even more. Nate moved to pinch his neglected nipple with a rough touch, tightening the nerve endings into a tiny, needy bundle, and then shoved his other hand down his stomach to squeeze his sac before wrapping his fingers around his shaft. He immediately started pulling on his dick in a frenzy, automatically attuned to Logan's aggressive brand of mating. Bead after bead of early cum leaked out of Nate's slit. He thumbed the head, hissing as his trimmed nail grazed across the slit, causing him to clench his muscles and buck his hips.

Logan growled and dug his fingers into Nate's ankles with a grip that would surely leave bruises. He shoved Nate's legs somehow even higher and wider, splitting open his entire crack. In a shot, Logan yanked his dick out of Nate's chute and started sawing his shaft between Nate's buttocks, branding the little-touched flesh with the burn of his length. "Jesus, I want to fuck you everywhere." As Logan smothered his dick with a half-dozen more strokes, he looked up at Nate with something that came across as anger. "Fucking tell me when you're gonna come before it happens." Just as fast as he'd whipped it out, Logan speared his shaft back into Nate's open hole and filled his channel to the root.

Every nerve ending in Nate's rectum screamed with confusion. He'd gone well past tender to something nearing pain, but he wanted this too much, wanted Logan too much for too long, to dare stop. Nate more than accepted Logan's fucking; he gloried in it. As he did, he dragged his fist up and down his rearing cock, the color of his shaft now so deep a red, so full of blood, he thought something might be wrong. He refused to slow down one bit; with each jerk of his hand along his prick, tension coiled tighter and tighter within Nate, warning of the freight train building steam inside him, poised to ram him head-on into a brick wall.

"Logan, Logan..." Everything felt so torturously good that a sudden fear of coming staggered Nate to a stop and laced Logan's name with a plea for help. "So close..." The coiling twist of impending release snaked through to every corner of Nate's being, seizing muscles and limbs in its path. "I'm almost coming..."

The second Nate started to say *coming*, Logan ripped his cock out of Nate's ass. He let go of Nate's legs, tore off his condom, and tossed it aside. In the next breath, Logan came down on top of Nate, shoving him into the bed with his full weight. Their cocks met between the crush of their stomachs, and Logan continued to thrust with every ounce of power in him, grinding their rigid, ultrasensitized lengths against one another in a furious rhythm that choked words and moans deep in Nate's throat.

Without slowing his pace, Logan wrapped his arms around Nate's head and pressed their foreheads together, opening the blur of his intense gaze for Nate to see all the raw passion living inside. Logan dipped down until their lips touched and

roughly whispered, "Now." The friction between their cocks felt like they'd set themselves on fire. "Together."

And that was all it took.

Nate opened his mouth as it happened, shouting hoarsely, and Logan's cry of completion reverberated not only through the bedroom but deep into Nate's body too. The thrusts of their hips became full-frame stutters and jerks as orgasm hit them at the same time. Spurt after spurt of hot seed pumped out of their cocks into the suffocating sliver of space between their abdomens, mingling and smearing cum on hard flesh with each gasping breath they took.

Shit.

As Nate came down from the high of orgasm, endorphins and adrenaline pumped through his body at a drugging rate. He looked up at the man who'd made it happen, into the uncharacteristic beauty of Logan Jeffries's face, and a euphoria took him over, turning his body into melting ice cream and creating a blur that made him feel as if he looked through a layer of water.

Nate's arm felt like it weighed a hundred pounds, but he lifted his hand to cup Logan's chiseled cheek anyway. "You're so handsome." He blinked and blinked, but he no longer possessed the strength to keep his eyes open. Logan's features grew even wavier, but Nate managed to grin up at him as his fingertips found the man's lips. "I'm gonna like waking up to your face."

Although Logan shifted to the side, taking his weight away from Nate, he did keep hold of Nate's hand. He pressed a kiss to the center, and his voice sounded very far away as he said, "We need to talk, honey. We were in the middle of a work conversation when we got distracted."

"Tomorrow." No longer able to fight the exhaustion, Nate curled on his side, toward Logan's wonderful heat, his body automatically searching to maintain their new connection in another way. "Everything will be okay till tomorrow."

Just before unconsciousness sucked Nate under, he thought he felt Logan climb out of bed. He reached out, mumbling a protest through the haze pulling him toward sleep. A familiar nickered-up hand definitely tunneled through his hair, and lips pressed a kiss to his forehead, making him sigh. The words "I'll be back in a minute, I promise" sank into Nate's brain, along with another soft kiss, this time to his cheek. Nate curled up tighter into a ball, for the moment content to slip into his dreams.

After all, Logan lived there too.

Chapter Ten

Logan jerked awake and found himself reaching for a warm body that was no longer next to him. Nate.

Oh hell.

Logan's stomach twisted with dread until he blinked a few times, and the light in the bathroom registered in his brain, signaling Nate hadn't left in the middle of the night. The strip of light bisecting his bedroom floor, flooding through the crack left open in the bathroom door, immediately loosened the dread sitting in his belly.

Jesus Christ. This can't be good.

Flopping back onto his pillow, Logan pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes, cursing under his breath. He hadn't even needed to achieve full consciousness for something inside him to process Nate's absence from his bed and for it to register as panic. Not only that, but the second he realized the guy was just taking a piss and would return in a minute, everything settled inside like a skittish beast being soothed by a skilled animal behaviorist.

He can't be that important to me. Not this fast.

As soon as he had that thought, Logan groaned again, and it had nothing to do with the vigorous nature of his activities that left soreness in his leg and hip. Instead, the low, rumbling noise came from rapid-fire memories of how he'd taken Nate a second time last night. The constriction banding Logan's chest existed with the realization of how much he'd opened himself to Nate during the throes of sex. Not once in his life had Logan started out intending to take *any* man with slow, smooth precision, and then with one thrust immediately switch to losing himself in a mating to the point where he had very little control over the nature of the fucking.

When Nate finished up in the bathroom, Logan wouldn't have to ask him about the level of tenderness in his ass. Nate had to hurt more than a little bit this morning. After all, Logan had aggressively fucked the man twice with little care for his newbie status. *Not true.* Logan had cared. He just hadn't been able to overcome his body's need to take and take and take until nothing mattered to either of them but coming.

What are you doing, Jeffries? Logan stared at the sliver of light streaming across his floor from the bathroom, suddenly dreading the moment Nate would emerge. *You were going to stay far away from him. Then you weren't going to get close enough to kiss him. And now you've not only taken him twice, you cleaned him*

up afterward and crawled into bed next to him to sleep the best seven hours straight since well before Ryan left you.

Logan's groan turned into a soft growl. He didn't want to think about Ryan right now. Didn't want to acknowledge the vast difference between sex with Nate and every other man in his past. Logan hadn't even experienced that level of intimacy with Ryan, whom once upon a time Logan had privately believed might be the one. If Logan thought too much about how incredibly intense and beyond personal sex with Nate had been last night, so different on so many levels from anything he'd had with Ryan, then Logan would have to admit Ryan might have found something similar with Roland and had made the right choice to move on. *But not the way he did it.* The burn of old anger still sparked in Logan's belly, heating his gut.

Suddenly a distinct "yes" and clang of metal hitting metal carried to Logan from the bathroom.

What the hell?

Logan climbed out of bed and strode to the bathroom, ignoring the throb in his leg. His knock merely a warning, he pushed open the bathroom door to find Nate easing the toilet tank lid back in place, an open toolbox at his side, wearing only a smile and the sweats Logan had wiggled him into last night.

As if he suddenly realized he had an audience, Nate whipped around to face Logan, his eyes wide. "Oh, hi. I didn't mean to wake you."

"You didn't." His brow furrowing, Logan settled his shoulder against the doorjamb, his attention fully captivated by this disheveled, sexy man kneeling on his bathroom floor. "What in God's name are you doing, though?"

"Fixing your toilet." Nate's cheeks went sweetly pink as he said that. "I got up to take a piss and when I flushed it, I broke it. I didn't want you to know, so I found your toolbox under the kitchen sink and repaired it. I'm sorry." Nate fussed with lining up the three rolls of toilet paper and hand towel Logan kept on the back of the commode. "I didn't mean to break it."

Jesus, how did this guy not collect hearts from Minnesota through to every stop on his bus ride to Chicago?

Logan pushed the rest of the way into the bathroom and made his way to the cutest damn man he'd ever met. The urge to touch filled his hands, fuck, filled his entire arms, with tingles.

Surrendering to it, Logan threaded his fingers through Nate's mess of hair and tilted his head back. "You didn't break it, honey. It has been running for almost a week. I haven't been able to get it to stop." He smiled wryly. "Threatening to do violent things to the building's super hasn't moved me to the top of his list."

One of Nate's brows rose in a comically dastardly arch. "I'm shocked that browbeating him didn't work."

"Wiseass." Logan smacked Nate on the butt and then ruined it by pecking a kiss to his temple. "Don't worry about it." Taking a step back, he leaned against the sink. "I'll get him up here eventually."

"No need." Nate went from blushing to beaming. "I fixed it."

Logan pushed up straighter. "No shit?"

"Shit. See?" Nate pushed the handle, allowing Logan to hear the smooth flow of water as the toilet flushed and then a lack of dripping after the bowl filled. "It's not that hard if you know what to do."

This strange mix of shy confidence in Nate stirred Logan's blood. It had him shifting and studying the man even more closely than he normally did. "How do you know what to do?"

Nate pulled a face. "Promise you won't laugh?"

Giving Nate a once-over, already battling the beginnings of hunger for another taste, Logan fought the throb of a morning erection trying to reemerge. "I never laugh at sexy, bare-chested men in my bathroom who've just assured me they fixed my plumbing problem."

Rather than a cute-as-hell tinge appearing in Nate's cheeks, a burst of sharp laughter filled the bathroom. Nate covered his mouth as he made a face, but the stifled chuckles still seeped out through his fingers.

What he'd said suddenly hit Logan, and a dull heat roared under *his* skin. "Okay, fine. So that didn't come out right."

Instead of Nate calming down, tears formed in his eyes. He cuffed his mouth tighter, making his fingertips turn white, and laughed even more uncontrollably.

"Fine. Don't tell me." Logan put the sternest tone he possessed in his voice, but he bit the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing too. "I'm going back to bed."

"Wait!" Nate lunged and grabbed Logan's arm, holding him in place. Mirth still twinkled in his eyes, highlighting the warmer, lighter browns. "Wait. Give me a second." In a few blinks Nate went from openly biting back laughter to chewing on the edge of his lip. "Do you really want to know?"

Every soft place inside Logan that had never been comfortable reached out for something to grab onto when it came to Nate. "I wouldn't have asked if I didn't want to know." He pried Nate's fingers off his wrist and placed a kiss in the center of his palm, all the while never breaking away from that oh-so-serious stare. "Why are you so nervous to tell me?"

Nate acknowledged the kiss with a small smile but also untangled himself, closed the lid on the toilet, and took a seat. "It's silly," he said. With his clasped hands dangling between his spread knees, Nate suddenly looked like the young man, so full of secrets, Logan had met three years ago. "For all that my dad thought he was tough and a real man, he didn't know much when it came to fixing our house. So whenever something stopped working, my mom would call someone in. If I was home, the guys would usually let me stand there with my mom and watch.

That was nice and interesting, but mostly I loved how happy my mom was to see one of these people when they came over.”

Watching Nate closely, Logan saw the hint of a smile that disappeared as fast as it had happened. The clear love and sadness Nate had for his mother both tugged and tore at Logan’s heart. Logan held his silence, though, hardly breathing, sensing Nate needed room to speak at his own pace.

After a steady exhale that filled Logan with ridiculous pride, Nate went on. “We were lower-middle class. My mom was a quiet, hard-working homemaker, but there wasn’t a whole lot in her life that made her really happy and excited. My dad never physically abused her or anything, but he was this remote person most of the time and didn’t show much emotion with us except to make sure things in the house and with his wife and kids existed within his rules. In hindsight, I think my mom might have been clinically depressed, but you don’t let a doctor diagnose you with that kind of mental shit where I’m from. In a lot of ways, my mom’s marriage and her life beat her down, and that’s just how it is. Suck it up, you know?”

“I know,” Logan murmured. Sounded a whole lot like Logan’s upbringing, except with less yelling.

“But for my mom, when it came to something needing fixing in the house, she was different.” Sparks of life brightened Nate’s eyes. “When one of those guys came over my mom would smile. An honest to God real smile”—Nate’s voice cracked, making him pause for a heartbeat—“which was so fucking rare. She’d be really happy to chat with them when they were there, and she’d make coffee and cookies, you know, something special, and she’d make sure they knew how grateful she was to have them at her house, fixing something she couldn’t do herself.”

“So it was really about your mom, not the plumber,” Logan said softly. *Shit*. He didn’t know how he kept from scooping Nate off the toilet and right into his arms.

“Right.” Now Nate looked like the kid trying to tuck himself away at the back of the class or the corner of the lunchroom. “It’s tough to see someone you love barely sleepwalking through life.”

“I get that, Nate. I really do.” Logan moved in close and straddled his partner on the toilet. The warmth of the solid body beneath him sank into Logan better than the therapy pillow, but right now he only cared about bringing more light into Nate’s beautiful, dark eyes. Logan leaned in even closer, plastering their chests together, and brushed their lips in a warm, simple hello kiss. Staying close, gazes locked on each other, he said, “Thank you for fixing my toilet.”

Nate stamped a grin against Logan’s mouth, and nothing had ever felt better in Logan’s mind.

In a teasing voice, Nate replied, “You’re very welcome.”

His blood warming at a rapid rate, Logan snagged Nate’s lips again, lingering this time with little nips. In between the love bites, he said, “We can negotiate for cookies and coffee or”—pushing a hand between them, Logan freed Nate’s long,

glorious prick and gave it a good, solid stroke. *Fuck he's scorching hot and hard already*—"something else in payment."

Gasping, Nate pushed into the handjob, pumping his shaft into Logan's grasp. "I think... Oh fuck, that's good..." He clamped his teeth as Logan fondled his balls with a firm hand. "I think I'll take the something else."

Moving in for another taste, Logan murmured, "Good call." He flicked his tongue, and a jolt went through him as Nate met him in the middle with an equal lick back. The brief contact ignited the shared fuse between them. Suddenly, Logan took hold of Nate's hair and held him in place for a deep, branding kiss. At the same time, Nate scratched his fingers into Logan's waist on his way around to the small of his back, where he then pushed his hands into Logan's sweats and grabbed hold of his ass. He took Logan's kiss like a man who craved ownership, but his fingers dug into Logan's buttocks with the force of someone fully aware and in charge. Logan shoved his hand between them, this time to whip out his own erection. Nate immediately rocked Logan's crotch into his for a rough grinding of burning ridges of flesh.

Nothing sounded better to Logan than a day spent together learning each other. Yet other images flashed right on top of that amorous one and drove a knife into Logan's mood. "Fuck, no." He tore his mouth off Nate's and pushed to stand on unsteady legs. His chest already heaving with his arousal, Logan wiped at his mouth and put another measure of distance between them. "We can't get into this again right now. Your ass needs a break." A loop of last night's talk played incessantly in Logan's mind too, nagging him back to better choices. "Tell me what you found out about Daria and the school newspaper. I should not have allowed us to get off of that conversation last night."

Never forget you're naked with this man right now because a job threw you together. There's still a missing girl who needs to be found.

Logan shoved his dick back into his sweats and plastered his spine to the wall. "Talk to me, Nate." Fears that he'd never experienced as a detective planted infectious little bugs in every part of Logan's psyche. He looked at the man who seemed too at-home in Logan's bathroom, and tightness pained his throat. "I need you to help me focus."

Nate clamped his legs closed, squeezing his hands between his thighs so he didn't reach out and soothe the renewed tension mapping every inch of Logan's face. It didn't take a genius to see this demand for conversation only had about half to do with Logan's need to find Daria and everything to do with how Logan saw himself and what criteria he used to judge himself a man. For Logan, a job well-done defined who he was.

Give him what he needs so he can feel like he's back in control.

Suppressing a sigh, Nate kept his attention on Logan and pushed his erection back into his sweats. Correction. Logan's sweats.

“Since Daria started at the university,” Nate began, “she has written four articles exposing various ethics or workplace violations of local businesses that have ties to the campus. Only she didn’t get credit for them. A girl named Chloe Lane did.”

Logan pushed off the wall and began pacing the small amount of real estate in the bathroom. “How did you figure this out so fast? Did this Chloe person steal them from Daria?”

“Not at all. At least not according to Chloe.” At that, Logan jerked his focus off his tile floor. Nate nodded, tracking Logan’s caged prowling as he went on. “I went with the ‘which one of these things is not like the other’ clue you obtained. Rather than reading all the articles, I listed the names of all the journalists who’d ever had something published since Daria started college. One name stuck out.”

“Chloe Lane,” Logan murmured, nodding as if to himself.

“Right.” Nate nodded too. “She’s not even a journalism major. She is an actress pursuing a liberal arts degree. She also was the only person who’d never written an article outside of these investigative type reports. The vast majority of the other students working for the paper have at least one if not multiple articles written about something related to school functions. Chloe never had any of those. Combine that with her lack of journalism interest compared to the other names I had on my list, and I decided it might be a good idea to have a talk with her. I tracked her down yesterday evening.”

Logan stopped in front of Nate. “What did she say?”

“You’ll love this. She was once upon a time a runaway.”

“Let me guess.” A frustrated rumble escaped Logan. He shoved his hands into his hair and began moving again. “She spent some time at Haven.”

“You got it in one,” Nate confirmed. “It was when Daria was a bit younger, but they became friendly and maintained contact. Chloe says Daria approached her about presenting these articles as Chloe’s because Daria wouldn’t be able to pursue these exposé type stories if people knew it was her rooting around for info. Chloe agreed to submit them for Daria as her own. It took a while, but once I explained who I was and what I was doing, Chloe confessed. She wanted to help, just in case one of these articles ended up getting Daria in trouble.”

Logan came back to Nate. “Do you believe Chloe?”

“Yeah. I don’t see her hurting Daria. That’s for sure.”

With a step back, Logan leaned against the wall and shifted his attention to his darkened bedroom beyond the open door. He rubbed at his neck, a tic Nate had registered as part of Logan’s thinking process.

“Okay,” Logan said, shifting his determined focus back to Nate. “We know the student editor definitely knew Chloe wasn’t the real writer and must have somehow figured out Daria was. She must have done a little investigating of her own. If it’s a good story and generates interest in her paper, then that looks good for the editor too, so it doesn’t make sense that she would kill Daria. I suppose one of the other

journalism students could have figured out the truth and was jealous Daria didn't have to climb her way up the ladder like everyone else. But it seems more likely a person like that would force Chloe to confess and expose Daria rather than kill her. I don't feel like those are the right tracks to aggressively pursue, though. My gut doesn't feel enough motive there."

"I already have someone at Quinn looking into the businesses Daria exposed," Nate shared. "We can assign Riley to look into the editor and reporters, but I'm with you. I honestly don't feel like it's going to lead to anything crucial."

"Agreed." Like a wind up toy cranked to capacity, Logan started walking the length of the bathroom once again. "But it does continue to paint the picture of who Daria was," he threw out at Nate from over his shoulder. "She was a do-gooder. Someone who wanted to expose wrongs but didn't feel the need to get the credit herself. It definitely confirms what we believe she was really doing working at those strip clubs."

"Another investigation," Nate said to Logan's sinewy, bare back. "She'd upped the ante with this search of missing runaway girls. That is well beyond the investigative type of work she'd tackled before."

Logan did an about-face at the door, and his gaze landed on Nate. "It also means if these runaways were at the mercy of a serial killer, and he figured Daria out..." For a prolonged heartbeat, Logan's jaw turned hard as granite. "If Daria somehow got close, he definitely wouldn't have hesitated to take her out too."

Icy chills rippled down Nate's bare back, rushing away all the warmth. "A serial killer? Do you really think so?"

Logan staggered to a stop. "I'm sorry, honey." He moved to Nate and knelt down. His mouth only thinned a little bit as he did it, and he muttered a curse under his breath. "I didn't mean to scare you by tossing that out so casually." He picked up Nate's hands and pressed kisses to the back of each.

"Serial killer," Nate whispered. "It sounds so"—he swallowed a bad taste—"brutal."

"I'm just talking out loud right now, I promise." Logan held up his hand like a scout. "It helps me to spin scenarios until one hits that feels right. That's all. It's what I do."

"Do you think Tracy is not a victim but rather the killer, and that's why Daria was looking for her?" Nate wondered. "Maybe she was hunting not searching."

"I don't know about that." Logan pushed up to pace.

Shit. That was a stupid suggestion. "Was your ex good at this?" Nate hated the tentative waver he heard in his voice. He cleared this throat and tried again. "Did he help you work out cases when you were together?"

"What? Ryan? No." Logan threw a quick, narrow-eyed glance Nate's way. "He was never a part of my work. It wouldn't have been proper. You are. We're working this case together. Now if we could just find Tracy..." Nodding to himself again,

Logan went back to rubbing his neck as he trolled the bathroom. “She’s the key to blowing everything wide-open. I know it.”

Deftly changed the subject away from Ryan. Just like before.

“You can talk about Ryan, you know.” Something inexplicably naive or stupid or hopeful pressed Nate to go at Logan harder. Nate didn’t know rule one about relationships, but he’d found himself with a unique ability to read this particular man. The sudden choppy nature of Logan’s moves pricked at Nate. “You can say his name. It won’t freak me out.”

“Why would I do that?” Logan didn’t raise his voice above conversational, but the flash of glare he sent Nate’s way burned his skin. “There’s nothing to say. He found someone else. We went our separate ways. End of story. Now if we can move on?”

Nate jumped up and blocked Logan’s path. “Why does my mentioning Ryan make you so uncomfortable?” He grabbed Logan’s waist, holding him in place when he made to move. “What happened between the two of you?”

“There isn’t a reason, and nothing did,” Logan bit off through clenched teeth. “I’m just not interested in talking about Ryan. Or about any of my exes for that matter.” He put a stare on Nate that would have made the most seasoned criminal crack; Logan’s entire body became one rigid, unmoving line. “Is one of the conditions of us doing this thing, whatever it is, going to be that I have to give you all the gory details of my past? Because I have to tell you”—Logan didn’t blink once through his low tirade—“I’m not interested in that happening. It’s not relevant, and I won’t do it.”

Son of a bitch. Shit. Fuck. Nate wanted to kick himself in the ass. He’d definitely crossed a line Logan wasn’t ready to leap over with him yet. *Maybe it was ugly. It wasn’t exactly easy for me to spill about Grady either.* Still, something scratched at Nate inside, and it whispered silent little comments in his head that Logan had not fully moved past his relationship with his ex.

“Well?” Logan’s lips barely moved, but that softly spoken word whipped around the bathroom like a curse. If glaciers could somehow have tinges of green in them, it would perfectly describe his stare. “What’s it gonna be?”

I won’t be pushed... No. Nate stopped that thought on a dime. *Don’t take it there.* The nagging sensation remained, but the absolute, unbending quality in Logan reached even deeper and tugged at Nate’s heart with a telling constriction. *He needs me. Even if he doesn’t know it.*

Nate sidled up close to Logan and rubbed against his solid front. Logan jerked in reaction and narrowed his stare. Staying with Logan’s step backward, Nate eased his fingers inside the back of Logan’s sweats to tease the smoother skin.

“If you’ll remember,” Nate began, “you were the one who climbed off me so we could talk.” Never having done it before, Nate teased his fingertips down the crease of Logan’s ass, grazing sensitive flesh. Logan sucked in a breath as Nate flicked his tight, little hole, and Nate could fucking feel the goose bumps rising on the man’s

buttocks. A grin, full of a new sense of power, came over Nate, and his heartbeat slowed down some of its frantic racing. "I would have been happy letting that kiss take its natural progression to other things." He snagged the waistband of Logan's sweats and pushed the material to his hips, springing his reddened cock free. *Good God, that's a thing of beauty.* Nate brushed his lips against Logan's, took firm hold of the man's hot penis, and gave it a squeeze.

Logan clenched his teeth, making it sound like a hiss. "Where do you think it was heading, Nate?" A second moan remained almost under Logan's breath, but his dick immediately thickened and reared to full staff, giving him away.

"I saw it starting with me pushing you into this wall"—Nate guided Logan back until his spine kissed the plaster behind him—"and then suggesting you hold on tight." Twining his fingers into Logan's right hand, Nate lifted it high and to the side to wrap it around the shower railing. "Because I've been fantasizing about tasting you all over for far too long to wait another second." Bypassing foreplay, Nate went for the thing every man wanted. He dropped to his knees and parted his lips around Logan's cock.

Oh fuck yes.

"Oh fuck..." Logan bowed his back away from the wall and in doing so pushed his prick deeper into Nate's mouth. "Yes."

Nate thought it, and Logan said it, and hellfire and damnation, it was right on the money. *Oh fuck, yes, indeed.* Thick, scorching-hot man slid over Nate's tongue as he took Logan farther into his mouth, desperate to suck as much of Logan's length as he could. Nate had only given blowjobs twice in his life, both since he'd moved to Chicago. And he'd never let a man inside him till last night. But holy fuck, with Logan, Nate found himself voracious to learn more. He wanted to relax his jaw so he could one day take Logan all the way down his throat and make the man come with one swallow.

Oh God. Nate's prick pushed against his sweats with vigor in happy agreement with that imagery.

Realizing he couldn't yet force every inch of Logan's cock past his lips, Nate wrapped his hand around the lower half and started jerking him off in time with the dragging suction he could manage over the top half. Logan bucked his hips in response, grunting as he grabbed onto Nate's hair and held him close for another shallow thrust. Nate welcomed the fucking with widespread lips. *So good.*

The pungent scent of sweat and arousal and damp woods filled Nate's nostrils. It spread like wildfire through his system, tagging all his receptors with Logan's unique smell. Nate moaned at the pleasure of it, and Logan dug his fingers nearly into Nate's scalp. On the next pull back on Logan's shaft, as Nate teased the glans and sensitive underpatch with the tip of his tongue, he chanced a glance up at Logan and found himself mesmerized by the stunningly raw picture before him.

Harsh lines dominated Logan's features. He had his lips pulled taut, baring his teeth like an angry animal. His right arm remained stretched out wide, and he gripped the shower rod with such force his whole hand looked ghost white. But in

his eyes—*good God*—the intensity in his gaze smoldered. That base, raw stare alone swelled Nate's cock and shoved it well past hard to painful. Piercing green with dilated pupils burned right through Nate's flesh and branded his soul. Logan's appearance conveyed far more than a man fighting the blowjob Nate offered; he looked as though he warred with someone giving him pleasure at all. No longer pumping his hips, Logan stood tight and still, his bare feet rooted into the floor, watching Nate suck and jerk his cock as if he wanted to run but did not have the ability to step away.

Rather than scare or intimidate him, Nate found Logan's clear battle to distance himself from the moment only spurred him on even more. He sucked on the thick, red cockhead taking over his mouth like it offered precious water to a thirsty man, and every time Logan's hips pulsed forward, barely a sliver, clearly against his will, Nate lapped at the salty stream of early ejaculate Logan could not keep inside. Logan possessed heavy, low-hanging balls in a softly furred sac, and they proved a distraction that made Nate's mouth water. He laved his tongue all around Logan's hot shaft one more time and then pushed it against his belly to burrow under and suck one big nut into his wet mouth for a thorough bath.

Logan finally released a rough shout, and a fast shudder waved through his entire frame. As Nate rolled his tongue around the scorching orb burning his taste buds, Logan clenched his fingers in Nate's hair, stinging his scalp like a son of a bitch with a twist and pull. The action rocketed a sense of victory through Nate. He quickly began pumping his fist up and down Logan's rigid length then spit one ball out to suck the other past his lips and anoint that one with warm, suctioning moisture too.

With another powerful tug on Nate's hair, Logan became one fully engaged live wire. "Oh Christ, Nate, please..." He snapped his hips, out of control now, and growled like a rabid dog. "Give me your mouth." He yanked Nate off his testicles and shoved his cock past Nate's swollen lips, filling him to the throat in one sure thrust. "I'm gonna come."

Nate managed to rear his head back just enough to take Logan without gagging. He grabbed onto Logan's hips, careful not to dig too deeply into his damaged flesh and cause extra pain. The penis taking over Nate's mouth burned "Logan" brands into his cheeks, tongue, and the roof of his mouth, but Nate didn't care or even want to breathe. He just wanted to make this man lose himself, so he sucked in his cheeks for everything he was worth and bobbed up and down on as much of Logan as he could take, licking pure physical joy into every millimeter of the man's thick cock.

As Nate pulled back, he blinked and did his best to look up at Logan. Just as he did, Logan met his gaze for a split second, and everything they'd ever done together snapped between their eyes. A heartbeat later, Logan jammed the back of his head into the wall and roared the bathroom down as orgasm hit him.

Oh God, yes. Nate moaned with bliss. *Finally.* With every sharp thrust of Logan's hips, scorching hot cum jetted onto Nate's tongue, filling his mouth with

bitter, acrid, *wonderful* seed. Nate couldn't get enough. He reveled in the tight little thrusts from Logan that slid his shaft over Nate's tongue, each slower jerk spilling a smaller amount of ejaculate, making Nate moan and get even harder as it slid down his throat.

When Logan finally pumped out his last spit of jizz, Nate had fallen so deeply into his need to learn everything about this man that he couldn't let Logan go. Not nearly content just to give him a blowjob, Nate pushed at Logan with an order to turn around and brace himself against the wall, using forceful hands to make it happen. *Holy Mother, full of grace.* Nate swallowed hard as Logan did as instructed. The sight of Logan with his hands and forehead pressed into the wall, with his ass thrust out, offering it to Nate, stole Nate's breath away. Tight, firm globes pressed snugly together sat right in front of Nate's face, and he suddenly wondered if studying the male form, this particular male form, could be considered a religion because Nate wanted nothing more than to worship every inch of Logan Jeffries's stunning body for the rest of his life. *I'd want to kneel at this altar and learn something new every day of the week.*

The smooth, olive-toned flesh covering Logan's buttocks became the next lesson too enticing to reject. Nate leaned in and pressed his entire face into one taut cheek, inhaling more of that damp, musky outdoors smell that seemed to be embedded in Logan's skin. He licked the warm flesh, and Logan trembled in front of him.

Logan's response flipped a switch inside Nate, and he suddenly became voracious and hungry once more. He parted his lips and sank his teeth into Logan's ass, biting hard enough to leave a mark but not to break the skin. Above him, Logan made a high, tight sound. He pushed his ass harder into Nate's face, and Nate replied with another bite, this time high on the upper curve of his buttocks. Nate nipped and licked his way across Logan's ass, up one side, and down the other, putting his mark on his man. *My man.*

With a growl, Nate smacked Logan's cheeks once, twice, reddening the skin and loosening the tension, to Logan's yelps of "Yes!" Nate wanted something more, and he knew exactly where to go next. He took hold of Logan's ass and split him wide open, revealing a dark, tight, little hole that filled Nate with hunger. He stared, his mouth watered, and his cock burned the fabric of his sweats. *I want inside you in every way possible.*

Unable to look without touching a second longer, Nate dived in and licked a long line up Logan's crack, from his pucker to his cleft. When Logan jolted, Nate groaned and went in for another taste. The salty residue of sweat and musk popped on his taste buds, and one flick of his tongue over Logan's snapped-tight bud made it pulse, prompting a deep-seated desire in Nate to lick Logan's asshole again.

Logan grunted. He pushed his ass out toward Nate so fully the line of his spine looked like a ski slope. "Please..." He heaved a shuddering breath. "Don't stop." Logan reached back and took hold of his cheeks, spreading himself somehow more

for Nate's pleasure. "Eat me." It sounded like it choked him to make the request. "Eat my hole."

"Sweetness"—Nate pressed the softest, gentlest kiss to Logan's dark bud—"I intend to own your ass by the time we're through." With that, Nate pushed his face into Logan's crease, parted his lips the tiniest bit over the snug muscle, and sucked as if swallowing down eight inches of cock.

Logan howled and went up on his tiptoes, and Nate switched to teasing his tongue in a circular motion around the man's ring. And then—*fucking shit, no*—two distinct ringtones chimed through the apartment, cutting into the moment so completely they might have been bullets shot in their direction.

Double shit. Nate dropped back to rest on his heels. Logan strode out of the bathroom without looking back, uttering "Riley" as if speaking the foulest curse word on the planet. Since both their phones rang at the same time, Nate figured it had something to do with the case, so he went ahead and got up too. He moved into the living room and managed to grab his cell out of his jacket just as Logan called out, "It's Riley. He sent a text. He found something on one of the surveillance cameras. He thinks it's important and that I'm going to want to see."

Coming back into the bedroom, Nate finished reading a message from Riley that duplicated what Logan had just shared. He looked up at Logan but Logan already had his sweats back around his waist and his phone to his ear.

Rather than attempting to listen to Logan's low tones on his end of the conversation, Nate stripped out of the man's sweats and put his own underwear and jeans back on, wincing as he hit rigid flesh. Leaving the flap open, Nate decided it best not to zip up until his raging erection subsided. He put on his shirt, managed to push his feet into his sneakers, and went into the bathroom to search for a spare toothbrush just as he heard Logan tell Riley they'd meet him at the office in an hour.

Logan suddenly appeared behind Nate. He reached over Nate's shoulder to the sink and lifted a blue toothbrush from a cup. "I assume you're looking for a toothbrush. You can use mine." Logan wrapped Nate's fingers around the handle. "I don't have an extra."

A ridiculous bubble of giddiness popped inside Nate, which was stupid, considering he'd just had his face in the man's ass. Still, something about sharing a toothbrush felt more connected to an innate trust and intimacy without any sexuality attached to blur a choice. *It's different.*

"Thanks." Making sure to keep his smile of appreciation small, Nate took the toothbrush. After putting some paste on it, he turned on the faucet and wet it down while finding Logan's gaze in the mirror. "What did Riley have to say?"

"You won't believe our good fortune." Logan's eyes lit like those of a hunter who'd caught his prey's scent. "We have evidence of Pierce Lyndsey coming out of the Kitty Club on the night Daria disappeared. Not only do we have him getting into his car"—that glint of predatory animal flashed in Logan for a split second

again—"but he can also be seen putting something in his trunk before driving away."

