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HIGHER RANK

Sons of
THANATOS
2

Joyce Flynn

The
ManLove
Collection

Sons of Thanatus 2

Higher Rank

Finn has been fighting his feelings for his trainer Raven since arriving at the Sons of Thanatus compound. Raven is attractive, strong, and completely unattainable. On the night of their friends Josh and Madden's wedding, Raven finally gives Finn a clear sign that he, too, is interested. The night is heavenly until Finn realizes Raven's feelings for him are only casual.

Left feeling used, Finn tries to ignore his still growing attraction to Raven. The men must work together on a mission to recruit a member of Finn's old unit, and sharing his body with a man who wants only a bed buddy is breaking his heart.

When Raven's cold treatment of him hits a new low, Finn is crushed, and he decides he and Raven need a clean—and final—break. Will Raven let him go, or will his facade finally crumble in the face of Finn's departure?

Genre: Alternative (M/M or F/F), Contemporary, Paranormal

Length: 35,783 words

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**EROTIC ROMANCE
MANLOVE**



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DEDICATION

To everyone who ever got the short end of the stick: Here's to hoping it wasn't always meant the way it seemed and sometimes good can come from what we thought was bad.

HIGHER RANK

Sons of Thanatus 2

JOYEE FLYNN

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Chapter 1

“Finn, dance with me, big guy,” Josh said as he took my hand. I looked at Madden with wide eyes, and the jerk just laughed, giving me a nod that it was fine with him. So much for hoping it wasn’t polite to take the groom from the groom at a wedding.

As we started moving, I realized what the little sneak had been doing. “Thanks, Shortie.”

“I don’t know what you’re speaking of,” he replied as he batted those long eyelashes at me playfully. Then he stopped as if realizing what I’d called him. Sure enough, he smacked me in the chest. “And I’m not short!”

“Vertically challenged?”

“Oh, blow me!”

“Um, no, you have a hubby for that now,” I teased, feeling much better that we weren’t in the group. Plus, Josh was a wicked dancer, and I couldn’t remember I’d actually been the one dancing instead of just watching. But since I worked at a gay leather-and-chains bar until Madden and Josh found me six weeks ago, it made sense I didn’t get to have the fun. I worked security. Not who people rush to try and dance with at most clubs.

I started to really let loose when I saw Madden and the man of my dreams leaning in to each other, whispering. And then I stumbled when Raven shoved Madden, ready to jump in. But then I realized they were just playing around.

“He’ll pull his head out of his ass eventually,” Josh said gently as he grabbed my arm to make my stumble seem as if he’d been in my way.

I probably should have acknowledged his comment or played dumb and asked who he meant. But it was Josh’s wedding reception. It wasn’t the time for my aching heart. “So most everyone got you guys some fun toys. Word leaked out into your kinky-ass activities.”

“Really?” he exclaimed. “Sweet!”

“Yup,” I answered, glancing over at the man I’d love to get kinky with. As if Raven knew my thoughts, he chose that moment to look at me and lick his lips. Fuck! I was a goner. One glance from him and I was ready to cream in my cargos. And then I realized he was coming over here. “What do I do?”

“Play it cool,” Josh answered as he took my hand and had me spinning him. Just as he finished, Raven tapped Josh on the shoulder.

“Mind if I cut in? Your husband needs a little TLC,” Raven said calmly as he looked at me with heat in his eyes.

“Of course,” he replied, giving me a quick wink. “Maybe we’ll play with some of our presents.”

“Just pace yourself, Shortie.” I chuckled and patted his shoulder.

“No promises!” he yelled before racing over to Madden and leaping into his arms. I smiled. They deserved to be happy.

“Do you have a thing for Josh?” Raven growled as he stepped closer. “I heard you kissed him.”

“Josh isn’t my type,” I answered firmly, taking the leap and making sure he knew *exactly* what I was implying. “I did it to help Madden pull his head out of his ass. Josh is just my buddy. He’s sweet and makes sure I’m okay, always like a good friend.”

“Why wouldn’t you be okay?” He raised an eyebrow as if confused... not concerned. If he had sounded concerned, I might have answered, but he wasn’t, so I wouldn’t. Instead, I shrugged and stepped away from him, about to leave. The party was over for me. Raven reached out lightning-quick and grabbed my wrist. “I thought we were dancing?”

“I thought you came over here to tell me to stay away from Josh,” I answered as I gave in and stepped closer to his firm body. As confused as I was to his sudden notice of me outside of a professional capacity, I wasn’t about to pass up the opportunity to touch him. Raven was stunning, six-two, nicely built, and well-toned. But since I was six-eight, his head reached my shoulder.

“I thought we should talk about our trip,” he said as he moved one of his thighs in between mine. “We were supposed to leave at the beginning of next week, but the Patriarch likes the idea of looking into those tracking chips when we’re out on assignment. So if you think you can swing it with your contacts, we’re leaving in a few days.”

“You don’t have to dance with me to talk business,” I replied as what he was saying sunk in. I started to push away as he slid one hand up my chest and around my neck while moving the other to my hip.

“I’m not here for that,” he said huskily when my hard cock brushed his stomach. “Yes, we need to talk some business, about your contacts and your Marine friends in Iraq we’re going to see, but that’s not why I came over to you and asked to dance.”

He had really asked Josh if he could cut in, not asked me if I wanted to dance. But he was in my arms where I wanted him, so why split hairs? I moved my hands slowly from his arms, down his ribs, past his stomach to his lower back, my fingers grazing the top of his firm ass.

“How does a man with blond hair get the name Raven?” I replied, leaning in much closer than I needed to so he could hear me over the music. His bright blue eyes sparkled with mirth as he licked his lips.

“I was born with a full head of black hair, so my mother thought it was fitting. A few months later, it turned blond, so the joke was on me.”

“I like you as a blond,” I purred as I reached up with one hand to run my fingers through it.

“Can we talk business before getting into playtime? I told the Patriarch I’d have answers for him in the morning.”

“Sure.” I sighed, as I knew I wasn’t going to get him naked until we talked.

Dante Hinder, the Patriarch. That was the term given to the head of the order for each continent. He was the main man in charge and had more gifts than most of us did, and one did *not* question his orders. And he was Raven’s boss’s boss, and at least four levels higher rank than me.

Raven’s main role in the order was almost like a military recruiter. He traveled all over the world, like a few others in the order, and followed up leads when reports came in that someone had the birthmark.

Everyone in the order had the Ankh birthmark on his ass. The Ankh was an ancient Greek symbol of eternal life. It was said the gods used it as “the breath of life” they would need in the afterlife. It was basically the Christian cross, with a loop above the transverse bar.

“I can call my contact and see if he can meet us in a few days,” I said, glancing down at my watch now that I was in business mode. “With the time difference, he should just be getting up.”

“Good, then we’ll leave in two days instead of a week. How receptive will your Marine friends be to our offer, do you think?”

“They’ll listen,” I answered with a shrug. “We were tight since we were a unit, but in the middle of a war zone isn’t really the place to talk much about your dreams in life. I know most of them don’t have families to go back to. So the main issue will be if they feel they’re done with the military. A lot could have happened in the eight months

since I got out. But when I left, only a few were thinking of not renewing their contracts.”

“I already got the okay that they can get out of them,” Raven replied with a dismissive wave of his hand. “Getting them out of the Marines isn’t a problem. It’s whether they’re as open as you were to the idea of getting answers and starting a new life as a Son of Thanatus.”

“I can’t answer that, Raven, until I’ve talked to them,” I said as I leaned in closer, so my lips were against his ear as I slid my hands down over his ass. “Enough business yet?”

“Yeah, let’s go fuck in your room,” he groaned.

Well, that was easy! I stood there shocked for a moment before I realized he was tugging on my arm. I let him lead me out of the ballroom, catching Josh’s wink and gesture to call him with details. Dork.

I hurried and unlocked my door when we got to my room, standing aside for Raven to go first. Once inside and the door locked behind us, I watched in awe as Raven quickly stripped.

“Are you just going to stand there, or are we going to fuck?” he asked as he stopped getting naked and eyed me over with his hands on his hips, looking annoyed. I snapped out of my stunned stupor and yanked off my shirt. “Better. Hurry up and get on the bed on your hands and knees. Are your supplies in the nightstand?”

“Um, yeah,” I answered, shocked at how fast he was going. By the time he retrieved my well-used, small bottle of lube, I was naked and crawling onto the bed.

“Been getting a lot of action since you got here?” Raven asked as he tossed the lube by my knee. I couldn’t see his face, but his tone didn’t sound like he approved of the idea.

“No.” I laughed at the idea of me being a slut. “You’re the first person since I’ve been here. Actually, you’re the first person besides me to touch that bottle. I like to play with my ass when I jerk off.”

“Good to know.” I heard him taking off his belt and then his slacks as I started to shake with anticipation. He knelt on the bed when he was naked, and I glanced over my shoulder so I could at least get a glimpse of him naked. “Spread your legs.”

I did as he asked, shivering when I saw him pick back up the bottle and slick up his fingers and then his cock. Moaning as his fingers rubbed my hole, I leaned forward on my arms. I knew I looked like a wanton slut presenting my ass to him like that. But I didn’t care. I wanted Raven from the moment I saw him.

“Oh, you like that, do you?” He grunted as he pushed in a finger. “I love a nice firm ass begging to be fucked.”

I didn’t answer since it seemed to be a rhetorical question. Instead, I simply felt the rush of sensation he was stirring in my body. While I’d told him the truth that I hadn’t been with anyone since I came to Miami with them, I left out the detail that it had been much longer for me than that. It took me a moment to think of the last time I’d had sex. When I realized it had been over a year, I didn’t feel so bad for hopping right into bed with him.

“Look how pretty your hole is.” He purred as he pushed in a second finger. “It’s almost begging me to take it.”

“Okay,” I groaned, not sure what else to say. Hell, if he was happy, that meant I was about to be very happy. I wasn’t sure why he was giving me a commentary, but to each his own.

He quickly stretched me out, rushing a little as he slid in a third, then fourth finger. I was so on the edge of losing control, I didn’t mind some rough play. The next thing I knew he was pulling his fingers back out, which got a whimper from me.

“Gonna fuck you now, don’t worry,” he said as he pushed his cock against my hole. Before I could say anything, he thrust hard into me, bottoming out in one shot. “Oh yeah, your ass is as good as I thought it would be. Bet you’re loving a hard cock shoved in you.”

Again, I wasn’t sure what to say, so I decided to just enjoy finally being with him. He started hard and fast, no preamble or foreplay. I

found that odd but then decided he was probably too excited for us to be together to have worried about the niceties. Next time I'm sure there would be some tenderness.

"This ass was made for fucking," Raven grunted as he slammed back into me. "How many men have enjoyed this ass? I bet lots, with an ass this great."

Not really, but okay then. Maybe he just got off on talking dirty? I pushed back so I met him thrust for thrust. Raven had a huge slab of meat, because I'd never felt this full during sex before. I loved it. We didn't say anything for a while, listening to the erotic song of our bodies. He was fucking me within an inch of my life, setting a punishing pace that barely left me enough time to gasp for air before he slammed back into me.

"Can't hold out any longer," Raven moaned as he grabbed my cock roughly. "Come now."

"Almost," I gasped as I moved my hips faster, fucking his hand.

"I said now," he growled.

I don't know if it was the demand for me to find my release or the growl that set me off, but set me off it did. I hollered as I shot my load, lights flashing behind my eyes at the intensity.

"Yeah, this ass was meant to be fucked good," Raven groaned before going stiff. Then his cock exploded in my ass. I gasped at the sensations of feeling a partner's seed for the first time. I hadn't known before this that I was immortal and couldn't catch diseases, so I'd always made my partner wear condoms. As soon as we were both spent, I collapsed on the bed, and Raven pulled right out of me. "You liked that, baby?"

"Of course," I panted as I tried to get more air in my lungs. I rolled over onto my back and stared at him before holding my arms out for him.

"I'm still hard," he said, shaking his head at my invitation. "Get on your knees and suck me off. I can't seem to get enough of you."

I nodded and slid off the bed onto my knees. I wasn't a fan of how he'd ordered me to do it, but Raven was a powerful man. I'm sure the whole being in charge thing just flat did it for him. Plus, he'd admitted he couldn't get enough of me, so that boded well for our future.

The second I had my mouth open, he pushed his cock past my lips. I gagged for a second, backing off and grabbing the base of his cock so I could take him. He grabbed my hair as his head fell back onto his shoulders, and pumped into my mouth without any restraint. Damn, he must have needed this bad.

I relaxed my throat to take him as I reached up and rolled his sac in my hand. Licking around the head each time Raven pulled back out, he grunted before shoving it right back in.

"You really know how to suck cock." He moaned as he moved faster. "I knew with lips like those you'd be a champion cocksucker. I'd guess you sucked a lot of dick while you were overseas. How long have you wanted your mouth on my cock?"

Part of me wanted to laugh. Did he think I'd stop what I was doing to answer? The other part of me wasn't a fan of what he was saying to me. Truth be told, I could count the number of men I'd been intimate with on my hands. Only three had ever fucked me, Raven included. What had I ever done to lead him to think I was someone who hopped beds? Or was this part of the game he was playing?

"Coming!" Raven shouted seconds before the first reams of his seed shot into my throat. I pulled back so I could taste him and not choke. I moaned at the taste of him. He was salty, sure, but almost sweet at the same time. I knew tasting him once wouldn't be enough for me.

When he was spent and I'd licked him clean, I sat back on my heels. I gasped for air as my cock leaked on my stomach. I was hard enough to pound fucking nails after that.

“Give me a minute and then I’ll fuck you again,” Raven panted, patting my cheek before walking on shaky legs to the bathroom. I stared in shock as the door closed and I heard the water turn on.

Did he just fucking pat my cheek like I’d been a good pet? I jumped to my feet and went to open the door as it swung in and away from me.

“You’re that excited you couldn’t wait in the bed for me?” he asked with a chuckle, raising an eyebrow at me. I opened my mouth to say something as my brain tried to catch up with his misperception. “We can do it in here. Anywhere’s fine as long as I get your tight ass again.”

I let out a startled yelp as he pulled on my arm and moved me so I was leaning over the counter. And at six-eight... damn, was that uncomfortable.

“That’s hot.” Raven purred as he ran his fingers over my hole. “You’re all slicked up with my cum. Your ass is just begging for another load.”

“Raven—” I said, but it turned into a moan when he shoved his cock right back into me. “Fuck!”

“I am.” He snickered and pulled me up against him so that I was bracing my hands against the mirror. The angle made me tighter around him, and he growled his approval. I stared at his reflection as he started pounding into me. It should have been as intimate as fucking face-to-face, but it wasn’t. He never met my gaze.

Raven had his eyes closed, head leaning back on his shoulders as he held on to my hips tightly and fucked me. It was right before we both came again that I had an epiphany. I could have been anyone to him right then. This wasn’t about us having sex together. It was about Raven getting his rocks off.

When he got close, he stroked my cock hard in time with his thrusts. I came first, shooting reams of seed right into the sink seconds before he filled my ass again. And again, the second he was spent, he

pulled right back out. Raven smacked my ass and turned away, heading back into the bathroom.

Oh hell no! I turned and followed him, freezing when he was already picking up and putting on his clothes.

“This never happened, Finn,” he said, his chest still heaving with the exertion of fucking me like that. Twice.

“What?” I gasped. His fucking cum was running down my thighs from my used hole and he was saying it didn’t happen!

“This didn’t happen. You can’t tell anyone I was with you. It’s against the rules, and would get us both in trouble.”

“Madden and Josh are together,” I said as I started to shake. “No one says anything about that.”

“Josh is an apprentice,” Raven replied smoothly as he buttoned up his shirt, still not looking at me. “You’re technically a trainee, and I’m Madden’s boss. I’m a higher rank than you by three levels.”

“So?” I whispered, still not getting it.

“Finn.” He sighed and finally looked at me as he put his hands on his hips. I wished he wouldn’t have after seeing the annoyance focused on me. “A maven isn’t allowed to be with a trainee. I’m above a maven. Are you following the logic here?”

“Well, yeah, but I’m not a normal trainee, Raven. I’ve been *teaching* some of the self-defense classes.”

“Only until we see whom else of your unit is coming with us,” Raven replied, waving off my logic before tucking his shirt back in his pants. “Then all of you will be in special training classes at an accelerated rate over other trainees. But you still are a trainee, and there are rules about that.”

“Why tell me this now *after* you fucked me?” I asked, my heart breaking as he walked to the door.

“We both needed it,” he answered with a shrug. “It’s not like I promised you anything.”

I stood there with my mouth agape as he left. *Those* were his parting words? That’s how he explained using me like a cheap whore?

Fine, he didn't promise me anything, but he also didn't say this was a one-time thing, either. If he knew it was only tonight, wasn't it only fair he tell me that upfront?

Only when his cum started to get sticky on my thighs where it had leaked out of me did I snap out of it. Jesus, I was a whore. That thought hit me like a two-by-four upside the head. I stumbled back into the bathroom, too disgusted with myself to look in the mirror as I moved to the shower and turned on the hot water all the way.

It was a stupid thought, but I figured if I could stand the scalding water, maybe I could wash this night away. After the spray warmed up and I stepped under it, I knew it wouldn't work. I'd be feeling tonight for a long time... and I didn't mean physically.

I quickly scrubbed my used body, feeling older than my twenty-eight years. When the hot water was more than I could stand, I got out of the shower, shut it off, and grabbed a towel. I went through the motions of my nightly routine, not focusing on anything before pulling off the sheets that had remnants of Raven using me.

Then I crawled into bed with just the comforter over me and curled into a ball. I refused to cry, pretending I wasn't as hurt as I felt. I started to drift into a restless sleep. The last thought I had before the darkness took me was, *He didn't even kiss me*

Chapter 2

The next morning I called my contact and explained what I was looking for. I kept it a personal request for a few reasons. One, my contact was known for selling information to the highest bidder. Not exactly a moral guy. Second, if he knew it was behalf of the order, which had gobs of money, he'd jack up the price.

He agreed to meet in two days' time in a market I knew well in Umm Qasr. It was located on the southwest corner of Iraq, right where my old unit was currently. They were on an aircraft carrier in the Persian Gulf. I left Raven a message at his office of the time and place of the meeting before heading to one of the many training rooms the order had in this massive mansion.

It was more like a plush housing compound on the inside, but from the outside it looked just like a southern mansion. But if I'd learned anything over my years, it was that looks could be deceiving. Raven included.

I'd just taped my hands and slipped on gloves when I saw Madden and Josh slip through the door. I so didn't want to talk right now. Instead, I turned away from them and focused on the punching bag I planned to take my aggression out on for the next few hours, or until I collapsed. Maybe then I could deal with taking a trip with Raven and not breaking down and begging him to want me. That or strangling his neck for making me feel this way.

"How did last night go?" Josh asked, ignoring the fact I was slamming my fists into the bag and his husband's gesture to leave me alone.

"It never happened." I grunted and launched a right hook with everything I had, almost taking the bag off the chains holding it up. "Nothing to talk about."

"It never happened is different than nothing happened, Finn," Josh said gently. He must have finally figured out my mood, as he moved to right the bag for me and held it away from his body so he wasn't in the line of fire.

"Doesn't matter," I replied softly and started punching again.

"It does to us, buddy," Madden said as he took the bag from Josh and held it for me. Josh might have been able to handle himself in a fight, because he was well-trained and fast as all get out, but when it came to actual muscles and size to hold a bag for an angry giant, Shortie just didn't have it.