Nate spit toothpaste into the sink. "Don't even tell me he was stuffing a body into his car." He watched for Logan's expressions and body language in the mirror's reflection. "That guy is an arrogant asshole, but he is not stupid enough to be caught on camera putting Daria in his trunk."

"Definitely not a body," Logan replied. "Something much smaller, like a bag, but Riley couldn't make out what it was."

"Shit." Nate slapped the toothbrush on the counter and spun to face Logan. "I bet it's Daria's laptop."

An approving gleam shot extra color in Logan's eyes. "That's a very good guess, and I'd bet right on the money. Which makes me wonder what is on it that would make Pierce want to steal it. Did he follow Daria with the intent to lift it, seeing as how everyone seemed to know her laptop was important to her and she always carried it with her. Or maybe she left it in her car, and he saw it as a crime of opportunity? Shit, he might have even sweet-talked or bribed his way into the dressing room while Daria was on stage and stole it from inside the club. Doesn't matter how; it only matters that he appears to have it, and we need it." Logan's brow furrowed. "Which begs another question: did Pierce only figure out about Daria's stripping career that night, or had he been watching her for weeks?"

"I'm gonna guess he lucked into finding her there one night." Nate's mouth twisted, and a foul taste took over the minty flavor of the toothpaste. "Pierce strikes me as the kind of guy who enjoys strip clubs on a regular basis. He probably has girls do private dances for him then stiffes them a tip. Or more insulting, he probably gives them like a buck or something just to humiliate them."

Logan's warm chuckle filled the bathroom. "I'm gonna take a stab in the dark and say you really don't like that guy."

"You think?" Nate replied, employing his best narrow glare.

"You look very fierce. But maybe a little less so with the flecks of toothpaste drying on your face." Logan licked his thumb and then rubbed it over Nate's chin, coming away with a smudge of white. "Anyway, we're going to head to Quinn to look at the footage, just to be sure it's Pierce with the laptop, and then we'll track him down and have a chat. We don't have a lot of time"—he snagged Nate's shirt and undid the top button—"so let's get into the shower and get cleaned up."

Every muscle in Nate's hand and arm protested the move, but he forced himself to cover Logan's hand, stopping him from undoing a second button. "As much as that sounds like the best offer I've ever had on any morning of my life, it's smarter if I go home. I don't have a suit with me, and it's a time waster to shower here but then put dirty clothes back on to go home and change. I have my car too. Plus"—he appealed to the man in Logan who lived for his job—"I want to get back to Haven this morning and talk to Anna-Maria. See what she knows. You can handle Pierce. I have such a bias against him it's probably a wiser move anyway."

Logan wrapped his arms around Nate and held him close. “You blowing me off, Nate?” His thick brow arched comically.

Every time this rare show of playfulness displayed itself in Logan, Nate couldn’t resist teasing back. “Well, I did in fact just do that very thing recently, if you will recall.” He wiggled his groin into Logan’s and then wished he hadn’t. *Still too fucking hard*. “And I did a fairly decent job of it, if I do say so myself.”

Logan rumbled in a way that vibrated the whole way through him. “You did a damn fine job, honey. That was the fucking most mind-blowing mix of the sweetest and most erotic blowjob I’ve ever had.”

“I’m just sorry the”—Nate’s cheeks heated as a replay of his face tucked into Logan’s crease filled his mind—“other thing got cut short.” His stiff cock reminded him of where it wished it were right this second. “I was looking forward to prepping your ass for a fucking.”

Logan reared back his head. His pupils dilated and left only a slender rim of jade. “You want to fuck me?”

“Yeah,” Nate answered without hesitation. Then his entire body seized. “Can I?” *Shit*. Maybe since he’d opened this relationship begging for a fucking, and Logan clearly loved topping, then they’d already established the boundaries of their sexual partnership. “Am I allowed?”

Logan’s jaw clenched visibly. He went tight all over but then obviously worked just as hard to release the tension. “I haven’t let anyone inside me in a really long time,” he confessed. His eyes grew luminous as he studied Nate’s face. “But I will for you.” The gentle thread of his fingers through Nate’s hair became the most caring, *loving* caress. “I want you there.”

Yes. Yes. Yes. Feeling ridiculously high on life, on this man, Nate leaned in and flung his arms around Logan’s neck. “Can we meet somewhere private during our lunch hour today to do it?”

Logan let out a gritty laugh. “You are so fucking uninhibited when it comes to being naked together, honey. Look at yourself.” He turned Nate to face the mirror and tucked himself in behind, his chin just above Nate’s shoulder. “There is not a hint of intimidation or fear in your eyes.”

Studying their reflection, looking so much like a *pair*, Nate warmed inside even more. “I’m becoming so much more uninhibited all around when it comes to you.”

“Yeah.” More grit coated Logan’s tone. “I’ve noticed that too. I like it. You don’t try to keep your thoughts under your breath around me anymore either.” He closed Nate in his arms, engulfing Nate in his heat. “I think it means you feel comfortable and safe with me.”

“I do.” Letting Logan support him, Nate threaded his fingers on top of the big hands resting on his stomach. “About more and more things every day.”

Logan’s mouth came to rest at Nate’s ear. “That’s nice to hear, baby.” As his lips brushed Nate’s neck, Logan pushed the tangle of their hands into Nate’s

underwear and took firm hold of his erection. All the while, Logan never broke their connection in the mirror. "It's a shame you can't use this monster the way you want to right now, but that doesn't mean I'm going to send you out into the bitter, cold morning with a cock jutting out like a spike in your pants." Untangling their hands, Logan pushed Nate's underwear down in front and unearthed his dark red prick. "Might scare people if you bump into them."

Nate gasped, pumping his hips as Logan ran his rough fingers over the smooth skin surrounding Nate's prick. "As long as it doesn't scare you," Nate responded breathlessly.

"It doesn't scare me." Each word Logan spoke snaked inside Nate's ear and rushed through his system like one-hundred-proof alcohol. "It inspires me." He nipped Nate's earlobe, tugging with his teeth as he reached down and wrapped up Nate's cock in his big hand. "It makes me too goddamn horny and hard when I should be focusing on other things." His stare telegraphed his desires, and Logan stroked Nate from root to tip. "Good thing I learned how to multitask." With that, he reached down and took Nate's balls in hand, adding a firm squeeze to the glide over Nate's shaft.

"Ahh... Fuck, fuck, yes." In a jerking motion, Nate knifed his hips into Logan's two-handed tug and massage, quickly losing control. Moaning at the rolling squeeze and rough pull he got a second time, he whispered savagely, "Go ahead and start multitasking the hell out of me right now." Slipping into the pure pleasure, Nate grabbed onto Logan's forearms, digging into the solid muscle. He dropped his head back, succumbing to wild thrusts into Logan's wonderful hands. "Fucking make me come."

In response, Logan bit into the tendon lining Nate's shoulder, through his shirt and everything, and growled something about "pure magic." He started jerking base to head over and over again, using an almost brutal technique Nate welcomed with vigorous snaps of his hips. Logan pulled on Nate's sac and reached back with two fingers to rub his sensitive taint before returning to double-fist Nate's cock, never allowing a single nerve ending a second of reprieve. Line after line of earth-shaking pleasure raced from Nate's dick, balls, perineum, and ass, where they twisted like a long rope in his belly and pulled all the way up into his spine, winding Nate tighter and tighter into a delicious knot of nerves all on the brink of shattering.

Just when Nate knew for certain he would explode right out of his skin, Logan wound his hand around Nate's neck. His long fingers curled under Nate's chin and guided him until they found each other's gazes. Logan's pupils took over with bottomless pools of pitch. "Give it to me, Nate." With a base lick into Nate's parted lips, Logan dragged his hand with oh-so-incredible slowness up and down Nate's cock, killing him with a fingertip rubbing right across his leaking slit. "I want it right now."

Locked in on Logan, Nate forgot how to breathe, let alone blink or look away. He wanted to fight the final pull speeding through him and tagging every corner of his being, but the tingle taking over his body told him he wouldn't beat the force of

Logan's will. Another man shouldn't possess the power to compel a reaction with a simple order, yet the longer Nate looked at Logan, the deeper he fell, until suddenly everything rushed out of Nate with a raw shout. Logan stole most of Nate's cry with a searing kiss. The second their lips touched, Nate jerked and shuddered, and spilled himself into Logan's waiting hand. Each subsequent brush of their lips elicited another spasm and spurt until Nate finally leaned his weight into Logan, fully spent.

Logan lifted his sheen-covered fingers between their mouths and anointed his lips with Nate's ejaculate. He looked at Nate, and his gaze smoldered with such lustful intent it nearly scorched Nate's flesh. Logan finished spreading Nate's seed and said with a gritty voice, "You know what I want you to do."

Nate did know. And even though he'd never thought something so base could arouse him so completely, he leaned in with a moan and licked his cum off Logan's lips. The slightly sweeter taste hardly registered before Logan crushed his fingers into Nate's shoulder, surely creating bruises, as a violent shudder went through him. Seconds later, warmth seeped through Logan's sweats onto Nate's hip, confirming Logan had come too.

Sweet mother. In Nate's wildest dreams, he'd never imagined an intensity such as this in sex and coupling. Shared heavy breathing thickened the air in the bathroom. They held locked to each other's gazes for so long Nate thought he could see all the secret vulnerabilities living in Logan's soul.

Nate could happily let himself get lost in Logan forever, but then Logan licked the edge of his lip and said, "Tastes like chicken."

Nate went reeling into the wall, hooting and laughing. *Holy fuck. Who is this man?* Logan's eyes sparked in place of a smile, but his gritty chuckle was real and present, and Nate had never heard sweeter music in his life.

His stomach still hurting from laughing, Nate moved in to plant the biggest kiss in the world on Logan's sexy mouth but then got a glance at the little clock sitting on the sink. *Fuck.* Reality kicked in, and Nate pulled short of slathering himself all over his partner. He did take Logan's hand, though, and loosely twine their fingers. "Goddamn, sweetness." Nate couldn't break away from the twisted humor twinkling life in Logan's eyes. "This is the strangest moment to part ways, but I have to get home to change and you have to shower, and if I keep standing here, I'm just gonna want to feel you come like that again, and I'm gonna start thinking about how I can make you hard a third time—"

Logan slapped his hand over Nate's mouth, but the light in his stare softened the gesture. "Leave now, baby." He spun Nate to face the doorway and smacked him on the ass to get him moving. "You're fucking doing God's work by somehow making my balls hurt again just by listening to you. Get out before I convince myself it's okay to take you for a third time in less than twelve hours." Now in the living room, Logan snagged Nate's coat off the arm of the couch and helped him into it. "And for fucks sake, put your cock back in your pants and zip up. Nobody gets to enjoy that but me."

As Nate adjusted himself, zipped, and buttoned, while smiling a secret smile that wasn't hidden one bit, Logan guided him to the door. He undid multiple locks, opened the door, and practically shoved Nate into the hallway.

Just before Nate got out of grabbing distance, Logan snagged a fistful of Nate's coat and hauled him back in close. He studied Nate in a way that looked like he was trying to memorize every detail. "Listen." His tone scratched rough. "Just because I don't kiss you at the office today doesn't mean I'm not thinking about it and wanting you all the time." He stole a fast kiss, sealing their mouths together. Logan scraped and licked just enough to reignite Nate's blood and then effectively pushed him a full arm's length away. "Remember that."

"Like Patrick said to Demi," Nate replied with a cheeky smile. "Ditto."

Logan's brows pulled together. "What?"

"Never mind." Of course Logan wouldn't get a *Ghost* reference. For someone without much give in him, he was so fucking cute. "Don't forget I'm going to Haven first," he added. "I'll see you later."

"Yep." All the hard lines slid back into Logan's face, making him wildly untouchable again. "Bye."

But not untouchable to me. After pressing a kiss to his own fingertips, Nate touched his hand to Logan's cheek, grinned, and then turned to walk sedately down the hallway. He didn't have to look back to know Logan watched him. Once Nate turned the corner and knew Logan couldn't see him anymore, he jumped a foot in the air and pumped his fist with a jubilant "Fuck yeah!" As his sneakers hit the ground, Nate looked up and went red all over. A woman stood at the elevator, and she had to be ninety if a day.

"Hello." Nate sobered, nodding as he reached her side. "Good morning."

The woman arched one penciled-in brow. "Apparently an excellent one for you, dear."

Nate looked at the mirth in the woman's eyes, and thought, What the hell? "Absolutely spectacular," he shared in a conspiratorial whisper.

Together, they enjoyed a little chuckle on the elevator ride down to the lobby.

It was just that kind of beautiful day.

* * *

Logan closed his door and leaned back against it with all his weight. "Jesus Christ." He could still taste Nate's seed on his lips. More than that, he only had to breathe deeply and he could still feel himself inside the man's body. "What the hell are you doing, Jeffries?"

For the first time in a relationship, Logan had no fucking clue.

Scratch that. He knew. *You're getting lost in someone the way you swore you'd never do. Ignoring every one of your fucking laws too.*

He growled, wanting to chastise and lecture himself. But the second a thought of Nate and the night they'd spent together filled his mind—hell, filled his entire

being—a sense of rightness settled inside Logan in a way he'd never experienced in his life.

It has to be worth the risk. Take a chance and throw everything out the window. This is Nate. That's what makes it different.

As Logan accepted that, he added another thing to his to-do list today.

Something well past time to make right.

Chapter Eleven

Logan took a deep breath as the automatic doors in front of him swished silently open, allowing the myriad of sounds that made up the emergency department beyond emerge.

Okay. Here we go.

Ryan worked in this building now, and a phone call had let Logan know his ex was on shift. It hadn't taken much research to find Ryan. A call to Nicole would have sufficed, but everything about this moment still went against Logan's natural grain, and he didn't want to hear advice from a well-meaning friend. Tugging at his collar, feeling like his tie strangled him, Logan stepped inside anyway and veered in the direction of the nurses' station.

Logan would have gladly put this task off, but Quinn hadn't yet tracked down Pierce Lyndsey. The guy hadn't turned up at his apartment in the city and a drive by his home in Arlington Heights last night had shown the start of a renovation—an irritation Pierce certainly would not tolerate. The asshole was definitely in the city or with a friend; it was just a matter of tracking him down for that chat. Logan had just left his meeting with Riley at the office. They'd gone over the surveillance tapes, confirmed it was Pierce leaving the strip joint with a laptop, made a plan, and Logan now had Riley working on finding the prick right now.

As Logan stepped up to the desk, his mouth went dry. *Suck it up.* When a young woman in pink scrubs looked up at him, Logan forced out a tight smile. "Hi." The first word went well. His voice sounded extremely normal. "I'm looking for Dr. Ryan Joyce. Can you help me?"

"Your name?" The girl whipped a pen off the top pocket of her scrubs. "Were you a patient here? Did Dr. Joyce treat you in the ER?"

A shadow suddenly grew bigger and fell across the edge of the nurses' station. "Definitely not a patient." A smooth voice once more familiar to Logan than his own drifted into his ear, and his stomach lurched. Swallowing down the unexpected case of nerves, Logan looked up into ocean blue eyes. *The first thing that attracted me to him.* Ryan Joyce—Logan's Ryan, once upon a time—stood as tall, fit, freckled, and with a shock of red hair as Logan remembered.

Yep. That's him. And you're standing here giving him your attention in a way you swore you'd never do again.

Ryan kept his stare pinpointed on Logan, but said to the nurse, "Detective Jeffries is much too willful to ever get sick."

That evoked an internal growl. “I’m not a detective anymore,” Logan reminded him. “At least not that kind.”

“I know,” Ryan replied, his voice softening. His eyes did too, reminding Logan how well they’d once known each other. Their time together would never go away. “The shield is always there, though. It’s still in your blood.”

Ryan’s insight into Logan reminded him precisely why he’d come. “Listen. Is there somewhere private we can talk?” Logan knew he had to do this, but that didn’t mean he wanted an audience.

“Sure.” Ryan shifted his focus to the girl behind the desk. “Mindy, I need fifteen minutes. Work your miracles, okay?”

The nurse nodded, and Ryan put his hand on Logan’s back, murmuring, “This way.” Logan forced himself to move but stiffened at the contact. Ryan’s hand on him didn’t feel comfortable or natural anymore. Only Nate had permission to touch the small of Logan’s back; anything else felt like a violation of his trust.

Ryan must have sensed the unspoken resistance thrumming in Logan. It didn’t take but a few seconds for him drop his hand and continue their walk without physical contact.

“In here.” Ryan swiped a card in a slot, opened the door, and held it wide for Logan to enter. “It’s not much, but it’s mine while I’m on duty. We’ll have some privacy.”

Entering an office that wasn’t much more than a glorified closet slammed home for Logan exactly how much Ryan’s life had changed since they’d parted ways. Logan hadn’t visited Ryan’s former office often, nor had Ryan frequented the precinct where Logan used to work—*keep the work and personal life separate*—but Logan remembered the much larger, grander space Ryan used to occupy.

Logan took a seat on one narrow side of the desk and Ryan took the other. Glancing at Ryan, Logan couldn’t help remembering the big window and spectacular view in his ex’s old digs. “Did you choose to leave your job,” he asked, “or were you forced out?”

“Not technically forced out.” Blue fire briefly flared in Ryan’s eyes, telling Logan everything. “Not that I could prove anyway. Once I started showing up at various functions with Roland as my boyfriend it became clear the partners did not approve or want me in their practice anymore.” A blink took away Ryan’s anger. The man could let go of wrongs done to him in a way Logan had yet to achieve in his life. Shit, Logan had shown up here today due to his absolute inability to let go of past grudges.

“It all worked out in the end, though,” Ryan added. “I’m happy. And this is a rewarding place to work.”

“Good.” Logan nodded. Then he said nothing, even though Ryan looked at him expectantly, and Logan knew he should. He just... Fuck, he could hear the words in his head, but every time he silently told himself to start spilling, it felt like rusty

nails stabbed at the inside of his throat. Jesus Christ. *I do not know how the fuck to do this.*

Ryan suddenly blurted, "I apologize for contacting Nicole. I know she's your friend. If I angered you, I truly am sorry. I would never do that on purpose. I would never deliberately try to hurt you."

Stricken, Logan's throat scratched even more. "That's not why I'm here."

"Oh." Ryan clasped his hands on his desk. "All right."

Logan felt like he'd pinned Ryan to a specimen board, and he only had to open his mouth in order to give the man freedom again. *Crap.* He hated the flaw inside him that made this so fucking difficult. *Just do it.*

Ignoring the stupid flutter of panic in his chest, Logan clenched his hands into fists against his thighs and forced words out of his mouth. "I shouldn't have been as brutally cold and silent as I was when I found out about you and Roland. We had enough of a history between us that I should have let you say more than 'I've been seeing someone else, and I've fallen in love with him' without icing you out. The way I treated you was wrong." Christ, a year ago, Logan hadn't even given Ryan a chance to say Roland's name. He'd shoved this man out of his apartment, refusing to speak or even look at him, and had found out the rest through Nicole. "As I pushed you out, I told you things don't last forever and I didn't care what you'd done, but that wasn't true." Looking at Ryan now took Logan back to a year ago, and his voice thickened terribly as he went on. "I was so fucking pissed when I found out you were cheating on me, Ryan. I've never felt so betrayed by a single person in my life."

Red flooded every inch of Ryan's skin, highlighting freckles Logan had once upon a time privately vowed to memorize and cover with kisses. Hard lines bracketed Ryan's mouth, and it looked equally difficult for him to speak. "I know, Logan. I swear—"

Logan put up a stop sign. "Let me get this said because I hate doing it, and you goddamn knew me well enough to know how much I hate doing it, but I need to do it, and it has been a long time coming. What you did made me more than mad. It fucking hurt me so much, but I didn't want to know that. I didn't want to deal with it. And I sure as hell didn't want you to know it. I never voluntarily give anyone enough power to hurt me, and I couldn't accept I'd somehow let you in enough that you could." Everything about this moment felt so foreign to Logan. He kept talking with the hope that coming clean would help untwist all the knots inside him he'd refused to acknowledge existed since the night of their breakup. "That's why I cut off all contact with you and refused to see you or accept messages from you through Nicole. I didn't want to be hurt. I wouldn't allow myself to be. I just wanted to be mad. And I was." Logan wiped at the tension thinning his lips to a narrow line. "I was fucking angry at you for a very long time."

"I know, and I deserved it," Ryan said, his tone as solemn as his eyes. "The minute I met Roland, I knew it could be something special. But you're a wonderful man in a lot of ways too, and I didn't know how to let you go. I knew committing to

Roland would mean coming out. I knew if I stayed with you, I'd never have to face the fear and the consequences that would come with revealing my sexuality. I knew you'd never come out. Not for me anyway."

Heat flushed through Logan. "You don't know that."

"Come on, Logan," Ryan said. "I do know it. We were together for almost four years. You never once even speculated about what it might be like to come out as a couple. Not even after you were shot and got assigned a desk job we both knew would eventually force you to give up your badge. Never once did you mention us coming out. Not once."

"You didn't either." Logan's defensive hairs all shot up to protect him.

"I know." Ryan made his admission without hesitation. "I knew it wasn't a battle I could win. Maybe I didn't want to. Maybe I was intimidated, or maybe I was okay with what we'd built. Shit"—he laughed without humor—"we never even said I love you to each other."

"I did love you," Logan murmured, his throat tightening on him again. "Otherwise, I don't think what you did would have hurt so much."

"I loved you too, man." Ryan reached across his desk but abruptly pulled his hand back to his side. "But we could never get to a place where we felt safe saying it to each other. In hindsight, the fact that we both knew we did but couldn't bring ourselves to say it out loud is pretty telling."

"I suppose that's true." In a strange way, Logan felt like he was breaking up with Ryan all over again. Only without the icy hatred and the desire to kill.

"So who is he?" Ryan asked, eyes trained on Logan.

Logan opened his mouth to say *nobody* but then snapped it shut. Words once again eluded him.

"Come on," Ryan cajoled. "The only thing that brings the hard-ass, unbending Logan Jeffries to me, with this particular conversation, is someone coming into your life that did for you what Roland did to me. Someone got you thinking about really moving on. You've met a man," Ryan said, knowledge shining in his eyes. "And he's important to you."

"I...I-I..." *Shit. No way.* Ryan didn't get to know about Nate. Logan didn't even know what the hell to expect from Nate himself, so he damn well didn't intend to share tea with his ex and chat about his new man. This was about clearing up the past, not finding a new gossip partner.

Logan shot to stand, suddenly antsy to move and get this finished. "Listen, I still don't know if I can entirely forgive that you chose to hedge your bets and start seeing Roland before you broke up with me, but I can understand that you felt some kind of bond with him that went deeper than what you felt for me. I'm not bitter anymore." With his hand wrapped around the door handle, Logan stopped himself from running away to search for some privacy. Avoiding discomfort and pain had gotten him here in the first place.

Logan dragged his focus off the wall and forced himself to make eye contact with someone he'd once loved. "I'm trying my damndest not to feel a knee-jerk anger about anything that went down between us anymore, and I think there's a good chance I'll get there soon."

Ryan got up too. After moving to stand closer to Logan, he braced his shoulder against the wall. "I hope this guy is good and honest and funny and kind. I hope he can handle all the wonderful and frustrating idiosyncrasies that make you *you* better than I could. You deserve someone special, Logan. I know we've moved on to separate lives, but I want you to know I missed you and it was good to see you. You look good, and I'm so happy you've met someone and are doing well."

Logan nodded. For the first time, he let himself see the happiness and contentment in someone he used to care about deeply without fighting resentment that he hadn't been the man to put it there. "Have a good life with Roland," Logan said gruffly. "I mean that. I understand now why it was him for you and not me. I get that it was different. Goodbye, Ryan."

"Bye, Logan." Ryan pushed open the door, and Logan walked away.

For real this time. In every way. A sadness Logan hadn't expected to feel lingered. He'd finally shut the door on a relationship that had ended over a year ago, lifting what felt like two hundred pounds off his shoulders. The thought of seeing Nate again quickly edged front and center in Logan's mind. Wondering what might happen between them dragged a bigger, involuntary smile out of Logan than he'd made in a lot of years.

* * *

Nate clasped his hands behind his back, silently waiting for Anna-Maria to break up a verbal squabble between two of the shelter girls. He'd spoken with Ms. Gonzales while she walked the hallways, the woman always checking to make sure her girls were all right. Anticipation bit at Nate's shoulders, making it difficult to maintain his distance. Anna-Maria continued to hold something back from him; he could feel it. Nate could admit to himself he wanted to please Logan by unearthing good information. He didn't care so much about himself. Nate had never tied up his sense of purpose about himself in this job, but this was Logan's first case, and Nate wanted him to have a good result.

I want him to feel proud of himself and to let him believe he deserves the accolades from his bosses when he solves this case. He won't want to work for Quinn if he can't deliver on Daria's disappearance. Without Quinn, without something to channel his sharp mind and desire to solve puzzles, he won't feel like he has a purpose in life.

Which was why Nate had to get Anna-Maria talking more about Daria. The woman had information. Nate sensed it in every carefully chosen word she spoke.

Anna-Maria gave a final, warmly coated warning to the girls to get along and keep it clean and then rejoined Nate in the hall. "I apologize, Mr. Jordan. We don't have enough volunteers on staff today for me to sit and talk with you in an office."

"My fault," Nate replied. "I didn't make an appointment."

"Proceed." Anna-Maria gestured Nate forward as she started to walk. "Ask your questions. I'll help if I can."

"Thank you." Nate fell into step beside the petite woman, matching her shorter stride and slower pace. "Both yesterday and today, your insistence that something bad has happened to Daria hasn't wavered. Can you tell me why you're so certain?"

"I've known Daria for a long time," Anna-Maria answered. "She wouldn't just disappear like this without cause and without saying something. Not for this long."

"She did disappear off the radar for ten days a few years ago without giving anyone a heads-up," Nate reminded her.

Anna-Maria shook her head vehemently. "No. Absolutely not. That's not what this is."

Whoa. Nate pulled to a stop. He put a hand to the woman's shoulder and turned her to face him. "You didn't even hesitate in that answer, ma'am," he said carefully.

If Nate hadn't been scrutinizing, he would have missed the miniscule flinch in Anna-Maria.

"I just know Daria," Anna-Maria said, her voice monotone. "That's all."

Nate narrowed his stare. He didn't have much in the way of detective-type radar, but he paid attention to odd sensations whenever they hit him. "What do you know? Why can't this be the same thing?"

Anna-Maria stared Nate straight in the eyes for such a long time his neck started to perspire. He hadn't even done anything, and he suddenly wanted to confess so she'd stop trying to peer into his soul.

The woman then glanced down one side of the hallway and the other before looking up at Nate through dewy eyes. "This cannot go on any official report. The police can never know. The Sarnas can never know. Nobody in the world Daria circulates in can ever know. Daria would rather die than have this information get into the wrong hands."

Shit. Nate wondered what Logan would do. *Get the information.* "I can promise you I will only tell my partner," he finally said. "We just want information. If it doesn't pertain to finding Daria, then the police don't need to know. Please. Talk to me."

Anna-Maria tapped his elbow and got them moving. She looked for all the world like a woman walking her rounds, but her hushed voice conveyed anything but a casual conversation. "I know this isn't like two years ago, because back then I helped Daria get a molestation victim out of the country and disappear forever. A very good friend of hers." The woman's voice dropped even more. "The child of an extremely wealthy, terrible man." Anna-Maria looked ill as she shared. "I spoke to this girl at Daria's request. The abuse, the horrific things this man did to her lived in her eyes and her voice. Almost worse than that was her debilitating fear that she

would never be able to get away from him. She was dreaming about suicide, and no kid should ever think that's the only way out."

Shit. Bitter sickness turned Nate's throat rancid. "Ma'am, you have to tell us who this man is. He might have found out about Daria's assistance and done something to her."

"No. The moment I heard about Daria I thought the same thing. But I looked into this person's whereabouts, and he has been out of the country on business from well before the time Daria disappeared. He still hasn't returned to the states."

"You're sure?"

"Positive."

"Is there any chance Daria has gone to visit this person she helped?" Nate asked, his mind still spinning.

"Absolutely not. Maintaining contact with the girl creates too much risk of discovery. Through my source, I know the girl is okay. My contact is the only one who truly knows the victim's whereabouts, and he doesn't even tell me. He only assures me she is getting past her trauma and building a new life."

"And you can trust this man?" Nate needed to gather as much information as he could. "Would Daria contact your friend directly to help another victim?"

"If she'd tried, he would have told me." Certainty rang in Anna-Maria's tone. "My contact is related to me, and I trust him with my life. When I assisted Daria two years ago, I knew where she was the whole time. She was always in contact with me. This time, I haven't heard from Daria since the day before she went missing." Anna-Maria glanced up at Nate, and all the tragic possibilities for how this search for Daria could end haunted her dark eyes. "There is no way in the world Daria would disappear for a legitimate reason without telling me. Something happened to her. Something awful."

"Thank you for this information." Nate extended his hand. "It's safe with Quinn."

Anna-Maria clasped Nate's hand between both of hers. "Just find Daria. We miss her, and we love her. Bring her home."

Fuck. Nate hated this part the most. "We're going to do our best." He just shot clear of outright lying. "Is there anything else you can think of that stood out as unusual these last few days or weeks before Daria went missing?"

"She wasn't here at Haven quite as much, but I got the feeling she was working on another one of her secret cases. With you and your partner showing Tracy's picture around here, it clearly had something to do with her."

"We're working a lot of angles," Nate replied.

"You can't say more." Anna-Maria crossed her arms over her breasts as if hugging out the cold. "I understand. If Tracy turns up here or I hear about her on the streets or in one of the other shelters, I'll let you know."

"That would be helpful." Nate fished into his inner jacket pocket. "Here's my card."

She blocked his offer with her hand. "You gave me one yesterday."

"Right. Sorry." He stuffed the thick card stock back into the silver case.

"It's all right." Anna-Maria's smile was one Nate imagined she would offer a little kid who'd made a silly mistake. "I imagine your mind is overflowing with information right now."

"That sounds about right." Nate could at least confess to that truth. Even if he couldn't admit his thoughts didn't entirely swirl around Daria.

"I want to thank you for setting up that interview for Jamie." Anna-Maria opened the door for Nate. "She's getting dressed for it right now."

An easy smile appeared with the mention of Jamie. "Wish her luck for me. Tell her the best advice I can give her is to look my sister in the eye, don't try to inflate her skills or knowledge, and be as real as she can be. Kasey will spot a poser a mile away."

"Thank you again. Jamie is a good kid at heart, and she's incredibly sharp. She's rough around the edges, but I truly believe she could be an asset to your business."

Backing down the steps, Nate lifted his hands in front of him. "Not my business. I just work there." A tingle of awareness suddenly played with the hairs on Nate's neck and ran a pleasant little shiver through his body. He scanned the street, and sure enough—*Goddamn it, he's so sexy*—he found Logan with his arms crossed, leaning against Nate's car. Logan had one of those tilts to his mouth that didn't exactly qualify as a smile but still warmed Nate inside as if he wore the biggest grin in the world. *For me*. Upon seeing the man, Nate's heart started to pitter-pat like an adolescent experiencing first love.

"Excuse me, will you?" Nate said to Anna-Maria. "I see someone I need to speak to."

Anna-Maria easily followed Nate's glance in Logan's direction. "And I have to get back to work. If you are able, keep us informed about Daria."

The open worry in Anna-Maria's eyes nicked at Nate's heart. "I'll do my best. Thank you again for trusting me with this information. It is a very important piece of our puzzle." He squeezed her hand. "Bye."

As soon as the woman nodded and went back inside, Nate dodged a car and jaywalked across the street.

What are you doing here, sweetness?

Unable to help it, Nate went from walking to just shy of outright running toward his man. Logan would be so proud of him for finding new information.

Logan stared as Nate drew closer, his heart pounding like a son of a bitch. He couldn't fucking believe just watching each step the man took made him feel like a

kid counting down each second on the clock to the time his parents would wake up on Christmas morning and allow Logan and his brothers and sisters to tear through their presents.

He's a fucking gift, and I cannot believe I couldn't stay away from playing with him for even half the morning.

Logan's need for this man bordered on a combination of ridiculous and obsessive, and he knew it.

Nate rushed up to Logan, and his eyes shone with chips of black diamonds. "Good morning again. This is a pleasant surprise." He wrapped his hand around Logan's forearm, giving him a little squeeze, but kept the contact short of a caress.

The unspoken distance in public mirrored everything Logan had always demanded in a partner, yet it still stung to witness the restraint in Nate.

"I wasn't expecting you," Nate added. "What are you doing here?"

Logan rubbed his gloved hands together and hunched his shoulders to ward off the steady gusts of bitter wind. "I was nearby, so I thought I'd come to see if you got anything out of Ms. Gonzales."

"You have no idea. More than I ever thought I would." Nate braced himself against the cold in a similar fashion and proceeded to go pale as he revealed his conversation with Anna-Maria.

By the end, Logan wanted to track down this abuser and do some serious damage to him. *Fuck.*

"I believe her," Nate added. "She desperately wants Daria found."

Logan gritted his teeth. Internally, he battled between wanting to do violence on behalf of this nameless, faceless girl, and euphoria that they had successfully uncovered another layer of Daria's life.

Grim, Logan said, "That more than likely explains why Daria was spending money with nothing to show for it. She was hoarding cash to help her friend. Disappearing without a trace isn't cheap."

"What about the guy?" Nate asked. "Do you think he might have found out about Daria helping the girl—I'm assuming his daughter—and gone after her?"

"The scum probably was out of the country, as Anna-Maria said," Logan answered. "It shouldn't be too hard to figure out who he is and double-check." The list of obscenely wealthy men with a daughter who no longer had contact with the family couldn't be long.

Nate's brow furrowed. "Could this guy have hired someone to grab or kill Daria for him?"

"I won't rule anything out," Logan replied, "but it's unlikely. If he did that, unless he then turns around and kills the person he hired, he leaves a potential trail back to himself. If he has a survivor mentality, and I suspect he probably does, it's doubtful he'd hire anyone and open himself up to blackmail or potential prosecution."

“So he’s probably not the guy,” Nate said, grumbling a bit.