"I'm a trainee." Right hook. "He's higher rank than I am." Double left jab. "Rules against it." Right uppercut, then a left. "I was informed last night never happened."

"Motherfucker." Josh gasped and moved in between me and the bag. He was a trusting idiot on that one, since I was able to pull back the punch I was throwing at the last second, before almost clipping his jaw. "When did he tell you this?"

"Don't, Josh," I whispered and took a step back. "Just let me deal with it, okay?"

"After you answer me," he snarled and grabbed my wrist. "You're our friend. We brought you into the order, Finn. Talk to me!"

"After, okay?" I shouted and pulled my arm away from him, focusing all my anger irrationally on him. "After he fucked me, had me suck him off, and then fucked me again. After he used me like a fucking slut and smacked my ass as thanks. Okay? You happy now? Now you know I'm a stupid fucker who let Raven use me without even kissing me or giving me one second of tenderness. Can I go back to my workout now?"

"Sure, because I'm going to tear out Raven's throat," he said as he pulled away. This time, I grabbed him.

“You can’t, Josh. There are rules against what we did. You’ll get us both in trouble.” I pleaded with my eyes that he would understand and back off.

“Those rules are to keep mavens from abusing their power and authority on unsuspecting young trainees, Finn,” Josh said, taking a deep breath before continuing. “I know them intimately. I was one of those trainees. You are *not* one of them. You’re not some kid, Finn.”

“I know that,” I whispered and closed my eyes against the burning in them. “But that doesn’t change how he used me. It’s his excuse. And either way, I won’t be the pathetic slut whining that he never called when he said he would. You feel me?”

“You are not a slut,” Josh growled as he punched me in the arm. It didn’t hurt, but I understood his point. “And you deserve better than this. Raven’s being an asshole.”

“Yeah, he is, but how is you confronting him going to change that?”

“It’s not.” He sighed after a moment. “I still think I should get to kick his ass for treating you this way.”

“Duly noted.” I snickered and tapped my glove against his nose. “I can’t make him care for me when I was just a way for him to get some, Josh. And neither can you. So please just keep this to yourself and let me work through it my own way.”

Josh nodded and went like he was going to give me a hug, but then whispered in my ear so Madden couldn’t hear. “Take care of you, okay? No one else knows that you love Raven besides me. Madden and a few others just think you wanted him.”

“I don’t—” I started to deny it, but then I realized he was right. Fuck! I’d gone and fallen in love with Raven before we’d even become more than friends. And hell, were we even friends after last night? That was not a way you treated a friend in my book. “Yeah, okay.”

“And bring me back something cool from your trip,” he said with a wink as he pulled back.

“Don’t push your luck, Shortie.” I chuckled, giving him a wink as well.

“My fantastic ass wouldn’t look right on a larger body.” Josh purred as he ran his hands over his butt and leaned over so I got a good view. Just to emphasize his point, he shook it.

“We need to go back to our honeymoon,” Madden growled and attacked his husband. I smiled as they laughed when Madden threw Josh over his shoulder and jogged from the room. I wanted that. Okay, not to be thrown over my lover’s shoulder, because at my size, who the hell would be big enough to handle that? But I wanted that fun-loving and feisty interaction with a partner. I wanted that love.

Wishing for it wouldn’t get me anywhere, and right now I needed to get past this seething anger I felt towards Raven. So I went back to beating the shit out of the bag. It groaned under the onslaught of my fists, probably wishing I’d just get over my issues.

An hour and a half later, I was finally exhausted and ready to call it quits. As if fate was giving me the finger, Raven sauntered into the training room as I sat down.

“What’s with you?” he asked, eying me over as I panted from exertion.

“What do you want, Raven?” I pulled off my gloves, wincing from how tender they were. It had been a long time since I’d spent that long on just one bag, if ever.

“Got your panties in a bunch today?” He chuckled as he walked towards me. I looked up at him then, and he froze, probably from the anger on my face. “What’s the deal, Finn?”

“What do you want, Raven?” I asked again, because I was sooo not talking to him about him and how pissed I was.

“Not talking to me anymore?” He seethed as he crossed his arms over his chest.

“I’m talking to you just fine,” I answered, grinding my teeth at his attitude and the pain from my hands as I gently took off the tape.

“You can ask a question that I choose not to answer. So, again, what do you want, Raven?”

“I got your message about your contact and wanted to let you know we leave first thing in the morning,” he said after a moment of eyeing me over again. “We’re taking one of the order’s jets to get there, and then we’ll be taking one of the overseas order’s choppers to get to the aircraft carrier. Be ready to leave here at seven.”

“Fine, see you then,” I replied with a nod as I stood. I gave him one long look that made the hurt I felt resurface, as if I’d not just worked it all out.

“Is this about last night?” Raven asked as he stepped closer.

“Nothing happened, right?” I sneered and breezed by him.

“Finn, come on, don’t be such a bitch about it.”

“Un-fucking-real,” I growled to myself before spinning around to him. “You might have treated me like some cheap whore last night without even the payment. But do *not* ever forget that without me this trip wouldn’t be happening. That and I could pound you into the floor with one hand. So maybe you should be a little cautious who you call bitch.”

His eyes went wide as his jaw dropped. I didn’t give him time to recover from his shock. I stormed out of there without a backward glance. Maybe it was childish to stomp my feet and book it so I had the last word. But it was either that or make good on my threat right then.

Me? A bitch? Fuck him! Wanting some tenderness during sex, or gods forbid, a kiss, didn’t make me a girl, woman, or bitch. And being upset because I couldn’t have him when I wanted him for the long haul didn’t make me any less of a man. Hell, he treated me like a drunken mistake... without ever having been drunk.

Instead of heading back to my room, which was the original plan, I veered towards another training room I knew had a heavy bag in it. Guess now I’d be kicking out my aggression since my hands were done for, unless I didn’t want to ever be able to use them again.

Wonder if anyone would notice if I buried Raven in the desert sand? That thought had me busting out laughing and faltering on one of my kicks. After that, I worked out my legs and had several *Ally McBeal* moments where I saw all types of different ways to get even with Raven. I think my favorite was when his big ego inflated his hot-air-filled head until it popped like balloon.

Nah, I didn't have issues. But don't we all?

* * * *

The next morning I met Raven at the front doors of the mansion at five until seven, and almost fell over laughing. Here I was dressed in cargos tucked into standard issue boots, T-shirt with undershirt, and a Marine knapsack as my luggage. Then there was Raven... I bet his three-piece suit and luggage alone cost more than most people's cars.

"We're going to the *desert*." I snickered, shaking my head as I walked past him and out the door. "Douche."

"Right, but I always wear a suit when meeting potential brothers for the order," he said, his eyebrows wrinkled in confusion.

"Right, but we're not going to the Hilton in Iraq. We're going to a market and then an aircraft carrier. Hell, you'll be the flashiest dresser at both places. And you overpacked. Again, we're going to the *desert*."

"Whatever," he grumbled after stowing his large suitcase that was on wheels, for the love of the gods. Then he tossed his folding garment bag and briefcase into the back seat. "Neanderthal."

"I'll remember that you called me that when you're whining for help with your four tons of luggage," I said with a laugh as he started the SUV and headed to the airport.

He mumbled something I couldn't hear, though I was pretty sure I picked out "smart-ass" in there. We drove to the airport, and I suddenly felt much better about the trip. I looked quite forward to

Raven making an ass of himself and being out of his element. Did that make me petty?

Hell yes! But did he deserve it? Fuck yeah.

We parked in long-term parking at the airport and got out. I stood there with a smirk on my face, crossing my arms over my massive chest as I watched him start pulling out the luggage.

“Leave the suits.” I chuckled. “You’re going to draw too much damn attention to us, and we’re not exactly going into American-friendly territory. The last thing we need is for you to get nabbed because you scream money to be ransomed.”

“Right, okay,” he replied as he started to open his bags in the rear of the SUV and look things over. After a moment of him just staring at his clothes, I sighed as I dropped my pack.

“You can change into this on the plane.” I pulled out a regular pair of jeans, sneakers, and polo, placing them on his briefcase. Then I opened the garment bag, knowing it would be easier for travel than the suitcase. I took the suits out, laying them over the backseat before stuffing all of the normal clothes he had in the other bag. I left all the fancy, spiffy clothes and handed him the bag, change of clothes, and briefcase.

“What about the rest of my stuff,” Raven said, his eyes going wide. “This isn’t enough clothes for the time we’ll be gone.”

“Only if you wear three outfits a day and change after tea time,” I replied with a snort, and took the keys from him. I locked up the SUV, making sure what we’d left was well-hidden from the eyes of potential carjackers. Then I swept my arm out so he’d snap out of it and lead the way as I picked my bag back up.

Raven shook his head in disgust, slung the bag of his shoulder, and headed toward where we needed to go without making sure I was following. Idiot. Was he incapable of saying thank you, too? This *was* why he was bringing me with him, for my expertise. Shaking my head, I adjusted my own bag on my shoulder and followed him, trying

not to stare at his ass the entire time. I didn't succeed, but I figured I got points for trying.

It took us about a half an hour to get to the right place, on the jet, and seated. Once we were buckled in and waiting for the plane to start up and get into line for takeoff, Raven opened his briefcase and handed me a stack of files.

"What can you tell me about your friends that's not in those files?"

"No way," I growled and tossed them back at him. "I'm going as a friendly to get you a meeting with them and talk to them as someone who's seen what you guys are. I'm not narking on them so you can use what I know to your advantage."

"Finn, it's not like that," he said, looking taken aback and genuinely hurt. This was the kind Raven I'd fallen for. "I'm not trying to get dirt on them to trick them into something they wouldn't want. I wanted to know more about them than the basics from their military records in case there are any issues I should know about, topics I should stay away from. We do make special considerations for our brothers, like the accelerated training you'll all be going through."

"You're right, I'm sorry," I replied with a nod. "That was unfair of me. But I'm still not comfortable with what you're asking. If they want you to know more than what is in those files, they'll tell you. My unit is good guys, they won't keep things from the order they need to know."

"Fair enough," he said hesitantly as he tucked the files back in his briefcase. "I can respect your position. But I really wasn't trying to get you to snitch on them or anything. The more I know, the easier I can help them adapt to their new lives, if they want them. Madden was a special case like that."

"What do you mean?" I asked, curious about my friend. I knew bits and pieces from Josh, and that he was planning some special trip for Madden to the East Coast, but nothing more than that.

“It wouldn’t be fair for me to get into specifics, but I can tell you that when I met Madden, he’d suffered a great personal trauma. There were things that he needed me to handle and help him through before he could start over. It wasn’t like when we met and you just needed to pack up and move. Does that make sense?”

“Yeah, you met him after his brush with death, while I’d had mine a while ago,” I answered. I also felt better about Raven. While he’d been an ass to me personally about us being intimate, he did his job well and truly cared about the order and its members.

“It’s considered taboo to talk about a person’s brush with death or discuss it with others, except between maven and apprentice. But yes, I do find out when I go on trips like this and share the information with the Eldest and the Patriarch, but that’s it. It’s no one else’s business unless someone chooses to share it.”

The Eldest was the title given to the head of each compound. I’d met James Mahaffey when I’d come to Miami, and respected the guy. He’d been excited that I knew others with the birthmark but not overly pushy for information. Plus, when all the shit went down with Madden and Josh being kidnapped, he hadn’t thought twice about my request to go with Raven and the team for extraction.

“Most of the guys had the same brush with death when they survived a bomb at a camp in Afghanistan. I’d had mine when I was a kid, but I was with them for that, too. We’ve got some scars from that day. Mine aren’t so bad, but a few of the others had it much worse. But other than Val losing a toe, we’re all good.”

“I’m glad,” he replied with a soft smile. The pilot came on then and announced we were next in line for takeoff. We sat quietly and waited before holding on as the plane revved up. And away we went.

“I’m using the head,” I said, clearing my throat after we got the all-clear that we were at cruising altitude and could take off the seat belts. Raven nodded as I stood and stretched before going over to the bathroom and taking care of business. As I washed up I made sure to

splash some cold water on my face. I could do this. I could forget about the other night.

Once I got my emotions under control, I stepped out and went over to the small kitchen area. I grabbed a Coke and decided I'd stalled enough. I couldn't hide the whole flight, and it was a long one. But I'd brought a few things to do, and maybe I could catch a nap, too.

I turned back and headed to my seat. Raven stood there, eyeing me over like a treat before taking a step closer.

"Let's fuck," he said as he started to unbutton his shirt. My mouth fell open and the pop can slid from my hand. He reached out and caught it before it hit the floor and set it down. "What's wrong?"

"What's wrong?" I repeated, my mouth opening and closing like a dying fish. "What's *wrong*?"

"Yeah, what's wrong?" Raven asked as he kept working on his shirt and eyeing me over as if afraid I was losing it.

"You said the other night never happened, for one—" I started to answer.

"Right, but that doesn't mean it can't happen again," he said with a smirk. He must have realized I was still confused because he sighed and pulled off his shirt. "Just because we can't be involved or let anyone know we've been together doesn't mean we can't fuck, Finn. We simply can't talk about it, let anyone see us, or be in a real relationship."

"You're talking about being fuck buddies," I replied slowly, moving to grab the back of one of the chairs for support.

"Right," he said with a smile and pulled off his T-shirt that was under his dress shirt before toeing off his shoes. "We're adults. There's no reason we can't just fuck when we get a chance, and no one has to know."

"Like I'm your dirty little secret," I snapped, not hiding the venom in my voice. His hands froze at his belt, and Raven glanced up at me.

“Nooo,” he said, drawing the word out as if shocked at my reply. “Dirty little secret is about being embarrassed with someone. This is about a mutual need and attraction, Finn. Not only are we not allowed to have anything more because of our ranks in the order, but you’re about to start training, and then become an apprentice. You don’t have time or the stability right now to have a relationship with someone.”

What he said made sense. It just felt cold. Raven wasn’t just about fucking to me. But as I stared at him intently, I wondered if maybe I was confusing desire with something more. Maybe he was right. This could just be about mutual attraction and the need to feel close with someone when my life was taking an unexpected turn. I could do simple and fuck buddies.

“Fine, but I do the fucking this time, and there will be kissing. No more of this quick shit, smack on the ass, and acting like you’re paying me for use of my hole.”

“Okay.” He shrugged and went back to stripping. I tugged off both my shirts and moved closer. “But I’ve never been one for kissing. It seems a waste of time when the fun is in fucking.”

“Then you’ve not been kissing the right people,” I growled. I reached out before he could reply, slipping my hand behind his head and dragging his mouth against mine. I threw all my passion for him, and frustration from the other night, into the kiss. When he slowly opened up for me, I ran my tongue on the inside of his mouth, exploring it thoroughly.

“You’re right,” he whispered against my lips when we broke apart for much-needed air. “I have been kissing the wrong people, because it’s never been like that before.”

I felt a thrill go through me at his declaration before delving in for more. Raven produced a small tube of slick from his pants pocket before we got rid of the rest of his clothes.

We ended up on the floor with Raven on his hands and knees. I quickly got him ready, bemoaning the fact that he wasn’t facing me.

But when we got about halfway into it, I changed my mind, because I didn't want him to see the emotion on my face.

I learned something about myself as I thrust into him over and over again. I couldn't do simple and fuck buddies after all. And that was the only option I had with the man I loved. Didn't that just suck huge monkey balls?

I wanted to stop, to scream at the unfairness of it all. But instead, I made sure we both finished before slipping into the despair I felt. I felt walls being built around my heart as we recovered from another round of mind-blowing sex. Unfortunately for me, the walls came too late, and they were now up around my shattered heart and soul.

Chapter 3

First thing I did after we landed in Umm Qasr was pick up a couple of Beretta 9mms. And while I know I make it sound like I swung by Walmart to pick up some milk... in that part of the world, if you knew the right people, it was that easy.

Once I was armed, I felt we could handle the meeting just fine. While Raven did his best to hide his shock, I still saw signs of it. I just rolled my eyes and led the way. This wasn't the Sons of Thanatus compound or a playground. This was a war-torn Middle Eastern country where shit happened every day that the Scouts couldn't be prepared for.

The meeting went as planned, nothing hinky. I picked three types of tracking devices that the order could test out, one of which was biodegradable, so it wasn't always giving an active signal. My contact whined about not having known it wasn't for my personal use, but shut up quickly when Raven pulled out his satellite-communication-enabled laptop and transferred his payment right into the guy's account.

After we were done with him, we headed back to the airport to hop the helicopter that was taking us to the aircraft carrier. I had to give it to Raven. This was all new to him, and while he couldn't always hide his shock, he never questioned anything, balked, or started shit. I'm sure I'd get one hundred and one questions when we were alone again, but that was fine. He had enough sense to keep it to himself until the right time.

When we landed on the carrier, I took a moment to simply breathe in the gulf air. Raven tilted his head as if trying to figure out what I was doing while the chopper shut down.

“You forget, this was my home for years,” I said, answering his unspoken question. He gave me a nod, and we headed to the chain of command, waiting.

“Raven,” he said, extending his hand to the man obviously in charge.

“Lieutenant Murphy,” the man said, reaching for my hand and ignoring Raven.

“Captain Murphy,” I replied and took his hand.

“You’re related?” Raven asked, glancing between the two of us with wide eyes.

“Nope, Murphy’s just that common of a name.” I snickered and turned back to my old Captain. “How goes it?”

“Same shit, different day.” He chuckled and led the way. “You know how it is.”

“How have my goons been treating you since I’ve been gone?” I asked, noticing Raven followed us along with his mouth hanging open. What did I do to shock him now?

“Good, but it took two men to replace one you on the team,” Captain Murphy said with a smirk.

“Is that right?”

“No, you dope.” He laughed and smacked me upside the head as we descended into the ship. “They’re twins, so it was more buy-one-get-one-free with them. I swear, those boys could have a whole conversation with a look. Almost disturbing if it wasn’t useful out in the field.”

“And we know how easily you get shaken.” I snickered. My old Captain had seen just about everything in his years in the military, shit no person should ever have to witness.

“Oh yeah, puppies scare me, too.” He gestured to the corridor that led to the Special Forces or Navy Seal rooms on the ship. Each ship

had them, keeping the visitors that weren't always assigned to the ship separate. "I've got orders to give you whatever you need. You in trouble, son?"

"No, sir, I finally got some answers as to who we are," I answered. The Captain's eyebrows shot up in surprise. He was one of the few I'd ever entrusted with the knowledge of our birthmarks, and how they'd brought my team together when we were grunts. We all stuck together and worked so well together, we ended up getting recognized as our own Special Ops team.

"I'm glad for you," he said, giving my shoulder a squeeze. "I'll be sorry to see them all go, since they're one of the best teams out there. But sometimes a person's meant for more."

"Thank you for understanding."

"Just let me know what they decide, and who you're taking with you before you leave," he replied, and finally seemed to notice Raven was standing there with us. "He one of them?"

"Yup. He's here to explain everything I can't."

"Good deal," the Captain said and walked away, never even bothering to ask Raven's name.

"That's fine. I'm nobody," Raven grumbled as he stared after the Captain.

"You aren't on this ship." I chuckled and knocked on the door to my team's quarters. "Welcome to my world."

"Didn't know you were so important, or a team leader."

"Oh, I get it. You thought I was just some grunt," I sneered, narrowing my eyes at him. "No wonder you're always throwing your rank in my face, civvie."

Before he could reply, the door swung open and I was standing face to face with my old teammate and lover, Iago.

"Well, fuck me hard!" Iago shouted, and pulled me into the room. I opened my mouth to greet him but was cut off by his mouth on mine. Instinctively, I melted into him, kissing him right back, until

Raven cleared his throat. Wow, some habits never died. “You back for good?”

“No, but I’m hoping you all will come with me, since I’ve got answers about our marks,” I replied as I pulled away. I couldn’t help it, even with Raven standing there looking pissed off, I reached up and cupped Iago’s cheek. “God, I’ve missed you.”

“We knew it would end one day, Finn,” he said gently and moved his hand over mine. “I love you like a brother, and the sex was awesome, but we were never in love. But I do miss your cock.”

“You charmer,” I replied and hugged him again. It was true. Iago and I were attracted to each other, tight as best friends could be, but it was never more than that. Then I heard the barks of my team. Stupid Marine tradition. I bet when whoever decided the Marine mascot should be a bulldog, they didn’t think it would lead to years and years of grown men barking.

There were several minutes of hugs and greetings while Raven and two identical-looking men stood off to the side. When we were finally done, it was time for introductions.

“Raven Englewood, this is Iago Miller,” I said, starting with the man I kissed, and then pointing to each man around the room as I said their name. “Mal and Val Dorst, Mac Crenshaw, and Steph Berg.”

“And we’ve got two new ones,” Steph replied as he gestured to the men who’d stepped aside. “Ty and Merc Bailey joined us a few weeks after you got out.”

“Do they know?” I asked quietly as Raven shook everyone’s hand.

“Yeah, best part, they’re like us,” he answered with a smile.

“Hot and gay?” Iago joked as we all moved to sit around the large bolted down table.

“That, too.” I chuckled as I flipped the chair around and leaned my arms on the back of it as I stared at my crew. “I found out what the birthmark means. It’s not just us, guys. There are thousands of us all over the world.”

“That how you know him?” Steph asked and gestured towards Raven. I gave him a nod and them a moment to let it all sink in. “Okay, so why show up here? Why not just shoot us an email?”

“Because it’s more complicated than just information,” I answered slowly, trying to choose my words carefully. “First off, everything we say can’t ever leave this room.” I turned and looked at the new guys. “I don’t know you, but I’m trusting your word is good.”

“It is,” Merc said. Well, I think he was Merc. They were identical, after all. “We’ve been looking for answers all our lives. We want to know what it means, and why we can speak to the dead.”

“You can actually talk with them, or just hear them?” Raven asked, tilting his head to the side as if appraising them.

“Both,” the other one answered. “Why, is that odd?”

“Most of us can hear them, a few can speak with them, and others have different powers as well.” Raven shook his head and then held up his hand when everyone started to ask questions. “Let me start at the beginning, and then we can get into specifics.”

“I have one first,” Iago said before turning to me. “You with these guys? I mean, we’re not going to end up lab rats, are we?”

“No, I’ve met Raven and a few others six weeks ago and moved to Miami to learn everything I could. I vouch for them.” Iago gave me a quick nod and turned back to Raven.

“We belong to the Sons of Thanatus,” Raven said, taking a deep breath as he went into the explanation I’d heard several times since joining the order.

The Sons of Thanatus, and by extension, the Daughters of Thanatus, was a secret society dating back to the late 1700s, but our kind went back even further than that. How far? No one really knew, because at one point and time we were labeled warlocks or wizards. And while accepted and held to a high esteem for many centuries, when Christianity starting spreading through Europe, we became persecuted.

Overnight, many of our kind went underground, hiding who they were and what they could do. Over the years and generations, the knowledge of the gift of being able to help the dead was lost to some of the people who had it. Many were no longer taught how to deal with that gift and learn what to do with it.

We couldn't help what we were, any more than shape-shifters or vampires could. I was one of many born from a lineage that could see and speak with the dead. Or, more specifically, could find the dead and see their soul. They called to us like a homing beacon.

There was a catch, and there always was with anything paranormal. We didn't come into our abilities until we had a brush with death. Until then, they lay dormant. The restless souls didn't bother us, and we couldn't sense them.

Souls don't leave the area of their bodies until they are laid to rest. No matter the religion or rites that were observed, it didn't matter how. They just had to be allowed to find peace and move on to the other side. Until then, they stay within a small radius close to where they were.

The souls can give a basic message, like a loop recording. The longer the body's been there, the more time the soul starts to lose their sanity, since they're basically watching their own body decompose. The longer it's been there, the harder it is to understand the message from the soul.

We didn't get paid for what we did from military, law enforcement, or most people who contacted us. It was more a trade of favors. They knew if one of our people were ever falsely accused of a murder when we were called in, they'd be asked to step in and attest to what we could do. It wasn't blackmail or asking for the police to be in our pockets. It was about having credible references.

Policemen and military trusted other policemen and military. If I ever had a problem with someone somewhere else or whatnot, a call from one of them would go a long way. It was basic CYA, or "cover your ass," techniques.

We were immortal, but we could die. One of us just didn't ever hear of anyone in the order dying from a heart attack, cancer, or anything like that. It had to be massive trauma, blood loss, gunshot wound to the heart or brain to kill us.

After five years of intense training at one of the Sons of Thanatus compounds, each apprentice was given a maven to follow, learn from, and use as a resource for the rest of their lives. The apprentice-maven relationship was sacred in our world. A maven only ever took on one apprentice in all of his years. It wasn't just a teacher-student relationship.

Once a maven, which was our term for master in our order, was given an apprentice, it was the same as adopting a younger brother. This would be someone who would be in their life always, even after he became his own maven. I knew mavens who were still tight with their own mavens from their apprentice days.

I knew about in the training we went through that there were anatomy courses that we all took. It helped us learn to deal with human remains and prepare us for what we might find in the field. Not that it always worked. I'd heard about when people helped find a body and then threw up their lunch, but that happened at times after military training as well.

Being in the field wasn't the same as a controlled classroom where the cadaver died of a heart attack or something. At times, the bodies we found were gruesome and smelled foul.

But the training did help and give us some extra credibility. The order had an accredited program in which all of us ended up with a master's degree in criminology when we completed it. It helped when we came across nonbelievers or skeptics who thought we might contaminate evidence.

After centuries of being persecuted, and lots of generations losing the way of our kind, there were many of us who were in the wind. It had to be hard on them, knowing they were different, but not the how or why. I know it had been for me.

When Raven was done twenty minutes later, everyone but me stared at him with their mouths hanging open. I sat there and waited for them to digest all of this, squirming in my seat when the silence started to drag out.

“Would you be willing to submit to a drug test?” Steph asked me, snapping back to the present first.

“You think I’ve been hitting the crack pipe?” I answered with a laugh and shook my head. “No drugs, guys. There’s no special punch that we all drink and then commit suicide or other crazy cult shit. It’s not like that. It’s actually like being here, and instead of being sent to kill, we help souls be laid to rest and use our brains more than our brawn.”

“And still they took you?” Val snickered, and I reached over to cuff him upside the head. We all had a laugh before they focused back on Raven. “So what does this mean for us? Finn could have come and told us all of this, but I’m guessing you’re here for more than just sharing information.”

“You’re right, though I also came because, while Finn’s been with us for six weeks, there are still questions he won’t have the answers to.” Raven paused for a moment before leaning forward and resting his forearms on his knees. “This isn’t common knowledge, so I’d appreciate you guys keeping to yourselves. How old do you think I am?”

“I’d say thirty, but I have a feeling that’s not the right answer,” Mal answered as he raised an eyebrow.

“No, it’s not,” Raven replied with a soft smile. “I’m two hundred and sixty years old. I’ve been with the order since I was twenty. They aren’t just people like me with abilities. They’re my family, my brothers, and my friends. This is more than a job. It’s a calling. One that I believe in with my whole being.”

“So what now?” Merc asked after a moment.

“That’s up to each of you,” Raven hedged as he glanced around. “I’ve arranged for all of you to get out of your contracts with the

Marines, if you want to. You can also take a month leave, come with us, and check things out for yourselves. If you see our compound and learn what you need to and decide it's not for you, then you come back here on deployment as if it was a normal leave.

"No harm, no foul, no losing your current status with the Marines. Or, you can tell me this isn't for you, and you stay here, be a Marine and live your life. But just know this isn't a one-time offer. The Sons of Thanatus will always welcome you as brothers into the order. I won't lie. It will be easier if you come with us now because we're setting up special training for your team because you're way ahead of most of our trainees. So it won't be five years for you guys."

"They're cool with us being gay?" Steph asked me.

"Yeah, the guys who found me when I was bouncing in New Orleans just got married with the full support of the order. They're not like that. If anyone should be open-minded to people being different, it's them."

"The only time problems arise with relationships is when it's someone outside of the order," Raven said as he leaned back in his chair. "What we are isn't common knowledge, and it's imperative that it be kept secret. The general public is not able to handle something like this."

"Also there are rules about trainees getting involved with mavens or higher ranking people in the order. The rules are there to protect you guys when you're new and just had your world turned upside down. Just because we all share a gift doesn't mean that we're all necessarily moral and wouldn't take advantage of someone new. You guys should understand that, being in the Marines. Just because you serve together doesn't make everyone a friend."

"Makes sense," Ty replied, and exchanged a look with his twin. I understood what the Captain meant then. It was almost creepy, the way they seemed to talk to each other without speaking a word. "We're in. All the way. No leave or trial period. We want to know everything and find ways to help the dead we hear."

“Okay, then start packing,” Raven said with a smile. “We’ve got a jet waiting at Umm Qasr for anyone who wants to come back to Miami with us. Again, no one is going to be forced. It’s your choice. I just ask you keep everything you’ve learned today between the people in this room. There are certain things that are considered taboo to talk about, even in the order. Age is one of them, since we’re immortal.”

“What about our separate abilities? Will everyone know what we can do?” Steph asked hesitantly. He shot me a quick glance, almost apologetic, which I didn’t really get. We’d never talked much about what we could do, since we had no answers as to why and ended up with more questions than answers... until today.

“I will know, and a few others, including the head of our compound and your trainers,” Raven answered. “There will be some testing for you guys since you’ll be skipping parts of our normal training program. But again, everything outside from those few people isn’t for anyone else to talk about. Are there rumors and gossip? Of course, but as Finn can attest to, it’s more high school, who’s with who.”

“And who’s got the kinkiest sex life.” I snickered and shared a glance with Raven. He bit his lip to keep from laughing, but it didn’t work. We burst out laughing until I had tears leaking out of my eyes. “Oh gods, Josh was so excited when I told him most of their wedding gifts were toys and restraints.”

“Madden thanked me for the body paint and double-sided dildo I got them,” Raven replied, and we started laughing all over again.

“Care to share with the class?” Iago asked with a smile and raised eyebrow.

“The guys I said I met when I was bouncing, I met because they were at the leather and chains bar I worked at,” I answered, trying not to start the laughs all over again. “They, umm, put on, yeah, quite a show. It’s kinda a running joke at our compound that Josh is very vocal during sex and has *no* issue with others knowing about their sex life.”

“Hell, when I met Josh, he thought I wanted Madden, and was jealous of us,” Raven said, shaking his head at the memory. “Within seconds of shaking my hand, he announced that he planned on getting spanked before sucking Madden’s cock all night, and then letting him tie Josh down and fucking him with Madden’s massive cock some more. I just about swallowed my tongue in shock and intrigue.”

“So when they got married,” I chuckled, picking up the story, “everyone pretty much had heard about it and decided to get them toys they would enjoy. Except we didn’t know that we all had the same plan until the reception, when everyone was talking about what they got the couple.”

“I’m in,” Mac, Mal, and Val said together.

“*That* story changed your minds?” I asked, my eyes going wide in shock. Were my friends closet nymphos or something?

“I was on the fence, leaning towards saying yes already,” Val answered as he exchanged a glance with his older brother. “But it’s not about that they’re okay with kinky gay sex, though that’s always a perk. You just talked about people who care about each other, like a big family. And you guys seem to have a life beyond training and helping the dead. That was the only thing that worried me. I want more from life than just the Marines or work.”

“This isn’t a nine-to-five job where you get a regular salary,” Raven explained, as everyone but Steph and Iago started packing. “But we do incur bonuses that we could put into our own savings accounts when we continually did a good job and had happy clients after you reach maven status. Until then, the order takes care of everything you need. If there’s certain special requests, we’ve got a guy who handles that, and rarely does any request get denied.”

“Davin did deny my last request.” I chuckled as I stared at Raven. He bit his lip and rolled his eye before letting me have it.

“You wanted the room next to yours turned into your own play room!” He exclaimed and punched me in the shoulder. “You asked for your own whirlpool, seventy-two-inch TV, bar, and pool table!”

“What’s wrong with that?” Iago asked innocently, batting his eyelashes at Raven.

“Hey, Davin kept saying yes to anything I asked for.” I chuckled. “I was just testing to see where the limit was.”

“He still ordered you that massive TV for your room.” Raven gave me a wink, and I knew he appreciated my showing the fun side of the order. Then he turned back to Iago. “There are several whirlpools already in the lower levels with the indoor pool. There’s a bar and lounge like a real bar in Miami, but everyone can just fix their own drinks.”

“Why the push to have fun?” Steph asked as he leaned forward.

“We don’t just travel constantly and live out of a suitcase once you hit apprentice or maven,” Raven answered. “Any job that deals with death is hard, but what we see and feel is also draining. It can lead to depression, mental breakdowns, and various stress-related issues. The order understands that and wants us to experience other things in life that reminds us that there is good in the world as well.”

“I’m in for a month leave, and I’ll decide for sure after I see the full show,” Steph said after a moment. “I don’t want to risk my place in the Marines until I know for sure this is what I want.”

“Me, too,” Iago replied with a nod.

“We’ll go get everything arranged while you guys pack,” I said as we stood up. “Meet us up top with your gear, and the chopper will take us back to the airport. Might need two trips now that we’ve got the twins with us. I didn’t know about you guys in advance.”

“No worries,” they replied together.

Raven and I left to go find the Captain. He was curiously quiet as we walked down the corridor. He finally said something when we got to the stairs. “You did really well in there, Finn. I think you’d make an excellent recruiter one day. You’re obviously more prepared to handle certain situations than I am. I’m used to meetings like how I met you, or maybe a hospital room, like Madden. I wasn’t equipped for this.”

“Then it’s a good thing you brought me,” I whispered as I checked that no one was around. I cornered him against the wall and kissed him. He didn’t push me away or fight me, instead submitting and melting against me.

When I backed away he was panting, his eyes glazed over with lust as he licked his now-swollen lips. It gave me hope. Maybe Raven wasn’t as cold as he seemed, and just never had someone to show him what was possible in a relationship besides just sex. I left him standing there and was pleased with the desire on his face for more. Things were definitely looking up between us.

Chapter 4

The trip back to Miami was long and tiring. Most of the guys were too wound up to sleep and fired question after question at us. I had to give it to Raven... He handled it like a pro and never seemed the slightest annoyed if any were repeat questions. I, on the other hand, was ready to pull out my hair a few times.

When we got back to the compound, it was pretty late, but Davin was waiting for us with keys and room assignments that Raven had called ahead about. The guys all said they'd rather double up on rooms for now, since they were still adapting from all sharing one room, which they were used to from the Marines. I didn't fault them, but I knew there was more to it. They wanted to watch each other's backs until they knew for sure that this was a safe place.

Raven was smart and had given them rooms right next to or close to mine. Once everyone was settled, we agreed to meet back at my room in the morning so I could show them where to get grub and give them the grand tour.

We all went to our rooms, and while I felt a pang of disappointment that Raven didn't sneak into mine with me, I did understand. He still had reports to file, and we didn't know if any of my friends would come seek me out in the middle of the night. Until we knew for sure, there'd be no overnights in my room, though we'd not really discussed any of that.

As I crawled into bed and wanted nothing more than to pass out, I couldn't help but wonder if there was a future with Raven. He'd said that we could be fuck buddies, but I knew I'd want more, even if he'd

given in and would start at least kissing. Maybe I could change his mind and he'd want more. I just didn't know.

* * * *

"We got everyone?" I asked the next morning as I did a head count of my friends as they assembled in front of my room. Yup, everyone was there.

"Tell me they got better grub here than we're used to?" Iago asked, practically bouncing at the idea as I showed them the way to the dining area. It was like a small cafeteria or mess hall, but no one called it that. I figured they wanted to make it seem less cold, and homier.

"Yeah, it's way better." I chuckled and slung my arm over his shoulder. "It's more like diner food, and it's ready-order since they don't know how many people they'll have day-to-day. The omelets are fucking fantastic."

"Shit, if you'd have told me it was real food, I would have committed fully right away." Steph snickered and pushed me from behind. This felt right. I'd missed my friends more than I had realized. While I liked the guys in the order and I'd made some great friends, I'd not realized there was something missing until this moment.

"Hello, boys," Josh purred as he walked towards us as we entered the dining area. Guess they weren't out on assignment yet because of Madden's injury. Shortie ran his hands over his chest seductively as he licked his lips and eyed over my very big and muscular friends. "Finn, aren't you going to introduce me to these delectable men?"

"I'm Steph," my friend said as he elbowed me out of the way and took Josh's hand. "Finn didn't mention what attractive members the order had." He raised Josh's hand to his mouth, freezing when he heard a loud growl.

“Kiss my husband’s hand and you’ll spend the rest of the day trying to pull your lips back out of your ass.” Madden stormed over and wrapped his arms around Josh, pulling them a few steps back.

“Be nice, Mad,” Josh said, trying to look angry as he stared up at his man except the twinkle of lust gave him away. “I started it, and he was just being nice.”

“Do I have to paddle your ass until you remember who you belong to and that shouldn’t be flirting with other men?” Madden raised an eyebrow, but I saw he was trying not to smile as well.

“Oh, fuck, yes please,” Josh whimpered and pushed his ass and body back against Madden. “I’ve been a very, very bad husband. Spank me until my ass is bright red, use the handcuffs.”

“These are the friends you were telling us about?” Val whispered in my ear. I snickered and nodded. “Yeah, you weren’t kidding about the little guy being vocal.”

“And I like it when people watch.” Josh purred, giving Val a wink. “My husband likes to show off how I respond to him and beg for his huge cock.”

“Maybe later, Shortie.” I snickered when a few of my friends raised their hands. “We just got in last night. Let me get them fed and show them around before you entertain them.”

“Fine, but I still get spanked now, right?” Josh asked Madden, sticking out his bottom lip in a pathetic pout. “You can’t tease me with that.”

“No, I can’t, can I, baby?” he said with so much affection and love in his voice it made my heart ache. I wanted someone to look at me and speak to me like that. In a flash, he lifted Josh up and threw him over his shoulder. “Welcome to all of you, glad you’re safe from your trip. We’ll get introductions and whatnot later, but right now it seems my husband needs my attentions.”

“Have fun,” I yelled as they took off. Josh wagged his eyebrows at me from over Madden’s shoulder and waved. I couldn’t help but laugh at his antics.

“So yeah, they’re really cool with people being gay around here,” Merc said with a snicker. Everyone shared a chuckle while some shook their head at what they’d just seen with my friends as we headed to the cooks.

There were two for breakfast and dinner times that we could put in orders with. That was the norm, at least. Sometimes they did certain theme nights where we ordered out local if they knew how many would be here, and they rotated being here for lunch, since it was mostly sandwiches and fix-your-own-food time. It kept things simple, and I appreciated that.

“Dude, you can have seconds.” I laughed as Val and Mal ordered just about one of everything on the available options for today.