Logan’s fingers itched to rub at the lines bisecting Nate’s brow. “Don’t worry. Even if we can’t get him for Daria or the abuse, it wouldn’t surprise me if we can find something illegal in his business practices.” An unholy excitement Logan knew wasn’t entirely noble filled him at the thought of wrecking another man’s life. *Fucker deserves it.* “Once we get his name, putting him behind bars for something else might be a pet project down the road.”

Nate suddenly flashed a fast smile. “I like the way you think, but we still have to focus on what happened to Daria first.”

“I know. I’m not wandering away from my priority. No worries about that.” Logan shifted and leaned his weight into Nate’s car to take pressure off his hip and thigh. “So now that we’ve gotten to know Daria, in addition to learning what Anna-Maria shared about Daria’s disappearance two years ago, the flighty girl theory is officially DOA. Did Ms. Gonzales say anything else?”

“Not really. Other than she also believes Daria was working on another of her secret stories for possibly a couple of months before she disappeared.”

“Which confirms the timeline of the duration of Daria’s stripping career.” In Logan’s mind’s eye, a copy of one sketch continually loomed larger than everything else. “We fucking need to find Tracy.”

Sympathy filled Nate’s dark gaze. One step forward closed some of the distance between them. His gloved hand came to rest against the gloved back of Logan’s. “Do we have any word yet on if the police received any good tips after releasing her sketch to the media?”

The touch, so fucking sweet and discreet, twisted the most wonderful, terrible pull in Logan’s gut. His heart started beating wildly out of control, but he turned his hand anyway and brushed his fingertips to the inside of Nate’s palm. Through two layers of material, not even feeling skin—although Logan did sense the little jolt that went through Nate too—it somehow became the fucking most overtly sexual move Logan had ever made in his life.

“Nothing from Arlington Heights about the sketch so far,” Logan began, “but I do get the feeling they’re taking some of these other options like the missing blonde girls seriously and have finally started to back off from looking at the family so much.” Logan cleared this throat. He kept his attention on Nate as he spoke, but every tiny, deliberate graze he put on Nate’s hand filled his entire being with awareness. “And I think I earned good points with the commander up there by turning the sketch and our information over to him. I think he’d at least tell me they’d gotten something good to pursue even if he didn’t feel like he could give me details.” Logan slid his fingers up to Nate’s wrist to tease the thin line of skin between his glove and cuff.

Nate sucked in a trembling breath. “You’re playing with my hand.” He darted his attention down the sidewalk in both directions. “Where people can see us.”

Logan threaded his fingers into Nate's from the back side. His neck perspired under his coat, but never once did he break eye contact with the beautiful man in front of him. "So I am," he murmured.

Empathy, sympathy, or maybe pity or even a hint of sadness took Nate over. Logan couldn't tell for sure, but he didn't like any of them. Not from Nate.

"You don't have to do this," Nate said softly.

Nate attempted to step back, but Logan wrapped an arm around Nate's waist and didn't let him go. This man possessed such generosity, kindness, and sincerity that Logan couldn't imagine going a day hiding him, let alone weeks or years.

And Jesus, there's no way in the world I'd ever be able to keep my hands off him at work. How did I ever think I could?

Logan worked off one glove. Letting it fall to the ground, he cupped Nate's neck, marveling as he ran his thumb down the man's jaw. "I don't have to kiss you either," he said, leaning in until they were *this close* to grazing lips. He looked into Nate's eyes, and everything in the world felt okay and right. "But your mouth is so fucking pretty"—Logan quickly darted his tongue against Nate's upper lip—"that I want another taste. Can't wait for privacy." *Don't fucking want to anymore.* "I need it right now."

Once scant inch closed the distance, and Logan captured Nate's mouth with his. Nate squeaked and grabbed onto Logan's coat, tugging him closer, and Logan soared on the inside. It only took a hint of Nate's essence to fuel Logan's desire to take with raw, base intent, but he managed to rein himself in. He kept their kiss to exploring with scraping of mouths and teasing with the barest hint of brushing tongues, things that made him shiver and grow hungry, but not shudder and devour. With Nate right now, Logan tried to create the first kiss he wished he could have given the man if they'd openly gone on a first date, rather than the attacking kiss in his office, which he'd then followed with fucking Nate, twice, as if it were their last day on earth. Logan clung to Nate's mouth softly, savoring Nate leaning into him and clinging back with equal poignancy. Logan's cock started twitching with a command to take this somewhere more private, so he reluctantly pecked Nate's enticing lips one last time and ended the kiss.

His eyes burning too bright, Nate smiled and kept a tight hold on Logan's coat. "This is why you really came." He arched his brow like the best cartoon villain. "You wanted to keep me all hot and bothered and thinking about you all day long while I work."

"Something like that." Logan chuckled as genuine, sheer joy washed over his entire being. "Guilty as charged."

"Except," Nate lifted up and whispered in Logan's ear, "I would have been thinking about you anyway."

Logan put his mouth to Nate's ear and replied, "But you wouldn't have been hot and bothered."

Nate pulled back. “Maybe just warm and slightly discomforted,” he said, scrunching his brow.

Logan groaned. “You are so fucking cute.” He gave in to another fast nip.

“And you are by far the sexiest man I’ve ever met.” As Nate said that, he looked at Logan as if he could hold the world on his shoulders without breaking a sweat.

“Christ, honey.” Dragging in an unsteady breath, Logan looked away, needing a second. He’d never experienced someone so openly admiring of him, not even his family, and he didn’t know how to handle it.

“Are you okay, Logan?” Nate rubbed his hand over Logan’s heart, soothing and disturbing him even more.

Clearing his throat, Logan turned back to Nate, exhaling to loosen the tension. “Yeah, I’m fine.” *Work. It’s still the start of a day. Think about work.* “I need to relieve Riley and put him on talking to the college newspaper staff. I want him looking over the rest of the surveillance stuff too.”

“Okay.” Nate jerked his thumb over his shoulder. “I think I’m going back to Haven to see if I can get a list of places where runaways hide in the city. Those kids and the staff will know where to start better than I would. I’m going to spend some time trying to find Tracy today.”

“Sounds good. Hey”—Logan grabbed Nate’s hand before he got too far away—“can I get you to go sniff around Sarna Imports for a little bit first? The employees know you; it won’t be suspicious for you to look around and express sympathy. If the Sarnas see you, you can shoot a vague update their way to keep them off the scent of why you’re really there.”

Nate frowned. “You’re thinking there might be something to Jackson Roth’s claims?”

Shrugging, hoping like hell he wasn’t wasting valuable time and resources, Logan said, “I can’t ignore it, even though it isn’t my primary target.”

“I get that,” Nate shared. “I’ll see what I can find.”

“I know you’ll find me something good.”

With their hands still loosely linked, Nate swung the connection, almost like a schoolboy. He sucked in the edge of his lip, glanced around, and softly asked, “Feeling brave enough to let me kiss you goodbye?”

Oh hell. Not even remotely able to stop himself, Logan tugged Nate in until their chests touched. Nate’s eyes lit up, and Logan felt like a king. The need to please Nate overwhelmed every other uncertainty still twisting Logan’s gut.

“Show me what you’ve got, honey,” Logan challenged, excitement humming all through him as he waited for Nate’s next move.

A smile full of wicked intent took over Nate’s face, and all kinds of fluttering immediately tackled Logan’s stomach. *What have I done?* Old, deep-seated fear tried to push Logan to step away, but before it could happen, Nate slid his arms around

Logan's waist, under his coat. He whispered something like "Everything will be all right" just as he touched his lips to Logan's in the sweetest, gentlest kiss.

That innocent contact drenched Logan in a flash flood of possessive need. He immediately shoved his hand into Nate's hair, taking a fistful with an aggressive hold, and angled him for a deeper, openmouthed kiss. Logan licked inside, moaning with his first taste. Nate licked back. He leaned his full weight into Logan and shoved his hands into the back of Logan's pants under the cover of his long coat. The rough scrape of Nate's fingers mainlined blood straight to Logan's cock. Nate kissed him so completely and with such abandon, it overwhelmed Logan's lifelong instinct not to kiss another man in public.

Just as fast as Logan thought *fuck it* and backed Nate into the side of the car with an order to find his keys fast, every hair on Logan's body shot upright and pumped adrenaline through his system. And it had nothing to do with Nate's mouth on his. Logan stopped kissing Nate, his senses going on high alert.

Completely attuned, Nate withdrew his hands. "What's wrong?"

Logan put a finger to Nate's mouth and gave him the barest shake of his head. Every instinct Logan had ever learned to listen to as a cop remained on code red level...until one visual mapping of the street settled much of Logan's radar. *Fucking A*. In the distance, Jamie stood on Haven's doorstep openly watching Logan and Nate kiss. Then—*holy shit, she's ballsy*—the girl gave Logan an okay sign with one hand and a thumbs-up with the other.

A sharp bark of laughter bulleted into Logan's ear right then. He spun and put the stink eye on an amused Nate.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to laugh. But Jamie, really? That's what got your spine so stiff?" Nate looked over at the girl and waved. He then came back to Logan with an amazingly insincere frown. "Poor thing." He rubbed at the hard set to Logan's mouth. "You're not used to people even seeing you with a man, let alone giving you props for kissing one."

"She's a freakin' kid." Logan didn't know why that made it worse, or why it enhanced his embarrassment, but it did.

All traces of humor left Nate's face. "She's not mocking you," he said, hitting the nail right on the head. As he spoke, he crouched down and grabbed Logan's glove off the ground. "I don't think she's that kind of person."

"It's fine," Logan insisted, while trying to rise above feeling like a thirty-six-year-old man out on his first date. "I'm fine."

"You're not fine." Nate put Logan's glove back on for him and squeezed. "And that's okay with me. I swear it is."

Logan bit off an expletive and spoke through clenched teeth. "You shouldn't have to take a step backward to be with me. It's not right."

"Are you fucking serious?" Nate looked Logan up and down with an open hunger that made Logan tremble. "What we did last night and this morning put me about a hundred steps forward from where I'd been just the day before. You and me,

we're good right where we are." Nate burrowed his hands under Logan's coat and jacket to rub his chest. "And I'm gonna prove that to you today during lunch." With a sweetly lewd wink, Nate tweaked Logan's nipples through his shirt and then took a big step back, giving him breathing room.

Logan groaned even as his face grew hotter while imagining Nate pushing every bit of his long cock deep into Logan's ass. "Looking forward to it," he admitted, red-cheeked and all.

"Me too." Nate kissed his hand and then smacked it to Logan's cheek. "Ooh, sorry." He rubbed the place he'd just hit. "That was harder than I meant." He leaned in and pecked a quick kiss to the abused area. "I'm gonna go catch Jamie to see if she wants a ride to Quinn. I'll see you later!"

"Bye." Logan watched Nate sprint across the street again, amused and charmed by the enthusiasm and joy in his every movement. How could Logan feel uncomfortable with such a good man as his partner?

Once Nate reached Jamie, Logan waved at him one last time and then made his way to his car, limping heavily but happily bearing the discomfort. Everything he'd done with Nate last night made it worth the extra pain today. The rest of it, the comfort with touching and kissing in public stuff, would come with time. Logan would get right with it. He would figure out a way to make it happen.

Before Logan could completely set Nate aside and get back to breaking apart this case, his phone rang, and he knew it would be Riley.

Logan flipped open his phone and put it to his ear. "What do you have for me, Riley?"

"I think I found Pierce," Riley replied. "And you're gonna love this."

Fuck. Logan knew for sure he wouldn't.

"Where is he?" he asked anyway. He didn't have a choice.

"He's at Daria's apartment in the city." After the slightest pause, Riley added, "With Declan."

Motherfucker.

Logan sighed. "Don't approach them. I'll be right there."

Son of a bitch. This shit with Declan and Pierce would break Nate's heart.

Logan got into his car anyway. He had a job to do.

Chapter Twelve

It shouldn't have surprised Logan when Pierce answered Daria's door rather than Declan, but it did. The asshole definitely thought he owned the world and everything in it. Why not Daria's apartment too? Even when standing still, the prick had swagger. The fact that his shirt hung loose and open, and his jeans barely clung to his hips put a nasty taste in Logan's mouth. When Declan appeared in the background, thoroughly disheveled, wearing only jeans, Logan's heart dropped into his stomach with a sick *thud*.

Oh hell, kid. What did you do?

Declan pushed back his shoulders, but a dull crimson crept up his chest and neck. "I'm allowed to be here," he said as he came forward. "I've had a key ever since Daria got the place."

"Relax, Declan." Pierce even made his smiles look snide. "You don't have to explain yourself to this guy."

"You're actually right about that, Mr. Lyndsey." Logan nudged one finger against Pierce's shoulder and edged his way inside the apartment. "Declan doesn't have to say a word because I'm not here to see him. You however"—he laid an icy stare on Pierce—"might want to explain to me why you were at the Kitty Club the night Daria disappeared, and what you put in the trunk of your car when you left."

Declan stumbled into the side of a chair. "Pierce?" His voice squeaked so high Logan almost couldn't decipher the word. "You knew about Daria and the strip clubs?" Already pale normally, what little color Declan had fled from his face. "Why didn't you tell me?"

With a roll of his eyes, Pierce asked, "Why would I?"

"Because she was my sister," Declan answered in a low, feral voice.

"So?" Pierce shrugged.

His mouth agape, Declan dropped to sit, his questioning stare locked on Pierce.

When it became clear Pierce intended to remain silent, thereby mind fucking Declan even more, Logan took a seat on the coffee table in front of the young man. "I'm going to guess it didn't suit Pierce's needs for you to know, Declan. Daria's your sister, you love her, and you might have talked her into giving up the stripping. Whereas I bet Mr. Lyndsey here"—*I hate this, but I have to do it*—"enjoyed being a voyeur and having information he could use on Daria whenever he chose to spring it."

Declan's Adam's apple bobbed, and his eyes raged with a midday storm. He aimed that thunderstorm straight at Pierce. "How long did you watch my sister strip without her knowing?" Pierce's eyebrow went up in a mocking arch, and Declan lunged out of his seat. "Tell me!"

An unholy gleam shone in Pierce's eyes. "I watched her for an entire week. And damn." He whistled low. "She had a fucking sweet ass. Man, did I get off watching her bend over and wiggle it for cash. When I squint my eyes"—Pierce licked his lower lip while looking right at Declan—"yours can almost pass for hers."

You let him do it, kid. Logan dropped his head and wiped at his mouth. *Shit.*

Declan looked as if someone had gutted him. "You bastard."

"Give me a fucking break," Pierce said as he buttoned his shirt. "You're not so dumb you couldn't figure it out. Fake your outrage all you want, but you damn well know why we came here instead of to my place. It fucking happened in her room, you idiot. You got what you wanted out of it." After doing up his jeans, Pierce carefully, deliberately, while watching Declan, adjusted his cock. "Don't go crying like a pussy now."

An inhuman sound raged out of Declan. He rushed across the room and shoved Pierce into a narrow table by the door. "Get out." His entire body shaking, Declan ripped open the door. "Get out of here right now." Logan had never seen this young man exhibit such genuine, unscripted emotion. Declan grabbed a leather jacket off the floor and shoved it at Pierce's chest. "I don't want to see you ever again."

Pierce slipped into his coat as easy as you please. "You'll come back." He then leaned into Declan, as if to whisper, but spoke beyond loud enough for Logan to hear. "It only hurts the first time." He ran his fingertip down Declan's cheek as he brushed past to exit the apartment. "Bye."

Crap. Crap. Crap. Declan looked like the walking dead, but Logan's lead was getting away. Logan didn't regret revealing what he had in front of Declan. The kid needed to know what to expect with a person like Pierce, particularly if Declan had inadvertently done something for Pierce that had ended with his sister's death. But that didn't mean Logan was a robot. *Son of a bitch.* Any other time and Logan would have stayed and done his awkward best to comfort Declan. *Shit. Damn. Fuck.* He absolutely couldn't today.

Logan strode past Declan to the hallway and could still see Pierce ambling down the hall. "Listen." He hedged, putting his attention on Declan, when he should have been running. "I know it hurts like hell, but you're going to have to trust that it's better for you to learn what you just did right now rather than six months or a year down the line. Pierce is a manipulator. He's a fake, and you don't need him."

Declan shrugged, and shutters of indifference masked the brief moments of life in his gaze. "I've fucked guys hundreds of times. No big deal. I don't need your pity." He slammed the door in Logan's face.

Shit.

Logan strode down the hallway toward his mark and easily caught up to Pierce at the elevator. "You're a class act," Logan said as he stepped to Pierce's side. "A real piece of work."

Pierce glanced at Logan as if he were a pesky gnat. "He wanted it, and he knows it."

"Not like that he didn't," Logan replied, barely masking his growl.

"That's not my problem," Pierce said with a shrug. The elevator door dinged open, and he strolled inside.

Logan followed, saying, "Maybe not, but I'll tell you what is your problem. Me." As soon as the door slid closed, Logan slowly backed Pierce into a corner with each word he spoke. "I want you to give me what you put in your car that night at the Kitty Club. We both know it was Daria's laptop."

Pierce slid his hands into his pockets, making himself look ready to take a nap. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"There's evidence, man. Don't be an even bigger dick than you already are." This guy had cruelty living in his eyes, but if he thought fucking with someone like Declan made him gangster, he had another think coming. "What happened, Pierce?" Logan planted his hand into the wall and looked right into those soulless eyes. "Was watching Daria take off her clothes from a dark corner suddenly not enough for you? Did you show yourself? Or did she spot you? Did she tell you why she was really at the club with the hope you might actually be a decent human being and let her work in peace? Did you decide stealing her laptop would give you leverage over her? An exchange maybe? Her virginity for the laptop?" A flare widened Pierce's pupils. *Bingo*.

Logan leaned in a hair closer, suffocating Pierce's airspace even more. "I'm guessing you were gonna have a conversation with Daria the next day, but then she suddenly went missing. Or maybe you couldn't wait and you went to her that night. Is that what happened? Did she refuse you, and in a fit of anger, like the spoiled little boy you are, you killed her? Is that why you're redoing your bedroom?" Logan didn't pause, but shit, that might have some legitimacy to it. He'd have to look into when Pierce had commissioned this renovation. "Was there evidence you couldn't be sure you'd sufficiently covered up?"

Pierce blinked lazily. "You don't scare me, *former* Detective Jeffries." His voice lacked emotion or a tremor, and Logan had to give him credit for his ability to recover quickly. "You're a paid monkey. You don't have any power to arrest me."

Logan grinned, and if Pierce had an ounce of intelligence, he'd have started shaking. "I'll tell you what I do have, Mr. Lyndsey," he whispered loudly, right near the prick's ear, just as Pierce had done to Declan. "I have connections." As he pulled back to make eye contact again, Logan ran his finger down the man's jawline, fighting like the devil to cover that it made his skin crawl. "One phone call," he said conversationally, "and I will have you sitting in jail and then forgotten about until the absolute last legal minute I can keep you there. And I'm not talking about you sitting all by your lonesome in one of those quaint, expensive jail cells in Arlington

Heights where they're conducting Daria's case. I'm talking about calling a good friend, who happens to be a detective right here in the city, and she will make sure you are picked up by somebody who will put you in the nastiest, dankest, most foul-smelling holding cell in this fair town of ours. And it will be filled to the gills with some of the most disgusting people you've ever met. I'm talking bug-infested folks who haven't showered in months. Trust me when I say the smell is so rank, you will vomit within five minutes. The stench will choke you and you won't be able to breathe without tasting shit and piss in your throat. I don't even want to get into the interest your dick will generate when, after twenty-four hours, you have to piss so bad you can't hold it another second. And the communal toilet you'll have to use when you have to take a shit...

"Damn, I'd go get tested for a whole battery of little nasties when your time is up, and I finally have to let you go. Now, you don't even want to think about your ass, which I'm gonna guess you didn't let Declan anywhere near last night. Because if you think assaults only happen in prisons and not jail cells, think again." *Oh yeah, now you're scared.* Logan kept his voice soft but piled on the bullshit with menace. The elevator would open at any second. "One guy can hold your mouth and fuck you while three others obstruct the view, and then they each take—"

"All right." Pierce shoved Logan out of his face. "Shut up already." Just as he finished that sentence, the elevator opened to the lobby. "I don't even give a shit about Daria's laptop. I don't care if you take it. She has it blocked with a password anyway. You're not going to be able to open it."

"Why don't you let me worry about that," Logan said, keeping right at Pierce's side as he took big strides out of the elevator and apartment building. "Where is it?"

"It's at my house in Arlington Heights."

When Pierce veered in one direction, Logan grabbed his arm. "Huh-uh. Get in my car." He not only steered the blond to his vehicle but right to the passenger side door. "I'll take you to yours, and then I'll be on your bumper the whole way."

"I don't care." Pierce threw himself in the passenger seat. "Do what you want."

Daria's laptop. Shit. Logan couldn't begin to calculate the value of possible information stored in that machine. If Logan's hip weren't throbbing so much today, he might have tried to skip as he crossed to get behind the wheel.

The only thing marring the high of success was not having Nate at his side to celebrate.

* * *

"Thanks for your help, Monica." Nate shook the Sarna Imports employee's hand. "It was good to chat with you again."

The young woman nodded. "I hope you find her."

"Me too." Nate dipped his head and then discreetly moved on to the next office to have a similar chat.

Logan had actually been shrewd in assigning this task to Nate. Nate had visited these offices a number of times as part of Quinn's security contract with Sarna. These people knew his face. Today, he walked the building talking to people under the pretense of questioning their memories of the time Daria had spent at Sarna. Mixed in with those questions, Nate had slipped in subtle bids for information about Sarna's bottom line and if they had any exciting new plans on the horizon for overseas visits and imports. So far nothing had set off any alarm bells. But maybe that was good. Nate could hear Logan saying *Eliminating possibilities is just as valuable as gaining new information*. Nate smiled to himself. Except now, Logan might add *honey* or *baby* to the end of his investigative lecture.

Nate's stomach started to flutter with the possibilities of a lunchtime fuck session when his phone buzzed. Just as fast as Nate began envisioning scenes of folding Logan over the table in the conference room on the investigations side of Quinn, he took one look at the text message, and the pleasant hum fled from his cock.

Going to AH for Daria's laptop. Don't trust this asshole to bring it back to me. A rain check on lunch. XO, honey.

Nate warmed right back up at the hug and kiss signature. It was unexpected. Nate figured he would eventually learn all kinds of sweet surprises about Logan as they got started on this thing. Relationship? Affair? Didn't matter what they called it as long as they did it together.

As Nate reached the open door at the end of the hall, a loud crash reverberated through the walls. Then "What the hell, Elise?" Nate recognized Stephen Sarna's voice, and he quietly stepped into the office in time to see the man raging at the inner door to his wife's office. "Aren't you even trying to hide this asshole from me anymore?" The man's voice boomed with rage. "I know you can't live without the wonderful deals he makes for us, but at least take him to a hotel. I don't need to walk in on you blowing him."

Nate might have gasped if Elise hadn't emerged from her office right then, fully dressed. Phillip Cosgrove appeared behind her, his suit and hair immaculate as well. They might be having an affair, and apparently Stephen did know about it, but nobody had been blowing or boning each other right then.

Elise sighed. "Find Jennie, Stephen." She mentioned the Sarnas' shared assistant. Nate had met her. "Have her call you a cab. You're drunk. Go home."

Stephen slammed his hand on the assistant's vacated desk. "This is *my* business, damn it!"

"Which you haven't run in almost two years!" Elise went toe-to-toe with her husband. "Every person in this building would be out of a job if it weren't for me and the job I do with people like Phillip."

In a snarky tone, Stephen fired back something about doing one hell of a fine job. Just as Elise swore in a heated whisper back at him, a body brushed against Nate's side. He glanced down to find Jennie with a stack of large envelopes in her hands.

Nate dipped down and kept his voice low. "Does this happen a lot?"

Jennie shot him a horrified look.

"It's all right," Nate added quickly. "I would never say anything. I've already seen Mr. Sarna in a bad way a few times since Daria's disappearance."

Jennie quietly eased the door closed behind her, presumably to keep out curious employees. She hesitated for a moment but then rose up on her tiptoes and spoke softly at Nate's ear. "Mrs. Sarna has been doing her best to deal with all the contacts and clients herself since her husband started having problems two years ago, but it's exhausting working and traveling without ever taking a day off. Mr. Sarna functioned and did the best he could stateside, but then Daria disappeared..."

"Boiling point." Nate nodded. A heaviness sat in his chest as he watched the bickering couple, as well as the man in the middle, who now stood at Elise's back. "Mr. Sarna stopped caring about pretending, and Mrs. Sarna didn't care about hiding anymore either. I hear you."

With a nod, Jennie said, "Excuse me," and pushed herself into the scene. "Mr. Sarna." She put her work down and gently took his elbow. "Can I get you something to eat? I'd be happy to stop wherever you want if you'll let me drive you home."

Nate noticed Elise mouth the words *thank you* to Jennie at the same time Stephen said, "Thank you. You're a good girl." He touched her cheek lovingly. "Just like my Daria."

Jennie offered him a small smile. "That's a very nice thing for you to say. Come on. Let's go."

Stephen's eyes lit up the second he spotted Nate. "Mr. Jordan! Have you found my Daria? Tell me." He broke away from Jennie and grabbed Nate's hand. "Tell me you found her."

Elise and Phillip joined Stephen.

"I think Nate would have interrupted us if he had important news," Elise said, watching Nate. "Right?"

"I just have a little update," Nate shared. "We might have a new lead on Daria's laptop, which could prove very useful." God, he hated seeing expectations in the eyes of a victim's family. And he really couldn't stand to wipe it away with one sentence. "That's all I can say right now. I don't want to get your hopes up if it doesn't pan out."

"Where did you find it?" Elise asked.

"We haven't quite tracked it down yet, so I don't want to say anything more. I just wanted to give you a progress report. I know you didn't like that the police wouldn't keep you in the loop." Crap, that was manipulative, but Nate had to do it. "It is of the utmost importance to Quinn that you always remain informed."

"The police still don't share much with us." Elise took Nate's hand. "Thank you for coming. It means a lot that you and Mr. Jeffries are willing to speak to us in person." As Jennie escorted a dejected Stephen out of the office, Phillip excused himself too, and Elise appeared paler than Nate had ever seen her.

"It sometimes seems that nobody can look us in the eyes anymore," Elise said.

"In situations like this, people often don't know what to say. I know it hurts, but don't take it personally." Nate wondered if he'd ever get used to dealing with people in the midst of their tragedy without it draining him emotionally too.

"You're right, of course." Elise offered him one of those *buck up, soldier* nods. "That's good advice."

Well fuck. Nate felt like a heel, and he couldn't really snoop now that Elise knew of his presence. Especially now that he'd already given her and Stephen their vague update. For the moment, Logan would have to live with what Nate had gotten.

Maybe I'll have better luck with the runaways.

Logan believed the answers to this case lay with Tracy anyway. And while Logan might have some issues with openness and trust in relationships, he had no equal when it came to investigative work.

I'm going to track her down for you, Logan. Even if it takes me all night.

Finding himself alone with Elise and not exactly knowing what to say, Nate offered his goodbyes and got back to work.

* * *

"Get out of here, five-0." A tall, skinny teen with more strength than his lanky frame conveyed shoved Nate out of a dank apartment in an abandoned building. "If you can't find the girl, then she don't want to be found."

"Please." Nate grabbed onto the door frame as the boy pushed him again. "I'm not a cop. I just want to find this girl." He held up the likeness of Tracy again.

The kid laughed in Nate's face, but a girl came up behind the boy and wrapped her arms around his waist. "He don't really think you're a cop. But I bet you ain't ever even been down here before. Only now you want something, and all of a sudden we're supposed to help you."

Guilt heated Nate's face. "You're right." *Hell.* Looking at these kids made Nate want to donate a hundred hours at Haven and clear out his savings to offer one giant donation to aid runaway teens. *Later. Focus on work right now.* "But I have a job to do, and it involves finding this girl." He tapped at the sketch. "My job isn't, however, to care about her, but I do. I'm not only looking for her so I can talk to her. I believe she might be in danger. If I can find her, I can offer her some protection."

"Go ask someone else," the boy said with a snarl. Even though the apartment didn't have a door, he pushed at Nate again, as if getting him over the threshold meant they didn't have to deal with him anymore. "We don't know nothing."

Damn it. "Thank you for your time." This wouldn't be the first time today someone had slammed a metaphorical door in his face. "Bye."

"Hey!" The girl's voice stopped Nate a foot down the hall.

Yes. Nate spun and closed the distance back to the apartment. "Yes?"

"I ain't seen that girl anywhere in this building this week," she said. "That's as long as we've been here, so I don't know nothing else."

"She don't look like someone I seen around here either," the boy added.

"Thank you. That helps me a lot." Nate looked at them both, and mere gratitude for their assistance didn't seem like enough. *Crap. Don't take this as pity.* "Here. Why don't you take my coat?" Nate removed his phone and tucked it in his pants' pocket. "It's the coldest damn winter since I've been here. Take my gloves and jacket too." Nate took a few items out of his jacket's inner pocket before holding it and the gloves out in offering. "You can trade off wearing them. It'll give you an extra layer."

Righteous indignation moved the boy into Nate's face. "We don't fuckin' want—"

The girl smacked at the guy's back and wedged herself in front of him. "Thanks." She took the items from Nate.

"There are shelters you can go to," Nate said, knowing he sounded like a PSA announcement. "Places you can be warm and get help."

The girl clutched Nate's clothing to her chest. "We don't need that."

"Keep it in mind." Sighing, Nate fished into his overfull pants' pockets and withdrew his card case. "If you see the girl I'm looking for—Tracy—or if you decide you do want some information about those shelters, please give me a call." He handed her a card.

"Whatever." The boy snatched it out of Nate's hand. "Go away."

After thanking them again, Nate left them to their empty apartment, his heart heavy with rampant speculation as to what nightmare story had landed them on the streets. On his way out of the shadowed and cold building, he forced himself to stop and ask a few more people about Tracy but received pretty much the same information others had given him all afternoon. Most of which consisted of a variety of interesting ways of telling him to fuck himself mixed in with some vague threats to bodily harm if he didn't walk away. Those who did answer didn't recognize or know Tracy so hadn't been able to offer Nate any insight or direction.

The whipping gusts of Chicago's famous winds swirled outside, attacking Nate the second he stepped from the building. The icy winter temperature cut through his dress shirt and put his tie to flapping in his face. *That's one decision made easy.* Before heading to the next area to search for Tracy, Nate would head back to his apartment to get replacements for the gloves, jacket, and coat he'd just given away.

Nate found some room in between his stuff to burrow his hands into his pants' pockets. He tucked his face down to keep it out of the burn of the wind and headed back to his car. As he walked, he thought about putting in a call to Kasey to see how Jamie's interview had gone. If Kasey had already hired the girl, maybe Nate could pick her up and take her out on his next round of searching for Tracy. More than likely these kids would talk to another runaway more comfortably than a stranger in a suit.

Yeah. That's a good idea. Logan would be proud of him.

As Nate drew close to his vehicle, he chuckled at himself. This job wore on his psyche, yet he still wanted to do it well so Logan would respect him and think him strong and capable of the work. He knew some people would say his motivation to make Logan happy showed a lack of personal strength and pride in himself, but Nate felt it nonetheless. At least Nate was being honest with himself about his feelings. He laughed again and admitted he couldn't wait to see Logan tonight. *I think I have a boyfriend.*

He opened his door on that thought, and—*Oh my God, help!*—his world went black. The smell of plastic invaded Nate's nostrils, suffocating him, and pressure constricted around his neck, blocking his windpipe. *I can't breathe.* Nate tried to suck in a breath and kick back at his attacker, but his nose filled with trash bag, blocking his nasal passages, and dizziness spun his head. *Oh God, oh God.* Nate shifted to spin and throw the person off him, but a big arm surrounded his middle, and a large body shoved him forward, jamming his forehead into the top of the car. Pain shot into Nate's skull and down into his neck, but he could focus on nothing beyond being strangled.

Nate's throat scratched as he held down a panicked scream. If he opened his mouth, he would suck the trash bag into his throat and it terrified him that he could bring on unconsciousness that much faster. He tried to reach back and scratch at the hands tugging the bag at the back of his neck but found himself scraping against leather gloves. Nate hit at those fists, begging without words, when suddenly the choke around his neck loosened, and his attacker shoved him face-first into his car across the seats. The bag remained around Nate's head, blinding him, and a weight immediately came down on his back.

"Stop looking for the girl." A voice, muffled by more than the trash bag, spoke low but loud enough against Nate's ear. "Drop this case. If you don't"—the guy knocked the side of Nate's face into the passenger door one, two, three times—"I'll fuck up your boyfriend's other leg and you'll be leaning down to kiss him goodbye in his wheelchair." Then the hard, round muzzle of a gun dug into the back of Nate's head. *Oh please, please, please, no.* The voice said, "Or maybe I'll just kill him like I did Daria and all those other girls." The unmistakable *click* of a trigger rolling the chamber of a revolver reverberated in Nate's head. Nate jerked and silently screamed, but nothing happened. The butt of the gun whacked the side of his head in the next heartbeat, and the voice added, "Next time it won't be empty."

Tears streamed down Nate's cheeks, unchecked, and wetness warmed his leg as terror swamped his system. His heart raced so fast, ramping up his breathing to a terrifying degree. He sucked in air, which immediately drew the trash bag into his mouth and made him light-headed. Fear and panic mingled with adrenaline and roared through Nate's system, so much so he didn't know how long he lay there on his stomach before realizing his attacker had left. He could no longer feel the press of a barrel against his skull or weight on his back, and when he moved his head a little, just to experiment, nothing happened.

What if I move more and he shoots me?

Nate shook so hard his teeth chattered. His muscles ached from the trembling. Cold sweat drenched his clammy skin, but he pushed himself up to a sitting position anyway. Nothing happened, but he still couldn't stop shaking. He fingered the trash bag, gingerly moved his hand around his neck, and felt the knot tied at the back of his nape keeping it closed. Success came with commanding his breathing to slow down now that he knew he was alone. Nate managed to get the knot undone and the bag off his head without touching it more than necessary.

Blinking as light flooded back into his eyes, Nate scanned the lot where he'd parked. Emptiness surrounded him. Or if someone had witnessed the attack, he or she was hiding in alleys or behind the curtains of the windows in the distance and didn't want to get involved. Nate knew he should run straight to the nearest police station or even to Quinn, but neither of those things quelled the trembling making his body hurt.