“We’re growing boys,” Val said with a wink and went back to what he was doing.

“Besides, we’re going to start training you said, we’ll need the calories.” Mal gave me almost the same smile and wink before taking his turn.

“They are more mountain than man.” Raven chuckled, causing me to jump. When had he gotten here? As if knowing my question, he answered. “I was getting coffee while Josh was welcoming you. Madden’s got another week at least until he’s cleared to go out on assignment, so he’ll be helping me get your guys settled in. There’s a lot of testing to be done to gauge what level you’re all at.”

“The best level,” Iago said around a mouthful of waffles.

“Dude, wait until we sit down, at least.” I shook my head at the impression they were making to the others in the dining area. It didn’t help that we were some of the biggest members of the order, but now they probably all thought us Neanderthals.

“Do you have any clue how long it’s been since I’ve had anything other than crappy Navy-issued food or MREs on that damn ship?” he asked as he took the nearest seat and started shoveling food in. “This food is the fucking bomb diggity. Tell me the cook is gay. I’ll give him head every morning for this kinda grub!”

“Sorry, man, you’re not my type,” the cook called over. “I’ll still cook for you, but I like my partners with curves and boobs.”

“All right,” Iago drawled as he smiled at the cook. “But if you stop, I’ll get a sex change and be your slave for food this good!”

“Maybe just start with not talking with your mouth full.” The cook snickered and went back to work. Iago’s cheeks turned bright red as he shoveled more food in his mouth.

We all put our orders in and went to get drinks before they were up. Once we got what we needed and settled at the table with Iago, Raven passed out some papers.

“I’ve made up a testing schedule for all of you guys,” he said as the rest of us ate. “The next week will be mainly testing and showing you guys the lay of the land. Then after the trainers, the Eldest and I know where you’re all at, we can talk specifics in training. The main question I need to know right off the bat is if any of you have been trained as medics.”

“I don’t know about Merc and Ty, but the rest of us have,” I replied as I glanced at the twins. They nodded that they had. “Okay, so then all of us. I made all these other idiots take the training so we’d never be without help in the field when we split up or did assignments as teams.”

“Very smart,” Raven muttered as he started taking notes. “Then I just need to know if there’s any other special training you’ve had that we need to test.”

“I’m assuming sniper and evasive maneuvers training doesn’t count?” Steph asked.

“Sniper, no, though we do require all of our brothers be accomplished marksmen before letting them out in the field. Any martial arts belts, too, since we require at least one black belt to reach apprentice level,” Raven answered with a smile. “But tactical driving, yes, that’s good to know. We don’t currently teach that, but we’ve had to assemble recovery teams recently and that would be a useful addition. Also, any languages.

“We don’t have a language program, but we’re looking into one. While we stick to North America and mostly the US, we recently had a need when a team traveled to Argentina and was captured. So any knowledge of languages might help us and maybe could help our training program. You’ll be explained this in detail later, but not everyone goes out into the field.”

“Like you or the cook,” Iago said, nodding his understanding as the other guys did. “Finn mentioned you were originally hiring him for security before you knew he had the birthmark. Is that an option for brothers, or is it strictly outsourced?”

“We prefer everything to be in-house,” Raven said, shaking his head. “We just don’t always have the personnel for it. And unlike what you’re used to with the military, we don’t force people into jobs they don’t want just because they’re needed. We have enough funds to hire outside if we need it. We pay top dollar for discretion.”

“But if we wanted to?”

“Yeah, that’s something we can talk about after your training,” Raven answered with a smile. “I can’t say yes, you can be security for the compound, until I know what you can do. But we never, ever force someone out in the field. That’s just not who we are.”

“Good deal,” Val said firmly, and slapped Raven on the back. Raven wasn’t a little guy by any means, but I wasn’t even the tallest of the group. Val and Mal beat me by an inch. The others were all taller than Raven, except Iago, who was the same size with just a little more bulk. But it was funny to watch Raven groan and rub his back after Val’s “love tap.”

I glanced over the schedule and saw we had weapons testing in less than an hour. We quickly finished eating, cleaned up after ourselves, and I led the way over to the armory. Raven excused himself but made sure everyone had his cell phone number if they had any issues.

It was kinda funny since none of them had cell phones to call him with. Who needed that on deployment? The bills would be

astronomical, for one. Two, most of us didn't have any family, really, so everyone we'd want to talk to was right with us. Raven said he'd get with Davin and get them a list of options for phones by the end of the day.

"I wonder if we rubbed him like a genie if we could get anything we wanted?" Mal asked as we watched Raven walk away.

"You rub the lamp, not the genie, idiot." Iago snickered as we headed to our testing. "Besides, I think Finn would be very upset if anyone else rubbed his man."

"He's not mine." I hissed and checked to see if anyone else was around. "You heard what he said about trainees and mavens or others of higher rank. Hell, I'm not even officially a trainee yet."

"Doesn't stop you from watching him as if you hope to stamp your name on his forehead one day." He snickered and jumped out of reach.

"Just keep it quiet, okay?"

"We'd never out you. You know that," Iago said, looking hurt that I'd even think otherwise.

"I know, buddy," I replied and threw my arm over his shoulder. "It's just complicated, and I don't want to make things any worse."

"You love him, don't you?"

"I think so," I whispered as they got closer to me and intently listened.

"Well, I'm sorry we won't keep fucking like rabbits, but I'm happy for you, Finn. You deserve to fall in love and have something real."

"I don't think Raven believes in real," I replied, and then wanted to smack myself for admitting that. These guys needed to trust Raven and know he was a good guy. If they knew he'd been less than perfect to me, not only would that never happen, but they'd probably rip him into shreds. "I don't know what's going on yet, but I'll let you nosey asses know when I do, okay? Are we done with the Oprah moment?"

“Finn and Raven, sitting in a tree,” Mal sang as everyone else started humming.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” I growled, and threw my hands up in the air. They laughed and followed me along as I stormed to the farthest point of the east wing of the compound. We walked out the door and about three hundred yards to their shooting range with attached armory.

The armory itself was like a large six-car garage that had a keypad and was locked up like Fort Knox. The order had a small gun hold in the compound, but this was their main supply. I glanced around at my team, which included the twins for me now, and saw they had the same thought I did when I’d found this out. Stupid.

“Yeah, they need one of us to run security for them,” Mal grumbled as we stopped in front of the door to the armory. “This is not where they should store their gear.”

“I agree,” I said with a nod, proud of how my guys recognized the massive mistake in having their weapons away from the main building. Just then the weapons trainer, Ambrose, stepped out and froze as he stared at all of us. “Hey, Ambrose.”

“Um, hi, Finn and muscled men,” he stuttered as his eyes went wide. Ambrose was a small guy like Josh, so I understood why he wasn’t used to my crew as trainees.

“I change my mind about the cook. I want the twink,” Iago said as he pushed forward.

“Behave,” I growled as Mac spoke.

“Too late, you called the cook. I call the weapons cutie.” He elbowed Iago and gently took Ambrose’s hand, raising it to his lips and brushing a kiss over it. “My name is Macbeth Crenshaw, my friends call me Mac, but you can call me anything you want, sugar.”

“Hi, Mac,” Ambrose whispered, and I thought he might almost swoon at my friend’s gesture. I’d never seen the little guy react like this to anyone. He was very, very quiet and kept to himself. Hell, I’d only talked to him a few times, and I’d been out here at the range

daily since I got here. "I'm Ambrose Maynard, but I'd love it if you called me yours, or your sex slave."

"Focus, guys," I hissed as I saw Raven and the Eldest approaching. "Officer on deck."

"No deck here, Finn," Mac growled, and kept his eyes on Ambrose. "Are you free for dinner later, sugar?"

"No he's not, *trainee*," I said firmly, and pulled him back. "Sorry about that, Ambrose. I think Josh got to them this morning, and now they're all thinking with the wrong head. They seem to be trying to jump anything that moves."

"Right, yeah, no one would want me otherwise," Ambrose whispered, and took a few steps back.

"Ambrose, wait," I called after him as he booked it into the armory.

"Smooth move, Ex-lax," Mac snarled, and went after him.

"I didn't mean it like that," I yelled, throwing my hands up in the air. "I'm just trying to keep all you horny Neanderthals under control!"

"You said they were cool here with being gay and hooking up with other members," Iago said pointedly.

"Was I the only one who heard Raven explain about being a trainee and the rules against relationships with mavens, trainers, or higher-ups?"

"That doesn't really apply in your case, Finn," the Eldest, James, chuckled as they joined us. "Mavens, apprentices, and trainers are fine for your team, since you're far from young trainees."

I couldn't help but glance at Raven at this announcement. If we got the clear for mavens, did that mean he was still off-limits for me? Regrettably, his face gave away nothing.

"And who is this delectable morsel with Raven?" Iago purred. Unfortunately, he got four answers at once.

"Dude, you already called the cook." Val snickered.

“Is everyone horny but us after Josh’s display?” Ty asked and shook his head at the same time as his twin.

“He’s my boss,” Raven answered, trying not to laugh.

“He’s like the Captain, you asshole,” I growled.

“Okay, wait, can I get one answer please?” Iago asked, glancing at all of us as he took a step closer to the Eldest. “So he’s off-limits, I’m guessing? And screw the cook, he said he’s straight.”

“I’m Raven’s boss,” James answered as he looked at Iago with laughing eyes.

“Shit, sorry, sir,” Iago said as he moved to stand at attention.

“Not at all,” he replied, waving off the infraction. “I’m glad you’re all settling in this easily. I can tell you that this isn’t quite like hook-up central as Josh might have implied with his antics this morning. He has fun giving people reason to walk around with their mouths hanging open.”

Yeah, that was an accurate way to describe Josh.

“Eldest, this is Iago Miller,” I said taking the pause to introduce everyone. Just as I wrapped up, Mac and Ambrose came back out of the armory. I introduced Mac and went over to Ambrose and pulled him off to the side. “That’s not what I meant, Ambrose. I was trying to apologize for them trying to jump you like wild dogs. They’re normally a lot more subtle. You have to know how gorgeous you are, but—”

“You think I’m gorgeous?” He gasped, interrupting me.

“Yeah, you’re beautiful,” I answered with a smile. “If someone didn’t already have my heart, I’d follow you around like a puppy until you gave me attention. I didn’t mean to upset you. I was just trying to keep them calm because I know you’re kinda quiet. Plus, they just got off deployment, where they had to hide that they’re gay, and then they come here, where they can be open with it. And Josh kinda flaunted that this morning. It was like giving them catnip.”

“Apology accepted,” Ambrose said as he winked at me. “I’ll watch myself around your horny team, but don’t be surprised if I take Mac up on his offer.”

“That’s for you to decide.” I chuckled and we headed back to the group. “I just didn’t want you to feel pressured by any of these goons.”

“So what do you think of our setup so far?” the Eldest asked after shaking everyone’s hand and getting names and ranks out of the way. They all froze and looked at me. “Well, isn’t this interesting?”

“Sir?” I asked and gave them all looks to keep it shut.

“How long have you been out of the military and no longer their team leader, Finn?”

“Eight months, sir,” I answered, knowing where he was going now, and cringing.

“And one of you was their new leader?”

“Yes, sir, Mac took over command of the team.”

“It’s cool that Finn step back in the position,” Mac said cheerfully and slapped my shoulder. Oh, the idiot was just driving the Eldest’s point home. “I led when I needed to, but he’s the team leader. We all know that.”

“The point he’s about to make is I’m *not* the team leader here,” I replied through clenched teeth. “I’m starting out at the same spot, and there aren’t even any team leaders here.”

“Oh, well, shit,” Mac swore with his eyebrows scrunched together. “So we’re all back to basic training here? We can’t undo the pecking order between all of us after years of serving together.”

“No, I don’t believe you can,” the Eldest replied with a smirk on his face. “And I have a feeling with your extended training, none of you will fill the position of maven and take an apprentice. While that’s an option to be trained that way and have your team going out into the field when special circumstances arise, I can’t see you guys splitting up and doing what some of the others do.”

“Did we just fail the test?” Iago asked, looking confused as the rest of us. “I didn’t even fire a gun yet, and that sounded like we’re going to end up scrubbing the head with toothbrushes tonight.”

“On the contrary,” the Eldest answered with a wide smile. “I think your team will be changing the way we’ve done things around here for the past few centuries.” He quickly went over what happened to Madden and Josh in Argentina. “If we had a trained team with a military background, that would have been who we’d have sent instead of Madden. But until you guys, we’ve not had any ex-military personnel.”

“They would also be able to take the jobs we get for finding soldiers in war zones,” Raven said as he looked at me like a proud teacher. “We could start helping to bring soldiers home to their families to have proper burials instead of empty graves and restless souls for eternity.”

“Exactly.” The Eldest looked thrilled at the possibilities.

“Thank you, sir,” I said as I glanced at my team. “I know we’d like the chance to help our fallen brethren in any way we can. If you’re suggesting that I stay on as team leader, I promise you’ll never be disappointed with our performance.”

“Yes, I am and no, I can see you’re the boss of them even if there’s a higher boss over all of you. This might work out nicely. I must speak with the Patriarch first, but we’ll talk after your testing.”

“That’s like the general, right?” Steph asked as he glanced between us like watching a game of tennis.

“Yeah, or fleet commander if you want to run with the military analogy,” I answered. The Eldest smiled and nodded for me to go ahead. “All right, everyone get your first round of weapons to test from Ambrose. No more playtime. Now we show what our team is made of.”

I got several barks as response and a few “Ooh-rahs,” all of which startled poor Ambrose and Raven. Yeah, we were going to shake their world up whether we meant to or not. Might as well do it right.

We took turns with the various weapons, as if we were being tested in the Marine way. Everyone stayed focused, but still encouraged each other, and was supportive. When we wrapped up an hour later, I knew from the Eldest and Raven's faces that we aced the test.

"Yeah, umm, I've got nothing I can teach these guys," Ambrose said with a nervous chuckle as he looked over and added up our targets. "Hell, I bet they could teach me a lot."

"Like not having the armory outside of the main house," Mal grumbled as he cleaned a rifle.

"Care to explain that one?" the Eldest asked, looking shocked and taken aback at the criticism.

"Swear to gods I need duct tape for you assholes," I grumbled and went over to answer James's question. I knew my guys always had their hearts in the right place with their form of *help*, but damn, did it get us into trouble at times. I thought this might not be one of them. If it ended up being, I was so going to kick Mal's ass.

Chapter 5

The next week was filled with intense testing, crash courses on how things were done at the order, and the chain of command. Also, thanks to what Mal had said and my explanation to the Eldest about their weapons, we were designing several other gun holds in the compound, and an attached armory. That we had fun with, though. Raven and the Eldest had basically given us *carte blanche* to handle it however we wanted, and what to fill it with.

Damn, it was like watching kids in a candy store as we spent several dinner times around a table looking over blueprints as everyone shoveled food in their mouths. Raven had made a comment that they'd had to increase the amount of food to be delivered to the kitchen since my friends had shown up. They were seven large men... and they really didn't eat like rabbits.

Once we broke up for the night I would head over to Raven's room. We'd spent every night together over the week, and then I'd sneak back into my room before muster time and breakfast. My friends didn't hide the smirks and knowing looks, but they didn't bust me, either.

The shocker for me wasn't just that Raven always seemed glad when I'd show up. It was the way he was opening up. He'd started initiating some of our kisses and didn't immediately hop out of bed after sex as if he had to get away from me. Okay, so he wasn't the biggest cuddler in the world and still wasn't overly or openly affectionate, but we were making progress from the cold bastard who'd treated me like an easy slut the first time together.

We had one more day of testing tomorrow, and then we'd wait until a training plan was thrown together. All of us were nervous about that part. Hell, Mal and Val were sweating at the idea of textbooks and reading. I guess they'd never done well in school and had barely graduated. But I wasn't thinking of any of that right now, or trying not to worry about my team, since I was otherwise engaged.

"Fuck I love your tight ass," Raven moaned as he pounded into me at a punishing pace. While I'd gotten him to have sex face-to-face a few times now, he'd just about attacked me when I came to his room tonight. I knew him well enough to know that he was excited about something. I just had no clue what it was, and was willing to wait until he was comfortable telling me.

"Missed-you-too," I grunted as I reached down and stroked my cock. I cried out his name as I came all over the sheets below me. Raven moaned loudly, went stiff, and then his dick exploded in my ass. I was still shaking with the force of my orgasm and whimpered as his seed coated my passage, marking me as his.

"I'm addicted to fucking you," Raven panted as he slumped over me. Again, not exactly a declaration of love, but it was progress. "I talked to the Patriarch and under the circumstances he waved the rule about trainees with someone of higher rank. He'll be here at the end of the month to perform the binding ceremony for us. I'll have to be on top of course, since I can't look like a bottom boy to the order given my position."

"Get off me," I whispered, my heart shattering into a million pieces.

"And I've arranged for us to have one of the nicer joint rooms," he said, not even having heard me. "So there will be no more hiding us from everyone and we can fuck like rabbits every night. Hell, we can sneak away during the day sometimes like Madden and Josh do—"

"Get. Off. Me," I snarled as I reached back to shove him and rolled over. I pushed harder than I meant to, and Raven went flying off the bed.

“What the fuck, Finn?” he shouted as he blinked up at me in shock. Part of me wanted to laugh at how stupid he looked sitting there, naked, half sprawled on the carpet.

“Stay away from me, Raven,” I answered as I quickly grabbed my pants and started to shove my legs into them. “We’re done. Just keep the fuck away from me.”

“I asked you to marry—” he said before I cut him off.

“You didn’t *ask* anything, asshole.” I sneered and grabbed my shirt. “You *told* me we were having the binding ceremony and that you had to top me. No, fuck you, you son of a bitch, we’re done. You’re more worried about looking like a *bottom boy* to the order than caring for me. I deserve better than this.”

“Finn!” he shouted as I reached the door and grabbed the knob. “I want us to be together. How did you miss that part?”

“You don’t want me,” I whispered as I blinked back tears. “You’re addicted to fucking my ass. That’s what you said, not that you wanted to be with me. Now you live with the consequences for pushing me too far, and your cold heart.”

He called out to me again, but I ignored him. Walking out that door and not even looking back was one of the hardest things I’d ever done in my life. How could I have been so stupid to think we were making progress? Raven didn’t know what love was or even how to care about someone. That or he just didn’t love me.

But then why want the binding ceremony? I couldn’t understand his motives, not sure I even wanted to. I jogged back to my room hoping no one would be there to witness my walk of shame. Once I got there and locked the door behind me, I started stripping off clothes as I made my way to the bathroom.

I turned on the shower and then realized his cum was running down my thigh. I dove for the toilet just in time to unload everything in my stomach into it. As soon as I was finished, I dragged my sorry ass into the shower and scrubbed every inch of my body. Then I broke down.

Love wasn't supposed to be like this. Or could this even be love when it was so one-sided? No, it was love. I loved Raven. How I fell in love with such an asshole, I had no clue.

But he wasn't an asshole, not really. The order would never have assigned him the job of acclimating new brothers to our world if he was a jerk.

I thought back to the day Raven helped me wrap up my life in New Orleans. He was so sweet, so gentle of my feelings that I'd fallen so in love with him in one day. Sure, I wanted him from the moment I saw him, I wouldn't deny that. Raven was gorgeous. But as he helped me pack up, quit my job, and take care of my apartment, I fell for him.