I want to go home calmed Nate's hands enough to get the key into the ignition. *I want Logan* steadied the rest of him enough to drive.

* * *

By the time Nate reached his apartment, keeping his head down to avoid talking to security, the event in his car had caught up to him again. He could not control his shivers enough to get his key in the door.

Please, Wes. Nate knocked and knocked even though his legs would hardly hold him up anymore. *Please be home.* He didn't have any idea how he'd made it from the elevator to the apartment.

Just as Nate knocked again and started to slide to the floor, Wes opened the door, a "Hello" dying on his lips.

"Oh my God, Nate." Wes swooped in and grabbed Nate around the waist. "What happened to you?"

"I want Logan," Nate said, his voice breaking terribly. He couldn't hold back the flood anymore. "I need Logan." Cold penetrated every bone in Nate's body. "I just want Logan. I need to see him." *Please don't be dead already.* "He won't pick up his phone. Get him for me."

"All right. Okay." Wes practically carried Nate into the living room. "Let me sit you down first."

Nate tried to grab at Wes's uniform shirt but barely swatted it with a kitten's strength. "I need to see Logan."

Wes crouched down in front of Nate. "Okay, Nate, calm down. Everything is going to be all right." He dug through Nate's pockets, all the while assuring, "I have your phone"—he lifted it—"and I'm calling Logan right now. Do you understand?"

Fear now lived in Wes's eyes too. *He understands I'm serious.* A hair of tension finally leaked out of Nate. "Thank you."

“Just sit tight.” Wes stood, the phone attached to his ear. “I’m sure he’ll be here soon.”

Nate closed his eyes. Logan was coming.

Please be okay.

Chapter Thirteen

Logan slammed his fist against the door, demanding entry. *Oh Jesus. Please be okay, baby.* Canin had left a message about Nate on Logan's home phone and had sent Logan into a panic, driving across town like a crazy man. When the entire day went by without receiving a single text or call from Nate, Logan should have suspected a problem. But he'd told himself he was being stupid and overprotective and exactly the way he swore he'd never be with another man. *Clingy.* Plus, work had consumed Logan, and from the schedule he'd given Nate, he knew Nate might not have time to come up for air to call him either.

Fuck. Dumbass phone.

Canin opened Nate's door, and Logan pushed past him. "Where is he?"

"He's in the bedroom finishing up..."

"Logan?"

Logan heard Nate speak his name, and nothing else Canin spoke mattered.

Nate appeared from his hallway, his dark eyes so terribly bleak, and Canin ceased to exist. Nothing existed except Nate. The beginnings of nasty bruising formed on Nate's forehead and right cheekbone, and scrapes of red created a horrific necklace across his throat.

"Baby?" Gruffness coated Logan's voice, and debilitating fear locked him in place.

"Logan?" Nate, so fucking pale too, rushed to Logan, and Logan grabbed his treasure into his arms. Trembling all over, Nate clung to Logan, whispering, "Are you really okay?"

Nate's distressed state snapped Logan out of his paralysis. "Shh, shh." He held Nate close and did his best to absorb his tremors. "I'm fine, baby. I'm fine." With every rub of his hands across Nate's back, Logan tried to assure himself Nate was okay too. Wasn't working. "I promise I'm all right. What about you?" Drawing back, he brushed Nate's hair off his face so he could see his eyes. The mist layering the brown, such a clear effort to hold back tears, tore at Logan's heart. "How are you?"

Nate wrapped his hands around Logan's forearms, and his fingertips dug into Logan through three layers of clothes. "They took pictures of me, and they have my clothes, and they're going to look for evidence in my car."

"What 'they'?" For the first time since walking into the apartment, Logan remembered they had an audience. He glanced to the left straight into Canin's curious gaze. Wes stood a bit behind him. "What's going on?"

His arms crossed, Canin put a pinpoint stare full of a million questions straight on Logan. "Nate wouldn't leave the apartment. He was too worried for you. I called a friend to come here."

Right then, Nicole emerged from the back of the apartment with a forensics specialist Logan recognized as one of the best. They had plastic evidence bags, camera, and CSI kit in hand.

"I think we have everything we need for now," Nicole said. "Benny wants to take a look at the car."

Nodding, Canin said, "I'll come with you." He grabbed a set of keys Logan recognized as Nate's off the bar. "Just to observe."

"Sounds good." Nicole paused at Nate and Logan. She gave Logan's arm a gentle squeeze but put her attention on Nate. "I want you to come in and make an official statement tomorrow. Okay?"

Nate nodded. "Can I take a shower now?"

"Since you won't take my advice and go to the hospital, sure." Nicole switched to rubbing Nate's upper arm. "I know it won't be easy but try not to let this attack get into your head too much. That's what the bastard wants." With that, she, Benny, and Canin left the apartment, with a comment from Canin that he would return.

Wes, quiet till now, got up from the couch. "I have the overnight at the hotel"—he shifted his glance between Logan and Nate—"but I can call in if you need me to."

Logan drew Nate back into his embrace. Nate immediately tucked his face against Logan's neck, and Logan never wanted to let the man go. "That's okay, Wes." He made eye contact with the younger man from over Nate's head. "I'm not going anywhere tonight. Nate won't be alone."

"Okay then," Wes replied. "I'll just get my stuff."

As Logan watched Wes get into his heavy coat and strap a messenger bag over his shoulder, a swelling, sweet pain he could not ignore tightened a band around his chest. "Thank you for trying to help Nate reach me. And thank you for thinking to call Canin when you couldn't."

"Sure." Wes dipped his head, but then his gaze strayed to Nate. "Keep him close, Logan. He needs to know you're okay."

"I'm not stepping foot out of this apartment tonight."

Once Wes left, Logan pressed a kiss to the top of Nate's head, assuring him once again everything was all right. Nate finally lifted his face out of hiding. Christ, the man had bruises that made Logan rage, but it was everything around the bruises, the occasional tremble, the light dimmed in his eyes, that gutted Logan.

Logan swallowed thickness and had to clear his throat before he found his voice. "What do you say?" He brushed his lips against Nate's temple and into his hair. "Are you ready to take that shower now?"

An awful sob suddenly wrenched out of Nate. "I'm so embarrassed and ashamed, Logan. When the guy put that gun to the back of my head and pulled the trigger, I was so scared I pissed myself." Each tear that streamed down Nate's bruised cheek cut at Logan everywhere inside. "I-I had to give those clothes to your cop friends. Wes and Canin saw what I did too."

Motherfucking son of a bitch. An inhuman roar threatened to erupt inside Logan. He wanted to run out of this apartment and demand reinstatement to the force so he could track down the fucker who did this to Nate and drag his ass behind bars. Logan ached to do that for Nate with every fiber of his being. That waste of humanity had put humiliation and fear in this beautiful man's eyes and heart, and he had to pay. Right now, though, as much as Logan wanted to maim and kill, Nate didn't need him to go slay a beast on his behalf. Not right now.

Logan wiped at Nate's tears, careful not to apply pressure to his damaged cheek. "Baby," he said as he kissed the bruise, "the first time I saw blood at a crime scene—not even a body, just the blood—the sight and the smell of it made me throw up on my partner. I tried to turn away, but it came too fast, and I got the entire front of his pants and shoes. That apartment was full of people from the job. They all saw what I did." Logan nodded to back up his words while steering Nate toward the hallway to the bathroom. "It happens. You were terrified. I would have been too. Anybody would have been." He switched on the light in the bathroom and guided Nate inside. "With Nicole and Benny, a little piss isn't even on their radar. And Canin and Wes love you too much to ever judge or say a word to another soul. There is no need to be embarrassed." Logan stopped Nate in front of the shower, where Nate stood passively as Logan stripped him out of his sweats, underwear, and T-shirt with as gentle and caring hands as he could. "Let's get you into the shower." Holding Nate with one hand, Logan reached into the stall and got the hot water going. "Once you've washed the day off, you'll start to feel a little bit better."

Nate suddenly took bruising hold of Logan's hand, his eyes still drenched with tears. "Will you stay with me?"

Jesus Christ. Such pain lived in Nate's gaze. It crushed Logan's chest. He couldn't bear to see it.

"Honey." Logan managed to loosen Nate's death grip enough to lift his hand and press a reassuring kiss to it. "I'm gonna do you one better. I'm getting in there with you." He let go and stripped out of his clothing and shoes in record time, leaving all of it, including his coat, in a heap on the floor. "See?" Logan stepped under the spray of water first. "Okay?"

Nate followed, and Logan reached behind him to close the stall door.

"I tried to call you," Nate shared, grabbing Logan's arm. "I got so scared when you didn't answer your phone. The guy said if we didn't stop this case, he would hurt your other leg or maybe kill you like he did Daria and those other girls."

Christ. He's so fucking scared. For me.

"Shh. Shh." Logan dragged the man into his arms again, letting the downpour of hot water shield them from the rest of the world. "It's all right now. Don't think

about that animal.” Unable to stop touching, Logan softly pecked kiss after kiss into Nate’s hair. “I’m sorry I never responded to your calls. My work phone died after I texted you earlier today. We were so busy doing other stuff last night, I never charged it.”

“When you didn’t answer,” Nate mumbled into Logan’s neck, “I couldn’t think. I didn’t know how else to reach you.”

“I’ve never given you my other numbers,” Logan said, growling at himself. “I didn’t think of it, but we’re going to rectify that tonight.”

Nate pulled out of hiding and put a wet, heartbreaking stare on Logan. “I’ll give you all mine too. Okay?”

Logan cuffed his hand around Nate’s neck and dragged him in close. Pressing his lips to Nate’s forehead, he whispered “Absolutely.” He then just held Nate until Logan got his own trembling back under control.

Nate didn’t say much after that. The scars from the physical attack clearly couldn’t outmatch the emotional beating this scare tactic had taken on him. He let Logan tend to him, let Logan wash his body and his hair for him without complaint, and even rinse and dry him off. When Logan saw the black-and-blue marks forming on Nate’s back, he growled again.

Both of them naked, Logan linked their hands and tugged Nate into the bedroom, where Nate let Logan dress him in a fresh T-shirt and sweats. Before propping up the pillows and putting Nate in bed, Logan dressed himself in some of Nate’s comfortable clothes.

Knowing it was probably smart to keep Nate awake for at least a few more hours, just in case of concussion, Logan turned on the TV. Surfing the channels, he found a superhero movie he figured Nate would like based on a stack of comic books he’d noticed on the coffee table in the living room. After cranking up the volume on the TV, Logan then used Nate’s cell phone to text Riley a message to come to Nate’s apartment as soon as he could. Logan wanted to give the guy his keys with a request to pick up a change of clothes in the morning and bring it back here. He then crawled into bed next to Nate, opened his arms, and Nate immediately burrowed into his side. As Logan held Nate, giving the man his body heat, he blinked and blinked until he beat down tears that wanted to fall.

Nate watched the movie for a good half hour without saying a word. Logan knew Nate remained awake by the way he brushed his fingers back and forth across Logan’s belly. It was rhythmic and soothing, and Logan’s stomach went taut with alarm the second it stopped.

“Open your eyes, honey.” Logan pushed himself upright, and in doing so hoisted Nate to sit against the headboard. “You’re probably fine, but I want you to stay awake for a few more hours.” He crawled out of bed and switched on the bedside lamp, throwing an extra wrench into Nate’s desire to sleep. “I’m gonna go get you something with caffeine to drink.”

Although his blinks came slow and heavy, Nate opened his eyes enough to let Logan see the clarity in his gaze.

"You take such good care of me." Nate smiled, finally, and it lifted a two-ton weight off Logan's heart.

Logan leaned down and grazed a kiss against Nate's lips. He had to feel that smile. It had terrified him to think this attack would steal it from this gentle man. "Nowhere near as good as you took care of me." He stole one more quick kiss before standing back up. "I'm going to put coffee on, and I'm going to bring you a soda." He paused at the doorway. "Do you want anything to eat?"

"No thank you." An explosion from the movie thundered in the bedroom, and Nate rolled his head to look at the TV.

After promising he would return soon, Logan trod down the hallway and veered into the kitchen. He grabbed a soda out of the fridge, but the second he lifted his arm to grab a glass, hairs of awareness rose along his spine.

Logan spun and found Canin sitting on the couch watching him. The man's stare drilled itself into Logan's forehead, as if doing so could open a hole and spill out the answers to every question living in his eyes.

Shit. Not exactly how I wanted to do this.

Logan went ahead and crossed to the living room anyway. "Ask your questions." He took a seat in a sleek leather chair and braced his elbows on his knees. "You're entitled."

Canin was a big man, even when sitting, and he had a laconic yet focused way of looking at a person that could make the individual squirm. The beam of that stare trapped Logan right now.

"I'm here because I love Nate like a brother but also because my wife would kill me if I wasn't," Canin began. "I put her on a plane not a half hour before I got the call from Wes. Right now I know Kasey hasn't landed yet, but as soon as she does, I'm gonna have to call her and tell her what happened to Nate. She's going to be incredibly upset and would put the nails in my coffin herself if she found out I'd walked out of this apartment and left Nate alone after what happened to him today."

Logan exhaled steadily, but his heart raced like mad. *Here it goes.* "You don't need to stay," he said. "You have my permission to tell Kasey why."

Canin kept that uncomfortably intense form of attention on Logan. "And why is that?"

Another breath out, and Logan said, "Because Nate is mine now." He looked right back at Canin without blinking. *Oh Christ. I did it.* His stomach had never flip-flopped so much. "It's my right to take care of him just like it's yours to take care of Kasey."

"When did this happen? Is this like a Rhone thing?" Canin asked, lines forming between his brows. "You didn't know you could have these feelings for another man until you met Nate?"

"It's not like Rhone," Logan admitted. *Crap. I have to go full guns here.* "I've always been with men. I just kept it to myself. I had a job that wouldn't allow me to be open. But beyond that"—he shrugged, but the tension knotting his shoulders felt anything but easy—"it wasn't anyone else's right to know."

"Not even your women?" Canin's jaw clenched visibly, and his hand curled into a fist too.

"I was never with Nicole," Logan clarified quickly. "At least not sexually." *Damn it.* He didn't have a choice. He'd put himself into this corner, but he hated telling things to Canin before he'd even had a chance to share them with Nate. "I've never deceived a woman. The few I've been outwardly in relationships with had their own reasons for wanting to be in one with me."

"Jesus Christ. I had no clue." Canin wiped a hand down his face. "I thought I was your best friend, yet I had no inkling of this huge part of your life."

Logan swallowed through the tightness in his throat. "You are my best friend. Don't doubt that."

"But you didn't think you could tell me this," Canin said with an edge in his tone. "You didn't trust me."

Shit. Damn. Christ. Logan scratched his fingers through his hair. "It's not about trust. It's about being private about the people I want to be intimate with and the men I develop feelings for. You never once told me about Kasey," he pointed out, sending a narrow-eyed glare back to Canin. "You wanted her for years, but you never spoke one word of it to me. You wouldn't even admit it when I asked you if you were developing feelings for her."

"It's not the same thing."

"It is the same," Logan argued. "It's just that for me, the gender of my partners is not what you assumed it was. The desire for privacy, the natural inclination to keep my romantic or sexual feelings and interests to myself, is exactly the same as you."

"But I never presented a false image." Canin shot to stand, pointing his finger in Logan's face. "You let me believe you were in love with Nicole. And I met at least two other women you said were your girlfriends in the time we've been friends. It's not the same, Logan"—Canin sent another mutinous glare Logan's way as he sat back down—"and you know it."

Logan's chest ached at the hurt mixed in with the anger icing Canin's pale blue stare. "I'm sorry if you see this as a betrayal. It would kill me if you couldn't look at me and see the same person you always knew, but..." *Fuck.* Logan didn't even know how to articulate these feelings to himself, let alone someone whose opinion and friendship he valued so much.

Looking at Canin without flinching challenged Logan's backbone, but he forced himself to do it. "I've been in a mindset of protecting who I am for more than half my life," he shared. "It just *is* for me. It's how I function. It's how I was able to be a cop and detective for so long without constantly looking over my shoulder and

fearing discovery. As long as I never told anyone, as long as I always kept my relationships separate and private from the rest of my life, then I could breathe. I didn't ever think to tell you because I could never let myself get to that place. For me, the rule was not to tell anybody. Period. It was the only way I could do my job and live. It was never about you." Logan pressed his hands together, as in prayer, silently pleading for Canin's understanding. "Contemplating telling you was simply never a part of my psyche. I couldn't let it be."

Canin shifted forward, mirroring Logan's position. The chill in his eyes melted some and let Logan see his old friend inside. "That's fine for you, and I suppose I understand and respect it. I don't know what it's like to live in a place where you feel like you have to hide a part of who you are, so I'm not gonna tell you that you were right or wrong for doing it. That's not for me to judge. But I fucking will tell you this." As quick as the icy glare had gone away from Canin's gaze, a subzero arctic freeze took its place, washing over Logan's skin with a layer of frost. "Whatever you have going with Nate, you fucking better not try to shove him into a closet with you. I've watched that kid grow into a man and work hard every day to get more comfortable in his skin, so no matter how much history we have between us or how much I value your friendship, I won't let you start something with him in secret or push him into some world of secrecy with you. That will not happen." The emphatic spearing of Canin's finger almost caught Logan in the face. "Not when he's so close to figuring out who he is and to becoming the man he wants to be."

Logan grabbed Canin's finger and shoved it aside. Fire raged through him, and the desire to make his friend understand his position flew from his mind. "You fucking listen good right back, Canin." He surged to his feet to tower over his taller friend. "First, nobody tells me I can't be with Nate. If you try to get between us, I will become someone you don't like, and you won't win. I'm giving you fair warning of that right now. Second"—he snarled and felt like he wanted to bite—"whether you think I'm *out* enough to suit you, I couldn't hide Nate if I tried. When I found out what happened to him today, I lost my shit on the drive over here while I played a thousand awful scenarios in my mind. All I cared about was getting to him, and I didn't give a crap who saw me when I did. The only thing that mattered was seeing him and touching him and holding him so I knew he was okay. You saw that with your own eyes.

"I'm trying here, man." Logan's voice cracked as the thought of losing his best friend combined itself with the overwhelming feelings he had for Nate. "I was trying before this attack happened. For the first time I wanted to, because it's Nate, and because he's different. But I've known I was gay since I was a teenager, and I've been in a mindset to keep it to myself for more than half my life. That's who I am." Logan heaved, hating the swell of emotion that made it hard to breathe. "It's not easy to change and just become comfortable with everyone knowing the truth. I'm thirty-six years old. It doesn't happen overnight."

A shadow fell across Canin, and Logan's heart caught as Nate emerged from the hall. He stepped close and slipped his hand into Logan's. Such earnestness lived in Nate's gaze, and the fact that such sweetness right now bore the marks of

someone else's cruelty stoked new fear and rage in Logan's already volatile emotions.

"You don't have to change anything, Logan," Nate said softly. "I would never ask you to."

Logan moved in front of Nate and cupped his face. Quickly, he found himself drowning in a midnight sea living in Nate's eyes. "It's not a matter of asking, honey. It's a matter of coming to a place where I can't help myself when it comes to you. My body and brain still have a natural inclination to go into protection mode when someone sees me touching you or trying to be tender with you. I get bubbles of panic inside me that my world will come crashing down. I've been hiding for so long the pattern is ingrained in me." He tilted Nate's head to graze kisses on his cheek and forehead, wishing each touch of his lips would fade the painful bruises away. "I'm working to change that with you."

"I know." Nate rubbed his palms up Logan's stomach to his chest and then over his shoulders, and it felt like nothing so much as someone who had been handling and soothing Logan for years. "I believe you, and I trust you. I was there when you kissed me right out on that sidewalk this morning. Canin wasn't."

Logan's chuckle was rough, and as much as it was silly, heat rose to his cheeks as he mentally replayed their antics on the street. "Canin just loves you and wants to make sure you have full respect from whoever you're with. I understand that. It makes me respect him even more"—he chanced a glance at his friend—"even if he can't do the same for me right now."

"I didn't say that." Canin got up and clasped his hand around Logan's shoulder. "I will always respect you, Logan, and my trust in you is without question. I wouldn't have hired you if I didn't. I just needed to make clear that Nate is my brother-in-law, and I have to protect him."

With clearly deliberate moves, Nate took Canin's hand off Logan and moved Canin back one big step. "I love you for wanting to look out for me, Canin. I swear I do. But butt out." Nate moved in front of Logan like a shield. "I can handle Logan. I know what I'm doing."

"Shit." Canin looked over Nate to Logan, mock horror now in his eyes. "Maybe I ought to be looking out for you instead of him."

Canin's teasing released tension from every limb in Logan's body. *He doesn't hate me.* "Maybe so," he answered softly.

Just as Logan wrapped his arms around Nate from behind, the doorbell buzzed through the apartment, swinging everyone's attention to the front door.

"That'll be Riley here for my keys," Logan said. He reluctantly let go of Nate to answer the door. "I want him to bring me some clothes in the morning."

"I heard what happened," Riley said as soon as Logan let him inside the apartment. The guy made a beeline for Nate and gave him an abbreviated one-arm hug. "Are you all right, man?"

With a nod, Nate hugged Riley back. "I'm a lot less shaky now that I know Logan is all right."

"That's good to hear," Riley said. "I don't want to get in your hair. I'll just get Logan's keys and head back to Quinn." Riley turned his attention to Logan and stretched out his hand.

Rather than give Riley his keys, which Logan still had to get from the bathroom anyway, he steered the guy to the couch. "Sit down and let your adrenaline remember what it feels like to run at normal levels. You're doing a great job, but you also need to use that hotel room you're paying for to get some sleep." Looking at the swells of purple under Riley's eyes made Logan want to shake the man. "I know you want to find Bree, but you need to take breaks or you're going to make a mistake. You told me that yourself."

"Agreed," Canin said.

Out of the corner of Logan's eye, he saw Nate slip down the hall.

Canin added, "It won't help if you end up hurting yourself while trying to find your sister."

Riley nodded jerkily. "Understood."

Nate slipped back to Logan's side and handed him his keys. Logan pressed a kiss to Nate's head with a "thanks, babe" just as Riley said, "Logan, do you want to schedule some time in your office tomorrow morning for a quick meeting?" He slid his gaze to Nate. "You rightly have other things on your mind tonight."

A squeeze from Nate drew Logan's attention. "I'm okay," Nate said. He even offered a clearly forced smile. "Don't push anything back because of me. We can do an update right now."

Every time Logan looked at Nate's injuries and into his dark, beautiful, *scared* eyes, an unfathomably powerful need to drag the man into his arms attacked. "Are you sure?" Logan managed to contain himself to brushing his knuckles down Nate's unusually pale cheek. "We don't have to."

"I want to." Nate nuzzled into Logan's hand, pressing a kiss to the back, but then stepped away and sat down in the chair Logan had recently vacated. "It'll help me feel normal again."

Canin settled into the couch. "I'm going to sit in on this to save Logan a progress meeting tomorrow."

"As long as Nate is okay," Logan said, "then let's do it." He immediately took to walking the length of the living room to clear his mind. "You shoot first, Riley. Get us going."

"A-all right." Riley slid a quick glance Canin's way, swallowing visibly before putting his attention back on Logan. "With the exception of the editor-in-chief, my conversations with the other journalism students confirmed none of them knew Daria was the one writing the exposé articles." With another nervous look toward his intimidating temporary boss, Riley cleared his throat and said, "I believe it's a dead end and not worth taking up any more of our time."

"Agreed," Logan said, happy to back up his probie in front of Canin. "We'll check that off the whiteboard tomorrow. What about the surveillance tapes? Did anything else good show up?"

Pink crept up into Riley's hairline. "I didn't get back to that yet. I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry." Logan came to a stop in front of Riley, the leather-covered coffee table between them. "Convince me. Tell me what you were doing instead and why you felt it was more important than the tapes."

Frowning, Riley steepled his fingers and tapped them against his lips. "I don't know why I think it's crucial precisely. I just know the more I played over my conversation with Jackson Roth, the more I thought there might be something to it. I still think the guy is full of shit, and there's something not right about *him* specifically I can't figure, but something in his voice when he was talking about the Sarna Imports stuff had truth in it. He wasn't selling the cool and suave investigator act during that portion of our conversation. I think he had something legit in the middle of all the crap, so I went back to talk to him again."

"Any luck?" Nate asked. The interest and focus in his eyes helped Logan breathe easier. "Did his assistant let you in this time?"

"I didn't even bother to try." A gleefully wicked grin slipped out of Riley for just a tic, and a matching gleam lit his hazel eyes. "I waited for Jackson until he came outside, and then I slid right in next to him when he was on his way to his car."

Logan snorted. He couldn't help it. "I bet Jackson loved that."

"It made him jump a little." Riley shrugged but there was a little of the devil in the gesture. "It was fun."

"Did you get anything more out of him?" Logan asked, drawing them back to the case.

"It's still not clear. It's like he knows something, but he doesn't know he knows, if that makes sense." Shifting forward, Riley began using his fingertip on the coffee table surface, as if to attempt to connect dots. "Okay, so Jackson says a Sarna employee let slip that the financial numbers match the numbers in the import product files, yet something about the figures was definitely off. He couldn't figure out why. Now that kind of stuff wasn't exactly part of the Roth Agency's security contract, but it still implied there could be employee embezzling, so they felt it their duty to look into it. So Jackson says he goes to set up another meeting with the whistleblower because he wants to have this guy talk to Roth's financial guy, but all of a sudden this Sarna whistleblower doesn't know anything anymore." Riley put a big X across his invisible diagram. "He's as cheery as a sunny day, has never been happier, and all is good at Sarna. Right after that, Sarna fires the Roth Agency and eventually hires Quinn. That's all Jackson knows. Or possibly more accurately, all he'll tell me."

"What do you think, Nate?" Canin asked before Logan could. "Could the Sarnas be cooking the books themselves and paying off an employee to shut him up?"

"They live a big lifestyle," Nate replied, "and I don't think they're above it. But it's their company." His brow furrowed Canin's way. "They aren't beholden to shareholders or even a partner. If they want the money, they can just take it. It's theirs."

"But you want to look healthy in order for sellers and buyers to work with you," Canin explained. "If I'm bringing you an artifact or rare piece of jewelry to sell, and I'm trusting you to find me a buyer, I need to know your business is in good shape and that you're not living so far beyond your means that you could collapse at any minute. In a sense, my reputation in this import/export world depends on yours."

"Right." Nate went on to explain the fight he'd overheard between the Sarnas earlier and what Jennie had told him about who was now in charge.

"More important to our case," Riley wondered aloud, "did any of this go down while Daria was working at Sarna part-time? We now know her secret interest in rooting out what she perceives to be wrongdoers." He let a *holy fuck* look settle in on Canin, Nate, and Logan one at a time. "Is there any chance Daria stumbled on this possible insider fraud and thought an employee was stealing from her family? Could she have been investigating this in addition to the missing runaways?"

"Crap." Logan growled and started moving with a purpose again. "I hate that Jackson Roth had something. Riley, you stay on this angle. You go at Jackson one more time. And, Nate, give it a day so it isn't too suspicious, but find a reason to visit Sarna Imports's offices again. Jesus"—Logan tunneled his fingers into his hair, yanking the strands—"I can't believe how many fucking grenades might have been under one young woman's feet at a single time. There are so many people who could have killed Daria, each with their own reason."

Nate snagged Logan's T-shirt on his next pass, tugging with urgency. "But that man in the car today told me he would kill you like he did Daria and the other girls if we didn't back off." Tremors entered Nate's voice once again. "That says our theory of a serial killer is the right track."

The fear in Nate's tone immediately prompted Logan to kneel in front of his man. "Which is exactly why I don't believe that anymore." He dipped down and pressed kisses to each of Nate's knuckles, needing the extra contact. "Not that he hurt you—I believe that, and I swear I'll fucking kill the bastard for it. But how many serial murderers would threaten a person in the manner this guy did to you? It sounds like we touched a nerve somewhere, and someone is trying to steer us in the wrong direction."

Light suddenly brought out the chocolate in Nate's eyes. "The person who attacked me also called you my boyfriend. The only reason I can think anyone would call you that is if they saw us kissing this morning."

"Shit." Logan wanted to ram his head into a wall for his sheer rookie stupidity. "I felt someone watching us this morning, but I assigned it to Jamie and a general nervousness because I'd never kissed a man in public before. I should have known

what I was feeling was my instinct and not automatically attributed it to discomfort in a new situation.”

“Who knew you’d be looking for runaways today, Nate?” Riley asked.

“Logan did,” Nate answered. “You did. Everyone at Quinn did.” Logan’s headache grew along with Nate’s list. “Everyone at Haven too, I imagine, since I asked the councilors and kids where to search. Plus, whoever any one of those people I talked to might have also turned around and told too.”

“We can at least eliminate Pierce Lyndsey,” Logan said with a grimace. As much as he needed to narrow down the suspects, he hated crossing that asshole’s name off his list. “I don’t think he could have gotten back to Chicago with enough time to figure out where you were and go attack you.”

“I did go back to the offices to drop off Jamie for her interview,” Nate pointed out. “If whoever attacked me was watching Quinn’s offices, they could have followed me after that and attacked when the opportunity hit.”

“It eliminates Pierce but not necessarily Declan,” Logan said. It left a nasty taste in his mouth, but he went ahead and explained what had gone down in Daria’s apartment earlier today. As the ugly story unfolded, everyone winced as if they’d each so stupidly bent over for Pierce’s fucking too. “Declan was a dangerous mix of mad, hurt, and betrayed. If he couldn’t take it out on Pierce, who knows where he might have turned that anger? He’s clearly not thinking rationally. He hasn’t since his sister disappeared, and possibly before that.”

Nate rubbed his thumb into the seam lining the arm of the leather chair. “I don’t think Declan would hurt me,” he murmured. “I think he believes and values that I’m trying to find his sister.”

The empathy Nate felt for Declan lived on his face. It nipped at Logan’s desire to make this man happy at all costs. “We don’t know if Declan has an alibi, honey.” Logan squeezed Nate’s knee, a plea for understanding in the touch. “I know you want to, but we can’t rule him out. I still think he’s capable of having done something to Daria with Pierce. If he did, the two of them now have some twisted bond where they each need the other to survive this investigation.”

“If they do,” Riley said, frowning, “that’s gonna implode very soon. You don’t mock someone so cruelly after they just let you fuck them without paying an eventual price for it.”

“Let me talk to Declan again,” Nate said. He covered Logan’s hand and squeezed. “I can feel him out. I’ll do that tomorrow before I go out looking for Tracy again.”

A ball of scorching heat roared through Logan’s entire being, leaving a line of smoking embers in its wake. “No way,” Logan ordered. *If he’s out there, he’ll get attacked again.* Images of Nate left in his car to suffocate rushed fast and furious through Logan’s mind, each horrible ending crushing harder and harder on his chest. “No the fuck way.” Logan couldn’t breathe, but he scraped out each word as a

raw command. "You are not going out by yourself looking to talk to runaways again. That is not even up for a discussion. I am in charge, and I say no."

Every inch of visible skin on Nate flushed such a deep crimson Logan thought the man might spontaneously explode. "Don't you fucking dare," Nate uttered in a lethally soft voice Logan had never heard in this man before. "Not with me." With one more look that would have put Logan six feet under if such things could happen, Nate got up and left the room.

Fuck.

Chapter Fourteen

Logan closed his eyes and counted to ten, but when he finished and looked again, Canin and Riley still remained in Nate's living room, and Nate still did not.

He went ahead and silently added *shit* and *damn* to his previous *fuck*, but the foul words did nothing to ease the chaos swirling inside him.

This is why you always keep some distance in relationships. If you didn't fucking care so damn much, you wouldn't have shot your mouth off without thinking first. Law five: Never let a man become important enough to break you.

Only here Logan stood, one night of sex under his belt, one violent incident on his lover, and Nate already had Logan tied up in knots.

Exhaling, Logan wiped at the tension bracketing his mouth. "This is why you don't want me to be with him," he said, his eyes on Canin. "Because you know I'll fuck it up."

"Not even close," Canin replied. The bastard fucking looked like he fought back a grin. "The fact that you just screwed up so royally actually makes me feel a whole lot better about the two of you together. Some free advice, though. Don't let that fester." He jerked his head toward the hallway. "The Jordan siblings have a way of putting up a wall if you don't move in and fix a problem real quick."

"Not Nate," Logan murmured, anger at himself roiling in his gut. "He doesn't know how to hide himself from me. Not since we started working together anyway." And that was part of the problem. Nate's very sincerity and lack of guise only heightened his appeal in Logan's eyes. *Makes him that much more important to me.*

Riley grabbed his coat off the back of the couch. "If you give me your keys," he said, glancing at Logan, "I'll go, and we'll all feel a whole lot less awkward with one less person here."

"I'll second that." Canin got up and walked to the door as well. "When I call Kasey, I'll try to convince her Nate is resting and not to bother him tonight, but I make no promises." He grabbed his jacket out of the front closet while Logan handed his apartment keys over to Riley. "It's all-around smarter to just take care of this fast."

Logan nodded in place of saying goodbye. As he locked up, his mind wandered ahead to Nate in the bedroom and his absolute fury at Logan's decree. Logan rubbed his leg as soreness flared. It was fucking ridiculous, but he swore it weighed him down right now because he was out of sync with Nate. When Nate had allowed Logan to hold him and clean him up and put him in bed, Logan hadn't processed a

single twinge or hurt in his hip or thigh. Now, it throbbed with its own heartbeat and made his steps to the bedroom heavy.

What the fuck am I supposed to say? Logan had never excelled at explaining himself or at giving apologies.

Turned out Logan didn't have to say a word. The second he stepped foot in Nate's bedroom, Nate whirled on him, his eyes full of black fire. "Fuck you, Logan. It's hard enough for me to fit in at Quinn and do this job every day without feeling like an imposter and like I don't know what the hell I'm doing when I'm surrounded by people who get a hard-on at the thought of security and investigative work. But I try. I do my goddamn best, but it's tough for me. What I don't need"—he ran up and jabbed at Logan's chest, passion putting force behind the move—"is someone who's supposed to have my back ordering me, *in front of my fucking boss and coworker*, not to do my job and treating me like an inferior colleague. You humiliated me and implied I wasn't capable of doing the work." Nate pushed again, shoving Logan until Logan hit the wall. "How do you fucking think that made me look in front of Canin and Riley?" He poked again, and each ounce of his anger fueled Logan's. "How, Logan? How?"