He'd been so sure that I was doing the right thing it had been easy to ignore my fear. And fuck, had I been scared. I was leaving the only life I knew post military and moving to a strange city to be in an order I'd never heard of. But Raven had promised that I'd have a great life in Miami with the order. Who knew he'd be the one to shatter it?

Next thing I knew I was out of the shower, dried off, dressed, and packing a bag. I guess I didn't really make the conscious decision to leave, but what was here for me anymore? When I finished packing, I left the keys to my room on the bed, and left.

And of course there was no way I was getting out the front door before someone saw me. My luck wasn't that good.

"Hey, Finn," Josh said as I walked past him. "Where are you going?"

"I'm leaving," I answered, not slowing down my strides.

"Finn, wait up," he called and raced after me. When I didn't, it seemed Josh took it upon himself to stop me. I grunted as he jumped on my back and knocked the bag off my shoulder. "You're not leaving without talking to your favorite brother."

"Let me go, Shortie," I replied, my voice taking on a begging quality I wasn't a fan of.

“No! Not until you tell me what’s going on,” Josh growled and climbed up me until he was practically sitting on my shoulders. “Does this have anything to do with Raven telling Madden you guys were having the binding ceremony?”

That just about knocked me on my ass. Or on my knees, since they gave out, and we both fell.

“He told Madden before he told me?” I asked as my eyes started the waterworks again.

“Don’t you mean he *asked* you?” Josh said carefully as he took my face between his hands. Somehow he’d moved from off my back and around to face me when I’d dropped down.

I opened my mouth and then closed it several times, trying to tell him what happened. But when it was obvious it wouldn’t be working for me, I shook my head and begged him with my eyes to understand and let me go.

“Oh, Finn,” he whispered and crawled into my lap.

Josh wrapped himself around me like a monkey, but it wasn’t in any way sexual. He was trying to comfort me in his special Josh way. And it worked, because I hugged him right back, burying my face into his neck as if he was the only solid thing in my life to hold onto. I heard some clicking, and figured he was letting his very overprotective husband know where he was.

“Madden, get all of Finn’s friends up by the main entrance. We have a new job today. Tell Davin to reschedule the testing and tell the Eldest that we’re taking everyone on a field trip. Also get us a boat big enough to fit all these guys.... yeah, love you, too.”

“Josh, just let me go,” I whimpered and tried to get away from him. The little monkey wrapped himself tighter around me instead. I didn’t want everyone to witness my nervous breakdown and shame.

“Can’t do it, big guy,” he replied gently as I stood up with him still attached. “We’re switching testing to operation get Finn piss-ass drunk.”

"It's eight in the morning, Josh." I tried to pry him off of me, but with no success. Where was a crow bar when you needed one? "No one drinks at eight a.m., nor is there any place still open."

"Oh, I know of a few places," Josh giggled and kissed my cheek. "You're not leaving, and I'm not getting off of you until I've got reinforcements, so just behave."

"You're going to get me killed," I growled and tried again to move his legs off my hips. "Madden's going to be fucking furious when he sees you touching me like this!"

"He'll understand," he said with a shrug. "If not, then I'll get a spanking. And that would be such a shame."

"What's going on?" Mal asked as he and Val came racing through the hallway.

"Thank god," I groaned and gestured to Josh. "Can you get the leech off of me? He jumped me."

"He was trying to leave without talking to any of us or even saying good-bye," Josh quickly replied, completely busting me.

He narrowed his eyes at me as if daring me to deny it. I sighed and sank against the wall in defeat. He was right. There was no way I could turn this around and try to act as if Josh had just lost his mind. Well, what was left of it.

"Is this true, Finn?" Val asked gently as he helped Josh hop off of me. "Were you just going to leave without telling us?"

"No. Maybe? I don't know," I growled and rubbed my hands over my face in frustration. "I wasn't thinking."

"Does this have to do with Raven banging on your door a few minutes ago?" Mal asked as they moved closer. "He was freaking out and asking where you were, Finn."

"I can't see him," I said with a whimper and grabbed my bag. They boxed me in against the wall before I could make my escape. "Please don't let him find me!"

They exchanged a look before eyeing me over. Mal finally said something. "Fine, but you're explaining everything to us once we get

you out of here. And then maybe we won't beat the shit out of you for trying to bail on us."

"It wasn't like that," I whispered as my eyes started to burn. "You guys should know me better than that. When have I ever bailed on any of you?"

"Never," Iago answered firmly as he elbowed the other two aside. "Come on, sweetie. Let Uncle Iago nurse your broken heart and get you sloshed."

I knew he was trying his best to make me laugh, but I was too upset to even let his "Uncle Iago" bit work. He used it when any of us needed a smile. It was his standard fallback when we were hurt, or anything up to a broken heart now, it seemed.

"Wow, you are in a bad spot," Iago said as he led me to the door as he rubbed my back. "Uncle Iago always makes you at least smirk."

I glanced around and realized everyone else was there now, including Madden. Mal and Val were so tall and wide that when they'd boxed me in, I wasn't able to see anything else besides them.

"I told Raven you were at the armory," Madden said firmly as he ushered everyone to the doors. "So let's get gone before he finds you and fires my ass."

"You didn't have to do that," I replied, shaking my head as I stumbled along with them. "I wasn't trying to drag everyone else into this. I-I just had to get out of here."

"And Shortie had to stop you by climbing up you?" Val asked as we walked over to the garage.

"Can you come up with another way for me to have stopped Finn without hurting him?" Josh shot back angrily. "I was improvising until I got help."

"Wasn't criticizing," Val said quickly as he held up his hands in surrender. "Just trying to piece together what's what."

Josh filled them in on what he knew as we all climbed into two huge SUVs and left the compound. I felt horrible as I listened to how he busted me trying to sneak away. That really hadn't been my intent.

I simply wasn't thinking. Iago must have understood because he threw his arm around my shoulders for support.

"It's okay, buddy," he said gently. "We'll start pumping you with booze and you'll tell us everything. Then we'll figure out how to fix this."

"Nothing to fix," I mumbled as I stared out the window. "Can't change the way Raven feels."

"I'm not defending Raven, but the man I saw was desperate to find the man he loves," Madden said gently from the driver's seat. "After he was done banging on your door and realized you weren't there, he was running around shouting your name. He was freaking out and panicked that he couldn't find you."

"He's addicted to fucking me," I choked out, not facing any of them. The vehicle went silent at my admission, and no one said anything as we drove. When I saw where we were going when the SUV stopped, I burst out laughing. It was a psychotic, crazed laugh, but it seemed appropriate given the circumstances. "You're taking me to a strip club?"

"Only thing open twenty-four hours," Josh answered with a shrug. "Besides, naked men always cheer me up." Madden cleared his throat as we got out. "One naked man in particular."

"Oh, thanks." Madden snickered.

My friends all hopped out of the other SUV and pretty much dragged me into the place. Once in there, we found seats by the stage, and Josh went to talk to someone who worked there. Next thing I knew, the place turned up the music and a dancer came on stage as if it was Saturday night instead of a Wednesday morning.

Then Val and Mal came over with a few bottles of whiskey and rum. They littered our part of the stage with shot glasses and got to pouring.

"Not it," a bunch of us called out. It was a normal stand-by to decide who was the designated driver. Josh figured it out and said the same as he grabbed a shot glass.

“That’s fine. I planned on driving.” Mac snickered as he exchanged a glance with Madden.

“Yeah, I’ve seen my husband drunk.” Madden chuckled. “He needs someone sober just to watch him.”

“Oh, poor you,” Josh purred after slamming down some whiskey. “I get horny and take off my clothes no matter who’s around. If I remember correctly, you love how adventurous I get when I’m hammered.”

“You get *more* adventurous?” Merc and Ty choked out in shock. I couldn’t help but laugh with everyone else. The idea that there was more to kinky sex that Josh hadn’t already tried was frightening.

We downed several more shots as we watched the stripper. The guy was cute with a hot body, but he just wasn’t doing it for me. I was so screwed. It seemed now only Raven could get me going, and didn’t that just make me a sap.

Someone must have thought about the fact that none of us had eaten yet. Just as I started to get nice and tipsy, several boxes of donuts appeared. And for a while, we were all content to stuff our faces with sugary goodness as we threw back round after round.

Another dancer came on, and by this time they’d figured out who everyone was trying to cheer up. The hot little twink wiggled his assets right in my face and went as far as to grab my hands and rub his ass with them. Again... nothing. He seemed disappointed that he wasn’t flipping my switch but then shrugged and went back to dancing.

“Okay, time to talk to us, Finn,” Iago said after I was good and drunk. I nodded, took one more shot, and spilled everything.

I saw several of my friends cringe as I talked, and I wasn’t sure if it was because they felt bad for me, thought I was an idiot, or were just uncomfortable because we were talking about feelings. I was too sloshed to care, really.

Several of them swore under their breath and poured me more shots when I told them about the first time I’d been with Raven. Then

there were a few smiles and understanding nods when I explained that things were getting better. I'm not sure when it happened, but at some point a few of the dancers not performing joined our group. Kevin, the second dancer who'd performed, went as far as to plop down on my lap in nothing but a thong.

"It's okay," he said with a soft smile. "I'm not trying to give you a lap dance or anything. Just seems like you need a hug and maybe someone to hold while you talk."

"Thanks, cutie," I slurred and kissed his cheek loudly. He was right. It did help. I held onto him as he ran his hands over my back in support.

I went on to tell them what had happened this morning to blow everything to hell. Kevin ran his hands down my chest when I got choked up, and nuzzled my neck. By the time I got it all out, a few hours had passed since we'd arrived. I'd also killed the mood, because no one was dancing and everyone was drinking quietly as they stared at me.

"Un-fucking-believable," Raven hollered from the doorway. It took me a few tries to get my head to work the way I wanted to before I could look over at him.

"How did you find us?" Mac asked as he jumped up as if ready for a fight.

"All the vehicles have GPS," Raven answered and rolled his eyes. "I just didn't know you left the compound at first."

"Not now, Raven," Madden growled as a few of the other guys got up. He reached out to catch Josh, who skirted around him. That impressed me because I was pretty sure he was as drunk as I was.

"You're a bastard," Josh shouted and smacked Raven across the face. "Finn loves you, and you treated him like shit."

Raven ignored him, pushing him to the side as he stormed towards me. He didn't get more than ten feet before several of my friends blocked his path. "I'm freaking out trying to find you, and then I find out from Davin you're all on a *field trip*! I tell you that I want to

marry you, you take off, and now I find you with some slut on your lap.”

“Hey!” Kevin whimpered as he curled into a ball on my lap. “I’m not a slut.”

“Of course not, cutie,” I said, giving him a lopsided, drunk grin before kissing his cheek. I stood up and gently sat him on the chair before spinning to face Raven. That was a mistake with how much I’d had to drink, and almost tumbled over. Merc was there to catch me in time, and I gave him a nod of thanks. “He’s not a slut. He was trying to help me tell everyone why I’ve gone from loving you to hating you!”

“Y–You hate me?” Raven asked as his face drained of color. “I told you I wanted us to get married.”

“No, you told him that you guys were getting married,” Mal said with a growl. It wasn’t like we could talk about the binding ceremony right then in front of the others.

“Is that why you got so upset?” Raven seethed as he narrowed his eyes at me. “Because I didn’t make some big to-do and get all romantic like when Madden asked Josh?”

“You didn’t *ask* me at all,” I answered, throwing my hands up. Which, again, was stupid, and I almost toppled right back over. “You just told me it was happening at the end of the month while your cock was in my ass. The end of the month is two weeks away! And you just set it all up without even talking to me first. Then I find out you told Madden and everyone that it was happening, and you didn’t even ask me.”

I was pretty sure I was rambling and repeating myself, but I was drunk, after all. I’d lost count on how many shots I’d had after ten, and donuts only absorb so much booze.

“And you didn’t even say that you loved him,” Josh shouted as he moved around everyone to stand by Madden. “You just love his tight ass.”

“Yeah,” I said with a nod as I took a step forward. “You didn’t say you wanted us to get married so you could have me as yours or we could be together forever.” I paused as my eyes started to fill with tears and the anger slipped away. “You just said we wouldn’t have to hide our fucking anymore, and now we could fuck like rabbits all night. Oh, and sneak away like Madden and Josh do during the day. So forgive me for not swooning at your heartfelt proposal!”

“Finn, you didn’t let me finish.” He sighed and shook his head.

“If that was your opening, why would he have stuck around to hear more?” Madden asked, his arms crossed over his chest as he stared at his friend with such hate I felt guilty. This was why I didn’t want to tell anyone what was going on and just leave.

“You’re to stay away from Finn,” Ty said as Merc and Mac moved to block Raven from me as Mal and Val helped me towards the door.

“I don’t want to go back there,” I whimpered pathetically and pulled away to go by Kevin.

“You can stay with us,” Kevin said as a few of the other strippers nodded. “You’re a sweetie, and we could always use some more security here that doesn’t treat us like or call us sluts.” I didn’t miss the way he narrowed his eyes at Raven when he said it. One of the other guys flipped him off, which almost made me laugh. Almost.

“Fine, but we’re staying with you, Finn,” Iago announced as he plopped down on the chair next to me. “You’re our team leader.”

“Nice, now you’ve lost a whole team that James and Dante were drooling over,” Madden growled at Raven. “I suggest you beg them to stay and promise to leave Finn alone.”

“Fuck all of you,” he yelled as he glanced around the room, his chest heaving. Raven focused on me then, his face softening as he stepped forward. “Baby, come home with me. Please just talk with me, okay? I’m sorry I handled this like an ass, but I do care for you, Finn. I wouldn’t want to marry you just because we’re amazing in bed together. I’d think you knew me well enough to at least know that.”

“How sad is it that this is what it takes for you admit you care about me,” I whispered after a few minutes of silence. I glanced around at my friends and made a decision. This was the best thing for all of us, the opportunity of a lifetime and the chance to be happy. “We go back, but you all promise to keep him away from me.” I turned to Madden then. “I want James to know why I won’t work with him.”

“Good, he’ll fire Raven’s ass, then,” Josh said as he pumped a fist in the air before almost falling over. “If it was between your team and Raven, it would be you guys, no contest. The Patriarch called and asked me what I thought about you guys—”

Madden slapped his hand over Josh’s mouth then, and I realized we needed this conversation to happen anywhere but here. We weren’t about to give away the order’s secrets because of one couple breaking up. I nodded to Mac and Steph, knowing they’d take care of everything and get us gone. It was time, and I was too drunk to do anything but stumble around. Raven just stood there in shock as everyone moved around and ignored him. Good.

Chapter 6

“If you ever need anything, even just someone to talk to, you call me, okay?” Kevin said as he wrote his number down on a napkin for me. “I won’t deny that you and your friends are the hottest guys we’ve ever had in here, but I know your heart belongs to that other man. And we’ve all been there, so we understand. Hell, that’s how I ended up here.”

“Because of a broken heart?” I asked, tilting my head to the side in confusion as he stuffed the napkin in my pocket.

“Because of falling in love with the wrong person,” he answered with a knowing smile. I saw a slight flicker of fear in his expression before it left as quickly as it came. There was more to the story than what he was telling me. I handed him my phone.

“Call your phone from mine so you have my number,” I said before kissing his cheek again. “And if you or any of the guys need anything, we’ll come storm the fortress to help. I promise.”

“Why can’t you be single and like twink strippers?” Kevin sighed as Ty cleared his throat and shifted awkwardly. Oh, so that’s how it was! Kevin missed it, but I gave my friend a nod that I understood. Ty sighed in relief and smiled.

“Any of my friends you noticed besides the blubbery mess in front of you?” I asked slyly as he handed back my phone.

“Your friends are all hot,” he giggled and hugged me. I had to bend over to return the embrace, since he was about as short as Josh. Unfortunately, I wasn’t very coordinated then, and my hands slipped from his back to his ass. “I so wish that you were making a pass at me.”

“Sorry, cutie, just stumbling,” I said gently as I stood back up. Something felt weird on my hand where I’d touched him, and I glanced down at it. “Makeup?”

“Yeah, I have to use cover-up on my ass before I get on stage, since I’ve got a birthmark there.” Kevin winked at me and reached for another napkin. He wiped it over his right butt cheek until I could see the mark. I gasped in shock and almost fell over, but Merc grabbed me in time.

“Fuck yeah! We get to keep him now, right?” Ty shouted as he came over and swung Kevin up into his arms. “Finn was asking if you liked anyone because of me. I think you’re the prettiest man I’ve ever seen, and I’ll be your hero to rescue you anytime you want. And I know I’m big, but I’m nice, I promise. I’m never mean to anyone. Well, except when I had to be for the military and—”

“I’ve never heard you talk so much,” I interrupted Ty with wide eyes.

“What do you *mean* someone here has the birthmark?” Raven shouted in the back ground. We turned just in time to see him focus on Kevin in Ty’s arms. “Un-fucking-believable.”

“Why do I think I’m going to have to talk to him?” Kevin asked as he started to squirm in Ty’s arms. “And yes, you’re just as hot as Finn. And I’m all yours if you keep Finn’s very angry-looking man away from me.”

“It’s complicated, but he won’t hurt you, cutie,” I said gently as I reached up and took his hand as I tried to get back on my feet. “Are you still working, or can you take the rest of the day off? We have the same birthmark as you do, and we can explain it to you.”

“O-Okay,” Kevin whispered and nodded. Then he pulled me and Ty closer. “Can I just quit? I mean, you guys all work for the same place, right? Does that mean I can come work with you guys now? Does my birthmark mean I know the secret handshake or something? I hate working here.”

“Kevin quits,” Ty said loudly towards the manager as he carried his prize towards the back room. “We’re going to pack your stuff, and then you never have to come back here.”

“My hero,” Kevin purred as they walked towards a curtain. Merc, Val, Mal, and I exchanged a look before shrugging. Well, at least Ty seemed enthralled with Kevin, and we knew he was a good guy. I mean, he’d been more than nice to me. I just kinda felt bad that Ty had liked him and I’d been too drunk to notice.

“Damn,” Josh swore from Madden’s arms. “There goes my status as the sexiest member in Miami. I mean Kevin’s a *stripper* for the love of the gods. All the kinks, toys, and handcuffs in the world can’t top that.”

“I think it might just be a tie, baby,” Madden chuckled and turned towards the door. “Or if you’re really worried, I’m sure Kevin will show you a few moves that you can use on me. Me only.”

“Whatever you say, my husband,” Josh purred and licked Madden’s neck. “Take me home and tie me down. I’m feeling the need to play with lots of toys. That is, if it’s okay with you?”

“We’re leaving,” Madden said loudly and practically raced to the door with Josh giggling in his arms. Mal and Val helped me stumble after them as Iago and Merc kept Raven away from me. I waved at the manager like we were old friends for whatever reason as Mac and Steph settled the tab.

They’d just gotten my drunk ass into one of the SUVs when everyone else came outside to join us... including our new addition, Kevin. Once we were all loaded in, we headed back to the compound. While Kevin was practically bouncing in his seat with excitement, I had a feeling of dread that grew the closer we got. I was staying for my team, but right then, the compound, anything to do with the order, and even Miami was the last place I wanted to be.

* * * *

The next day we were to finish our testing, since my drama with Raven threw the whole schedule off. Luckily, I'd passed out while still drunk and ended up sleeping right through until the morning, so I didn't wake up with a hangover and caught up on some much needed sleep.

Raven kept his distance at breakfast, though he never took his eyes off of me. As much as I wanted to eat everything in the kitchen since I was starving and had only had booze and donuts the day before, today's test was martial arts and hand-to-hand combat. So I needed to not be weighed down with too much food.