"I don't think it made you look like anything!" Logan roared right into Nate's face. "I think it made it look like I'm fucking in love with you and don't know how the hell to handle it!"

The fiery color drained from Nate's face, and he stumbled back until he hit the edge of the bed. "What?"

"Shit." The word came out of Logan like a jagged blade. *I didn't just tell him I loved him like that.* "You keep doing this to me." Logan's heart pumped with out-of-control speed. He knew he needed to stop running his mouth, but Nate sat right in front of him, so beautiful and wonderful and frightening, and the words kept spewing. "You get me all riled up, and I do things I don't normally do, and I blurt shit out without thinking because all I can do is feel when I'm around you. I hate that I can't exhibit better control, which is why I have these laws. They've served me well for so long, but you've annihilated every one of them. You are so completely outside the boundaries of what I know. I don't have a damn bit of experience in how to deal with you, and that is why I came on so strong in the living room and said what I did. I didn't mean it like it came out, and I'm sorry it happened in front of other people and embarrassed you but"—Logan's chest heaved, and the more he looked at Nate, the more he shook all over—"Christ, I see these bruises and that red line around your neck, and all I want to do is protect you. I do that in the way I know how, which I know makes me come off like an asshole, and I even am an asshole a lot but—"

Nate shot up and slapped his hand over Logan's mouth. He then immediately soothed the rough action by rubbing the pad of his thumb across Logan's lips. "I love you back, Logan." Nate's dark eyes somehow shone brighter as he whispered that vow.

Oh Jesus. Jesus. Logan wanted to say something, but his chest squeezed too tight and he didn't have any words.

As if Nate knew Logan needed more time, the softest, sweetest smile, along with a little nod, backed up Nate's declaration, and Logan almost lost his legs.

"I understand exactly how scared you are," Nate went on, "because I was just as terrified for you when that bastard told me he would come for you. I still am scared. I know fear prompted what you said in the living room, and I'm sorry I got so pissed so fast. I reacted and got hot without thinking. I have personal stuff that triggers my insecurities with Quinn, but I swear I know you didn't do anything with the intention of embarrassing me."

Logan grabbed Nate's head and tilted it back for a press of his lips. "I swear I didn't." He grazed their mouths again, losing himself in the scrape of skin. "I would never do that. I promise."

Nate covered Logan's hands and dragged them down between their bodies. "I believe you."

"Make love to me," Logan begged, slipping back into that exposed place of need. Breaking free of Nate's hold, he couldn't stop touching Nate all over, but the contact wouldn't sink in and warm the cold inside. "I don't think I can believe you're okay until I feel you inside me."

"Shh. Shh. It's gonna be okay." Nate brushed kisses over every inch of Logan's face, soothing him with words and actions that had worked so well when Logan had employed them with Nate just a short time ago.

Wait. Logan went rigid all over. "I'm sorry." He clasped Nate's wrists and pushed him a measure away. "Someone attacked you today." He couldn't help it; he reached out and grazed the back of his hand down Nate's bruised cheek. "I'm supposed to be taking care of you, not the other way around."

Nate turned his head to kiss Logan's wrist. "I promise there is no better medicine for me than making love to you. Aside from that"—he playfully shoved Logan onto the bed, teasing desire sparking in his stare—"it's gonna do a damn good job of keeping me awake." Nate peeled off his shirt, only wincing a little as he tossed it aside. "Isn't that your primary job?" He came down on top of Logan and licked into his mouth. "Keeping me awake?"

Logan lifted up and snagged Nate's lips with his, aching for this man to his core. "You're too good to me." His voice sounded like it came out through gravel. "I don't deserve someone as thoughtful and loving as you."

A soft sigh from Nate washed warmth over Logan's face. "We're here, Logan. Together. And we both want to be." He played his fingertips along Logan's hairline in the gentlest manner. "So that must mean we deserve each other."

Oh Jesus Christ, baby. How I love you. "Finish getting naked," Logan ordered as he shoved at his own underwear and sweats. "I need you so fucking much." Logan's vulnerability attacked him beyond his ability to hide. His throat scratched

with the desire to scream or cry or yell, and losing himself in sex allowed him to do that without appearing as if he was losing his shit.

After watching Nate push down his sweats, Logan rolled over and shoved a pillow under his hips, offering his ass. “Fuck me, Nate.” He reached out and twisted his hands into the bedding. “Make me feel it. Do it hard.”

“Let me get you ready, love.” Sliding his hands under the back of Logan’s T-shirt, Nate ran his palms up either side of Logan’s spine, gathering the fabric to his armpits and over his head. “You said it has been a long time for you.”

Logan reached back and clutched at Nate, imploring with his hold. “Just a couple of fingers for the lube.” With a bump up, he rubbed his ass into Nate’s cock, gasping as the already rigid shaft slid into his crack and grazed his hole. “Do it fast. I don’t want any more than that.”

More soothing assurances that Nate would make everything okay reached into Logan’s ear. Nate stretched across the bed to the nightstand. After coming back with a box of condoms and tube of lubricant, Nate brushed his mouth into Logan’s hair, kissing his scalp down to his nape, promising everything would be beautiful and perfect and everything Logan needed.

Nate’s solid weight on top of Logan, and his lips leaving Logan’s skin alive with humming life everywhere he kissed, did nothing to settle Logan. “Please.” Logan grabbed the condom box and dumped the rubbers out, handing one back to Nate. He dug the side of his face into the sheets as he snatched the lube and popped the cap for Nate too. “Don’t play with me tonight. I just need you inside me.”

“Okay, love,” Nate whispered. The sound of the condom package tearing open had Logan leaking early ejaculate into the pillow. Then the shock of cool lube coated his pucker. Nate added, “Take a breath,” just as he forced one long, slick finger past Logan’s tight ring into his ass.

Oh fuck. Logan bit the bedding to stifle a guttural moan. His entrance flamed with its first stretching after such a long time out of use, and his passage awoke with a flurry of spasms he could not control.

Not giving Logan any time to adjust—*thank you for understanding, baby*—Nate quickly twisted his embedded digit inside Logan, touching over every fucking centimeter of Logan’s confused, fluttering chute. Nate then wedged a second finger through Logan’s burning entrance and eased it inside his ass to the hilt. Just as efficiently as Nate had pushed in, he eased his two fingers out and then slid them back in, forcing a groan out of Logan as his body fought to relearn this mating process. Nothing Nate did felt good precisely, but Logan needed it, and something beyond the realm of pleasure inside him knew it.

Yes. Please. Logan squeezed his eyes shut and pushed his tail end back to steal even more of Nate’s invasion. *It has been so long.* Logan bit his lip, stifling another sound as the first pleasurable contraction squeezed in his rectum and pulled at his balls. He rolled his hips as best he could into Nate’s finger-fucking, begging in every way he knew for this man to master him. *Give it to me.*

Nate pressed his lips into the small of Logan's back, making Logan shiver. A strong sure hand rode up Logan's spine to massage his neck. "Talk to me, Logan," Nate said, his mouth still resting on Logan's sensitive flesh. "Tell me how you're doing." As he spoke, he stroked right over Logan's sweet spot, sending his channel into a frenzy and chills down his legs.

"Oh shit..." Logan's toes curled into the bedding as he took another feathering brush across his prostate. "It's good, Nate." *Oh Jesus. Jesus.* Logan gritted his teeth as Nate corkscrewed those two fingers inside him, working his tunnel like a pro. "I want it." Blinking heavily, Logan pulled his face out of hiding and looked over his shoulder to find Nate's intense, *loving* stare waiting for him. The dark beauty Logan saw in Nate cracked his voice. "Fuck me."

Nate hushed Logan with gentle command, and with careful action withdrew his fingers from Logan's ass. In seconds, Nate covered Logan, reaching between their bodies to fit the head of his cock to Logan's throbbing entrance. With first contact, Logan choked on the sensation—*so close to happening*—and Nate reached out along Logan's arms to twine their fingers together, making them both tremble.

The grip Nate put on Logan's fingers might have crushed a man with smaller hands, but Logan welcomed the bruising force. Nate put his lips to Logan's cheek, whispered, "I've loved you forever, Logan," and nothing else existed. That was until—*oh Jesus God in Heaven, baby*—Nate flexed his hips and sank his cock all the way into Logan's ass.

Logan moaned low and deep. It felt like his ass opened up in welcome to accept Nate inside. Once Nate had buried every inch to the root, Logan's passage closed around him in a squeezing vise. Nate pulled out through the clamping fist Logan's chute put on his prick, moaning as every thick inch sparked friction in Logan's ass on its way out. Leaving Logan empty and begging for just a heartbeat, Nate pushed back in with a sharper, less controlled thrust. Fiery discomfort still burned around Logan's entrance, but his grunt was one of pure base pleasure at feeling Nate invade his very being.

"Oh God...Logan...Logan." Nate pumped his cock into Logan a third and fourth time. "Motherfucking God." Letting go of one of Logan's hands, Nate burrowed his fingers into Logan's hair and pressed their faces even closer together. "You feel so fucking tight and hot." He breathed heavily into Logan's cheek, dampening the skin. Nate's eyes, open wide, held the depth of polished onyx. As if he couldn't control himself, Nate cursed as he pierced his shaft into Logan again, stretching Logan so fucking good. They both clamped their jaws as Nate roughly asked, "Am I hurting you?"

"Ahh, fuck no...so good." Logan growled, trying his best to push his ass back into each drilling from Nate's cock, wanting with everything in him to feel overpowered by this man. "Don't stop." He twisted his hand in Nate's hold and clasped them together palm to palm, gripping with all his power as Nate knifed into his ass with a pointed shot and took him to the hilt, ending with a rough grind into Logan's stretched hole.

"Fuck me hard," Logan pleaded without censor. "Oh shit, shit, just like that..." Turning his head, Logan bit blindly, nipping Nate's chin as Nate picked up speed and pounded Logan's ass with more force. Each strike from Nate into Logan's chute clearly inflated the man's confidence in the mating. He shoved Logan into the bed with his fucking time and again.

Sticky sweat attached Nate's chest to Logan's back, and each thrust of Nate's hips rubbed his smooth skin against Logan's inner thighs in the most toe curling manner.

"So fucking hot and tight, Logan," Nate murmured, his voice full of raw awe. He darted his tongue into Logan's ear and then swirled around the shell to lick a line down the slope of his shoulder. "Never felt anything like you in my life." As Nate sank into Logan again, this time stuffing Logan full with the slowest damn easing in of his cock, he squeezed Logan's hand and pressed a soft kiss to his shoulder blade. "Never thought you'd let me love you like this."

"Nate...Nate. Oh fuck, baby." Emotion overwhelmed Logan, making him moan relentlessly in a way he never had when taking a cock before. With his ass filled to capacity, Logan's prick stiffened to a painful degree. His nuts grew more sensitive with every slap of skin, and his rectum clenched in a brutal hold around Nate's buried thickness. Logan groaned again, his cheek planted in the pillow, but reveled in Nate's chin right there on his shoulder.

Somehow, Logan found a blur of eye contact through the closeness and shadows and locked onto Nate's desire-filled stare. "Make me feel you inside me forever."

Nate's breath caught audibly. The motion rolled through his whole body and slid his cock deliciously within Logan's flaming channel. "You don't have to imprint this one time." Nate tugged on Logan's hair, lowering his voice as he went in for a kiss. He teased his lips against the edge of Logan's mouth with barely there contact. "I'll be here, with you, for as long as you want me." His forehead came to rest on Logan's temple. He put his mouth right at Logan's ear and softly said, "That offer includes forever."

Everything inside Logan coalesced in a firestorm at a light-speed rate. His lips parted, and he tried to utter Nate's name, but nothing came out. With his entire body twisting into one supercharged coil, Logan latched onto Nate's mouth in a clinging, desperate kiss as the spring inside him twisted tighter and tighter, winding him torturously toward release. His ass sucked a vacuum all around Nate's embedded cock, the sensation so insane it tore a rough shout out of Logan and straight into Nate.

Nate groaned and jerked on top of Logan, brokenly uttering, "Oh God, I feel you coming around me" as another sharp contraction inside Logan suffocated Nate's cock. Nate panted, "It's so beautiful."

Logan kissed Nate with everything in him, needing the contact, terrified of losing himself completely as orgasm continued slamming through him with the power of a tornado. Logan's ass contracted again, and Nate drove into him with one

final thrust, shuddering as release hit him too. Logan bucked beneath Nate with a bone-jarring jolt, and he cried out as pain shot through his hip and thigh. The sharp, knifing stab burned like a motherfucker, but he pumped his rigid, ultrasensitive cock into the pillow repeatedly in the throes of a second release, soaking the fabric with line after line of cum.

Still heaving and trying to regain his breath in the aftermath, Logan attempted to push up, but Nate kept him pinned to the bed with his solid frame.

With his face buried in the curve of Logan's neck, Nate muttered, "Don't move a muscle," just before he nipped at Logan's nape. "I'm not done with you yet."

Nate began creating a roadmap of kisses across Logan's shoulders and upper back, and immediately started stirring recently sated body parts. Logan shuddered as Nate brushed his lips and sipped at perspiration dotting his flesh, and he sucked in new air with every hint of nubby contact from the man's nimble tongue. Nate let go of Logan to add his fingers to the mix, grazing the pads over skin in a way that raised the hairs all over Logan's body. As Nate licked and kissed his way down Logan's spine, Logan burrowed his face into the pillow, stifling yet another moan. His cock twitched in its fight to get hard again. When Nate reached the cleft of Logan's ass, he took a gentle bite and then blew cool air on it. The bedding softly rustled between Logan's thighs, and instantly thereafter material brushed down Logan's crease and across his still-pulsating ring.

"Shit...oh shit." A second rub of fabric over Logan's tender hole shot every nerve ending in his ass to new life. Logan couldn't help it. He drew up to his knees, arching his back inward and sticking his buttocks in the air. "What are you doing, baby?" Logan knew what he wanted, but he didn't dare hope. Not right now. Not in this moment.

Logan felt rather than saw Nate's smile. The imprint fucking branded the top curve of his left butt cheek. "Finishing what I started this morning," Nate murmured. "I might not have a lot of experience"—he spread Logan's buttocks and licked his way down the crack—"but I don't think I should leave my man hungry for something he loves." With that, Nate flicked his tongue back and forth over Logan's entrance, racing heightened awareness to the recently used muscle.

Oh, shit. Goddamn motherfucking son of a bitch. Nate continued to tease his tongue all around Logan's pucker, and with a hoarse noise he couldn't stifle, Logan shamelessly pushed into the contact. Nobody had ever rimmed Logan after fucking him, and the sharpened, extra sensitivity to his recently taken asshole and passage increased the sensations a hundredfold. Logan already craved this brand of kiss more than he liked his partners knowing, and Nate somehow figuring it out and making it better and more intimate by licking him at this moment shredded what little reserve Logan had left.

"Fucking do it. Do it." Every guttural moan Logan released sounded less and less human. He circled his ass into Nate's face, mindless of whether the other man wanted it, or to how the motion enhanced the tightness growing in his leg. "Eat me raw."

Nate growled, his face buried between Logan's buttocks. He smacked Logan's ass and then held him wide open again, switching from fluttering his tongue to full-on sucking, to finally probing at Logan's hole. Logan encouraged Nate with base, coarse language, and Nate accommodated with every swat, lick, and piercing he did to Logan's fluttering ring, all the while murmuring noises that made it seem as if he enjoyed it as much as Logan did.

Muscles Logan had forgotten he even possessed strained with tension as he held himself a rigid entity for Nate to attack. Just when Logan didn't think he could even breathe anymore, let alone handle the pleasure Nate so freely offered, Nate pricked with his tongue again and slipped it inside Logan's ass. *Oh Jesus. Jesus.* Logan let loose another shout that scratched his throat. *Yes.* Nate stabbed just into Logan's body again and again, working each of the countless nerve endings there into a wild frenzy. The action swirled Logan down into a vortex of pure desire where nothing else mattered. Nate flicked and sucked Logan's tender hole and then moaned before nudging his tongue into Logan's sensitized ass once more. Every move was drenched in such intimacy they quickly catapulted Logan toward his endgame.

"Help me." Writhing from top to bottom, shaking out of control, Logan shoved his hand between his legs to grab his straining cock. Just as Logan wrapped his hand around his dick and pulled, Nate sank his tongue into Logan's passage again, fucking him in a way that made Logan howl with the need to tear out of his own skin. "Oh Christ, baby." Logan yanked himself with ruthless intent, pain and pleasure all becoming one. "It hurts so fucking good."

Nate bit at the inner curve of Logan's ass and then ordered him to roll over. He helped Logan make the transition to his back, and for the first time Logan got a full look at the equal lust, desire, and need deepening the color in Nate's eyes. Kneeling between Logan's thighs, Nate covered Logan's hand with his, and in doing so added his strength to the handjob. His gaze burning with intensity, Nate then dipped down and pressed the gentlest kiss against the largest scar gnarling Logan's hip.

A jolt and cry escaped Logan, and he buried his fingers in Nate's hair. *Oh Jesus. Jesus.* Nate continued to give loving attention to Logan's scars, and unexpected pressure built behind Logan's eyes. His chest constricted with the sweetest shock of terrible consuming love. *No.*

Instinct had Logan digging the back of his head into the pillow and increasing the pace of each stroke over his cock, shooting all focus into the physical pleasure in jerking off, something no man could deny. Nate kept his hand in the mix, making sure every inch of Logan's shaft and balls received constant contact. Soon Logan groaned low and swished his ass into the bedding as every bit of blood in his body rushed to his penis and somehow had him stiff as a spike again.

Once Nate mapped the entirety of Logan's damaged hip and thigh with grazing kisses, he worked his way up the inside of Logan's leg, easing him open once more. He licked at Logan's pucker, and Logan sucked in a breath as the teasing had his hole and chute squeezing for another taking. Denying Logan that, Nate moved

up and flicked his tongue over Logan's taint, playing with Logan there just enough to make him thrash and beg, and then licked higher to—*oh fuck*—his balls. Right on the razor's edge, Logan bit his lip, tasting blood as he suffered through the joyous torment of Nate tonguing his nuts. Nate slipped each orb past his lips for the shortest fucking suck, just enough to remind Logan how damn good it felt to have his balls in the wet warmth of a man's mouth, but then took it away before Logan could get totally lost in the pleasure.

The second Nate released Logan's left nut, he used the flat of his tongue and forged a damp path up to Logan's root, where he grazed his teeth around the furry base.

"Christ, baby." Logan jerked, spitting out pearls of early seed, but Nate kept right on going. Nate ended the handjob and trailed a line up the underside of Logan's cock with his tongue. Logan panted as he watched, barely able to catch his breath. "You're killing me," he said in a rough tone, unsure if he wanted this to stop or beg for it to last forever.

Nate looked up at Logan with the sexiest, wicked gleam of a man learning his power. "I don't think I am." He licked around Logan's glans, making Logan pump out more beads of precum. "You look pretty stoic to me." With one lazy blink, Nate parted his lips and went down on Logan in one smooth motion, swallowing his cock nearly all the way to the goddamn base.

Son of a mother. On the waves of such exquisite, mind-blowing pleasure, Logan snarled and tore into the sheets to cover the hoarse cry that wanted to break free. Forget the nerve endings that shrieked for more within the confines of Nate's wonderful mouth, begging him to let go and unload endlessly down Nate's throat. Logan had experience holding back on a blowjob. But good Christ. Nate's beautiful, dark gaze held his as he bobbed up and down on Logan's dick, and the sight of that incredible mouth wrapped around Logan's cock swelled his nuts to painful proportions. Every bit of Logan's body screamed at him to let go and fly into the sharpest, most incredible orgasm he'd ever known. At the same time, the hot determination in Nate's eyes spurred the combative beast in Logan who thrived on conflict and a challenge.

Logan couldn't produce an easy smile on the best of days, and right now one was impossible. Still, he forced himself to loosen his grip on Nate's hair and brush his fingers through the strands as if in the midst of a picnic on a sunny Sunday afternoon. "Blow me all night." Logan spoke through clenched teeth in his efforts not to lose his shit, but he would not break first. "You won't make me come."

After letting Logan's length slide from his mouth, Nate groaned again, something downright sexy, and weakened Logan's will. With one last lick across the tip, Nate crawled up Logan and plastered them together torso to torso. One reach between their bodies lined up their cocks, and a second move had Nate stretching Logan's hands above his head with Nate's twined within, holding him in place.

Looking into Logan's eyes, not glancing away or hiding a bit of what showed in his own, Nate began a slow easy grind. He rubbed their scorching erections into one

another with such precise pressure and full glides Logan would have thought this man fully aware of each of Logan's arousal buttons for many years.

Breathing became a tangible thing for Logan with every slow thrust Nate delivered, and the constant touch of rigid shaft against shaft put chinks in Logan's reserve. Finding himself captivated and captured in his lover's stare chipped away at Logan in a much deeper place, one that had nothing to do with sexual release. The second challenge became the one Logan feared he could not beat. *You have to.*

In an effort to take control, Logan twined his legs with Nate's and tried to roll the man onto his back. They stopped on their sides instead, and to top that, Nate wound up encasing Logan's legs instead of the other way around. His eyes fucking twinkled. He continued to rock his groin into Logan's, and Logan scowled and stole a nipping kiss in an effort to distract himself from the incredible beauty laying so close to him.

"Friction is an amazing thing, but it won't make me lose it." Logan's voice hardly gave away his strain. "You think you're a stud and so goddamn clever and cute," he muttered, snagging another kiss. "A rock star, just like I pinned on you."

Nate untangled one hand and brought it down to caress Logan's cheek. His grin was a small one, but it latched itself right around Logan's heart. "I think you're stunning and wonderful, Logan." He switched to looking at his fingers, as if in wonder, as he let the pads glance across Logan's brow, cheekbone, and lips. He finally came back to eye contact and whispered in a rough tone, "And I'm so lucky to get to love you."

Shit. Logan's chest heaved, and his throat went tight on an onslaught of emotion. "Jesus, man." He grabbed a fistful of Nate's hair and dragged their mouths together. "I fucking love you too."

Their lips met, clinging and full of need, stifling their twin cries as they kept their mouths fused together on a shared release. Nate curled his hand around Logan's neck to hold him close, and Logan knew he stung the hell out of Nate's scalp with the grip he had on the man's hair, but he could not let go. Logan jerked with every jetting line of ejaculate he dumped on Nate's belly and trembled with each hot spurt of seed that coated his stomach from Nate. Logan absorbed the shivers rocking through Nate too.

Eyes closed, they breathed in unison for a long time in the aftermath, their mouths still touching but not so desperate now. Their bodies moved together as if they worked as one unit, even though Nate had not reentered Logan's ass. They held each other close, so right away Logan sensed when Nate slipped into a shallower breathing pattern and the tension started leaving his body.

Logan immediately opened his eyes and found Nate's still closed. *He likes to hibernate after sex.* Since nobody was looking, Logan let a little smile slip free. "You need to stay awake, honey." The bruises on Nate's face, neck, and back were not lost on Logan. "Give me a few more hours at least."

"I'm not sleeping," Nate replied, a half grin now teasing his lips. "I'm mentally replaying the magnificence of what just happened."

"Don't do that." Rolling onto his back with a groan, Logan went to adjust his cock but thought the better of touching himself after coming so much in such a short span of time. He propped a couple of pillows behind his head instead. "You might be able to get it up again, but I won't."

Finally opening his eyes, Nate stayed on his side but shifted to rest his head in his hand. "Then talk to me. Will you tell me about Nicole?" He paused to chew on his nail, but then curled that hand, put it on the bedding, and met Logan's gaze again. "How did she end up as your girlfriend for so long? And I don't need or want a complete history of your exes, but can you at least tell me about Ryan?"

Fuck. Logan exhaled as tension automatically pulled his muscles taut. *You told him you love him. And you meant it. You can't do that without giving up important information about your life.*

Logan breathed and forced himself to keep looking at Nate. "Nicole is a stunningly beautiful woman, as you know. From the minute she entered our precinct, still a uniform back then, men hit on her left and right. It made it tough for her to feel like she was being taken seriously. History proves she probably wasn't. And I don't know how"—words rushed out of Logan a bit too fast—"but she pegged my sexuality almost from the start. She needed a way to come to work every day with an unspoken sign that said I'M TAKEN. DON'T TOUCH. She needed a man in the precinct—one who was respected and the other cops would take seriously—and I was the only thing that would work for her. Since I sometimes needed dates for functions, having a girlfriend helped me out a hell of a lot too."

Nate nodded. "You both needed cover," he said, nodding again, which Logan took as encouragement. "That makes sense."

"Absolutely." No judgment lived in Nate's stare. Just curiosity and caring. Logan found himself curling on his side to face Nate, craving the warmth and intimacy. "As for Ryan, well..." *Christ, I swore I'd never tell another man about this.* Old humiliation still nipped at Logan's heels, and he could feel the words that would put an end to this subject punching at his throat to get free

His eyes smooth as milk chocolate, Nate took Logan's hand and tucked it against his chest. "It's up to you, Logan." He rubbed his fingers over the tension Logan could feel pulling his face. "It's not a condition of our relationship."

Give him this. He's more than earned it. Pushing through the inclination to clam up, Logan cut open a vein for Nate. "Ryan was unfaithful to me for a long time before we actually broke up."

Nate's gasp filled the room. "I'm so sorry." Immediately he cupped his hand to Logan's cheek. "No wonder you've been struggling to trust me. It must have crushed you."

After exhaling unsteadily, Logan breathed in deeply again, expecting a choking sensation to strangle him. Instead, the second breath came easier, and it shocked the hell out of him when the third felt normal. "It fucking hurt worse than just about anything," he found himself admitting, "and I've only recently been able to admit how much. It isn't easy to forgive Ryan, but I'm getting there."

"I suspect that's more than most people are able to do." Once again, Nate's gaze beamed so openly, and Logan felt like this man's hero. *Ridiculous. But somehow true. Fuck. How is this possible?*

"Takes guts to forgive someone who wronged and hurt you," Nate added.

Heat burned Logan's skin. "I'm not sure about that."

"Tell me more about Nicole. Or Ryan." Locked in, fully engaged, Nate clutched Logan's hand against the steady beat of his heart. "Only if you want to."

Logan found himself settling in to share some of his past with Nate. Nate piped in with occasional personal little stories too. Pausing to pull a pillow to his chest, Logan found himself continually amazed that talking about his ex didn't feel too outrageously uncomfortable or wrong.

This is Nate. Logan silently repeated the new mantra he'd opened himself to the last few days. As he looked at the man, listening so intently, he'd never felt so protected and cherished in his life. *It's because Nate is different.*

He's the one.

Shit.

Chapter Fifteen

After shaking hands with a girl with a Mohawk, Nate thanked her for her time and started walking down the street once again. Next to him, Jamie pulled a wool cap tighter over her shaved head and tucked her hands into her puffy jacket. The wind whipped with such bitterness this morning that Nate envied her the black nylon with the thick insulation. His backup wool coat kept him warm enough, but he hadn't yet taken the time to replace the heavier one he'd given away.

With a glance his way, Jamie said, "I'm sorry I'm not helping you get any good information. I know you were hoping another kid might talk to a kid."

"You're helping us big time, Jamie," Nate shared. He bumped the girl's elbow with his. "The kids are definitely more open with you here today than they were with me yesterday. We can't help it if they don't actually know anything about Tracy. This is a good unofficial first day on the job."

Jamie ducked her head, but Nate could still see the smile she tried to hide. "I like your sister. She's a cool lady." Jamie suddenly bubbled with life, and the deep green in her eyes made Nate think of the first days of spring. Jumping a few steps ahead, she turned and faced Nate while walking backward. "It was freaking awesome yesterday the way she was like 'I'm flying to London tonight, but I'll be back in two days and we'll talk again.'"

"That could be you one day." Never having been in a position to possibly help change a person's life, Nate found himself caught up in Jamie's bursting enthusiasm. "If you decide you like the work and stick with the company, down the line they might offer you a piece of it the way Rhone and Canin did to Adam and Kasey."

Jamie looked at him as if he'd just told her whales could fly. "Yeah, but they're married to each other."

Nate's phone chimed right then. He lifted a finger, mouthing *Give me a sec* as soon as he saw the name filling his screen.

He turned away, keeping his voice low as he put the phone to his ear. "What's up, Declan?" Replays of that horrible scene Logan had witnessed tugged at Nate's heartstrings. Biting his lip, he chose his words carefully. "How's it going?"

"I called Pierce," Declan said, his voice thick. "I told him I was at the cabin and I needed to talk to him."

Nate winced for the kid. "Why would you do that?"

"Don't pretend you don't fucking know what happened!" Rage coated in pain saturated Declan's words. "I know your partner told you what Pierce did. What I let him do to me." Declan's voice dropped to nearly a whisper. "I told him I wanted to tell him something about what happened to Daria. That's the only way I know to make him come."

"Declan." Pinching the bridge of his nose, Nate took a breath while silently asking for assistance in choosing his words and tone. "You don't want to do this. You don't want to give Pierce another opportunity to hurt you."

"He has to come." Declan's voice cracked, and Nate envisioned tears streaming down his cheeks. "He has to understand what he did."

"Please don't do anything rash or stupid. You're smarter than that."

"I just want to know why." Declan spoke so softly Nate barely heard him. "Why did he pick me and Daria? Nothing else matters."

"Everything matters," Nate argued. Motioning to Jamie, Nate started running back to his car. "Daria would want you to think you still matter. You already regret the choice you made to trust Pierce. Don't let him manipulate your emotions into doing something even worse."

"I don't know what to do anymore," Declan said.

"I want you to leave that cabin right now. I'll meet you wherever you want."

"No, I can't." Declan's voice croaked. "What if he comes and I'm not here? I can't leave."

Shit. "Okay. Wait there for me instead," Nate instructed. "But I want you to hide from Pierce when he shows. Hide your car. Make him think you left. Whatever you do, don't let him get into your head again. I am your friend, Declan." *Please let him trust the truth he hears in my voice.* "I will be there as soon as I can and you can talk to me. Not Pierce. Can you do what I ask? Will you trust me?"

"I'll try," Declan murmured. "I'll go to the boathouse. Daria liked to be there."

"Sit and talk to her. I'm leaving right now."

"Bye."

As soon as Nate hung up, Jamie asked, "What's going on?"

"Emergency," Nate replied. He didn't want to get into Declan's business with a stranger. "We'll pick up our search for Tracy tomorrow. I have to get you back to Haven. *Shit.*" Nate skidded to a stop in front of his car. "I need to call Logan too." *He will not like me doing this.*

"Drop me off at the closest bus stop," Jamie responded. "I can get back to Haven from there."

Bless you, girl. As soon as Nate had that thought, guilt swamped him. "God, I hate doing that. You're out here as a favor to me, and now I'm dumping you." Declan's anguish resonated in Nate's ear, though, and his situation still brought up Nate's memories of once desperately wishing for Grady's love. "Are you sure you'll be all right?"

Jamie gave him the teenage eye roll. "I take buses all the time. You could give me a few bucks for the fare though. That would be cool."

"It's the least I can do." Rather than rounding the car, Nate moved to the passenger door and tossed Jamie his keys. "You drive to the nearest bus stop while I call Logan."

Damn it. Nate climbed in the car, but he hated even dialing the number. *Logan will not like this.*

Nate made the call anyway.

* * *

Riley hit enter on Daria's computer, and the gong sound effect snapped Logan's attention back to him.

"Nope, that's not it either," Riley said, as if Logan hadn't just heard the same noise denying them access to Daria's laptop. They'd listened to it go off for almost an hour.

Shifting his attention back to the whiteboard, Logan kicked his feet up on his desk and started clicking his pen. "I know you, Daria." He looked at the girl's photo as he spoke, searching her gaze. "I know I can figure you out."

Problem was, every time Logan looked at his board of suspects, his focus inevitably strayed to Declan. That automatically led Logan to his conversation with Nate, which widened the pit in Logan's stomach when he thought about Nate going to meet Declan somewhere alone.

"I trust your instincts, Logan." Nate's recent plea echoed in Logan's mind. *"Please give me the respect of trusting mine."*

Nate did not believe Declan posed a threat to him. Logan couldn't 100 percent for sure say the kid did either. The difference between his thought process and Nate's came down to what exactly classified someone as a threat. Maybe Declan hadn't murdered his sister. Maybe he hadn't accidentally aided in Pierce killing her. But that didn't mean Declan's emotional instability didn't make him very dangerous. The fact was, the kid seemed to have spun farther and farther down into a tunnel of darkness since his sister went missing. That might be a result of having something to do with her death; guilt could slowly kill a person. Or maybe it just meant Daria had been his foundation. His touchstone. His rock. Without her, he didn't have a sounding board and didn't trust his own judgment. Twins commonly shared bonds nobody could understand. Christ, even Pierce had targeted them as a pair.

Shit. Logan's feet hit the floor with a thud. *Son of a bitch.*

"Twins." Logan uttered the word as if saying *gotcha*. "They're twins." He stabbed his pen toward Riley. "It's the most important thing in Declan's life, and it had to be an equally strong bond for Daria."

His elbow on the desk, Riley scratched his fingers through his blond locks, tufting the newly shorn style. "I already tried Declan's name, her name, a

combination of their names, their middle names, the word twins. Their birthday too.”

“Yeah, but Daria was smart and well-read. She would think herself more clever than something so obvious.” Logan got up and stalked the whiteboard, his eyes on Daria, waiting for her to talk to him. *Come on, sweetheart. Help me find you.* “Start looking for symbolic or literary things that might mimic the idea of twins,” Logan said, “or even famous doctors who might have done studies on twins, or things that represent the two sides of a coin, the way twins sometimes think they do.”

“Like Pisces.” Riley immediately started clicking the keys on Daria’s laptop. “Or yin and yang.”

“Right.” Snapping and pointing, Logan added, “Try Gemini too.”

As three gongs sounded back-to-back, eliminating possibilities, Logan stared into Daria’s pure blue eyes and let his breathing get nice and even. *Show me the way, darlin’.* Logan regulated his heartbeat, and imagined himself standing next to Daria in her bedroom, watching her as she scanned her bookshelves. She settled her stare on a wide white book spine, and smiled at him. Logan followed her gaze, and a copy of Homer’s *Odyssey* made him grin.

Yes. Logan pumped his fist. *Thank you.*

He strode to Riley and braced his hand on the back of the guy’s chair. “Try Apollo and Artemis,” he said. “She had an interest in Greek mythology.”

“A pair of twins. Good idea.” Riley typed away and then cursed as the gong sounded again. “No go.”

“Damn it.” Logan drummed his fingers in a rhythmic pattern as words and images flashed with Mach 8 speed in his brain. “It’s her computer,” he suddenly said. “She’s Artemis. Try the names the other way around.”

After some additional speedy clicking from Riley, the melodious sounds of a wind chime twinkled in the air. “Fuck a duck. Look at that.” Riley whistled. “We’re in.”

Logan glanced at Daria’s photo on his board and swore she smiled back bigger than she ever had before. *You did good, sweetheart.*

Stretching his arm, Logan dragged in a second chair and took a seat. “Let’s see what we have.”

Riley swore and took a jab at the side of the desk. “She has locks on her files too.”

Motherfucker. “Let’s start coming up with other relevant mythological names and terms.” Logan pulled his laptop across the desk. The Internet would come in very handy. “We broke one. We’ll figure out the others.”

* * *

Nate pulled his car to a stop near the treeline behind the Sarna cabin and prayed it didn’t get covered too deeply in snow. The white stuff came down in big,

fat flakes, and the cut of the wind chafed his skin. He didn't see another car and hoped that meant Declan had taken his advice rather than chasing off after Pierce.

Trudging around the cabin, across the lawn, and down to the boathouse, Nate worked through conversation starters in his mind, wondering what would work best on someone like Declan. *Something kind of similar happened to me, and I have Logan now. You'll get past this and find someone too.* Maybe. Except, not really. Nate hadn't lived through a mind fuck at Grady's hands the way Pierce had done to Declan. As Nate approached the boathouse door, he settled on just being available and an open ear for the kid. He truly couldn't offer much more than that.

"Declan?" Nate knocked before entering the darkened, freezing cold structure. "Are you here?"

In a shaft of light entering the building from through a high, small window, Declan appeared at the railing of a second level loft. His wet blue eyes reeked of forlorn solitude. Nate just wanted to tuck him in bed, serve him hot chocolate, and then go beat the crap out of Pierce.

Declan stepped back, disappearing into the shadows. "He never showed. I guess Daria isn't even enough to tempt him anymore."

A center plank walkway bisected the water—ice right now—and created two slips for boats on either side. With the dead of winter upon them and much of the lake frozen, the boats had been raised and stored in the rafters. Nate used the plank walkway to make his way over the ice to the stairs. As he walked up the steps, he said, "I think that's for the best." He reached the landing and found Declan leaning against a bare wall, his face stark and pale against the dark wood. "How about you?"

"I didn't like using my sister to get him here." Declan looked up at the ceiling, but his chin wobbled. "Made me feel dirtier than I already do."

Taking tentative steps, Nate inched closer to Declan. "Getting Pierce out of your life for good will make the air smell a whole lot cleaner really fast. I promise."

"I know." Declan slid down the wall and clutched his arms around his knees. "I knew that before I let him have me"—his voice started to waver—"and I did it anyway."

Nate stooped down to get on level with Declan. "It sucks to suffer through it, but sometimes we need something really shitty to happen in order to wake us up for good."

The film of moisture layering Declan's bleak gaze spilled over the brim and ran down his cheeks. "Why did I let him do that to me? It hurt so much"—silent no more, broken sobs suddenly racked through Declan from top to bottom, cutting into Nate's heart—"and I-I just let him keep doing it."

"God, kid." Getting choked up too, Nate drew Declan into a hug, unable to witness the pain and self-hate in Declan's eyes. Once upon a time Nate's reflection had looked exactly the same. "I'm so sorry he hurt you. I know you won't believe me, but I swear that in time, when the right person comes along, you'll want to be

intimate again. And he'll take care of more than your body. He'll cherish your heart too."

Declan burrowed into Nate's shoulder, clinging. He grew quiet, but his entire body heaved, giving away his tears. Nate held him close and let the kid cry it out until he couldn't anymore. Back in Minnesota, Nate had cried alone after Grady's beating, and he couldn't remember a time ever feeling more desperate than those hours in a motel room by himself. At least until yesterday. Being attacked and having Logan threatened had moved to the top of Nate's shitty-day list.

Logan. The man had made Nate proud this morning. During their phone call, Logan had started out listing a hundred reasons why Nate should listen to his expertise and not come see Declan alone. After that, when Nate hadn't backed down, Logan had insisted Nate come back to Quinn and they would make the drive to see Declan together. Nate had lovingly, but with purpose, shut his partner down. He'd used logic every time Logan had spoken irrationally. Eventually, Logan had talked himself from the ledge and understood that while his fears were okay, his need to impose his will on Nate was not. *It's progress.* Nate would take what he could get.

Declan suddenly stiffened against Nate. He drew back, and his pupils had grown so wide they took over the blue. "He's here," Declan whispered.

Nate almost checked the kid for fever. "What?"

"I heard his car," Declan insisted. "Just like I heard yours." He scrambled to stand. "Pierce came."

"Wait." Shooting upright too, Nate blocked Declan from leaving. "Think about this. Do you really want to talk to him?"

The sound of a car door slamming caused Declan to shudder. "No, I don't." He withdrew to the wall, as if he could disappear into the wood. "I don't want him in my life anymore. Even if it means he got the last word between us."

Nate gave Declan a sharp nod. "When you're the one making the choice never to call or speak to him again, then your silence is the only message that matters. I'm going to get rid of him for you."

Declan latched onto Nate's arm. "Wait. I'll come with you." Taking a visible breath, he pushed himself out of his usual slouch. "I need to know I can see him and walk away."

"All right." As Nate and Declan passed the little window at the top of the stairs, a big form moving along the side of the boathouse toward the door caught Nate's attention. The person getting closer to them by the second did not have perfectly stylized platinum blond hair.

Shit. Adrenaline Nate had come to dread yet listen to without question sparked white-hot fire with a chaser of cold through his blood, making him shiver.

"Declan." Nate grabbed the young man's arm, shoving Declan and dropping himself flat to the floor just as the door opened. He put his mouth right to Declan's ear. "Be quiet. It's not Pierce."

* * *

"Ha ha ha. Yes!" Logan looked up from his laptop as Riley made that declaration. The guy drummed the desktop with his hands. "We have a winner. I'm into another photo file."

Logan rolled his chair closer, peering at the computer as dozens of thumbnail photos popped up on the screen. "What are these ones?" Lots of group photos as far as Logan could see. So far, they'd managed to open family photos, school photos, and a document file that organized research on a company Logan had connected to one of Daria's college paper exposé articles. "Pull them up to full size."

The first enlarged photo filled the screen, showing a row of eight teenage girls laughing and shooting the bird at the camera. None of them looked like Daria.

"Move on to the next one," Logan said.

"No wait." Riley blocked the arrow key before Logan could reach it. "Son of a bitch," he muttered. "Look at that. Look right there." He pointed at a blonde dressed in black. "She's thinner and has shorter hair, but that's one of the missing girls." Logan followed Riley's glance to the whiteboard. "There, third one down." He indicated the line of photos showing all the missing blonde runaways. "And I think this photo"—he tapped the screen—"was taken in the common room at one of the shelters I visited when I was looking for Bree. Let's see what else we have." He clicked a dozen more times, bringing up more photos that seemed to depict the same party.

"I bet it's a fundraiser." Logan squinted and leaned in to study the faces. "There are too many adults mixed in the pictures, and they're dressed too expensively for people who are running a shelter and having to keep up with kids all day."

"There are plenty more here." Riley opened the next picture, and Logan got the equivalent of an investigative hard-on.

"Well, well, well," Logan murmured, zeroing in on a familiar face. *You handsome, helpful bastard.* "Look at that."

"What?" Riley's brow furrowed. "Who are you looking at?"

A good-looking, dark-haired, brown-eyed treasure seeker smiled at the camera. "That is Phillip Cosgrove. He is a liaison for Sarna Imports. I wouldn't have pegged him for a shelter patron or volunteer. It's an awfully big coincidence to see him in this picture." *You don't have anything yet.* Logan silently talked his metaphorical erection down to half-staff. "Keep looking."

Riley continued to click through the photos. Within the countless numbers of them, Logan and Riley took turns cursing and sharing darker glances as eventually, mixed in with the innocuous group shots of kids, counselors, and philanthropists, they found photos of all the missing runaway girls. By the end of the reel, it became clear the pictures Daria had collected encompassed charity events at each and every Chicago runaway shelter. Attending parties at all of them, photographed as big as life, was Phillip Cosgrove.

Son of a bitch. “Let me check out these shelter Web sites.” Using his computer, Logan typed away and quickly brought up the first. “They usually honor big donors with special titles and recognition.” He went to honoree pages at Web site after Web site. After the last one, he shoved his laptop away in disgust. “Fucking asshole. He’s not on any of the lists for any local shelter.”

“Of course he’s not,” Riley responded, a chill in his voice. He stared at Daria’s computer, his focus on the single photo that included his missing sister. “Cosgrove doesn’t donate big enough to get name recognition, thereby keeping him off the more obvious red flag suspect lists should the fucking police eventually get off their asses and open a real investigation.” Such darkness filled Riley’s eyes that Logan would have believed him capable of great violence. “But he gives enough that he’s invited to parties, where he scopes out girls to kill. Motherfucking bastard.” Riley snarled, but he touched his fingertip to his sister’s face on the screen. Unspeakable desolation took over his stare. “Bree.”

Logan rubbed Riley’s shoulder, knowing it offered piss-poor comfort in place of getting his sister back. It took a few minutes, but Riley eventually scrubbed at his face and scratched his fingers through his hair. After taking a swig of water, he nodded and promised he was all right.

Getting up, Logan sighed. He walked to his whiteboard and wrote down Phillip Cosgrove’s name with arrows pointing to each of the runaway girls and one up to Daria too. “So,” he started as he stared, “the logical conclusion to this is Daria figures out Cosgrove’s game, and he kills her too.” Logan took to pacing in front of all the collected photos and evidence notes, scanning every piece of data they’d gathered. The more Logan looked, the less he felt Daria talking to him. A victim going silent on Logan never boded well. Holding Daria’s unblinking, frozen-forever gaze, Logan murmured, “Something about this isn’t right.”

Riley’s string of curses whispered across the office. “The guy’s a sadistic prick who preys on vulnerable girls he thinks nobody will care about losing.” He joined Logan at the board. Crossing his arms against his chest, he shot death glares at Phillip Cosgrove’s scribbled name. “There’s nothing fucking right about it or him.”

The mental block keeping the evidence disconnected in Logan’s brain brought forth a growl. “No, that’s not what I meant. Let’s think this through. If Daria had found a way to link Cosgrove to the missing runaways, and I bet we’ll find more evidence when we break into more of her document files, why didn’t she just go to the cops? You’re forgetting one important person.” Watching Riley, Logan tapped his knuckles against Mya’s valuable sketch. “If Daria was thinking what we are, that Cosgrove is a serial killer, then why was she still undercover at strip clubs looking for Tracy?”

“I don’t know.” Riley shrugged as he scrutinized the whiteboard now too. “To have a first person accounting of her theory to take with her to the cops?”

“Right.” The investigative juices started flowing once more, making Logan feel something akin to arousal again. “Which means Daria didn’t think Tracy was dead. We’ve been going on an assumption that all these girls”—Logan ran his hand down

the line of missing runaway photos—"have likely been murdered by a serial killer. We've toyed with the idea of Tracy being the killer herself, but is probably a victim too. But she can't be a victim, or we'd be looking for a dead girl. Daria clearly never thought Tracy was dead, so what does she know that we haven't figured out? If she thought Tracy was still alive, then it doesn't track that Daria was looking to uncover a serial killer."

"Unless Tracy got away."

That didn't tickle Logan's mind in a good way. "Based on our timeline of the girls going missing, Cosgrove would have already killed multiple times by the time he got to Tracy. Do you know how rare it is for a victim of a professional killer to escape?"

Riley shot Logan a puzzled glance. "So if he's not killing them, then what the hell did Cosgrove do to these girls?"

Standing center at the evidence board, Logan absorbed not only the photos of Daria, all their suspects, and Phillip's recently added name, but he analyzed with brutality each piece of information they'd accumulated. The shelters, the strip clubs, the suspicions with Sarna's bookkeeping, the exposé articles, how Daria disappeared, her relationship with Declan, Pierce's knowledge of Daria's secret, the missing runaway girls, and the unmistakable logic that Daria must have believed Tracy alive. One by one, Logan tore down or wiped away things that didn't fit for him, going purely on years of investigative technique and gut instinct, until the invisible arrows between what remained connected themselves and made a sick kind of picture.

"Fuck," he whispered, looking again.

"What?" Riley nudged his shoulder. "What do you see?"

Crap. Logan looked at Riley, and he could feel the new frown lines cutting into his face. "I'm about to take fifty presumptive leaps forward and go to an unconscionable, ugly place." He swallowed down a nasty taste. "If it's crazy, I need you to tell me to walk the dog back into the house before I go to Canin and put my job on the line."

Riley's Adam's apple bobbed. "Tell me what you're thinking."

* * *

As Phillip Cosgrove entered the boathouse, Nate's heart raced so fast it roared in his ears and made him fearful the man would hear it. He didn't know why he feared something menacing. He knew about the man's intimate relationship with Elise Sarna. They probably used this cabin for their liaisons.

But he's not here with Elise. And he's moving like he has a purpose, which doesn't speak to clandestine sex in the afternoon.

Phillip propped open the door and exited again. The second he disappeared, Nate clamped his hand around the back of Declan's head and dragged the kid closer. Whispering at Declan's ear, he said, "Don't show yourself. He can't know

we're here." In Nate's limited experience, he found it much smarter not to confront someone unless absolutely necessary. "Get your phone."

Phillip reentered right then, dragging something that looked like a jackhammer behind him, and Nate started to sweat under his clothes.

"Film whatever he does," Nate whispered right at Declan's ear. "Get it started under your coat in case it makes a noise."

A toe kick ledge that didn't entirely cover Nate's and Declan's heads afforded minimal protection from discovery. The shadows helped more than anything, but Phillip would only have to look up for a few seconds to process he wasn't alone.

Without nodding or giving any indication that he'd heard, Declan shifted the slightest bit, slipped his phone out of his pocket, and shoved it under his belly, his body muffling any sound.

Below them, Phillip put his boot on the layer of ice that had frozen under the raised boats, clearly testing its thickness. The sheet groaned but didn't pop or make a cracking sound, and the machine Phillip had brought with him became evident. It wasn't a jackhammer but rather a drill avid fishermen used to cut holes in ice.

Oh please. Nate shut his eyes for a heartbeat. His stomach lurched, and he thought he might be sick. *Don't let it be that. Don't let Declan be here to see this.*

The motor powering the drill ripped through the air. Quickly, Phillip put it to the ice, and in Nate's mind the high speed blades cutting through the ice shrieked like a woman's screams. Once Phillip cut the initial hole, he moved to chipping away at the edges with the drill, like a weed whacker trimming the edge of a lawn, making the opening bigger. As Nate watched, he grew sicker and sicker.

I know what he's going to do. Shit. Ideas moved like a flash flood in Nate's brain. *What do I do? Okay. That's smart.*

With Phillip momentarily fully engaged in his task, Nate slipped his wallet out of his pocket and said a silent prayer of thanks that the business card he needed still sat tucked in his billfold. Just before Nate could get out his phone, the boathouse fell into eerie silence. *He has his hole.* Phillip disappeared under the loft overhang, out of Nate's sight. *Please let my fingers remain steady.* While he had a few precious seconds, Nate typed a message to the Arlington Heights police commander as fast as he could. He clicked Send on the heels of a curse from Phillip filling the boathouse. *If I'm wrong, the man is still trespassing, and Declan can at least have him arrested for that.*

A rolled-up sail hit the plank flooring beneath them, stark white against the treated wood. A blue tarp hit next, along with another sail, and a curse with a furiously whispered, "Can't fucking believe I have to do this," from Phillip.

His heart breaking, Nate put his mouth to Declan's ear once more. "I think you're about to see your worst nightmare"—his gut wrenched at warning this kid with as few words as possible—"but we have to stay hidden and film this. Our lives could depend on it." Nate put his cheek against the freezing floor and looked into Declan's eyes with a plea. "Do it for Daria."

Declan nodded, and Nate did his best to convey his sympathy with a little nod.

I need to alert Logan. Nate pressed the first number into his phone just as a grunt sounded below them. Another blue tarp nudged into their sightline. Phillip came into view again and began pulling on that tarp, something that clearly held weight. Dragging it in steady increments, he pulled it down the walkway to near the hole, and Nate took hold of Declan's hand, giving it a supportive squeeze.

Declan didn't squeeze back, though. He looked down at the scene below him without blinking. His hand shook like a son of a bitch, but he kept the phone trained on Phillip Cosgrove. Phillip took out a knife and cut a line up the tarp, starting at the bottom. Trendy pink boots appeared first. Next to Nate, Declan covered his mouth, muffling a cry. As Phillip continued to cut the blue plastic, he exposed slender legs covered in jeans, a trim torso clothed in a form-fitting fuchsia cable-knit sweater, and then finally revealed Daria's long blonde hair and lifeless, discolored face.

Holy shit. Nate gulped, swallowing down bile.

A heartbreaking cry ripped right through Declan, and he surged to his feet, shouting, "Murderer! You killed my sister!" He tore down the stairs in a rage toward a stunned Phillip Cosgrove and flung himself at the man, knocking them both onto the ice.

Nate had jumped up and taken half the steps by the time Declan flew at Phillip, but he couldn't move fast enough to prevent the much bigger Phillip from flipping Declan on his back and shoving Declan toward the hole in the ice. Phillip had Declan by the neck, choking him as he shoved. Declan scratched frantically at Phillip's hands, but his gloves didn't allow him to get any kind of grip. *Oh God, he'll drown him.*

As Nate hit the walkway, he reached down and grabbed Phillip under his arms. He ripped Phillip off Declan while shouting at him to let go of the kid's throat. Phillip's roar of outrage pumped pure adrenaline through Nate's system and allowed him to keep hold of the man. Suddenly, Phillip cursed and threw his full weight into Nate, pushing them both backward, where Nate hit the walkway with a bone-jarring thud. Phillip landed on top of him, his back to Nate's chest.

Gasping for breath as pain exploded in his back, Nate sucked in bitterly frigid air that only made breathing harder. Declan pulled himself up to the walkway, and Phillip lunged for the kid again. Still sucking oxygen, Nate dived back into the fray in time to get under Phillip's arms, burrow up, lock his hands behind the man's neck, and drive his face into the flooring.

Phillip howled and reared upright, but Nate kept hold of him, giving Phillip 175 pounds of extra weight to carry as he leaped for Declan again. Declan scrambled on all fours out of range, and Phillip went with him, grabbing the kid's leg and yanking him backward. Phillip made Declan lose his footing and in doing so knocked Declan facedown, where a glint of steel winked right next to his hand.

“No!” Phillip shouted, lurching with Nate still clinging to his back. But it was too late. Declan picked up the knife. Still on his knees, he spun around, his gaze full of glee as he waved it in an arc, swiping it in Phillip’s direction.

“What is taking so long?” A very familiar voice echoed behind Nate. “I told you exactly where I hid her.”

Declan’s eyes suddenly changed, his pupils widening unnaturally. They took over his entire crumbling face, and he looked like he’d seen a ghost.

Nate spun and tried to lunge, but *wham!* a block of solid force slammed into Nate’s middle. Fire ripped through his insides, sending his world into blackness.

Chapter Sixteen

Logan caught himself just before blurting out his theory to Riley.

Let me make sure I have this right first.

Shifting sideways from the whiteboard, he said, "Tell me again what Sarna's original whistleblower told Jackson before he clammed up." Logan needed certainty before he blew open someone's life.

"That something about the books didn't add up even though the dollars matched," Riley replied. "He didn't think the money they were bringing in accurately matched the product they were moving."

"Right." Nodding, Logan rubbed the pads of his thumbs against his fingertips as if he could almost feel the truth. "Which makes you think someone is cooking the books to skim money."

"It makes me think someone was stealing from the Sarnas," Riley said with a shrug. "Or maybe on paper they were inflating the value of what they sold in order to make it seem like they were doing better than they were."

"But what if it's just the opposite?" The hairs on Logan's neck sizzled as a sick but necessary excitement within him grew. "What if they were actually doing *better* than they should have been? What if there was too much money for the items they were selling, not less, which is what one would assume."

Lines pulled between Riley's brows. He glanced between Logan and the whiteboard. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying"—a horrid taste filled Logan's mouth—"what if they were selling more than they were itemizing, and what if they were using Sarna Imports as a cover to make the sales?" He snatched picture after picture off the board, all out of the same line, holding them in front of Riley one at a time.

It took a moment, but when it hit, all color slid from Riley's face. "No way. You can't think..."

"I can think. And I do." Logan's mouth went dry, but he said it. "I don't think Cosgrove was killing those girls. I think he was selling them." He barely paused before dropping an even bigger bomb. "And I think he was doing it with Elise Sarna's help."

"Jesus Christ." Riley stumbled to the arm of the sofa. "Who are they selling them to?"

"To whoever wanted and could pay," Logan said. "Think about it. Cosgrove has contacts all around the world. They could be anywhere. Cosgrove gets a list of what the client wants, he finds that person in a shelter, he brokers the deal, and Elise sells an artifact or expensive piece of jewelry to the client along with the girl to make it all look legit."

"That means..." Riley's chest heaved, and his eyes brimmed to overflowing with tears. "Bree."

Christ, I hope I have this right. Logan squatted down in front of Riley so he could see into the man's eyes. "I think your sister could still be alive."

A gut-wrenching noise erupted from somewhere deep inside Riley. He covered his face, and shudders racked his shoulders. Logan looked around, but crap, he didn't have any tissues. Using Riley's knee to help him stand, Logan rubbed his thigh as he trod to his private bathroom to grab a roll of toilet paper. When he returned, he curled Riley's hand around the TP and then backed up to lean against his desk and give the young man some space.

After a few minutes, Riley blew his nose, wiped his face, and once again set his chin high. "I'm all right." He nodded, possibly to convince himself. "Go on. What's the rest of your theory?"

Logan sifted through the photos of runaway girls he still had in his hands. "You saw a pattern with blonde girls because your sister is blonde. I bet we'll find Daria did as well because she was probably close to one of these missing girls." He counted the girls again, and the small number scratched at his brain in a bad way. "But I bet they're selling all kinds of girls. And boys too. That's the only way I see a large enough discrepancy happening in Sarna's books that would allow an employee to notice."

"How is this possible? This woman... Fucking hell." Riley moved to the whiteboard to stare at Elise's picture. "Elise Sarna is a mother, for God's sake. How could she do this to children?" He glanced at Logan. "Why don't you think Cosgrove is doing this on his own? He could. He could bring Sarna an item and tell them its worth much more than it actually is. Mrs. Sarna doesn't have to be in on the trafficking. Maybe that's why Cosgrove seduced her. If she's infatuated with him, then he can more easily snow her about the value of his products."

"From where did Daria go missing?" Logan posed right back. "Her home. Elise says Daria sneaked out as usual that night, which Elise says she thought meant Daria was going to meet with a boy her parents wouldn't approve of. We know Daria was really stripping on those nights, not meeting a boy. Daria definitely worked the evening she went missing. Even though the employee parking area isn't on any neighboring surveillance, we know she was there because we have evidence of Pierce stealing her computer."

"So how do you figure it went down?"

Logan eyeballed Elise's and Daria's photos, let everything he'd gathered about these individuals ferment in his mind, and began to theorize. "My guess is Daria made it safely home. Elise wanted her daughter dating a boy like Pierce"—he

snorted—"and thought Daria was sneaking out to meet someone inappropriate. I think Elise was waiting up to confront her when she got home. Daria isn't dating a boy, so maybe she decides to confess everything to Elise about what she suspects Cosgrove is doing. She doesn't realize her mom is involved. So Daria blows the lid off Phillip and what he's doing through Sarna Imports. Hell, maybe she thought she was not only looking to protect these girls but also protect her family's company. Elise says let's go to Sarna and look at the books and client list right now. This family is so disconnected I think one or more of them could disappear for hours without anyone knowing. So Daria gets in her car under the pretense of going to Sarna to investigate the books"—Logan snapped his fingers—"and on the way Daria and her car are never seen again."

"So you think Elise killed her own daughter?" Riley paled.

"I don't know," Logan answered, rubbing his leg again. It hurt more than usual right now. "She could have handed Daria over to Cosgrove. Then Cosgrove stashed her somewhere to sell her as soon as he could. They dump Daria's car together, and Cosgrove gives Elise a ride home. Presto chango, you have a missing girl who people already think is prone to disappear without a word, and not many people truly suspect foul play."

"Except Elise didn't count on Daria having plans with Declan the next day and calling everyone he could as soon as he found out she wasn't home and ready to go to the cabin," Riley murmured. "If not for that, Elise might have convinced Stephen not to report Daria missing for days or even weeks. From the case notes I've read, Elise never shied away from pointing out Daria's propensity for running off. Shit." Riley moved back to sit in front of Daria's laptop. "You said Elise even kept hoping Daria might have done another European vacation, which would definitely keep the case cooler in the eyes of the cops. I think you might be onto something, Logan, but that's a lot of speculation to take to the bosses."

"Maybe you can shake the name of that almost-whistleblower out of Jackson Roth before I go talk with them," Logan suggested.

Riley pushed right back to standing. "You give me all the good assignments." If Logan had only paid attention to the resignation in Riley's voice, he would have missed the glint that came into the man's eyes.

Oh hell. Before Logan could warn Riley that Jackson Roth was bad news, a soft knock against his door interrupted his lecture.

After Logan called out "Enter," a familiar, petite runaway with a shaved head appeared in his doorway.

"I'm sorry to bother you," Jamie said from the doorway. "First, I know I told Nate I would go back to the shelter, but I didn't. I know those streets. I know how to search them and be safe on my own. So I went back out looking"—Jamie finally paused to take a breath—"and I think I found someone pretty important." She tugged another person into view. Through the scruff and dirty clothes loomed familiar long blonde hair, a soft heart-shaped face, and almond-shaped blue eyes.

Damn, Mya. The girl standing in front of Logan was an exact replica of the crucial sketch the Latina woman had made for them. *You did a great job.*

"Tracy?" Logan asked, even though he knew Jamie had found the right person.

The girl nodded. "I hear you people are looking for me."

Logan rushed forward, limp and all, and shook Tracy's hand. "You have no idea."

He then immediately turned, grasped Jamie by the shoulders, and slipped into cop mode. "You should never disobey when your superior tells you to leave a search. There was nobody here who would have known where you were if something did happen. We're gonna have a serious conversation about that. But damn"—Logan smacked a big kiss to Jamie's forehead and wished like hell she had a ponytail he could tug—"you are on your way to a freaking bonus right now. Nice work."

"Thanks." Jamie shoved her hands even deeper into her pockets and slouched forward, but twin blooms of rose burned her cheeks.

Riley introduced himself from across the office and then beckoned Tracy closer. As soon as she stood over his shoulder, Riley brought up a group photo from Daria's files. "Can you tell us if any of these men look familiar to you?"

"Yeah," Tracy said. Logan reached them just in time to see Tracy pointing at Phillip Cosgrove. "That's the guy who grabbed me and took me to a motel."

"Good. Good," Logan said, exchanging a glance with Riley. "We're going to get you some food to start, and then we'll get the cops in here so you can tell them your story. You don't have to be scared and on the run anymore." He moved to his side of the desk to search for a candy bar. He always kept one stashed nearby. "We're going to make sure you're safe."

Tracy looked from Riley to Logan to Jamie and then back to Logan, studying them all like they were high. "But that asshole Cosgrove is not the one who offered me a job and drugged me during our interview."

Logan's hand froze around a candy bar. "No?"

Tracy walked to the whiteboard and drove her pointer finger right between Elise Sarna's eyes. "She is."

* * *

Oh damn it. Damn it. Throbbing fire ran rampant through Nate's chest and back. He lay with his face planted on the freezing walkway, blinking, trying to get the spots to stop floating in front of his eyes. The blow hadn't knocked him unconscious, but he'd been hit so hard it had stolen his breath, leaving him conscious but temporarily blind and immobile.

The buzzing in Nate's ears dissipated just as Declan said, "Mom? What are you doing?" He sounded so fucking confused and scared. "Why did you hit Nate? Phillip killed Daria."

From his peripheral vision, Nate saw Elise with a two-by-four still in her hand. Cosgrove's laugh filled the boathouse, mocking Declan, and put an even sicker

dread in Nate's stomach. *Oh no.* Nate blinked some more and could see Declan with the knife still stretched out in front of him. He stood at Daria's feet as if guarding her.

"Didn't you hear your mom?" Phillip took a step toward Declan. "Do you really think I lured your sister out of your house, boy?"

"What?" Declan cut across the air with the blade again, making Phillip retreat that foot of space he'd just taken. Declan looked at Elise, a plea filling his eyes. "Mom?"

"Give me the knife, honey," Elise said, sounding like she didn't have shit on her hands that stunk to high heaven. "We'll talk about this."

"Talk about what?" Declan took a slash at her too. His voice rang high and tight. "That Daria is right here on the floor and you don't even seem shocked? What the hell is going on?"

As Nate's faculties came back to him, he kept one eye on the scene playing out before him and the other on doing a visual inventory of the boathouse. He needed more than something that would work as a weapon. He needed ropes or cords for restraints. In addition to that, he needed to find those items in a small area of the boathouse he could crawl to undetected. Neither Phillip nor Elise faced him, but Nate didn't kid himself that he had the muscle power or skills to take Phillip in a fight. Beyond that, Declan waving a knife in front of Phillip and Elise kept their attention fully on him, which gave Nate a few seconds of freedom. Keeping as much of his eyes and ears on Declan as possible, Nate also began to scoot backward, scanning left and right, all the while praying the planks didn't squeak under his body.

"I brought your sister here to the cabin just to talk," Elise said, her tone full of reason. "I tried to surround her with the best memories of our family in order to make her understand, but she just wouldn't."

"Wouldn't what?" Declan screeched. "*I* don't understand what the hell you're saying."

Elise sighed, sounding as if this moment inconvenienced her. "Daria wouldn't understand I had to make choices to secure our future. I explained everything to her; I laid it all out so she could see I'd thought this through and decided it was a solid choice and that we were doing well again because of it. I swear I did. I tried to make her see I was doing everything for the two of you. I just wanted to give you both the best life possible. But she didn't care about us. She only cared about those damn runaways." A hint of rancor slipped into Elise's tone. "When it became clear she intended to betray us, I did what I had to do to keep this family and our business safe."

"You're not making sense!" Everything in Declan's clearly agitated state and tone indicated utter confusion. "Daria is our family, Mom!"

"No"—Elise slashed her hand through the air—"she wasn't. Not after that night. She chose them over us." As quick as that flash of emotion showed itself,

Elise slipped back to a frighteningly disengaged place of calm. “You’re different, honey. If we talk, I can make you understand I’ve only done what is best for you. What is good for our family is good for our company. The company you’re going to take over one day soon.”

“You mean like the great gift you give our family every time you fuck this bastard!” Declan jabbed the knife in Phillip’s direction first and then poked it at his mom, but not anywhere close enough to making contact. “You sound like a crazy person! Start making sense!”

“You want sense?” Phillip asked, just as Nate spotted some rope coiled on top of a metal trunk by the door. “Let me break it down for you, you little spoiled prick who doesn’t understand magic fairies don’t sneak into your room every night and fill your wallet with cash.”

Nate gingerly got to his feet and slipped the rope over his forearm as Phillip went on.

“Your sister stuck her goddamn nose in where it didn’t belong, and your mom had to snap it off so the whole fucking family didn’t go under.”

“You’re lying. He’s lying.” Declan turned to Elise. “You didn’t really kill Daria. Your boyfriend did, and you didn’t know, but you’re taking the blame because you think you’re in love with him or something and you have to. Right, Mom?” Declan’s voice croaked terribly. “Please tell me he did it. Tell me you didn’t kill Daria.”

Elise crossed her arms, as if running out of patience. “Declan, stop acting like a child and start accepting the choices an adult sometimes has to—”

Right then, in a cacophony of screams, Phillip jumped Declan. Nate grabbed for a fishing pole hanging on the wall, but by the time he raced back down the walkway, Phillip had elbowed Declan in the face, taken control of the knife, and now had Declan in front of him like a shield.

Phillip held Declan around the chest, but he looked at Nate with deadly intent. “Don’t even think about moving a step, Mr. Jordan.” He pointed at Nate with the knife.

After letting the pole fall, Nate raised his hands, and Phillip held the knife over Declan’s heart. *Plan B*. Nate’s mind raced too fast to think clearly. He didn’t want Declan to get hurt. *What’s my plan B?*

Seemingly uncaring that he had a weapon against his chest, Declan only had eyes for his mother. “You really killed Daria?” Tears fell, and his voice broke.

“Like I tried to tell your sister, I took steps to protect our family and business.” More of that reasonable, insane calm lived in Elise’s tone. “Just like I did when I took over running Sarna from your father. If you’d not insisted on calling everyone, I could have taken care of this mess that morning and you never would have had to see your sister in such a state.” Elise embodied cold, dead steadiness. “But you insisted on bringing in the cops and inviting an almost nonstop investigation on us. You should have believed me when I told you she probably ran off again.”

"And let you get away with murdering her? What, are you going to kill me too?" Declan clutched his hand around Phillip's wrist and yanked the knife up to his neck, pointing the tip at his throat.

Nate's heart seized. "Declan." He took a careful step toward the volatile scene. "Don't."

Blinking away the wetness filming his ocean gaze, Declan shifted his focus to Nate. "It doesn't matter anymore. She has to kill me." He slid his gaze back to his mother, and the blue in his eyes became the licking flames of the hottest fire. "Because I will not cover this for you, Mother. You killed the only good thing in our lives; the person who made us a family. You took away the only thing that made me feel like I might have something decent in me too."