Once we were done eating, we headed to one of the larger training rooms that was used for sparring and had a boxing ring. Darby, the instructor for those areas, was already there and finishing up stretching as we entered.

"Sorry we had to, um, reschedule," I said sheepishly as we went over to him.

"No worries." He chuckled as he shook everyone's hands and got names. "Just sorry I missed the field trip. I heard it was a hell of a party."

Those of us with any belts in martial arts retested for them. After that he set us up in sparring partners, and we showed that we could actually do the moves when needed instead of just going through the testing routines. That took a while longer, but overall my team did very well, and I was glad they'd kept up on their training while I'd been gone.

Just as we were getting ready to start boxing, the Eldest came in to watch. It made me nervous to have him there with everything going on, and I wondered how much, if anything, he knew about Raven and I. But he leaned against one of the walls and simply observed, so after a while I forgot he was there.

I'd just finished my match with Mac and was going for my water bottle when he finally approached me.

“Do you want to talk about what’s going on with you and Raven?” James asked quietly, so no one else heard us.

“Only if I have to,” I answered and took a long drink. I wasn’t just thirsty after my workout now. This conversation made me so nervous my already-dry throat was now like the desert.

“No, not at all,” he replied, shaking his head. “I just wanted you to know that my door is open if you ever want to talk. Raven wouldn’t tell me what’s going on, but he did say that if it comes to it, he’s willing to be transferred. He thought it was more important for you to feel comfortable in your new home and keep your team here where he thinks you can do the most good.”

“H-He s-said that?” I sputtered out as I wiped my chest with a hand towel. “Why?”

“He loves you, Finn,” James answered with a soft smile. He held up a hand when I went to protest. “I know Raven doesn’t believe in love or soul mates, but he does love you. He just can’t admit it to himself. And you’re incredibly smart, Finn. Why would an intelligent and obviously caring man like Raven not believe in love?”

“Because he’s been badly hurt before,” I whispered and swallowed loudly.

“I’m not excusing his behavior or whatever he’s done to you,” James replied with a nod. “But before you completely write him off, you might want to give him the chance to explain. If nothing else, for your own peace of mind. I’d hate to see his hang-ups ruin something good for you guys or further relationships for you, if that’s what you decide.”

“I’ll think about it. Thank you, Eldest,” I said after a moment’s thought.

“We’ve got four who have no martial arts training or belts,” Darby informed James as he jogged over to us. “But all of them are more than past our standards in hand-to-hand combat. Hell, some of them are so good in a fight the boxing rounds are all draws. I’d recommend they all be passed out of this part of training but suggest

that those who don't have any belts work with me in between assignments on getting them. It never hurts to have more training."

"Agreed," James and I said at the same time. Which of course made Darby chuckle before he jogged back over to the group. Then James turned back to me to continue. "I'd like to meet with all of you in the morning to go over all of your testing outcomes and devise a schedule to fill in the gaps of your training. Overall, I only see your team needing a short time before we send you out for a few more months with some of our mavens for hands-on experience."

"However you want us to get caught up, just let me know, and I'll see it done."

"Of that, I have no doubt, Finn." He gave me a nod before heading back out of the room. I stared after him a few minutes, lost in my own thoughts.

James was a really good guy. I'd liked him instantly when I'd gotten to Miami. I hadn't heard a single person say anything but great things about him. Surely that was someone whose advice you should listen to, right?

Yes, it was, I decided after several minutes. But how? How did I get Raven alone and ready to talk without some prepared answer. I'd seen him under pressure and knew he could be an incredibly smooth talker. It wasn't that I thought he'd lie to me, but I wasn't all about him being forthcoming with everything either.

I thought about it as we headed to dinner and ate. I thought about it some more after dinner and headed to my room. Then I kept thinking about it as I showered and got dressed. It hit me then. I quickly texted him and said to meet me on the back terrace. I knew we could get some privacy there without risking him being able to distract me if we were alone in a room with a bed.

As I made my way out there, I wondered if he'd even come. Would he be pissed at me after what he walked in on in the strip club yesterday? Or the way my friends and his gave him the cold shoulder?

I got my answer a few minutes later while I waited outside for him when he came racing out the back door.

“Oh thank the gods,” he gasped as he ran to me and opened his arms to hug me. “I thought you’d never speak to me again.”

“This isn’t a makeup, Raven,” I said quietly as I held up a hand to hold him off. He skidded to a stop a few feet away from me and nodded.

“T—Then what is it?”

I searched his face for a few moments before answering. He seemed upset and almost lost. Could my ending our relationship have gotten to him so badly?

“The Eldest suggested that I give you a chance to explain why you don’t believe in love before completely writing you off in my life.”

Raven’s face drained of all color. I could even see it with the lack of light as the sun set. It almost made me worry he was going to pass out, how fast he went pale. “I didn’t tell him what was going on, just that I was willing to be transferred if that’s what you needed.”

“I know. He told me,” I whispered, starting to get choked up with his gesture. “You’ve got one chance here, Raven. One chance for me to even consider forgiving you. Why don’t you believe in love? What happened to you?”

He stared at me for a moment before clearing his throat. Then he opened his mouth before closing it right back up. Raven stood there for a few minutes doing a great impression of a fish. I stood there for at least ten minutes giving him the chance to explain.

“Never mind, this was a stupid idea,” I said finally and turned to leave. I couldn’t believe he’d wanted me to talk with him and now that I was giving him a shot to explain he had nothing to say. I’d just reached out to open the back door when he called out after me.

“My twin brother and my fiancée tried to kill me.”

Well fuck! That wasn’t one I’d been prepared for. Of all the possible scenarios I’d ever thought in my head, none of them came even close to that one.

“Say that one again?” I asked as I turned around slowly, like we were in a horror film. I took several steps back toward him as I eyed him over to see if he was showing any signs of lying to me. He wasn’t.

“I grew up in a different time than you did, Finn,” he said with a sigh and sat down on the short stone wall that lined the terrace. “People didn’t just announce they were gay back then. When I turned eighteen, I was a man, a real adult, unlike today. I knew I desired men, but that wasn’t an option. So on my eighteenth birthday, my parents announced they’d chosen a wife for me. I didn’t want *any* woman, so I didn’t care which one they picked.”

“Did they know you were gay?”

“I think they knew that I was different, and that’s why they picked one for me while my older brother and my twin were allowed to choose their own.” He nodded as he said it, looking almost lost as he thought back to it. “Back then, there were also long engagements, where you got a chance to know your betrothed while you set up a life where you could take care of a wife and a family.”

“So what happened?”

“I’d just finished my apprenticeship of a blacksmith,” he answered as I sat down next to him. Part of me was crying out to hold him while he confessed something that was so obviously painful to him, but I just couldn’t yet. “I came home to tell my twin and my parents that I was done, and had set up a shop of my own two towns over where they didn’t have one. I found my twin and my fiancée fucking in my boyhood room I shared with my brother.”

“Why did they try to kill you?” I asked when he went quiet and stared off into space. He shook his head a moment as if coming back to the present.

“My twin thought I would call him out on a duel for the woman I love,” he answered with a snicker. “I told him I didn’t care and I wished them the best, but it hurt that they did it this way. Why not just

tell me? I didn't love her, and I loved him. He wasn't just my blood. He was my twin, for the love of the gods."

"Were engagements able to be broken back then?" I racked my brain trying to remember anything I knew about the late 1700s from history class.

"No, and if it got out that she'd been tarnished, all of us would have been ruined. I was never going to tell, though. I just knew I'd never have anything to do with him again. Yeah, I was pissed at her, too, because she'd gone on and on about how she'd loved me. But obviously, neither of them did. Next thing I know, she's screaming that I can't live to tell of their shame. I froze for a moment, completely shocked that it went from their infidelity to me being killed."

"Was that your brush with death?" I asked, some of the puzzle pieces falling into place.

"Yeah," he whispered as he looked up at me with tears in his eyes. "My brother attacked me, and we didn't know what or who we were then. I'd never heard of the Sons of Thanatus. We thought the birthmark was just a family trait. I dove out of the way and ran to the living room screaming for my parents. I didn't want to fight over this, and I figured if they knew, then we wouldn't end up killing each other.

"But I guess they'd gone to town. Rafe came racing after me with his sword, and I grabbed one just in time. We fought, and then my fiancée threw something at me to distract me from the fight so I'd lose, though her plan backfired. While I'd been just defending myself instead of doing any attacking of my own, when she distracted me, I cut out with my sword to block what she threw and slit my brother's throat."

"Fuck, Raven," I gasped and finally gave into the urge and pulled him into my arms.

"I didn't mean to do it, Finn," he whispered as he started to shake. "I know I should have been angry enough to want to kill both of them

at their treachery, but I wasn't. I was just hurt. I never would have outed them or brought what they'd done to light. I just wanted to leave and start over after walking in on them. Wash my hands of all of them and my fucked-up family. If that's what love was, then I didn't want any part of it.

"I mean, not so much with my fiancée, since obviously she'd never loved me, but my own twin? Family is supposed to love you and have your back, no matter what. But after that, I realized there was no such thing as love."

"What happened after he died?" I asked, dreading to hear if it got worse.

"I was ostracized from my family, my town, everything," he answered and leaned his head on my shoulder. "I was a leper, basically. Then I met James, and he took me in even before he knew that I had the birthmark. I've been with the order ever since, and kept to myself. James might really be the only true friend I have. Sure, I'm friends with Madden, and maybe now even Josh, but we're not very close friends. They don't even know how old I am."

"It was better to keep people away than risk getting hurt again," I said quietly, speaking what he basically was saying in his roundabout way.

"Yeah," Raven sighed, and took my hand in his. "Until you, Finn. Look, I know I'm an asshole for how I went about all of this, treated you, and what I said. I don't have any excuse for that, but the *reason* is that after two hundred and forty years of cutting my emotions off, I finally felt something and didn't know what to do about it. I'm not smooth like Madden or Josh. I didn't know how to say that I liked you, or tell you that you were it for me."

"Why not just talk to me instead of always acting like us being together meant nothing to you?"

"Is that how you really felt?" he asked as he sat up and stared at me with wide eyes. I nodded when I couldn't speak around the lump in my throat. "I thought I showed you more than that. I'm always

staring at you, Finn. I practically attack you when you walk into my room. The sex between us is like Fourth of July. Doesn't that tell you anything?"

"Yeah, that you lust after me," I answered with a shrug. "That you're addicted to fucking me. That doesn't say that you care about me."

"I'm so sorry," Raven whispered as he reached out and cupped my cheek. "Gods I'm so totally deluded. I thought you knew how I was feeling and wanted us to be together. I've been more affectionate with you than anyone in my entire life."

"Then why were you so worried about appearing as a *bottom boy* to the order," I said, my anger renewing. Yes, I listened to what he said, and most of it made sense. But that didn't excuse the other shit he'd pulled. "And if you cared, why would you be okay with *me* looking like a bottom boy in front of everyone. You're so fucking wrapped up in the fact you have a higher fucking rank than me here, that everything else doesn't matter!"

"I was trying to not show how it would crush me if you wouldn't go through with the binding ceremony," he replied, as he moved towards me when I jumped up and away from him. "I knew I should have asked, but I was scared that you'd say no. I figured if I just said I'd set it up, that maybe you'd just go along with it."

"So you were going to trap me into eternity with you?" I shouted as my eyes went wide.

"Yes—no, shit, that's not what I meant," he answered and then shouted in frustration as he wiped his hands over his face. "No, I didn't want to trap you. I thought you'd want to be with me! You were pushing me for more intimacy, and I liked it. I thought it was the next step, but I was just so fucking scared you wouldn't go that far. I figured if I didn't make it seem like such a big deal that maybe you'd say yes."

"You're a moron," I scoffed at his explanation.

“Yeah, I know that,” he grumbled and ran his hands through his hair. “This all sounded *way* better in my head a few days ago when I called the Patriarch than it does now talking to you about it.” He looked up at me then.

“I didn’t mean what I said about the whole bottoming thing. I’ll bottom. I’ll tell everyone I’m the bottom forever. I got nervous and just kinda blubbered shit out. I never, ever looked down on you for giving me such pleasure, and your body. If nothing else, I need you to understand that and believe me.”

“Do you believe that nothing happened with Kevin?” I asked instead.

“Yes, I knew that, though it hurt walking in to see another man in your lap like that. An almost naked, gorgeous man, who was staring at you like he wanted to lick every inch of you. But I know you’re not the type of man to bed hop. You wouldn’t even consider revenge sex or something when I was such an ass.”

“Well, that’s a start,” I said with a nod as I started to pace. “I need time to think about all of this, Raven. You hurt me.”

“I know, and I’m sorry about that, Finn,” he whispered as the first tear ran down his cheek. Well, obviously he had a heart. “Hurting you was the last thing I ever wanted. What can I do to fix this? How can I get you back?”

“I don’t know,” I answered after a moment as I stopped moving and stared at him. “I really don’t. But for now I need you to give me some space to process all of this. And you might want to take some lessons on how to show you care about someone. Because I might believe you care about me, but I don’t think you remotely love me, and I won’t tie myself to someone who doesn’t or can’t love me. Not that you said that you do love anything, other than my ass.”

“I do, though,” he said as he stared at his shoes. “But you’re right. I need to learn how to open up and treat you like you deserve. And I’ll wait as long as you need, Finn. You’re worth the wait to me.”

“That’s the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me, Raven.” I turned and left before he could reply. I’d had my fill for the night and knew I couldn’t handle anything else. He’d agreed to give me time to think and said I was worth waiting for. That was a step in the right direction... I just didn’t know if it was enough.

Chapter 7

I didn't sleep a wink that night, tossing and turning as my mind processed everything that Raven had told me. When the alarm went off, I realized the time to even try for sleep was over. I got up and went through my morning routine, looking forward to some coffee to wake me up.

After I was dressed and ready to go, I grabbed my keys, opened the door, and froze. Outside my door were a dozen long-stem red roses with a note. I glanced left, then right down the hallway. Nothing. Where the hell did these come from?

Squatting down, I picked them up and smelled them. I'd never gotten flowers before. Kinda made me blush. Okay, so it really made me blush, but I wasn't sure guys were allowed to blush when they got flowers. Then I read the note:

*Roses are red,
Violets are blue...
I miss you in my arms at night,
Even though you snore, too.*

(It's really hard to try and rhyme! I know that was horrible, and that took me four hours to come up with. In case I didn't get my point across, I wanted you to know that it's not just about sex with us. I missed waking up to you, even with your faults. And yes, you do snore. But it's a nice snore, almost cute. Not that I'm saying you're cute. It's endearing. It's you, and I miss all of you, even your snoring.)

Love, Raven

I reread the note three times before bursting out laughing harder than I think I ever have in my life. *That* was his romantic gesture? Telling me that he missed me even though I snored? Oh, for the love of the gods, he was clueless. But he seriously got brownie points for trying.

“What is wrong with you?” Val shouted as everyone started coming out of their rooms and into the hallway. I’d fallen to my knees when I started laughing and couldn’t seem to catch my breath.

“Flowers—read card—” I gasped in between bouts of laughing. I just couldn’t seem to get it under control. Instead, I handed him the card that came with the flowers. Val read it, and his mouth dropped open in shock before he wordlessly passed it to his brother.

“You do snore, and it is a cute snore,” Mal managed to say before he joined in my hysterical laughing. The others started passing around the card and laughing with us.

We had to be going at it for at least five minutes before Madden and Josh came down the hall. They had to pass our rooms to get to the dining area. They glanced between all of us idiots practically rolling on the floor laughing like loons. Iago handed Josh the card as Madden read it over his husband’s shoulder.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Josh moaned and rolled his eyes. “This was *not* what I meant when I said he needed to woo you.” That finally got me to stop.

“You told him to write me poetry?” I asked as I rolled to my feet.

“He came to me last night begging me to help him win you back.” Josh snickered. “He said he explained a lot of things and you weren’t completely giving up on him, but he needed to show you how much he really loves you. I told him to woo you. To be romantic. Not write bad poetry, though I guess it’s memorable.”

“Yeah, it’s really sweet actually,” I admitted as I took the card back. “He’s trying at least, and he gets points for creativity!”

“And he even stayed after Josh smacked him a few times, pleading for help,” Madden said with a smile. “He’s determined to get you back and make it up to you.”

“Do you know what else he’s got planned?” I asked Josh, feeling almost giddy at the idea of more surprises. “I’ve never gotten flowers before.”

“Oh my gods, you’re blushing,” Iago gasped with wide eyes.

“So?” Josh and I said at the same time. I winked at Shortie as he went on. “I love it when Madden gets me flowers, and he loves the wild sex he gets as a thank-you.”

“I really do,” Madden purred, and kissed his man. I leaned in my room to lay the flowers and card by the table by the door. I’d have to find a vase or something to keep them in. They were too pretty to not take care of.

Everyone got themselves under control, and we headed to breakfast. I glanced around and almost immediately found Raven. He looked like he was panicking as he stared at me as if trying to figure out my reaction. I couldn’t let him suffer after such a sweet gesture and mouthed, “I love the flowers.” His face lit up in the brightest smile before he darted back into the kitchen.

That was odd. Shouldn’t he take that as a sign to come talk with me? I mean, it wasn’t that he was completely forgiven, but after our talk last night and his immediate gesture that he’d heard me, I’d at least eat breakfast with him.

I shrugged and ordered, talking with my team about the meeting we had with James this morning. Madden and Josh were smiling, not answering any of our questions, so I figured they knew what was going on with the meeting and were happy.

We’d just sat down and started eating when the stereo in the dining hall came on. They had a sound system hooked up so we could have some fun and play some tunes when we had theme nights or whatnot. I’d just never heard it come on during breakfast before.

“Oh no,” Josh groaned as he stared over my shoulder towards the kitchen. Glancing over that way, I saw Raven was standing there looking ready to shit his pants with nerves. Then I saw the microphone in his hand. What the...?

And then he started singing. It took me a moment to shake off the shock, and I recognized Frank Sinatra’s “Witchcraft.” Oh no he wasn’t! But yes, he was. Raven made his way over to me, serenading me to the classic song as he danced in between tables, his eyes never leaving mine. Then he jumped up and slid over one of the tables, knocking over some poor guy’s tray and food.

Part of me wanted to laugh at the song choice given where we were, what we were, and his audience. The other part of me forgave him. Raven kept singing, never missing a word or beat of the song as he stepped up onto a chair. He tried to do the smooth move of tipping the chair over to get back to the floor and almost landed on his face instead. At the last second he turned and plopped onto another chair.

He was making a complete and total ass of himself in front of *everyone* to show how he felt. That was love. And it kind of turned me on. Who knew my man could sing? He hopped back up from the chair, completely ignoring the chaos in his wake.

I smiled like a loon as he belted out the last lines and came to stand in front of me. His chest was heaving as he set down the mic and got down on one knee.

“Finn Murphy, I love you,” he said as his eyes filled with tears. “You’re it for me, and I wanted you to know that I love you with all of my heart and soul. That I’m yours in every sense of the word and—”

“Yes,” I whispered as I sniffled, completely overwhelmed with the emotions he was stirring in me. “I’ll go through the binding ceremony with you, Raven.”

“I-I wasn’t going to a-ask that,” Raven stammered as his eyes went wide. “I wasn’t going to ask for anything. I was trying to woo you. You said you needed time, and I respect that.”

"I know, that's why I'm saying yes," I replied with a smile as I reached out and cupped his cheek. "I love you, too."

"Really?" He gasped, his eyes going even wider.

"Really, truly."

"I still have more planned for my wooing," he said and glanced at Josh. "Do I still do it?"

"Yes, you idiot." Josh snickered. "Madden still woos me, and I still seduce him. We're still romantic, even though we're married and bound. It doesn't stop if you want to keep your relationship alive and exciting."

"I can do that." Raven turned back to me with a glowing smile and then moved to straddle my lap. "I love you, I love making love to you, I love when you fuck me with that massive cock, and I don't care who knows it. I'll bottom for you any day and twice on Sundays, Finn. You could do it right here in front of everyone, and I'd shout for more and never, ever be embarrassed that I take it up the ass when it's you."

"We so need to work on your sweet-talking." I chuckled before pulling his head down to mine. We didn't start the kiss soft. It was full of fire and need as we bit, licked, and explored every inch of each other's mouths. "You have an amazing voice, Raven. It got me so fucking hot that you were singing to me."

"Really?"

"Yeah, really," I purred and moved his hips so my erection was poking against his ass. "Would you really let me fuck you right now in front of everyone to show you belong to me?"

"Yes," he whispered and then swallowed loudly as he started to unbutton his shirt. "I love you, and I'll do whatever it takes to show you that. I'm just sorry I wasn't doing it before and almost lost you."

"Do you want me to take you right now, right here?" I asked, seeing the sweat form on his brow. He was freaking out and nervous.

"I-If that's what y-you want," Raven stuttered and nodded as he pulled his dress shirt off. "I'll do whatever you want, always, Finn."

“How about we just go to your room and you can show me in private how much you love me?” I wasn’t going to push him. Hell, I didn’t even know if I’d be okay fucking him in the dining hall. I just wanted to know he’d go against his comfort level to make me happy.

“Thank you,” he whispered as he stopped undressing and leaned his forehead against mine. “I’ve never had sex in public before, and I was ready to shit a brick at the idea. But I’m still bottoming for the binding ceremony. I want everyone to witness the bliss you bring me when we make love.”

“Man, you crack the armor and the flood gates open with him,” Josh said with a snicker.

“What would you have done if you were about to lose Madden?” Raven asked as he turned enough to look at our friend.

“Anything and everything,” Josh answered with a wink. “And I won’t even beat you up anymore. I officially think you deserve Finn now.”

“Thanks, Shortie.” I snickered.

“I saw what you did when you thought you were going to lose each other. Shit, I helped Madden plan it.” Raven shook his head and wrapped his arms around my neck. “I can learn to open up and be the mushiest man on the planet if it means keeping Finn with me. Though I really hope it doesn’t come to that.”

“Nope, not into the really mushy.” I chuckled and kissed his neck. “But we’ve got to make this quick. I’ve got a meeting with the Eldest in twenty minutes.”

“We can push it back an hour,” James called over from where he was ordering food. Then he looked over his shoulder at us with a wide smile. “Or should we make it two hours?”

“One’s good,” I answered and jumped out of my chair with Raven wrapped around me. I glanced over to Steph. “Get me a couple of bagels or whatever so I can eat breakfast when we’re done. Meet at my room in an hour and don’t knock.”

“You got it.” He laughed. I raced back to my room as fast as I could, which wasn’t really that fast since Raven was almost as big as I was and carrying him was awkward.

“I can walk,” Raven said quietly as I almost toppled over again.

“I just think you’re too big for the monkey ride,” I grunted. I moved him around to swing up in my arms. “There we go.”

“Yeah, I’m less bulky this way.” He bit his lip to keep from laughing. I leaned over and licked his tempting mouth. Thankfully, we finally arrived at my room. I set him down so I could get my keys and unlock the door. When I got it open, I almost swallowed my tongue in shock. Raven was already down to his boxer briefs in the hallway as he hopped around to get his socks off.

“Get in here, you goof,” I said as I pushed the door open wider and picked up his discarded clothes. He raced past me after he got his socks off and went straight for my night stand. Raven stripped off his boxer briefs and slicked up his fingers as I got undressed as fast as humanly possible.

“I’m starting to believe the legend,” he moaned as he lay back on the bed and pushed two fingers roughly into his ass.

“What legend?” I asked as I dropped my boxers. I knelt down on my knee in between his legs and spread them wider in the air, captivated by the show he was giving me.

“That every Son of Thanatus will find their true soul mate who will be a Son or Daughter of Thanatus,” he answered and then gasped as he slid in a third finger. “Because you’re my soul mate, Finn. I’m sorry I ever made you believe that I felt any differently.”

“It doesn’t matter anymore, Raven,” I said gently as I ran my hands over the inside of his thighs. “I know now.”

“I swear on my soul as a Son of Thanatus that you will always know the depth of my love for you, or I will cut off my own balls and gift wrap them for you, Finn Murphy, as proof that you own them. My solemn oath binds me to the gods and may they carry out my request if I do not.” I tried to get his words to sink through my lust-

filled mind as I watched him fuck himself with his fingers. “I mean every word of it.”

“Fuck, Raven!” I exclaimed as my eyes went wide. “I like your nuts where they are, okay? Don’t you ever remove them and give them to me. That’s just fucking gross. And I don’t even know what that oath means.”

“It means if I ever break my promise that I’d be kicked out of the order and the gods can take away my immortality. It means that you now own me and every day of my life will be spent proving that I’m worthy of you and love you.”

“The song worked just as well as the offer to neuter yourself.” I chuckled and leaned over him. I smiled as he cried out because my hips pushed his fingers deeper into him. “I love you, too, and I demand you keep your gorgeous body intact. If I ever doubt your love for me again, I will just fuck you into submission and make you scream it in front of everyone as I plow my cock into you during breakfast.”

“Okay,” he panted and pulled his fingers free and used the extra slick on my cock. “I’m ready. Please, Finn.”

“What if I want to tease you?” I whispered in his ear as I rubbed my cock over his hole, but making sure it didn’t go in. “Maybe you should beg like you said you would. How badly do you want me, Raven?”

“More than anything,” he said firmly as he took my face in his hands. “I want you and need you more than anything in life. I’ll beg, plead, or do anything. I love you.”

“Right answer,” I purred and slammed into his tight ass. We both groaned at the feeling, his muscles quivering at my sudden invasion. “Is this what we’ll do at the binding ceremony, Raven? Will you give yourself to me fully like this?”

The binding ceremony was something soul mates did in the order to not only bind their souls but their magic and gifts to each other. It

was the ritual to intertwine our life lines that the Fates gave us together for eternity.

“Yes, yes of course,” he gasped as I started pounding into him, slowly at first but hard enough that he moved up the bed. “I submit to you now until eternity. Everything I am is yours.”

“You’re getting better at the sweet-talk,” I moaned against his mouth before claiming his plump, well-kissed lips. It spurred on our need because he started thrusting his hips up as hard as I did.

“Once isn’t going to be enough,” he cried out minutes later as he climaxed. We wrapped around each other as I slammed as deep as I could go into him and came.

“No, never enough with you, Raven,” I whispered as the tears started to burn in my eyes after I caught my breath. Next thing I knew, the floodgates opened. Through all of our ups and downs, I’d not cried even when my heart was shattering at the loss of him. Now that I knew we’d be together forever, it was as if all my heartache was pouring out of me as I healed and cried tears of relief.

“Baby, please don’t cry,” he said gently in my ear. But then I felt his own tears on my cheek. I rolled us over so that I didn’t hurt him with my larger size and weight, careful to keep inside of him, to keep our connection. “I love you, Finn. I love you so fucking much. You’re everything to me, baby.”

He started slowly moving his hips, taking me to new heights since neither of us had gone soft after our first orgasm. I let him take the comfort he needed from me as he gave it to me as well. He lifted his head so we could stare into each other’s eyes. I reached up and placed my hands on his cheeks as he did the same to me.

“I love you, Finn,” he whispered over and over again, knowing how much I needed to hear it to heal my heart. I planted my feet on the bed and gently thrust up in time with his hips, giving him all of me.

“Raven!” I called out to the heavens a few minutes later when my orgasm sideswiped me with the strength of a freight train. I was so

lost in his eyes I completely missed the warning signs. As I rode it out, I reached up to stroke him, but before I could he moaned loudly and shot pearly ropes of seed all over me. I felt a thrill go through me that my bliss brought on his.

When we were spent, Raven collapsed on top of me. We didn't say anything for a while since words couldn't convey what I knew we were both feeling.

"I like being wooed." I chuckled after we laid there for a while. Raven leaned up, groaning as slid off of me from the cum drying between us. We gazed at each other for a moment before bursting out laughing.

"That was the worst poem ever," he admitted, and it set us off all over again. We were still chuckling as we got off the bed and headed to the shower.

"But I did love it," I whispered in his ear as I turned on the shower so it could warm up. I moved my body against his back, loving the feeling of him. This was heaven to me. Making love to him and then laughing together as we did everyday things like showering. It felt so right, so comfortable to be here with him. "And we need to work on your moves, but you have an amazing voice."

"Yeah?" He gasped as I walked us under the shower, and he turned in my arms.

"Oh yeah," I purred and grabbed the soap. I lathered up my hands and then started slowly washing him, taking my time with the man that was now mine. "I look forward to a repeat performance."

"Anything for you, Finn." He said it so solemnly, with so much emotion in his eyes, I wondered how I'd missed the depths of his feelings. His eyes said so much with just a look. But then again, his words had told me a lot, too. How was I to know that when they didn't match his eyes I should believe them instead? Well, at least I knew that now.

We quickly dried off when we were done and got redressed. Raven slid his hand in mine after I locked up my room and headed

towards the conference room we were meeting the Eldest in. I stared at our intertwined hands a moment in shock. He'd not only made the sign of affection all on his own, but we weren't in our room. This new, open side to Raven and his feelings for me was going to take some getting used to.

But that didn't mean I wasn't still smiling like a dope as we walked along the hallway hand in hand.

"There's our little snorer," Iago teased as we joined them. I was glad they'd met us here instead of outside my room. If I'd been thinking with my brain instead of my other head, I would have told them to gather here.

"Dude, you grind your teeth so bad that I'm surprised you have any left," Mal said with a snicker and cuffed him upside the head.

"Anyone care to fill me in?" James asked with a raised eyebrow. Everyone glanced between Raven and I before breaking out into peals of laughter again. It took us a bit, but we settled down and explained about the roses and poem. "Well, that's—um, interesting." James was trying so hard not to laugh or look directly at us in fear we would make him laugh it was almost funny.

When we got back down to business, I realized most of the trainers, Madden, and Josh were all there with us. Stupid big conference rooms. It felt way too formal sitting there for this to be good news. Raven must have felt my apprehension because he reached for my hand under the table.

"We need to make one change to the schedule we outlined now that you two have reconciled, and I'm assuming will be having a binding ceremony soon?"

"Yes, Finn agreed," Raven answered with a smile so bright that I wanted to swoon like a sappy teenager.

"Then we need to get his gifts tested before that can happen," James said as he slid over a file folder across the massive table. "We got a call from the Miami PD about a possible missing person-body

dump in the Everglades. So you can take him out on assignment with you and see what he can do.”

I glanced between the two of them, trying to school my features. Normally I was really good at that, especially after years in the Marines, but I must have failed this time. Or I was caught so off guard, I didn’t hide my revulsion in time.

“You knew this was what we did, Finn,” James said softly, and shot a look to Raven.

“Yes, of course,” I replied with a fake smile.

“That’s not why he’s upset, Eldest,” Josh said, as he gave me a very knowing look. Then we both glanced around the room to my team and I saw they felt the way I did, given their expressions. “You get used to the idea that everyone has different powers. And referring to them in such a flippant manner doesn’t make you any less significant or like a truck to be test driven.”

He nailed it. That’s exactly how I’d felt. As if James was telling Raven to take out his new toy and kick the tires when he took me for a spin.

“Oh gods no,” James gasped. “I never meant it like that. I just meant that we need to make sure your powers are compatible with Raven’s. Every trainee goes out on local assignments when we get them since the Miami PD is familiar with us, and there’s no distrust or prejudice with them. We call them test runs so we can gauge someone’s gifts or power and we don’t run into issues later.”

“I don’t understand,” Steph said slowly as if mulling over what he wanted to say. “Don’t we all have the same gifts that grow in power the older we get?”

“No, not all of us,” James replied, and I caught the look he gave Davin. “There are varying levels, and we found it best to work with new people early on so we know how to help them, train them so there aren’t issues later.”

“What the Eldest is saying very nicely and without bringing me into it is that I almost died and got the maven I went out with on

assignment killed because of my powers.” Davin blushed furiously and then cleared his throat before continuing. “I don’t just hear souls or can find them. Or even see their last moments like Josh can. I can talk to them—”

“Is that rare?” I asked, a sinking feeling growing in the pit of my stomach. I thought everyone could talk to the souls. Fuck! Would they pull me from field work when they found that out?

“Yes and no, but we have several here who can,” James said gently before gesturing Davin continue.

“Souls who have their bodies laid to rest can go on to the afterlife or some decide not to and miss that chance.” Davin fidgeted with his collar and looked anywhere but at Steph and Mal. Well, wasn’t that interesting? “And they become spirits or ghosts if you will. One of my gifts is the ability to call them. I’m like a homing beacon to them and well—um, they don’t like that. So that’s why I can’t leave the compound or the wards here that protect me. When I do, they come after me.”

“Fuck,” someone cursed under their breath.

“Yeah, that about sums it up.” Davin chuckled nervously. “And like souls who’ve been attached to their bodies for too long, sometimes these spirits aren’t in the best mental state. Some get really strong and can become corporeal like in the movies. But before I knew I could call them or bend them to do something if I wanted, they found me and tried to kill me since they assumed I would like make them my ghost army or some shit.”

“And now you know what we mean about having people go on a test run with their gifts,” James said as Davin paused, pulling the attention off the younger guy. Davin looked grateful and seemed as if he was nervous enough to start a long ramble. James was a good guy. He must have understood that and jumped in to help.

But I still had a question... “What do you mean, combine powers?”

“When you go through the binding ceremony you intertwine your soul with another’s,” James answered with a smile, nodding towards Raven. “You’ll combine your lifelines that Fate has given each of us, and share your gifts with your soul mate.”

“Don’t worry, it doesn’t hurt.” Madden chuckled. “Josh has actually got stronger gifts than I do. When we got bound, I was able to have those gifts if I needed them, but it also increased his power level.”

“Think of it like an electrical current,” Josh said gently when we all looked at them confused. “The stronger the current, the more you can power up with it, right? Well, combine two and there’s lots more you can do with the combined gifts.”

“There we go.” Val snickered as the light bulbs went off over all of our heads. I’d been here almost two months now, and that was the best, simplest explanation I’d heard about anything in the order so far. Go Shortie. Seems he knew how just lay the cards out there for the jarheads to understand.

I wasn’t sure if that should worry me or just make me smile how overall talented my friend was. I’d go with the latter just to make myself feel better. Didn’t want to have too much in common with Josh, after all. Kinky bastard.

Chapter 8

We finished our meeting and plotted out the training we needed. I laughed that my team cringed when we were told that we had a week of working with Lars. While I saw several of them checking him out, it was what he was in charge of. Lars Darrell handed teaching all the trainees about fashion, business etiquette, and manners. He was the compound's Emily Post.

Of course, we all understood *why* that was needed given the clients we would meet with the appearance and vibe we had to give off. But that did not mean eight hardcore, special ops Marines liked the idea of wearing a suit and learning how to seem like a white-collared businessman. The idea really didn't go over well.

"Did they think they'd go everywhere in fatigues with their rifles?" Raven asked with a snicker as we snuck out of the chaos in the conference room so we could go meet with the Miami PD.

"Says the guy who packed a closet worth of clothes to go to the desert," I drawled.

"Point taken." He snickered and headed to his room.

We split up to quickly change, while Raven gathered up whatever we needed. Probably a briefcase for show, if nothing else. There was a package at my door when I got there. I picked it up, curious at how heavy it was, and opened my door.

I pulled on a nicer shirt to go with my black cargos and a sports jacket. I'd not gotten fitted for a suit yet, and I figured this would pass. Then I opened my package with a bright smile when I realized what it was. I'd mentioned a while back that I wanted the newest Glock that came out. Guess Raven had been listening.

Shrugging back off my jacket, I strapped on my shoulder harness, loaded the gun, and slid it right in the sleeve. It fit perfectly. I couldn't help but melt a little at the thought that went into the gift. Plus, I really just wanted one.

I grabbed my jacket, locked up, and jogged over to meet him at the front doors. I'd just slid it back on when he came over to me with a smile. Before he could say anything, I fisted his shirt and pulled him to me. I mashed my lips down to his in a passionate, toe-curling kiss.

"Nothing says love like a new gun." I chuckled as I let him go but kissed him again. I realized I was wrinkling his shirt by holding him that way. Instead, I ran my hand up his neck into his hair as I made love to his mouth. We didn't break apart until air became necessary. "You're so getting a blow job or two later."

"Good thing I gave you a large budget for the new armory," he panted, smiling at me before he pulled back. "I'm so glad you liked it."

"You didn't just order this since we split up," I said, realizing how long it takes to order a gun, get it registered, and all the hoops to jump through. Raven shook his head as we walked out the door and headed to the garage.

"I ordered it the day after we first slept together," he replied as his cheeks heated up. "I remembered you saying you wanted it, and after such an earth-shattering night, I wanted to do something that showed how much it meant to me."

"It did?" I gasped, grabbing his arm so he faced me as we got to his vehicle. "I didn't know that."

"Finn, that was the most amazing sex and connection I'd felt in my life," he said softly, as he looked sad. "I—I know I didn't act like it rocked my world and meant so much to me that night. But you scared me. I'd never felt emotional like that during sex. That's why I basically ran from you that night, not because you weren't important or I thought you were a slut."

“Thank you for telling me that,” I whispered against his lips as I crowded him against the SUV. “You have no idea how much better knowing that makes me feel about us. Is that why you didn’t even kiss me?”

“I meant what I said about the kissing,” he answered, leaning in to lick the seam of my mouth. “I’d never been a fan, never saw the point of it. But you showed me it wasn’t kissing—it was *who* I was kissing. I could spend days simply kissing you and be happier than I ever have in my life.”

“You’re getting *really* good at the sweet-talk,” I said with a wink as I groped his cock before jogging around to the passenger’s seat. He shook his head and laughed as we climbed in and set off.

I glanced over the case file, which wasn’t much, as he drove. He filled me in that the chief of police knew James and called the order a lot for help. Raven went on to explain to me how entrance and the security cameras at the Everglades worked. They were put in a few years ago, since it was an infamous place for body dumps since the wildlife took care of the remains. Gross.

The cameras were mounted at the main entrances of the park and were night-vision activated. The state just didn’t have enough man power to patrol such a large area. One of the guards had seen a dark SUV enter the park and leave not to long after last night, and it raised red flags since the park was technically closed. That, and the vehicle was missing license plates or any identifying markings.

By the time we pulled up, I was caught up on how this would work and the background I needed to know. When Raven parked, I got out and joined him at the front of the SUV as two policeman came towards us.

“Good to see you again, Raven,” the one said as he extended his hand and smiled at my man.

“Nice to see you, too, Raven.” He chuckled and shook hands. I raised an eyebrow at him and gave me a wink. “Finn Murphy, this is Officers Raven and Patrick.”

“Last names,” Officer Raven said as he shook my hand next. “We have fun with it.”