"Don't be dramatic, Declan." Elise held out her hand as if expecting a child to turn over a toy he'd been forbidden to use. "You have everything you could ever want in life. I know you're not going to give it all up for this."

"You don't know me at all," Declan whispered. "You never did. Goodbye."

Nate shouted "No!" just as Declan jabbed the knife toward his neck. Horror filled Nate to his core as he watched the knife blade move that one deadly inch in super slow motion. Only, at the last second, Declan whipped his head to the side, out of the way, and the knife pierced right under Phillip's throat with so much force it sank in all the way to the hilt. Phillip gurgled and fell forward, clutching uselessly at the knife buried in his neck. Declan stayed right on top of the man. He jammed his boot into Phillip's back, making the bigger man scream as the knife ground deeper into the wound.

Nate pounced on Elise before she could take a step. He tore the makeshift weapon out of her hands and tossed it onto the ice. Quickly, he wrestled her wrists behind her back, tying her with rope in place of cuffs. With the length of the rope, Nate bound her feet too, trussing her like an animal. He didn't want her running. After securing Elise, Nate located another length of rope and tied Phillip in the same manner. He then placed a call to the Arlington Heights commander to explain they would need paramedics in addition to the police. One look at the butt of the knife sticking out of Phillip's neck made Nate's decision for him. He would wait and let a professional remove the weapon.

With Phillip and Elise bound, Nate touched Declan's arm. The young man jerked and looked up at Nate with bleak eyes.

"You can let him go now," Nate said with a glance down. Declan still held his boot on Phillip's back.

"Right." Declan took a step away. "Sorry."

"That was a smart move, Declan," Nate shared. "You fucking scared me, though. I'm not gonna lie. I thought you were really gonna try to kill yourself."

"Not today." Declan moved to kneel next to his sister. With obvious care, he caressed her hair. "Someone has to take care of Daria. I'll make sure that happens."

"You're a good brother."

Declan shook his head, his attention still on Daria. "I should have been. But I wasn't. Making sure she has a proper burial is all I can do for her now."

"You did a lot." Nate stooped down and rubbed at Declan's shoulders. "If you hadn't been so upset, then you wouldn't have called me here and we never would have seen what we did. They would have gotten away with making Daria disappear forever. Maybe you can tell yourself the terrible thing that happened with Pierce ultimately ended in your discovering your sister's killer." It wasn't much, but Nate still felt a need to help the kid. "You helped bring Daria some peace and closure."

"Makes it a little more palatable that way," Declan murmured, his tone gruff.

The first whirs of sirens in the distance broke the stillness surrounding the boathouse. "That'll be the cops," Nate said.

"You should let the paramedics take a look at you. Pierce landed on you pretty hard, and that wood to your chest probably hurt like a motherfucker." Declan glanced sideways, studying Nate with a narrowed gaze. "You already looked beaten up."

"I'm guessing Phillip was the one who took a few whacks at me yesterday. I bet he was planning on scoping out Haven and saw me with Logan. Then he heard what I said at Sarna and probably figured we were closing in." Sirens nearly drowned out Nate's voice, and the first slams of car doors got Nate to his feet. Where he promptly swayed toward the ice.

"Whoa." Declan jumped up and steadied Nate with an arm around the waist. "Are you okay? You should really let them take you to the hospital."

"I'll go as soon as I get back to Chicago." Nate took a few painful breaths, but the fog mostly cleared. "I need to see Logan first. He's going to freak out as it is." Right now, Nate needed nothing more than to see Logan's harsh, beautiful face and step into the safety of his unshakable embrace. "I need to be face-to-face with him so he can see I'm okay."

Nate did sit down, though. With Phillip adding a second wallop to the bruises he'd already delivered yesterday, Nate didn't feel entirely steady or clearheaded. He answered questions from the commander as succinctly as possible, promised he would return to make a full statement in the morning, and then did accept the man's offer of letting a uniform drive him back to Quinn.

* * *

Logan paced in front of the elevators while waiting for Nate. *Where the fuck is he?* Nate had called to explain what had transpired at the boathouse and to assure Logan everything was okay. They now had Tracy, as well as a growing mountain of damning information on Daria's computer, and what Nate and Declan had witnessed today to add to Logan's theory about how and why this terrible tragedy had happened. Logan didn't see any way Elise Sarna and Phillip Cosgrove wouldn't go to jail for a very long time. Quinn's best hope in finding the missing girls lay with one of them making a deal and talking. Riley had little other hope to find Bree.

Bringing home these girls could be Daria's final act of heroism. Maybe it would give Stephen and Declan some peace to know she hadn't died for nothing.

Selfish as it was, though, none of that mattered to Logan right now.

I just need to see Nate.

Canin caught Logan's arm midpace. "He'll be here soon. It's a long drive in traffic. Give them a chance."

Logan glared. He liked his pacing. It helped keep the bubbles of panic in check. "You don't have to wait with me."

"And not give Kasey a firsthand report on Nate's condition? I don't think so." Canin made a move to protect the family jewels. "You're obviously not married."

"No." *But I want to be.*

Logan staggered. *Shit.* Since when had he ever wanted the hetero institution of marriage? *Never.* Not even during the time with Ryan, when he'd thought Ryan "the one," had the desire for legal nuptials entered his mind. *Ryan isn't Nate.* With Nate, from the beginning, everything had been different. He wanted forever. With strings attached. *Damn.*

The elevator dinged right then, and the doors opened to reveal the sexiest, sweetest man Logan had ever known. Logan rushed in before Nate could step out. He grabbed Nate's face, tilted his head back, and quickly found himself drowning in his partner's beautiful eyes. Leaning in, Logan stole kiss after kiss from Nate's lips, aching for the mere contact more than a deep plundering. He reveled in touching his thumbs over Nate's cheekbones and brushing snow out of the man's hair. He could hear the elevator door trying to close behind him, and without looking he knew Canin held it open. Much like last night, Logan didn't give a rat's ass he had an audience.

Logan pecked kisses to Nate's lips, nose, and forehead, and whispered, "You're the best thing I've seen all day." A rough chuckle escaped, scratching at the tightness in Logan's throat. "And considering Jamie found Tracy, that's saying something."

"See?" Forehead to forehead, Nate guided Logan's hands all over his body. "I'm all right." Nate wound his arms around Logan's waist and pressed them close. "No need to worry."

Logan wrapped his arms around Nate too. He kissed the man's temple and then into his hair, all the while wondering who absorbed who's warmth and who did the comforting. "I was scared." Logan slipped back to sounding like he had sandpaper in his mouth. "I think it took ten years off my life waiting for you to get back." He tipped Nate's head up and backed him into the wall for another kiss.

Nate immediately tensed and pushed at Logan. "Ow. Ow." He grabbed onto the railing so hard his knuckles turned as pale as his face suddenly had. "Ah, fuck." His knees buckled.

As Logan grabbed for Nate, ice-cold fear cut through his veins. "What's the matter?" He tucked his partner into his side. The beads of sweat forming on Nate's forehead made Logan's skin equally clammy.

"I swear I'm okay." Nate's voice couldn't have been softer, but the strength in his vow pierced straight at Logan's heart. "But I think I need to go to the ER." As soon as Nate said that, his head lolled and his legs went out from under him again.

"Shit." Logan scooped Nate into his arms. "We're going to the hospital." Looking around frantically, he found Canin already in the elevator with them. "You're driving."

* * *

Hours later, with Canin long gone, Logan hovered outside Nate's hospital room. Through the window, he could see Nate sleeping peacefully, but the thought of walking inside to sit with Nate paralyzed him. The nurses would come wake Nate up again soon enough. In addition to all the outer visible trauma, the doctors had diagnosed Nate with several bruised ribs as well as a possible concussion. No internal bleeding, though, and nothing on any scans made the doctors overly worried. They wanted him to stay overnight as a precaution.

Logan had barely contained his fear while waiting for news in the ER. The desire to do violent things to each and every other person in that crowded space had overwhelmed him. Anything was better than sitting in silence and allowing his imagination to run wild with the thousands of ways that situation in the boathouse could have ended with Nate never walking away alive.

Twice in two days Nate's life had been in grave danger, and Logan couldn't predict how he would respond if it happened again. Christ, he didn't know if he could do this job every day while constantly coping with wondering and worrying where Nate was, and if any future task Logan assigned him would end with Nate dead.

No. Logan had to move. He felt like he was coming out of his skin. *I can't deal with that.*

Ryan, decked in scrubs, intercepted Logan's path. "You can go in and sit with him." He nudged his head toward Nate's room. "I told the nurses you could."

"They told me." Fairness compelled Logan to add, "Thank you for taking care of him." He pressed his forehead to the window set into the door, his focus on Nate's unnaturally pale skin. "It helped to know he was in your hands."

"It's my job."

"Right." The more Logan stared at Nate the greater his heart rate and restlessness grew. "Excuse me," he murmured. "I think I need some coffee."

Ryan blocked Logan again. "Why don't you let me do that? You go in, and I'll bring it to you."

With a glare Ryan probably remembered, Logan bit off, "I can do it myself."

"Go inside and sit with him." Familiar blue eyes looked back at Logan without blinking. "I can see you're scared, Logan, but pulling away to protect yourself is not the answer. It has never worked for you in the past."

Logan's hackles rose on end, and he spoke through clenched teeth. "Nate is not the same as you."

"I know. Which is why my advice is even more important." After glancing around and finding the halls empty, Ryan moved in and lowered his voice. "Nate might not make a shit move like I did by cheating on you, but if he has you this tied up in knots, I seriously doubt he's the kind of man who will accept only the pieces you choose to give him. You won't just lose another boyfriend if you withdraw into your *Logan* shell. You'll drive away the man you love."

Logan fucking hated that someone who no longer had ties to his life still had such knowledge of his personality flaws. "I'll do what I have to do." He turned and put his attention back on Nate. *Christ. He looks so fucking fragile.*

After a pause, Ryan said, "I hope you think about what I've said." He squeezed Logan's shoulder. "Take care."

Logan waited until he was alone again, watching Nate through the glass, until he couldn't bear the distance anymore. He slipped into the room and pulled a stool to his partner's bedside. He put his hand on the bed, fingertips grazing Nate's. The immediate pulse of warmth and life wrenched an ugly sob out of Logan, one that he stifled with two hands and stuffed back down into his very marrow. A bruised body lay in front of Logan, and too much pale skin that should hold the healthiest pink blooms of life twisted his gut with sickness. Touching Nate wreaked violence inside Logan. It felt like someone shattered a glass orb, and each shard cut through organs and muscles, tearing him to shreds. At the same time, Logan knew leaving the hospital would stab the biggest, sharpest piece right through his heart.

I can't leave him. And I don't know how to stay.

If he'd followed his laws he would not be in this situation.

Logan dragged a chair to the farthest corner of the room, close to Nate, but also not, and settled into the darkness.

* * *

As soon as Logan rounded the corner at Quinn and spotted Nate standing in front of the elevator, he drew back into the shadows. Where he proceeded to bang into the only person bigger than him. *Shit.*

Canin took one look at Nate and then rounded on Logan. "What in the hell are you doing?" He kept his question to a hissing whisper. In the distance, the elevator opened, and Nate stepped inside. "This is the third time in as many weeks I've caught you ducking to hide when you see Nate."

"N-no." Logan's adrenaline raced in his stumbling scramble. "I forgot something in my office."

"Bullshit." Canin pulled Nate into the empty conference room. As soon as the door clicked closed, he raised his voice, saying, "Nate's already upset because the Sarna kid is morphing back into that asshole you first told me about. On top of that, he's trying to mend from some serious shit without complaining one bit. What the hell happened to 'Nate's mine now. It's my right to take care of him'?"

Righteous fire got Logan in Canin's face. "Fuck you. I have been taking care of him. I've made sure he's had everything he's needed since getting out of the hospital."

"Yet you avoid him every chance you get here at work." Canin might as well have rolled his eyes. "That's wonderful."

Logan sneered right back. "You're seeing things that aren't there."

"I'd fucking hit you right now if you weren't my best friend." Canin's growl encompassed the vacant room, and his eyes burned with cool fire. "Don't be an asshole, man. Don't ruin the best thing that ever happened to you. Don't take away from Nate the best thing that has happened to him. Fix whatever the hell is broken between you before you find yourself going home to your apartment at night instead of his. Then it's two nights, and then you're busy with a new case and need to work late. And before you know what happened, it's over between you."

Logan opened his mouth, but Canin cut him off. "Take the afternoon off." He shoved Logan into the hallway and guided him to the elevator. "Go find Nate right now. He likes to take breaks—"

"And go up to the roof. I know," Logan finished with bite, glaring at Canin. He stepped onto the elevator and jabbed the appropriate button. "You don't have to tell me about Nate."

Canin merely offered Logan the lamest little wave. Logan gave him the one-finger salute back, and he could hear Canin chuckling as the doors closed.

With each floor the elevator ascended, as Logan got closer to Nate, his heart rate increased to the point that he started to sweat. *What the hell am I going to say to him?* During a three-week period, Logan had yet to figure out the right words.

The elevator doors parted, leading Logan a short distance to the entrance to the roof. *Better figure it out quick.* Logan let himself into the atrium. Beyond the glass-enclosed seating and eating area that had once housed an indoor pool, he could see Nate's shape through the flurries of snow swirling outside. *This is it.* He dragged one of the table chairs over to the door and wedged it under the knob, ensuring them privacy. Right now, Logan didn't much care if anyone else in the building had plans to use the space.

With one last steadying breath, Logan moved across the sunroom and opened the glass door that led to outside. A gust of wicked wind cut right through his suit and reminded him he hadn't taken time to put on his coat. Twenty feet in front of him, Nate didn't move. He leaned his elbows on the brick protection wall, giving Logan his back.

"Nate?" Logan braced himself to withstand the whips of snow. "It's fucking cold out here." His leg dragged as he moved to Nate's side. "You're still recovering from everything that happened to you," he offered gently. "I think you should come inside."

"I'm fine." After pulling his coat more tightly around himself, Nate lifted his face up to the rays of sun beaming through the flakes of snow. "I'm not sure I've convinced you, but I can take care of myself." Finally, finally, he turned and gave Logan the once-over. Logan couldn't tell if the cold or something else had brought it on, but Nate's nose and cheeks were red, and his dark eyes shone just a little too brightly. "You're the one not properly dressed." Nate turned Logan's suit collar up for him and did up the buttons too. "You should go back inside."

Logan captured one of Nate's gloved hands. "Of course I know you can take care of yourself." He started to breathe a little easier. "If that's what's bothering you, then we can go back inside." He tugged on Nate's hand but Nate didn't budge.

"I'm out here trying to figure you out, Logan." Unwinding their fingers, Nate caressed Logan's cheek. The cold leather, in place of Nate's warm skin, sent an extra shiver down Logan's spine. "But I'm afraid I'm not doing a very good job."

The blood in Logan's veins turned to ice. "What do you mean?" Withdrawing, Logan took his first steps across the brick, moving, feeling caged once more. "What you see is what you get. I'm not complicated."

"But there is more, you see." Sighing, Nate rubbed his face, and it tore Logan up inside to see the darkness still smudging his eyes. "You apparently live by these rules or codes or laws or something. Only you never come out and talk about them, so I'm at a disadvantage. I'm playing blind. I never know if what I'm doing or how I'm behaving"—deeper slashes of color burned across his pink cheeks—"or even if how I'm loving you is putting check marks in the plus or minus columns you have for me."

"No, Nate. No." Logan's heart squeezed with unbearable tightness. *What the hell is going on here?* "It's nothing like that. I would never rate the things you do."

"At first I thought you were just scared," Nate went on, and Logan only heard sadness in his voice. "I only wanted to make sure you felt safe with me. But we have been sharing a bed for weeks now, and no matter what I say or do, you don't touch me. You won't let me touch or comfort you."

"You were hurt." Logan threw his hands up, and a growl of frustration entered his tone. "Good Christ, honey, you had bandages wrapped around your middle tighter than a mummy until a few days ago. What did you want me to do? Attack you?"

"No, but I didn't expect you'd sleep with one eye open in order to make sure there are always three feet of space between us in bed."

Logan felt like a dog trapped in a corner. "It's not like that. You're exaggerating."

"It doesn't feel like I am," Nate argued. He grabbed Logan and forced them face to face. "I want to fight for you. I'm not interested in tucking my tail between my legs and running. I know you love me just as much as I love you. I believe that with all my heart." Just as much as Nate's words, his very life force seduced Logan. "But I'm doing my damndest to figure out what the hell I'm up against with you. Am I fighting the scars put on you by all the men in your past? By how those relationships came to an end? Because I will do that. I will fight your fears and put them to rest. But I need to know what they are. I can't just flail my arms and hope I hit the right thing."

"You're not in a battle against other men." Pressing a kiss to Nate's lips, Logan held there in a gruff voice. "I promise I don't want anyone but you."

Nate leaned into Logan and kissed him back. "Then what are these rules you've hinted at breaking for me? Maybe I can help show you that you're not. Or that at least with me, breaking them will be okay."

"I don't want to talk about them." Logan untangled himself and pulled away. They'd now reached a place where talking about such incredibly personal things felt like it stripped his skin away and left every necessary lifeline exposed. "They're stupid."

"They're not stupid if you've used them to shape your life." Nate stood still at the barrier wall, but Logan could feel the man tracking his every limping move. "That means they're a part of you."

"Which doesn't make me proud," Logan admitted. A growing heat inside warmed his skin. He threw Nate a sideways glance as he paced past him. "But I didn't know any other way to be."

"Tell me one of them," Nate said. "How many are there?"

Coming to a stop by the atrium door, Logan saw the dull red creeping up his face in the glass reflection. *I can't do this*. Logan turned to face Nate, but he stayed hugged up against the glass. *You'll lose him if you don't*.

"There are five." Christ, Logan had never shared this part of his life with anyone. *Ever*.

Nate nodded and murmured an *okay*. "That's not too many. I think I can knock them down." He crossed his arms against his chest and from twenty feet away held Logan transfixed with his beautiful stare. "Tell me the first one."

"Never fall for a straight man."

"I'm not straight." Nate lifted an eyebrow. "Which you know better than anyone by now. What's next?"

Logan cleared his throat. "Never mix business with pleasure." Saying these things aloud, Logan had never felt so fucking embarrassed in his life.

The sweetest damn smile mixed with a bit of naughty lifted Nate's mouth at the edges. "We did do that." He chuckled, and Logan could see it twinkled in his eyes. "Big time."

"We definitely did." Logan wanted to laugh, but he still remembered the damage Cosgrove had done to Nate on two occasions, and it left him cold. Looking at Nate right now, Logan slipped back to walking into Nate's apartment and finding him terrified and bruised. "If I didn't love you so much"—Logan blinked back the hated pressure that made tears want to fall—"it wouldn't matter. But when I think about assigning you a job that might put you in danger... Damn it, I don't know if I can be professional. Which isn't on you. It's me. But I don't know if I can treat you like anyone else. You aren't like anyone else." He exhaled unsteadily. "Not to me."

Nate took one step closer, bridging the gap, and so did Logan.

"What if I told you I was thinking about making a career change, thus putting back in place the 'no mixing' part of your law?" Nate tentatively closed another foot of space between them.

Logan went to move, but Nate's words suddenly penetrated, and he pulled up short. "You want to leave Quinn?"

"I don't know yet," Nate replied. He looked away for a moment, and Logan watched the edge of Nate's lip suck into his mouth. He moved to chewing on a fingernail, and when he came back to Logan, red had taken over his face. "I've never felt like I quite fit here, you know, and the Sarna case reminded me how much I hate the ugliness that sometimes comes with living in this world and doing this work. I know you hate the cruelty as much as I do, but you also love the investigation and thrive on solving the puzzle. The pleasure I got when I figured something out with the case happened because I knew my work would make you proud, and that was what mattered to me. It's the same with the work I did before you came here. I was happy to do it mostly because I wanted to prove to Kasey it wasn't a mistake to hire me."

Fucking hell. The thought of assigning Nate investigative work screwed with Logan's sanity, but the reality of not having Nate close by every day sent fear through him too. *It doesn't matter where he is. You'll always worry about him.*

Logan didn't know if he could get used to worrying every day, no matter what. "If you didn't work for Quinn, what would you do?"

"I don't know." Nate shrugged. He suddenly struck Logan as young and shy, much as when they'd first met. "I think I'd like to go to college. I've never thought I could before, but now I think I might excel at it."

"Christ, baby." His voice cracking, Logan wanted to run to Nate, yet something deeper and more terrifying kept his feet rooted in place. "You definitely would. You deserve to be there as much as anyone else."

"Thank you." Although brief, Nate's smile gave away how much Logan's opinion meant to him. Which only staggered Logan even more. "I'd stay working here part time for the moment," Nate added. "And maybe in a few years I'll discover Quinn is where I want to be. I don't know. But even if I did, I could always work on the security side. They assigned me to investigations because they thought it would help that you knew me, not because I expressed an interest in the work."

Logan scrubbed at his face. “Damn it, baby.” He’d never felt so haggard and beat. “I don’t want you to change your career choice because of me.”

Nate closed the distance between them. He pulled off his gloves, and one touch of his strong hands against Logan’s jaw soothed away the tension. “I am my own man, and I would never let you do that. I want to explore because of *me*. So we sort of have rule two taken care of. What’s number three?”

“They’re laws”—Logan managed a rough chuckle with his correction—“and it’s ‘never force someone back into the closet with you.’”

Nate busted out laughing, and Logan really couldn’t blame him.

Light now danced in Nate’s brown gaze. “You’re way out of the closet now, Logan.” He poked at Logan’s stomach and sides until Logan twisted away, laughing too. “You busted that one yourself, sweetness.”

Logan snagged Nate’s hand and tucked him close again. “It wasn’t conscious.” Looking, overcome with love, Logan brushed a fluffy snowflake off the tip of Nate’s nose and then kissed away the cold. “I can’t hide what I feel for you.”

After crinkling his nose, Nate wrapped his arms around Logan and linked his hands at the small of his back. “Give me the next law.”

“Never compete for a man’s interest.”

All humor left Nate, and his gaze softened with such adoration it made Logan’s breath catch.

“There was never anyone for me but you,” Nate confessed, never blinking, never looking away. “I will never hurt you like Ryan did. You’ve never had to compete for my love, and you never will. You fascinate me. You make me feel safe. You’re clever, and you make me laugh. The sex is amazing and will never be boring with you. I don’t have to experiment with someone else to know what we have is special. I look at your face, and I listen to you laugh, and I lay my head against your chest to hear your heartbeat, and I wonder how I got lucky enough to capture your interest.”

Wind whipped Nate’s hair across his cheek, and Logan pushed it behind his ear. He lingered, though, needing to touch. “You were yourself.” The eye contact between them intensified and almost stripped Logan of his voice. “It didn’t take any more than that.”

Nate turned his head to press kisses to Logan’s fingertips. “You will never have to compete for my interest or jump through hoops to have me in your life. That’s law four cut down and put to rest.” He looked at Logan, and his gaze shone brighter than the occasional ray of sunlight breaking through the snow. “Give me number five.”

Okay. Logan exhaled. And then did it again. His throat became thick, and it took another minute before he could speak. “Never let a man become important enough to break you.” He barely got it out.

Nate suddenly went rigid. “That’s the one.” He moved his hands to rest against Logan’s chest, where he surely felt the frantic uptick in his heartbeat. “This is the

law that matters to you. It's the one that's causing you to pull away." Nate nodded, as if he could read Logan's mind. "Am I right?"

Every emotion Logan had spent his life avoiding slammed through him with blazing fire and then arctic cold, leaving him trapped in a place he'd promised himself he would never be. Adrenaline raced out of control. He put space between him and Nate, pacing again, to cover the sudden trembling. He murmured something about the fucking cold weather and walked to the atrium, but he could feel Nate's perceptive gaze on his back the entire way. *Think, man, think.* It sounded like a swarm of bees buzzed all his insecurities in his head, and Logan couldn't make them shut up. *You're gonna look like a pussy and an idiot.*

"Tell me." Gentle insistence rang in Nate's tone. He moved close to Logan, against the wind, blocking the snow and chill from hammering Logan directly. "We're going to stall here with this distance between us if you don't. I don't think you really want to live in this lonely place, Logan, despite your laws that say otherwise. I think you want what Canin and Kasey, and Adam and Rhone have. Talk to me." He curled his hand around Logan's shoulder, and Logan shuddered. "Trust me."

Just Nate's touch, right now, crumbled Logan. He put his forehead against the glass, and squeezed his eyes shut. "I've had to tell a lot of people about the passing of a loved one, of a spouse," he shared, his voice scratching raw. "I've seen men who looked like they could tear down a tree with their bare hands and tough women who looked like nothing could topple them break into a million little pieces and become completely immobile when losing a spouse, a partner—whatever you want to call it. I've seen people who know they have children and responsibilities and a full life become so crushed by the death of their mate they end up taking their own lives because they can't tolerate living in this world without them." Taking a steadying breath, Logan rolled his head against the window and found Nate's gaze as misty as his own. "I've seen death in pairs too many times to count, and I never wanted that to happen to me. I never wanted to have such a weakness. I never wanted my heart and my life to be in someone else's hands. It seems terrible to give another person such power over you."

Unable to control himself, Logan reached out and caressed Nate's chiseled cheek. "But now I'm with you." He couldn't help the smile that came with looking upon this man. "I couldn't help it. I tried to walk away, but I couldn't. You're too wonderful. And that should be great, and it is, but at the same time, it's not. What I feel for you, the depth of it, is like a bomb inside me waiting to explode. I know what I went through when Cosgrove attacked you in the car, and then when you got trapped in the showdown at the boathouse." Logan's chest heaved as he fought the anxiety of reliving those moments. "Every minute during that time when I couldn't see and touch you for myself so I could tell myself you were okay, I got a taste of how much you have become my very life. I didn't like it." *There, I said it. You'll hate me now. I deserve it.*

Now came the part where Logan should shut up, but words and ugly, out-of-control emotions kept spewing. “I didn’t like what I felt because it showed me my heart is already so tied to you that I don’t think I can live without you. If something happened to you...” Logan couldn’t even bear finishing that thought. “Christ, Nate.” He exhaled and swallowed, trying to dissipate the thickness clogging his throat. “I wouldn’t be able to pick myself up and go on. I never wanted to be that guy, but with you—I love you so fucking much—I am. Losing you would break me, and I don’t want that.” He felt as if someone had flayed him open and left him to roast under a blazing sun. “I don’t know how to be with you when I feel like this. I can’t make myself break up with you, but I know it isn’t fair to keep you on a hook like this either.”

Rather than softness or sympathy, the burn of an inferno turned Nate’s eyes pitch. “So you want me to tell you it’s okay to give me fifty or sixty percent of you. Is that it?” he asked, his voice cutting. “If I want to be with you, then I have to accept whatever amount would allow you to keep enough of your heart safe, so it won’t hurt so much if I die.”

“Don’t even kid about that.” Stricken, Logan grabbed for Nate, but Nate sidestepped his hold. “Don’t put bad mojo in the air.”

Nate got right into Logan’s face. “That *is* the offer you’re putting on the table, though. Right? Stay with me, and you have to learn to accept what I’m willing to give.” A snarl unlike any Logan had ever seen flashed Nate’s anger. “I have to learn to be happy with the scraps you’ve been giving me since I got out of the hospital.”

“I never said that.”

“You didn’t have to,” Nate shot back, invisible fire blazing around him. “I’m able to read between those lines. The spaces are pretty damn big.”

“Great.” Logan tore open the door and stalked into the atrium, needing a new space to breathe. Suddenly, it felt as if his suit suffocated him. “I cut myself open for you, and you’re mocking me.” He unbuttoned his jacket in an effort to help him cool down.

“I’m not mocking you.” Nate strode in after Logan and spun him around. “I would never make fun of you. But I’m also not going to roll over and play dead or bullshit you.” He grabbed tightly to Logan’s hands when Logan made to pull away. There was no give. Logan had never felt such strength in Nate. “You wouldn’t respect me if I did.”

“Then what the hell are you going to do?” Logan meant to sneer and jab, but he feared the emotions raging in him turned it into a plea. “I don’t know what else to tell you.”

Something like an indulgent sigh escaped Nate. His gaze never wavered, though, and when he leaned to brush his lips against Logan’s, Logan clung and deepened it to something desperate. Nate held on to Logan and kissed him back, licking into Logan’s mouth in a way that made Logan moan. Logan went for more, tasting, hungry, but Nate nipped his lips and ended the kiss.

Quickly as Nate put space between them, he dipped down to press kisses against each of Logan's hands. He looked into Logan's eyes, holding Logan prisoner with just his gaze. "I am going to put a counteroffer on the table for you, Logan. That law five of yours"—he shook his head—"you're going to have to break it to be with me. I love you. I love you with everything in me. I love you so much it would devastate my world if something ever happened to you. It would crush me. I don't know what I would do. And guess what? If something were to happen to me, I damn well want it to crush you too." Nate held up his hand, Logan's still entwined, stopping Logan before he could speak. "That would mean I have all your heart, the way you already have mine. I demand every bit of you, heart and soul. I deserve it. I can ask for something so big because I know that as much as losing me would break you, I also know you are so strong." He nodded when Logan would have said, *Not about this*.

"Yes," Nate said, as if reading Logan's mind. "I know as much as it would hurt and feel like it's not worth waking up anymore, you would find a way to mourn and then pick up the pieces and go on. You'd do it because I'd want you to, just the same as I think you'd damn well want for me.

"I hope we grow old together, sweetness." Nate's genuine smile, something subconscious Logan knew existed just for him, backed up his vow and endearment. "I hope in sixty years when we're old and gray, we're still fucking each other in the retirement home while on a constant Viagra drip. But there are no guarantees. I can't promise you seventy-five more years together any more than you can for me. What I can promise you is that I will love you and take care of you beyond anything your wildest dreams can imagine, and I'll do it for as long as I'm on this earth breathing with you. If you want to be with me, then I need you to promise me the same. I want everything. I want all of you.

"That's my offer, Logan. All or nothing. You dive into us, and you trust that I'll catch you." Nate stepped back then, giving Logan the space he always craved.

With plenty of room for Logan to run, Nate asked, "What do you say?"

Chapter Seventeen

“All or nothing.”

Nate’s heart raced like a son of a bitch, but he stood his ground. He watched Logan struggle, and maybe even grow angry as he processed Nate’s vow. Nate wanted nothing so much as to close the gap between them and take the stubborn, beautiful man in his arms. His fingers itched to caress and soothe Logan’s harsh features, so much so Nate curled his hands into fists to stop himself from making the move. Right now, Nate only had his will.

Please don’t let us end.

Logan started prowling again, and Nate knew that meant he felt trapped in his head and skin.

“So you’re issuing me an ultimatum.” Logan shot those words out with such bite and trajectory Nate half expected to hear a shatter as they pierced the glass atrium walls. “Is that what is going on here?”

His heart contracting terribly with each uneven step Logan took, Nate moved to touch Logan but withdrew before brushing his fingers down the man’s stiffened spine. *Don’t crumple to your knees now.*

“I adore you more than I thought it possible to love another person,” Nate admitted instead. “And there is a part of me screaming to take whatever I can get from you. But if I did that, in the long run, I’d lose you anyway.” Logan whipped around to face Nate, and Nate blinked away tears before they could fall. He didn’t want Logan to change his mind because he couldn’t stand to see Nate cry. “You wouldn’t respect a man who thought so little of himself that he would sit at your feet and beg for whatever nuggets you’re willing to give.”

“*Capable of giving,*” Logan growled. “There is a difference. Don’t make it sound like I’m some tyrant bastard who wants to manipulate your emotions for my personal pleasure.”

Nate stepped into Logan’s path and forced his partner to see him. “I think you’re entirely capable of offering incredible commitment and love.” He put his hand on Logan’s chest, needing to feel the life in his heartbeat. “You’ve already shown me so much of what you have inside you to share.”

“And look what it has done to me.” Waving his hands down his frame, Logan chuckled derisively. “I’m a fucking unfocused wreck.”

That felt like nothing so much as a jab aimed right at Nate. "I'm sorry you see it that way." He withdrew and took a step toward the door, his confidence pricked, but a voice in his head said, *Do not retreat. If he's worth it, stay and fight.*

Nate spun and marched straight back to Logan. "I don't see a wreck. I see someone who is fucking scared but is also on a journey to becoming stronger than he ever imagined he could be. Which is saying something for me, because I'm already awed by your intelligence, abilities, and determination." He stalked Logan, backing the man closer to the glass wall with every sentence he spoke. "You've helped me learn to trust myself. You've had so much faith in who I am and what I can do that I've opened myself to school and the possibility of a different career. I wouldn't be in the place I am right now without you. I can admit that." Once Logan's spine hit the glass, Nate planted his hands on either side and caged him in. "I just want you to be open to letting me do the same for you. I don't think it's too much to ask."

Sparks snapped left and right in Logan's eyes. "But you only want it on your terms."

Nate swallowed down a curse. "I want it with equal commitment and vulnerability." As soon as he spoke, he bit his tongue and forced himself to think before frustration prompted him to say something he would regret. Every time Nate looked at Logan, and every time he didn't see any give in Logan's gaze or stance, Nate had to remind himself Logan's defensive posturing came from fear and the lifelong instinct to hide his desires.

Instead of showing his talons in return, Nate brushed the back of his hand over Logan's hard cheek and jaw, marveling he even could. The man flinched in response, and it gave Nate hope.

"You know," Nate began, "if a month ago someone had told me I'd be standing here today in a relationship with you, and that I would be willing to walk away from it, I'd have thought we'd slipped into Bizarro World. Never in a million years would I have believed I could give you up."

Nate studied Logan openly, without trying to conceal the love for this man that filled him to overflowing. "But I've spent a lot of time with you since we started working together, sweetness. You're more than a fantasy now; you're a real person with a lot of layers I didn't anticipate. But at the same time, I know what you're capable of giving me, and I only want what is equal to what I'm putting on the line for you. Which is everything." Taking Logan's hand, Nate put it against his heart so Logan could feel the constant kicking that existed for him. "I think you're worth fighting for, and I damn well will, but if you can't promise me you'll dive into this with your whole soul, then I won't do it from the same apartment and definitely not from a shared bed."