“I got you.” I snickered as we got the introductions out of the way.

“You guys have any ideas or a grid-search set up?”

“Nope, we just got here ourselves,” Officer Patrick answered as he spread his arms wide. “It’s your show.”

“Okay, you know what to do, right?” Raven asked me, and I gave him a firm nod. I closed my eyes and reached out, feeling what was around me. I heard Raven gasp, and I knew I’d located the soul. “Holy shit, you’re a channeler!”

“New trainee for power testing?” Officer Raven said as his eyes went wide as he stared at Raven. I guess he wasn’t used to seeing Raven shocked.

“What’s a channeler?” I asked and opened my eyes back up and stared at the soul in front of us. I was listening to her instead of Raven until he touched my arm. “I’m sorry, what?”

“It means that you don’t just feel them and can find them, but they can do the same for you,” Raven answered as he smiled at me like a proud parent. “It means you are way more gifted than most of the order, me included. Can you talk to her? Will she answer you?”

“Yes, but sometimes the answers aren’t very clear,” I said as I scrunched my eyebrows together. “Why is that?”

“You know how we’ve explained that when a soul is around their body too long they start to get confused and the message gets convoluted.” I nodded, thinking I understood what he was getting at. “Same thing. She’s probably easy for you to understand since she’s only been here since last night. But if it had been weeks, they can only take so much of seeing themselves dead and not being able to leave the area.”

“It’s so sad,” I whispered as I moved towards the soul. She reached out her hand to me and while I couldn’t take it in mine, I reached out as well to show I understood. “I’m so sorry.”

She gave me a soft smile and a half shrug before leading the way. The longer I was around her, the more I learned about her. The poor kid was in college here and went out on a date with the wrong guy. The asshole wouldn't take no for an answer after dinner, and they fought. According to her memories, her death had been an accident, though if he hadn't been trying to force her, it would never have happened.

The guy freaked out and wanted to clean up her death, so he drove out here. Unfortunately for him, he didn't know there were cameras or people like us who could help. I stopped when she did, my stomach churning as I looked down at her lifeless body. So young. Such a waste of life and potential.

"We'll do right by you," I whispered to her as the officers started calling out orders into their radios. She kept talking and telling me what she knew about the man that had killed her. Raven was next to me, furiously writing down everything the police needed to know. I could hear the grief in her voice, but it seemed to give her some closure that the guy would be caught.

"And while this is horrible, your family won't always have to wonder what happened to you," Raven said quietly to her. "This monster won't be able to hurt anyone else ever again."

She agreed but still looked obviously, and understandably, sad. We said our good-byes, gave the officers the information, and left. It was about five minutes outside of the park that I told Raven to pull over. He did, and I hopped out in enough time to empty my stomach on the side of the road.

"Does it get easier?" I asked when I was done, and he handed me a napkin to wipe my mouth with.

"No, no it doesn't," he answered as he squatted down next to me and rubbed my back. "You'll go through the stages of grief as if she was family or close to you, because it's not just a body to you when you see and talk with the soul. But after a few times of this, you'll learn to adjust, adapt to how you look at what you're doing."

"I don't understand," I said as tears burned in my eyes, and I shook my head.

"What was the first thing you thought of when you saw her body?"

"Why couldn't I have saved her? Why couldn't I have stopped this from happening?"

"Exactly," Raven said gently as he cupped my cheek and helped me stand. "And that's why you will grieve, and there's nothing wrong with that, Finn. In time you will learn to see it as I do. You helped her, her family, and the police so that guy doesn't kill again. We gave her a chance for peace and to move into the afterlife where she belongs. Her family can grieve, help make sure that guy goes to jail, and move on, instead of always asking where she is and what happened."

"That doesn't bring her back, Raven," I replied with a very un-adult snuffle and whimper. Part of me just wanted to crawl into bed and pout at the unfairness in the world.

"No, it doesn't, baby," he whispered and ran his hands over my chest as he leaned me up against the SUV for support. "But there was never anything we could have done to stop her being killed. You can't let guilt eat at you for something you have no control over. So no, it never gets better, but you will understand that as time goes on and focus on how you *did* help, instead of what you couldn't do."

"So you don't feel the pain of her death?"

"Never said that, Finn. There's no way you can't feel the pain at her untimely, very unjust death." He opened the door for me and guided me to get in. It was sweet. I was fine really, just tossed my cookies, but he was making sure I wasn't feeling light-headed or weak-kneed. Raven jogged around the SUV, got in, and started driving again.

"What do we do now?" I whispered after a few miles.

"We go home, baby," Raven answered and reached out for my hand. "I'll write up the report and talk to the Eldest about your gifts."

You're powerful but it's not an unmanageable power like Davin's, so there should be no reason we can't have our binding ceremony—"

"I mean about her, Raven. About how I'm feeling," I said, clarifying my meaning and interrupting him.

"We live, Finn. We can't bring her back, nor stop every death or murder in the world. Sometimes we get called in for missing persons that are accidents and those are easier but still hard. But no matter what we see, how we help—at the end of the day there's nothing we can do but live life to the fullest and be glad we have the chance to do that. We'll take the rest of the day off and talk, maybe have lunch with Josh and Madden, and they can help you, too. We've all been where you are right now, baby."

"Thank you," I said as I ran my thumb over his hand. I knew he was right, but damn was it hard to let go what I just saw. And I didn't even know the poor woman. "It's just different than what I've seen before, you know?"

"Because they were men?" he asked after a moment and glanced from the road over to me.

"No," I answered, shaking my head. "I've found men and women at times when on deployment or in a war-zone. That's not what's so different. It's that there was a reason behind their death. They were fighting for something they believed in and knew the risks. It doesn't make it any less sad or tragic. It's just not as senseless. Do you get what I mean?"

"Yeah, it's much different when a soldier dies in for a cause, than a woman being killed when all she wanted was to go on a date and have some fun."

"That's it exactly," I said, and then got lost in my thoughts again. Raven let me, driving us home as he held onto my hand. We stopped to pick up some food since we'd missed lunch at the compound. As we waited in the drive-thru, I saw Raven typing away on his phone but didn't pay much mind to it. He was pretty important in the order,

and I figured either he was rescheduling his day or filling someone in on what had happened.

We got our food and drove home. Once we were there and Raven parked, we got out of the SUV. I headed towards the front door, but he took my hand and led me over to one of the picnic tables on the side of the mansion. We sat down and started to eat.

“This isn’t just a job, Finn,” he said when we were done as he eyed me over. “We didn’t decide one day to become a cop or a medical examiner whose job deals with death every day. This is a calling, one we were born into. But it’s not for everyone, and there’s no shame in that. You went out for your first time and now you’re faced with the same question every Son or Daughter has had since the beginning of time. Can I do this?”

“Yeah, I can,” I answered after a few moments of thought. “It’s hard, much harder than I ever thought it would be, but I understand what you were telling me earlier.”

“There are other jobs with the order. I’m a prime example of that,” he said as he spread his hands out. “I was trained to be a maven, but it wasn’t for me. I believe in the order and helping people, I truly do. I just couldn’t handle the assignments like Madden or Josh do. I wanted to help others who’ve been lost to our ways for whatever reason, like James helped me. Davin can’t go out into the field, and the man is a genius, so he helps in a different way.”

“The Eldest made it sound like our role would be more for security details, war zone retrievals, and that type of thing. That’s what I’m trained for and want. I *could* go out on these types of assignments when needed, but no, I can’t see me handling it as well as Madden does. It’s ingrained in me to keep people safe, and I think finding bodies of those who’ve been murdered would be too much for me.”

“I’m proud of you, baby,” Raven said as he stood and moved to the same side of the bench as me. I stared at him, confused as to why. He sat down next to me, one leg thrown over mine until he was

partially straddling my lap, and wrapped his arms around my neck. “It takes a very strong person to admit their limitations and accept them. There’s not a damn thing wrong with what you just said, but a weaker, insecure man might have denied it.

“And that can lead to doing more harm than good. Hell, it’s led to people losing their ever-loving minds and going off the deep end. But you saw my point, analyzed the data, and came to a conclusion based on what’s best for you, not ego.”

“Doing a job you’re not suited for doesn’t help anyone,” I agreed as I laid my head on his shoulder and rubbed his back. “I love you, Raven.”

“I love you, too, Finn,” he said and kissed my neck. We sat there a few minutes, giving each other gentle caresses as we let everything that happened today sink in. Then he let me go and moved off of me. “I have something to show you. It’s one of the perks of being part of the order, and why I love my job of bringing people here.”

“Vague, but intriguing.” I chuckled as I stood. We cleaned up our garbage and headed inside through the side door to the west wing. I tossed our trash in a can as we passed it and followed him to the main lounge. It was one of a few the mansion had, but this one was set up more like a bar. Except everyone made their own drinks and there was no one to wait on you.

Though it did have several pool tables, dart boards, and even snacks like a real bar or pub. I glanced around as Raven took off his jacket and then did the same with mine. My team was shooting pool while a few of our other friends were doing something at the bar. Before I could even ask what was going on, Josh saw me and came running over to me. I opened my arms just in time to catch Shortie as he jumped up to hug me.

“Welcome home, Finn,” he said and gave me a loud smacking kiss on the cheek. “Raven emailed Madden and Davin what happened out there. We’re here for you, big guy. I decided we needed a party, some fun, and some margaritas.”

“More strippers?” I chuckled as I walked with him still hugging me over to the bar.

“I don’t think Ty will let me strip for you guys.” Kevin giggled and gave me a wink. Josh slid down, moved back behind the bar, and gave Madden a kiss before handing me a drink.

“I’m fine if you want to, as long as no one’s touching or putting money in your thong,” Ty said with a shrug. He stared at Kevin with such heat in his gaze that I wondered what was going on with them.

“So did Raven tell you that I threw up my first time?” Madden asked. I shook my head as Kevin and Josh made more drinks, and we all sat down. Madden started telling us the story about how he’d thrown up in the crime scene and blacked out. Which I understood was embarrassing for him, but helped me feel better about my own reaction.

“Lars has a good story, too,” Darby snickered and elbowed the other trainer. Lars rolled his eyes and told his tale. We all laughed and joked around as everyone exchanged stories about their first time, or when they realized they were different, had gifts. Some of them were funny, others were hard to hear, like Davin’s. But all of them knew that we all *got* it.

This wasn’t a place for judgment, or to look down at someone because they didn’t react to being in the field well. The order was like a brother or sisterhood. This was an extended family of people who understood and supported each other.

“I understand what you were saying now,” I whispered in Raven’s ear later as I hugged him from behind.

“Oh? Are you sure about that?” he asked with intrigue, as he turned his head enough so he could see me.

“You go out and help people understand who they are,” I answered with a nod. “You help by letting people know they’re not alone, and there’s a place where they don’t have to feel different. That’s how my team found each other, and we banded together. We

had each other's backs, and didn't have to worry about the rest, or people looking at us as if we were freaks."

"Smart is so fucking sexy," he purred, and turned in my arms, moving his hands up around my neck. "And yes, that's it exactly. You and your team might never have decided to come here and be a part of this, but you had the option. You guys now understand what you can do and who you are. And that there are others of us that are here for you. That's how I help, that's how I use my gift, because I'm one of you."

"You helped me when I needed you most, and not just to give me answers," I said, and reached up and cupped my cheek. "You were amazing today, Raven, and I will be the happiest man to spend the rest of my life with you, loving you."

"Music to my ears," he purred, and kissed me. In that moment, I realized the cold Raven who helped people but didn't feel what others felt was gone. And while I loved the closed-off Raven who had a heart but didn't know what to do with it... I adored, loved, and cherished this new Raven. And damn if it didn't make me want to make sure everyone knew he was mine.

Chapter 9

A week later the Sons of Thanatus were in their deep green ceremonial robes, filing down the stairs for our binding ceremony. Raven and I were hanging back until everyone was in place. It was almost like a wedding, where everyone was gathered to support us as we entered, together.

When it was time, Raven gave me a passionate kiss and then took my hand when we broke apart. “I love you, Finn.”

“Love you, too, Raven.” We walked down the stairs, through a corridor and to where we needed to be, and everyone was waiting.

The main ritual room was over half the size of the entire compound. It was built under the house in the way the catacombs of Rome were done. The symbolism was there to remind us of our ancestors who were persecuted over the centuries and had to keep our ways hidden. It was lit with candles and torches.

There was a large stone altar at the front of the room, with a pentagram on the floor under it made out of gemstones. I swallowed loudly as I glanced around at everyone, and Raven squeezed my hand. That did not look like a comfortable place for us to have sex on. Personally, I’d only seen the ceremony once in my life, and I was starting to wonder if it was as easy as Madden and Josh had made it look. Then again, they were exhibitionists.

Oh gods! What if I couldn’t get it up in front of all of them? I turned to Raven, ready to admit my fear and ask what we should do. But the love I saw in his eyes as he leaned in to kiss me wiped every doubt I had away. Hell, Raven was so fucking gorgeous, and I wanted

him so badly I'd be able to get it up in the Arctic surrounded by penguins to be with him.

We walked past everyone to the altar, stopping in front of it. James and Dante both gave us warm smiles, and we nodded that we were ready.

The Patriarch recited the blessing the Sons of Thanatus gave for our union, stating they recognized us as soul mates. He rubbed warm blessing oil on our foreheads, and then we broke apart.

I watched as Iago undressed my man, as Madden did me. It was still hard to keep my jealousy under control, even though I knew the meaning behind the actions. It really helped that Josh was standing only a few feet away with a wicked smile on his face. The little shit was getting hot on watching this.

The ceremony required each of us to name a second. In a way, it was the same theory as in olden-day duels. If something ever happened to me, Iago was promising to take care of Raven in my stead, and vice versa with Madden. Iago was showing he would pledge himself to tend to my mate if anything ever happened to me. Starting with preparing him for our union.

As I was ready to growl as my friend slicked up his hands with oil, Raven bit his lip and then blew me a kiss to calm me down. Iago winked at me over Raven's shoulder, letting me know that it was all good, and he wasn't putting the moves on my man. My husband-to-be was shaking with excitement as Iago knelt behind Raven and started stretching him for me.

I glanced around and looked at my brothers in the order who were here to witness our union. But my team stood out front, showing their support and giving me their strength, as always. Damn, I loved those guys. And I swear I saw a few of them snifle and wipe away a stray tear... but I wouldn't ever mention it.

"Yeah, this isn't awkward," Madden mumbled as he used his hand to oil up my cock. I didn't start completely hard, but after a little

attention from him and watching Raven enjoying Iago stretching him out, I was ready to go.

When we were both ready, I met Raven at the end of the altar, and he glanced at it nervously. Deciding to take how he was getting up there off his mind, I lifted him up and set him down on it.

“I forget how friggin’ strong you are since you’re not that much bigger than me,” he said before kissing me quickly. I smiled at him as he moved to the middle, lay down, and spread his legs wide for me. He reached out his hand, and I crawled right up there after him, ready to be joined with him for eternity.

“I love you so much, Raven,” I whispered, my voice thick with emotion as I lined up my cock to his hole. He nodded that he was ready as I stared at him. I pushed in just enough so that I would stay inside of him for the rest of the preparations. He wrapped his legs around me as we both reached over his head with our left hands.

“Are you both ready?” the Patriarch asked as everyone else moved into positions. He stood at the head of the altar, while Madden and Iago stood on either side of us. James was at the other end, showing that every major supporter of our bonding was there to experience it with us. While kind of creepy to make love to Raven while they were all right there, it proved the solidarity of our union.

The Patriarch bound our left wrists together as he blessed us and released our ingrained gifts to flow into each other. This wasn’t just about binding our souls and life lines for eternity, but our magic, gifts, and very essences.

Once we were tied together, we had a slight balancing act as we reached up with our right hands. I glanced down at Raven, who was bearing most of my weight, to see any signs of discomfort, but all I saw was contentment. The Patriarch cut a two-inch gash in each of our palms. Then I placed my hand over Raven’s heart, as he did mine.

“It’s time to pledge yourselves to each other,” he said with a smile. I swallowed loudly as I stared into the eyes of the man I loved.

“I, Finn Murphy, pledge my heart, my soul, and my body to you, Raven Englewood. I dedicate my entire person to your happiness and well-being. I swear by the gods and goddesses in the heavens above to put your needs, your wants, and your desires above my own for the rest of our days together. I pledge all that I am to you and am now yours for eternity. Your life, happiness, and safety will forever be placed above my own. From this day forward, may our life threads forever be intertwined. Accept my oath and all of me as we bind each other in the ways of our forefathers.”

“I do,” Raven replied with tears in his eyes. Then he recited the same words back to me.

“I do,” I sighed as I kissed him. I started moving inside of him, having every intention of going slow and drawing out our moment as long as I could. But being with Raven was like my own personal drug that made me lose all control. I knew he didn’t mind as he kissed me passionately and moved his hips in time with mine.

I felt his soul fill me as mine did him, as we moved as only two people deeply in love with each other could. We fell over the edge into our orgasms together, crying out as we came. I heard his yell in the background as his magic slammed into me, as mine did to him. My hand felt hot on his chest as my own heart started beating even faster.

Several minutes passed before my vision cleared, and I was feeling bliss that I’d never lose Finn now. Holy shit! My eyes went wide when I realized I was feeling Raven’s emotions and thoughts, along with mine. I stared down at him as he understood why I was shocked. Or felt my shock, I guess.

“Never again will we be apart, my love,” I said, as tears sprang to my eyes.

“Thank the gods for that,” he whispered and then kissed me. I got so swept up in Raven and realizing I was truly and always his, that I forgot other people were there. We both flinched when the Patriarch unbound our hands, and glanced up at him.

“Your hands should be healed as well,” the Patriarch said softly. “We’ll leave you to your coupling in front of the heavens alone.”

“I forgot there’s more,” Raven panted and wiggled his eyebrows at me. I guess my man had gotten over his issues of public sex. I had too, actually.

“Does it hurt?” I asked Raven when we were alone, as I traced my handprint over his heart. It was elevated, almost like a burn that had been singed into his flesh when we mated. That was the reason for the cuts and blood as we made love while touching each other’s hearts.

“No, it actually feels fantastic when you touch it,” he moaned, and squirmed beneath me. I hissed when I felt his cock getting hard between us, as mine filled right back up. “I can’t believe they kept this part a secret! I didn’t know it would become a new erogenous zone for us. How did Josh keep this quiet? He has no filter.”

“Guess they wanted us to have some surprises.” I chuckled as he ran his hand over mine. I groaned and my cock started leaking. He wasn’t kidding. Raven touching his handprint on my chest was almost as good as his tight ass wrapped around my dick.

“Once is never enough with you,” Raven whispered as he ran his hand down my back while the other stayed on my chest. I got the idea when he squeezed his thighs over my hips. “I’ll never get enough of you, Finn.”

“And I’m so grateful for that,” I purred before mashing my mouth down to his as I thrust into him. I could always go for seconds... and I did. And Raven, he did, too, always.

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joyee Flynn grew up in Chicago living in the same house all her life until she left for college. She loves to get lost in fantasy that only books could bring. Her wide interest in reading was reflected in her writings. Currently Joyee lives with her dog, Marius, named after a vampire from Ann Rice's *Interview with the Vampire* series. She dreams of one day living with enough land to have a few horses, and find a couple of cowboys of her own.

A lover of men, Joyee's all about them in any form in her books. Vampire, werewolf, military, doesn't matter at all as long as they are hot, hard, and sex fiends!

Also by Joyee Flynn

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