Stepping aside, Nate pressed his forehead against the window to stare at the violent beauty of the snowstorm kicking up outside. "I'll still be in your life every day." He dropped his voice to a hush, as if being in this warm cocoon of an atrium cloaked them in the safety of the eye of a hurricane. "You'll think about me. You'll remember what we had. Your fears might be stronger than your desires. They

might win. I know I'm taking a risk that you'll never come back to me. But even if you don't, you'll still love me just as much as I'll keep loving you. It won't go away just because we're not together."

Nate smiled softly, just for himself. *If I could stop loving you, Logan, I would have found a way some time in the last three years when I didn't think I had a chance with you.*

Now Nate took the biggest gamble of his life. He did it for both of them. Glancing sideways, he found Logan with his back against the windows, as still as a statue. At the same time, Logan rubbed his thumb against his finger again and again and again, and Nate knew the man listened intently to every word. *Please.* Nate prayed to whatever God or deities listened to him today. *Let me find the right thing to say.*

"I'm betting you'll find you continue to worry about me just as much," Nate went on, looking out the window again. "You've been pulling away already, but it hasn't eased your fears and worry. I want a chance to be happy and build a life with you. I think together we'll learn how to deal with the fears we can't control." Nate shrugged, but his shoulders felt weighed down with cinder blocks. "It's up to you." *I've done what I can.* His heart cracked as if they truly were saying goodbye. *Maybe we are.*

Next to him, Logan appeared as unmovable as steel. "I don't like ultimatums," he said in a gruff voice. He stared straight ahead.

"I don't either." His heart breaking, Nate refused to cry. *I won't do that to him.* He curled his hand around Logan's arm and leaned in to brush a kiss against his cheek. That rough stubble abrading his lips almost broke Nate. He dipped his head and murmured, "Bye, Logan. I'll give you some time alone to think."

Nate stepped away, but Logan instantly grabbed his wrist. Logan held Nate so tightly it ground bone against bone, but Nate didn't care. It was the only pain he'd ever welcomed feeling in his life.

Pressing his face to the side of Nate's head, Logan exhaled shakily. "I don't want to be without you," he whispered, his voice stripped bare. His lips and teeth scraped against Nate's temple. "I love you."

A terrible, hopeful longing made Nate's chest squeeze exquisitely. He shifted to find misty, pale jade waiting for him. "You'll give me everything?"

Logan curled his hand around Nate's neck, his chest rising and falling rapidly as he dragged Nate into him. "I already have." He sealed the deal with another brush of their lips, the contact a dizzying temptation. "I don't want to pull away anymore." Logan couldn't seem to stop touching and studying Nate's face, and he looked equally terrified and excited to be doing it. "Be with me. Help me. Call me on my shit, and I'll find a way to work through it. I love you." He tangled his hand in Nate's hair and tugged, tilting his head back. "I've never wanted anything more in my life than to be with you." As Logan descended, his gaze burned with unchecked fire, something Nate hadn't seen since the last time they'd made love.

Nate cried out as Logan captured his mouth, and it was the sweetest kiss Nate had ever tasted. Logan moaned, pulling Nate's hair. He angled Nate's head to lick his tongue and teeth. Nate met the first strike of tongue with a slide and tangle right back, eager to savor an intimacy he had so quickly come to need with this man. The taste of coffee from Logan's kiss mainlined straight into Nate's blood and flooded him with passionate energy. He ran his hands under Logan's suit jacket to touch over the taut lines of his stomach and chest and then pushed higher to savor the breadth of his shoulders.

As Logan forced Nate's jaw down and sank in for a deeper kiss, he stripped Nate's heavy coat off and then tore at his shirt and tie, ripping the fabric to get at skin. A rumble started inside Nate, and he rubbed himself all up against Logan's front, desperate to feel this solid frame fused to his again. Nate wrapped his hands around Logan's upper arms and held on with every ounce of strength in him. He slashed his mouth across Logan's and invaded right back, tangling tongues and clinking teeth before licking the roof of Logan's mouth.

With a low groan, Logan nipped at Nate and then ended the kiss. Visibly catching his breath, he switched their places and plastered Nate to the glass. "Promise me it's okay to touch you, and I'll believe you." So quickly, Logan's pale eyes burned with more drugging heat than Nate had ever seen. "I've missed feeling this close to you. I want it every day." A twinkle sparkled within the fire. Logan reached down to cover Nate's growing erection. He took another lick at Nate's kiss-swollen lips, and said, "But I've done nothing but dream about your cock since the last time we were together." Through Nate's pants, Logan got a good grip and rubbed from root to tip.

Nate hissed and bucked his hips. *Too fucking long.* "I've had a lot of dreams about you and my cock too." As Logan stroked him again, a moan took over Nate's chuckle and he scrambled to undo his belt. "How about we act one out right now?" His cock throbbed against Logan's hold, and anticipation made his hands clumsy.

A sly smile appeared on Logan and pricked at Nate's heart. "You read my mind, rock star." Logan stole another hot, hard kiss, sensitizing Nate's mouth even more, and then moved down to bite his chin. As Logan continued scraping his teeth downward, he yanked Nate's shirt out of his pants and tore at the rest of it, popping buttons and pushing fabric aside, clearing a narrow path to his target.

Just as Logan pushed Nate's head back to suck on his Adam's apple, Nate got his pants open and freed his cock. Air caressed his burning flesh, arousing Nate even more. After pushing Nate's shirt aside just enough to get at a bit more skin, Logan kissed his way to a nipple and flicked his tongue around the darker skin, not stopping until he had the tiny peak stiff. Nate gasped between a plea for Logan to suck the other one. As Logan mumbled a muffled agreement, he nibbled his way over and suckled Nate's other nipple to attention. Nate clamped his teeth together and tried to keep his hands off his straining dick. *I want to feel Logan there first.*

Folding to his knees, Logan kissed his way over every inch of Nate's belly, making the tense muscles quiver with each brush of his lips. *Oh God, yes.* Nate's

cock reared, eager for one of those kisses too. He bore his head into the glass behind him, arched his back, and poked his member out even more, desperate for a home for his prick.

Rather than going for Nate's shaft, Logan rubbed his face into the smooth skin surrounding Nate's penis, tormenting him with little scratches from his stubble. As Logan loved on every bit of skin surrounding Nate's prick, he pulled Nate's pants and underwear down past his hips. His eyes sliding closed, Logan visibly breathed Nate in and murmured about how much he loved the way Nate smelled.

Swallowing down another moan, Nate almost came on his stomach as he watched. Moving in a flash, he reached down and grabbed his balls, bringing pain that made him gasp but also took his libido down a notch. He exhaled and reminded himself to breathe.

Logan immediately looked up. "Are you all right?"

Nate fucking melted inside even more. He let go of his nuts to brush his fingers through Logan's hair. "Just getting too excited too fast. I want you again," he confessed. His dick twitched as he thought about being inside Logan once more. "But I'm fine."

"Then let me get you nice and ready to have me." With that sexy-as-hell, deep utterance, Logan licked a line up Nate's shaft and then swallowed him whole in one shot.

"Oh God. Logan. Logan." Nate bit his lip. His hips bucked wildly, out of his control, and he stabbed his cock to Logan's throat. Logan dug his fingers into Nate's thighs and shoved him into the glass, plastering him there, immobile, and went to town eating and jerking the hell out of Nate's penis. He worked his head in a twisting motion and covered every bit of Nate's dick in saliva, where he then proceeded to swirl his tongue around the throbbing tip while pulling Nate's shaft to the point of pain. Nate jolted and begged for more, whimpering about how much he loved it.

Glancing up at Nate with dirty, dirty thoughts darkening his gaze, Logan rubbed Nate's cock all over his face, moaning as it glanced across his cheekbones and forehead. He even turned his head this way and that to run it through his hair. The hundreds of feathery soft sensations of Logan's locks whispering over Nate's cock made him cry out and tremble. After one more pass running Nate's tip over his face, Logan parted his lips and sucked Nate into his mouth again.

"Please..." Nate gritted his teeth as Logan withdrew to swat his tongue on the underside of Nate's rim. *So good.* Grabbing two fists full of Logan's hair, Nate held on tight and ground his ass into the cold glass behind him, searching for something to distract him or give him the willpower not to come. Logan only went down on Nate again and somehow took him deeper. The blood started to rush inside Nate with dizzying speed, heading straight where he didn't want it to go. *Please.* Nate started whispering the names of every comic book hero he loved, as well as listing his or her special power, hoping against hope it would stave off coming.

Right then, though, Logan reached between Nate's legs and flicked his asshole. He applied delicious pressure to the striated muscle, and Nate lost track of his list at the Silver Surfer and his possession of "the power cosmic." *Never been this good.* Logan wrapped up Nate's sac with his other hand. All at the same time, he smothered Nate's cock in the warm cavern of his mouth, rolled Nate's balls in the most spine-shivery way, and pushed the tip of his blunt finger into Nate's ass.

Everything exploded in a perfect storm inside Nate. He shouted, his voice hoarse. His hips surged forward, leading the charge toward his end. Nate's dick swelled within the confines of Logan's mouth a split second before he came. "Ohhh fuck..." He spilled his seed down Logan's throat in uneven spurts, the first one massive to the point that it felt like it would never stop, and then each shiver spit out less and less until he had nothing left to give.

Before Nate could recover enough to speak, Logan scrambled backward on his knees and pulled himself to his feet with the help of the table and a chair. Not stopping there, he swiped the winter greenery off the table and climbed up on it, settling himself in the middle, still looking as harsh and unbending as the first time Nate had laid eyes on him.

Logan worked open his belt, undid his zipper, and pulled his thick erection out of his underwear. "I want you to fuck my cock and make yourself hard again," he said, his voice savage. "Then I want you to take me like you never intend to stop."

"Damn it, sweetness," Nate uttered. His knees went a little shaky but he swore blood already tried to work its way south and get him stiff again. He managed to kick off his shoes, pants, and underwear while hopping to the table and climbing up to straddle Logan's thighs. "I always did like the way you think." He reached into his suit jacket's inner pocket and withdrew a condom and packet of lube. "Thank God I excelled at preparedness and earned myself a very nice scout badge when I was a kid."

Logan covered Nate's hand with his. As soon as Nate looked up, he stalled on the intensity darkening Logan's gaze.

"We don't have to use the condom if you don't want to." Each word spoken sounded as if Logan had rust in his throat. "There's not going to be anyone else for me but you."

Nate's chest banded with such unfathomable tightness, he almost couldn't breathe. Overcome, he folded down on top of Logan and planted kisses all over his face. "For me too." He pressed his forehead to Logan's and stared into the blur of his beautiful gaze. "I love you." A hint of moisture at the corner of Logan's eye glinted against the light, and Nate dipped to lick it away. "I trust you with more than my heart. I trust you with my life."

"I'll never abuse it." Thickness coated Logan's vow. Nate could hear it. Logan slipped the lube out of Nate's hand, tore it open, and Nate rose up to his knees so Logan could spread the stuff on his cock. Once a thick sheen coated the red length, Logan held himself up straight from the root and met Nate's gaze again. "Ride me." Pearls of early cum beaded his slit as he said that. "I can't wait a second more."

On his knees, Nate scooted forward and then reached back, placing his fingers on the underside of Logan's dick to help hold it in place. Using his finger as a guide, Nate pushed down, down, and caught his breath as Logan's thick tip kissed his hole. Nate didn't stop. He bore his weight harder, and he bit his lip at the wonderful force pushing against his anus each time he pressed himself into Logan's cock. Watching, Nate hated the strain he could see in Logan as the man held himself still against the contact, while it surely wreaked havoc on the millions of nerve endings in his cockhead, each one clamoring for penetration.

Nate pushed down again, and when his chute squeezed closed tighter, perspiration dotted the back of his neck under his shirt and jacket. "Break me open," he begged. He tore at Logan's shirt and tie and dug his fingers into the man's hard chest. "I want to feel you take me."

Logan shook his head. "Together, honey." He did curl his hands around Nate's ass, though, and spread his cheeks apart wide enough for it to sting the skin. Immediately, Nate's cock twitched and his passage fluttered, sending a nice zing through his system. "I want to savor it too."

This time, when Nate rocked down onto Logan's cock, Logan planted his booted feet onto the table and applied pressure in return. Neither of them stopped, twin forces refusing to back off, and—*oh fuck*—Nate's entrance finally gave up the battle, and the thick head of Logan's prick lodged itself in his ass.

Nate moaned long and low, and his chute grabbed hold of that first inch of invasion, holding on like a vise.

"Ohh...fucking Jesus Christ, honey." Logan's mouth agape, he sank his fingers even deeper into Nate's buttocks. "You feel so damn good. Never been bare before. Don't stop now."

"No." Such focused, burning pleasure consumed Nate's pucker he found it hard to speak. "Won't."

Nate locked in on Logan, who looked right back at him without blinking. As one, Nate bore down, and Logan kept pushing upward. One toe-curling inch at a time, Logan eased into Nate, stretching his passage with delicious torment, until he'd tucked himself inside Nate to the hilt. Nate's flaming rectum automatically contracted around Logan's cock, and the extra pressure made them both groan.

Logan let his hands slide to Nate's hips. "Take it, baby." He lifted Nate halfway off his dick and then set him back down, filling him to the root. "You own it." He nudged against Nate's entrance again, making Nate clench around Logan's embedded length. With a flash of his teeth, Logan ordered, "Do whatever you want."

The more Nate looked and listened to this man, the harder he fell. "I'll take good care of it," he promised. He rocked his hips, sliding off and back on the object in question, hinting at hot, wonderful friction. Lost in Logan, Nate let every hope and dream for their future fill his voice, his heart, and his eyes. "I'll take good care of you too."

Without words, Logan drove his dick hard into Nate's ass just as Nate dropped down and seared their lips together. Nate pushed his tongue into Logan's mouth and kissed him with every ounce of love he hadn't been able to share since his injury. In return, Logan held Nate steady and thrust his hips repeatedly, fucking Nate with an aggression Nate reveled in feeling. He didn't care about the drilling his ass took. He wanted soreness and to still feel this mating tomorrow. This was Nate's real Logan. This was what his man had stubbornly stored inside himself, too afraid to let loose for fear of losing himself forever.

Nate bracketed Logan's head with his arms, and the fall of his hair blocked out almost all the light. In between licks and pecks and base, invasive kisses that left both men gasping for oxygen, Nate pumped down on Logan's piercing cock, stealing this coupling as much as Logan gave it to him freely. Every time they merged to maximum capacity, Nate's cock thickened with renewed arousal between the smash of their bellies.

More than blood surged through Nate. Every time he looked into Logan's luminous eyes, a wrenching, ridiculous mix of raw desire and tenderness choked him. "I lo—"

Logan slapped his hand over Nate's mouth. "Don't." Their bodies went still. "I'll lose my shit if you say it." Another rough curse escaped him, but he countered it with a brush of his knuckles down Nate's jaw. "I don't want to come until you're inside me."

"Shit, man." Nate reared up and bounced on Logan's erection a couple of times, sucking on his lower lip. Each time his ass took a pounding, his cock stuck out straighter and harder. "Look at me." One pull on his dick made him cry out and dump a puddle of precum on Logan's belly. "So fucking close." With one hand on Logan's chest to steady himself, Nate kept riding Logan, loving the feral fucking he brought on himself, but still managed to reach into his coat and produce another packet of lube. He tossed it on Logan's chest. "Put some of that on me."

Tearing the plastic open with his teeth, Logan dumped the clear stuff onto his stomach, and then scooped half onto his fingers. Back to looking wicked, Logan wrapped his hand around Nate's spike-hard shaft and gave it a moan-inducing tug, covering every inch in lube as he did it. He pressed the blunt tip of his thumb into Nate's slit, and Nate hissed. Nate tensed and came down on Logan, tucking the man inside his clenching passage until his ring kissed fur. In return, Logan stroked Nate and teased his opening again. *Motherfucking hell, yes that's good.* Nate clamped his fingers into Logan's pectoral muscles, holding on with everything in him as he rocked his weight over the thick cock shoved up his ass.

"Oh fuck..." A gruff shout escaped Logan. His entire body twisted, and then arced upward, lifting Nate partially off the table. "No more." As he came down, he pushed at Nate's thighs. "I'm not used to this without a rubber. You're gonna make me come."

"Not yet." Nate lifted up in a shot and moved down Logan's legs, uncaring the quick move stabbed a shot of discomfort through his passage. Too primed for a

fucking, Nate didn't dare let any pain register for more than a second. "Use the rest of that lube"—he tugged Logan's underwear and pants past his hips and down his legs as he gave that command—"while I get some of this stuff off you." In his task, Nate became tangled in Logan's boots, and took only long enough to remove those so he could toss the pants and underwear aside to free Logan's legs.

Nate started to peel off his own jacket, but Logan spread his legs and pulled a firm buttock aside right then, and Nate forgot about anything other than staring. Transfixed, Nate watched Logan rub his dark ring and make it shine with lube. Logan's muscles flexed, and he released a little humming sound, giving away his pleasure. The subconscious noise made Nate smile softly.

Logan then lined up his middle finger and pressed against his pucker, grunting but not relenting, until he finally broke through with a moaning, soft "Yes" and pushed his digit inside. Using that one big finger, he worked more lube into his body. Nate reached down to rub his cock in time with that appendage disappearing into Logan's ass slowly, over and over again. *God, that's hot.*

More than anything, Nate wanted to give Logan that pleasure himself. *Feels like I've waited forever.* He edged between Logan's legs and settled back over his body. Reaching between them, he took hold of Logan's wrist, eased him out, and fit his tip in place.

Teasing their noses against one another, Nate licked at Logan's parted lips and pulled the man's legs up to bracket his hips. "How about you let me take over from here?" Nate asked, nudging against Logan's entrance just a hair.

Logan wrapped his arms around Nate's shoulders. "Thought you'd never get here." With a squeeze of his thighs, he pulled Nate into him even more. "Take me, Nate." His gaze burned brighter than the light bouncing off all the snow still surrounding them beyond the glass. "Make me yours again."

Grazing their lips in a tender kiss, Nate whispered, "Always," just as he flexed his lower quadrant and sank his cock into Logan's welcoming ass.

Both men gasped and exhaled against the other's mouth with the first penetration. Logan's hold crushed Nate's shoulders while Nate drove his forehead into Logan's in an effort to fight the onslaught of guttural pleasure pooling in his cock. Hot, tight, slick walls surrounded Nate's penis. Without the condom, and with only one act of topping under his belt, it felt like Nate penetrated Logan for the first time. *Shit.* Nate withdrew, only to ease his length into Logan again with deliberate slowness, and then sucked in a breath as if he hadn't just experienced the sharp concentration of pleasure a second ago.

Nate gritted his teeth, fighting the pull in his spine and nuts that urged him to let go and fill Logan's ass with his seed right now. "No wonder you shoved me off you." He braced his weight on his hands, praying he could shake off the swirls of nerve-shattering sensations invading every corner of his body. "I don't know how you lasted more than three strokes. Oh God, Logan..." Pulling out and pushing into Logan's snug heat once more sent a shudder through Nate's system. "It's so insane."

As he pumped his hips again, Nate slipped equally into the deep, pale sea in Logan's eyes. "It's beautiful."

Rough, strong hands slid from Nate's shoulders to caress his face. "I don't need endurance this time, rock star." His unwavering stare backed up his words. "I just want to feel you making love to me. Move with me, Nate." Lifting himself into Nate, Logan slid his hands down to Nate's chest and then under his clothes to around his back, guiding him into a merging rhythm. He scraped their lips together, and promised, "It'll last as long as it's supposed to."

Nate followed Logan back down to the table. Their kiss became a shared breath, and they started to move as one. The snow outside turned into sleet and beat relentlessly against the windows, but the air in the atrium was thick with body heat and the musky smells of sex and sweat. Holding eye contact, Nate rocked into Logan again and again. And each time he did, Logan rolled his hips up in welcome, accepting Nate into the warm clutch of his body. Friction kept Nate's cock as rigid and full of blood as it had ever been, and his balls pulled heavy in his sac, working to increase the hum buzzing inside him to a resounding symphony. Nate stayed with Logan, though, attuned to every catch of breath and clutch of fingers from his man. What had started out with first penetration as something Nate feared he couldn't control had transcended the insane physical pleasure of fucking and had become something that encompassed his mind, body, and soul. Nate could see equal connection in the way Logan looked at him and in every small, involuntary catch of breath or move the man's body made.

This is the first time we're truly making love.

As the power of that truth hit Nate, he jerked, and the control he'd just possessed fled from his body. *Please. Please. Give me a second.* The zinging tingles ripped down his spine, heading right for his balls and cock. "I think it's time for me." He wrapped Logan's legs around his waist. "Hold on." With one growling drive forward, Nate rolled Logan halfway off the table and tucked his cock into the man's tight, hot ass as far as it could go. "Ahh God..." His dick swelled, pushing hard at Logan's squeezing chute. "I'm gonna come."

Logan grabbed hold of Nate's head and pulled their faces together. He brushed his lips against Nate's and locked their gazes. "Tell me." His breath caught, and his passage clamped around Nate like a motherfucker with his request.

Nate captured Logan's lips with his, kissing him for an exquisite split second in time, and then said, "I love you," into Logan's mouth just as he lost it and came.

Twin shouts echoed in the atrium as control abandoned Logan too, and together they filled the room with deep male voices in the throes of release. Nate jammed Logan into the table, holding his man down as he spurted one, two, three, four times, shaking as he jetted line after line of cum into the deepest reaches of Logan's ass. Beneath him, Logan lost his voice as the first shot of seed tagged his ass. Logan's skin pulled taut over his cheekbones, his mouth gaped, and he cried out without sound. He bucked hard. A second later hot ejaculate hit Nate's stomach in

an endless spray, making Nate moan with the base pleasure at another marking from his man.

I love having a man. I love this man.

Nate stayed plastered to Logan until the final shivers went through them and they regained a modicum of their breathing. Lazily, he kissed Logan, lingering with a brush of lips and hint of grazing tongue. Nate would have stayed on top of Logan forever, but with great reluctance he lifted into a push-up stance. Logan unwound his legs from Nate's waist, and Nate gently withdrew his cock from Logan's ass, eliciting one final shiver when their bodies separated. As Nate shifted to his side, he rubbed Logan's hole until it settled and contracted closed. Logan thanked him and pecked a kiss to his forehead.

Resting on his side, with his head in his hand, Nate fiddled with the placket of Logan's shirt. "I'm glad you came up here." He glanced at Logan, unable to contain his grin.

"Me too." Relaxing into the table, Logan clasped his hands against his chest and looked up at Nate. "You're a strong man, Nate. I admire you." His voice went a little rough as he said that, and Nate knew the man gave himself a moment by leaning in and pressing a kiss to Nate's forearm. "On our first day of work together, you never would have stood up to me like you just did. Shit." His rough chuckle bounced against the sunroom walls. "There aren't many men I've taken to my bed or let into my heart who would have issued me an ultimatum. None, in fact. But you did. I could see you were scared, but you did it anyway. It took balls." His gaze shone so bright it brought pressure to Nate's eyes. "Makes me love the man you're becoming even more than I do who you already are."

Humbled couldn't even begin to describe how receiving such a compliment from this man made Nate feel. "Thank you." Nate covered Logan's hands, clutching their strength and warmth. "I was scared I would lose you for good. For weeks I've felt you drifting away from me, but in my heart I didn't believe you really wanted to. It felt like you needed someone to lay down the law for you."

Logan groaned. "Oh Christ." He threw his forearm over his face. Peeking out from between two fingers, he added, "I'll never live that down."

"Oh God." Nate covered his mouth to hide the sputter of laughter. Even though he couldn't stop smirking, he drew Logan's arm away from his eyes. "I didn't even mean it like that. I swear." He crossed his heart.

"It's okay." Logan pushed himself to sit. "I invited it—oh shit." He grabbed his leg and massaged his scarred flesh. "That doesn't feel good."

Fuck. Nate shot upright. He blew on his hands to warm them before adding them to the massage Logan gave himself. "This table isn't the most forgiving, and I worked you pretty hard." Remembering their first night together, Nate hopped off the table and helped Logan to his feet. He put his arm around his partner's waist and helped him navigate the perimeter of the room. "You're definitely going to need some heat on your hip later."

With every step Logan took, his gait became straighter and stronger. "It's feeling better for the moment. But I'll look forward to a hot soak and a soft bed with your pillow warming away the pain tonight."

Nate jerked to a stop. "You're okay talking about your injury with me now," he said. This comfort between them pierced his heart, but Nate refused to let tears fall. "You're not trying to hide that it hurts you anymore." His voice became scratchy instead.

Turning them to face one another, Logan tilted Nate's face up to his. "Just like you don't mumble around me anymore. You speak up and look me in the eye when you have something to say."

"I know." Feeling downright giddy, Nate linked his arms around Logan's neck and gave him a soft, sweet kiss. "We're quite a pair, you and me."

"Hell yeah, we are." Logan swatted Nate's ass and gave one of his rare big smiles when Nate yelped and rubbed his smarting butt cheek. Logan turned Nate's head, and Nate immediately caught their entwined image in the window's reflection. "Look at us."

The faded images of two dark-haired men with mussed hair and silly grins on their faces reflected back at them, suit jackets and shirts still on but torn open, askew ties, no pants or underwear, and black socks. *Oh hell. What a pair indeed.* One glance to each other and then back to their reflections, and they both busted out laughing and pointing at each other.

Logan eyes suddenly sparked even brighter, and he did an uneven fast walk to the window. "And look at the pretty little ass print you left on the window." He framed the smudged twin orbs with his hands. "Christ, I love your ass." He bent down and planted a big smacking kiss mark on one of the cheeks, leaving his lips print behind. "Even just a stamp of its shape is good."

Nate strolled closer and lifted the hem of Logan's jacket and shirt out of the way, temporarily putting his hind end on display. "Yours ain't bad either, sweetness." He circled Logan, eying Logan's unforgiving, beautiful body, and trailed his fingers around Logan's waist. "Nothing about you is bad. In fact"—Nate burrowed his hands under Logan's clothes and wrapped his arms around the man's waist—"I find every bit of you just about perfect for me." He pecked a quick kiss to Logan's cheek.

Logan turned his head and captured Nate's mouth with his. Winking, he said, "Ditto."

"You did see *Ghost*!" Nate punched Logan in the shoulder and gave him a gentle shove. "You faker!" Feigning outrage, Nate pointed as he circled the table, putting it between them. "I should have looked at your DVD collection when I was at your apartment. I bet you love *Dirty Dancing* too."

His arms crossed against his chest, Logan braced a shoulder against the window. "I might have a weakness for tear-jerker movies," he shared. "Just a little

one.” Logan barely moved, but Nate saw him put about an inch of space between his thumb and index finger. “Very small.”

Nate snorted. “Or maybe very big.”

“Maybe.” Logan followed Nate’s every step from across the room. “You gonna toss me out of your bed over it?”

With the table between them, Nate stilled and met Logan’s gaze. The more he looked, the harder his heart pounded. “I think I’m gonna love you even more for it,” he admitted, too much love making his voice crack.

“That’s my Nate,” Logan replied softly. Such reverence and tenderness filled his voice when he spoke Nate’s name that it brought tears to Nate’s eyes. Logan studied Nate openly for the longest time, and the adoration in his gaze made Nate’s knees shaky.

“Come here, rock star.” Logan crooked his finger.

And Nate went running.

Right into Logan’s arms.

Epilogue

Nate paused at the door to Logan's office and took a moment to admire the man. Logan stood at his beloved whiteboard, his back to Nate, studying the suspects and evidence gathered in a new case. He had half a dozen people working for him now, including Nate on a part-time basis, but more than anything he still liked to stand at the board and let his victims talk to him. The difference now? Logan did the job but didn't seem to let his cases eat at him as much as his days on the force. He'd admitted that to Nate late one night in bed. Nate couldn't say the man had exactly become tame, but there was a contentedness in him now, and people other than Nate had noticed. Quinn ownership, who'd known Logan for many years, had commented on it more than once. Nicole had too.

I want him to be happy with me. And I think he is.

Right then Logan glanced Nate's way. He still didn't crack a smile much, but the pleasure at seeing Nate shone in the way his eyes lit up and in how his shoulders relaxed.

"Hey, honey." After attaching a photo back to his board, Logan crossed his office and pecked a kiss to Nate's cheek. "How was class?"

"Good." Nate didn't have much of an academic record as a foundation, so to become comfortable with the basics he'd enrolled at a smaller college rather than a big university. He was okay with that. The very process of diving back into learning new things fascinated him every day. "I just passed Jamie out in the hall. She was beaming with pride. I don't know if your trusting her with an assist on your new case or moving in with Wes did it, but I don't care." Once Nate had officially moved in with Logan, Wes then needed a roommate to help share expenses. Freshly eighteen and gainfully employed, Jamie fit the bill. Right away, Nate had figured Wes would take to the runaway, and he had. "I like seeing Jamie settling in. Happiness looks damn good on her."

"She's a hard worker and full of street smarts. You have a good eye for talent, honey." Logan winked, and Nate found himself beaming as big as Jamie had minutes ago.

"Don't I know it. I picked you, didn't I?" Nate swatted his man on the ass playfully. "I came in here thinking I'd steal the couch to study for a bit, but you're looking so studious and sexy in your new glasses I'm not going to be able to concentrate."

Growling, Logan lifted the trendy gunmetal frames and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Still getting used to them." He only needed them for reading, and he'd just gotten them two days ago. "It's nice to know you like me in them, though."

"I definitely do," Nate replied. "Why don't you take a seat"—he guided Logan to his executive desk chair and gently pushed him into it—"and let me show you how much." Nate proceeded to slide his legs in on either side of Logan and straddle his big frame.

Finally giving a little grin—a fucking cocky one—Logan leaned way back in his chair. "How is this showing me how much you dig my new glasses?" He gave Nate's position a once-over, lifting a brow.

Nate took hold of Logan's hand and put it on the front of his jeans. "Feel that?" He rubbed Logan's palm over his growing bulge. Quickly, the man took over the task. With a moan, Nate rocked into Logan's strokes. "In case you haven't noticed, I've been hard since the first time you put them on."

Logan continued to work Nate's shaft through his clothes. "You're hard a lot, honey." His voice remained even and cool, but he tore at his tie and the top two buttons on his shirt.

Blood quickly pooled in Nate's dick. "That's what rock stars do." He planted his hands on the armrests and ground himself against Logan's hand, aching for skin-on-skin already. "We like to leave an impression."

"You do that all the time." Putting Nate's hand to his chest, Logan held Nate's palm against the heavy thud pounding in his heart. "It's going crazy for you." Logan yanked Nate in and crushed their mouths together. "I damn well missed you this morning," he murmured in between kisses. "Wake me up next time, so I don't miss breakfast with you."

Goddamn it. In the littlest, most profound ways, Logan constantly pricked at Nate's already captured heart. Nate took Logan's face in his hands, staring for a moment until he regained his voice. "You're so sweet." Closing the distance between them, Nate grazed his lips over every harsh line that made up Logan's beautiful face.

Logan trembled and then with a growl surged forward and sat Nate on his desk. "There ain't nothing sweet about what I want to do to you right now. Jesus, baby." He tore Nate's shirt out of his waistband and dipped down to press kisses over his taut stomach. Up, up he kissed, taking the shirt with him, until he drew it over Nate's head and tossed it aside. His pale gaze settled strong and steady on Nate. "Every day, you take my breath away."

They held in limbo for a split second in time, caught in the intensity burning in each other's eyes. Then the charge in the air went supernova, and Nate and Logan went at each other as if they'd never shared a kiss. Logan grabbed a fistful of Nate's hair to angle his head for a deep, openmouthed kiss, invading with rough licks and bites that made Nate moan and strain into Logan for more. Nate worked his hands into Logan's jacket to push it off his shoulders, needing to get this man naked so he

could taste his warm skin again. Nate slept close to Logan every night, but he still craved that body heat whenever they came together.

Right then, the door clicked, the sound like a bullet going off in the office. "Hey, boss. I got..." A familiar voice filled the room with a curse. "Oh shit. Sorry."

Without looking up, Logan flung a pen at the door. "Go away."

"Right." A quick pause and then, "Hey, Nate."

Nate tilted his head back, back, and looked at an upside-down blond man who'd become a very good friend. "Hi, Riley." For a man who continually remained one step behind in his hunt for Bree—whom Quinn had at least managed to confirm was still alive a month ago—Riley kept up his spirits and hope like no other person Nate had ever met. "He's all yours in ten minutes," Nate said gently. "All right?"

"Take your time." With a little wave that showed no shame, Riley backed out of the office, shutting the door behind him.

"Ten minutes?" Logan looked insulted.

Biting his lip to stifle the laugh, Nate glanced down at the erection tenting Logan's black pants. "I knew you could rise to the challenge."

Dropping his forehead to Nate's shoulder, Logan shook his head and groaned. "That's terrible."

One shift of his head put Nate's mouth to Logan's ear. "But you still love me anyway." He flicked his tongue against the lobe and then over Logan's jaw.

Where Logan followed with a tender kiss to Nate's lips. "You know I do." Logan brushed a flyaway hair off Nate's face, his fingers so gentle Nate would have thought the man had no experience with violence. He looked into Nate's eyes, offering the light shining in his, and gave Nate a real smile. "I love you so much I'll always overlook your awful jokes."

"Good." Nate wrapped his legs around Logan's waist, basking in the solid frame of his man. Whispering "I love you too," Nate lay back and drew his partner onto the desk.

 THE END 

Loose Id Titles by Cameron Dane

A Fostered Love
Dreaming in Color
Something New

The HAWKINS RANCH Series

Demon Moon
Falling
ReneCade
Knowing Caleb
Becoming Three

The QUINN SECURITY Series

Finding Home
The Ultimate Kink
Saying I Do
Breaking Logan's Laws

Cameron Dane

I am an air force brat and spent most of my growing up years living overseas in Italy and England, as well as Florida, Georgia, Ohio, and Virginia while we were stateside. I now live in Florida once again with my big, wonderfully pushy family and my three-legged cat, Harry. I have been reading romance novels since I was twelve years old, and twenty years later I still adore them. Currently, I have an unexplainable obsession with hockey goaltenders, and an unabashed affection for *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart.

I'd love to hear from you! You can find me on the Web at <http://www.camerondane.com>.